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UNDERSTANDING BIBLICAL INERRANCY

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A major element of historic Christian belief about Scripture has been the doctrine of biblical inerrancy.¹ Many theologians and Bible teachers today, however, seem to be uncomfortable with the concept of biblical inerrancy. The term is subject to misunderstanding, of course, but even the term “Christian” is subject to misunderstanding;² nevertheless, we continue to use the term “Christian” without hesitation. We simply define the term properly and then use it correctly. Many important theological terms (such as election, depravity, or mission) continue to be used despite semantic controversy that may and does arise. Semantic problems relating to “inerrancy” may also be overcome if misunderstanding concerning definitions or word usage is really all the problem is.

I have spent one-third of my life teaching in the School of Theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, the largest evangelical Christian theological school in the world. (The other two-thirds, I was myself a student, with about one-third of all my student days being given to theological studies.) I have talked about the Bible with literally thousands of students, colleagues, and Christian friends, and I have read many expositions of the doctrines of our Christian faith by careful theological writers. I have no illusions about being able to do it better than they have already done it. Nevertheless, my dialogs with students and others have encouraged me to try to write out some of my own views on this rather controversial subject.

Therefore, in these pages I want to set forth my understanding of

¹Biblical inerrancy, for some people in Baptist life, is a new and relatively unknown term. It is quite well known in evangelical circles generally, however, and its meaning is fairly straightforward. “Inerrancy” refers to the non-errancy, the lack of errors, the complete and full truthfulness of the Bible. Recently some Baptist leaders have spoken of Scripture as being “not errant in any area of reality.” That is a good definition of “inerrancy.” Better and more complete definitions and explanations are given in the chapters that follow. It is quite clear, however, that authentic Christianity has never affirmed the errancy of Scripture.

²In some parts of the Middle East, for example, “Christian” may designate a socio-political religious group distinct from the Muslims or the Jews. In theological academic life “Christian” may be a broad designation of Catholics and Protestants. In the secular West it may mean “patriotic and morally honest.” To evangelicals, the term “Christian” refers only to a “born-again believer.” (The term “born-again” is another term that has been subject to a great deal of misunderstanding over the years.)

the “Scripture principle” that undergirds orthodox Christian beliefs. I offer these thoughts in the hope that those who seek the truth may find common ground with me in a common commitment to Christ as He is made known to us through God’s truthful Word, the Holy Scripture.

I hope that you will keep your Bible open as you read these pages, so that you can look up the many references that are cited in the text. Reading those verses will clarify much of what is written here, and it will help you to evaluate what I have written. After all, it is what Scripture says, not my views and opinions, that finally matters. In every case, I am making a point by citing a biblical reference assuming that my readers will in fact look up the verse and think about the context and the full meaning of the cited references.

As Baptists have so often confessed: The Bible is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore the Bible is, and will remain until the end of the world, the true center of Christian union.

Scripture and Truth

Having set out to write an essay on the subject of *biblical inerrancy*, I will try to concentrate on that one subject. Thus I will not in this essay give much attention to other important aspects of the doctrine of religious authority, the doctrine of God, or even the doctrine of Scripture itself. Inerrancy is, however, only one part of my belief about Scripture.

Among other things, to express my views more fully, I would at least want to affirm the sufficiency of Scripture, its clarity, its authority, its Christological center, its soteriological purpose (to teach us about salvation), its theological comprehensiveness, its historical character, its canonical form, its marvelous preservation, its moral and cognitive value, its relevance to the contemporary world, and its personal relevance for my life and yours. Had I the space to do so, I would want to discuss the evidence Scripture offers for the truth of Christianity, and the philosophical strength of its theistic world-view over against contemporary naturalism and idealism.

To discuss inerrancy, however, is not really to ignore these (and many other) issues, for in a very important sense, the significance of these other matters hangs (at least partially) on the conclusion one reaches about inerrancy. The truthfulness of Scripture is, after all, an axiomatic concept of historic Christianity.

The truth of Christian doctrine does not depend upon an inerrant Scripture, of course. Christ is Lord even if Scripture is at some point proven wrong. Many devout Christians doubt the doctrine of inerrancy. But the ability to show that Christianity is true (as opposed to the Spirit-

granted ability to know that it is true) would be severely compromised by the presence of biblical error.

What Is An Error?

“Inerrant” means “not errant” or “without error.” To affirm the inerrancy of something is to affirm in very strong terms its correctness or its truthfulness. A telephone number may be inerrantly recorded in the “phone book.” Fortunately, most of them are. The term itself simply denies the presence of error.³ In a math text, an error is the wrong answer or a calculation incorrectly made or misexplained. A dictionary error would occur if a word were misspelled or incorrectly defined.

In a history text (where we assume the intent is to tell the truth about history), error would be the misrepresentation of a fact or perhaps a misleading interpretation. Under some circumstances, the omission of a significant fact could lead to a misrepresentation of the truth and would thus be called a historical error. No historical account is absolutely comprehensive, however, and normally omissions of details are not considered errors. Historical errors occur when the historical truth is not told. Historical accounts written from different viewpoints or for different purposes may contain varying amounts of detail and may reflect different schematic arrangements of the facts without sacrificing truth itself since truth is often complex and richly personal.

Error, then, is a concept that varies with the context in which it is used. An error in social grace is something quite different from a grammatical error, which again is altogether different from a factual error. Inerrancy, then, could have various meanings depending on the situation.

Inerrancy would not properly describe anything that misrepresents the truth. Biblical Christianity clearly presents itself as the truth of God. Therefore inerrancy does have a special theological usage.⁴ It is that special theological usage to which we must now turn our attention.

³When evangelical theologians use the term “inerrancy” to describe Scripture they mean to affirm the full truthfulness of the Bible. Their reason for making such a claim is their belief that the Bible is God’s Word. What Scripture says (teaches, affirms), God says.

⁴As a preliminary note, it should be pointed out that social customs and grammatical forms are thought by most evangelicals to be culturally conditioned and thus the truth of the Bible is not located in these things. Facts, however, are philosophically interpreted and the biblical “world-view” is considered to be an essential element of the divine revelation. Thus inerrancy as a theological concept does apply to factual affirmations of all kinds in Scripture. Paul Feinberg says, “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.” See “The Meaning of Inerrancy” in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), 294.

What Is Biblical Inerrancy?

The Bible is the inerrant Word of God. When we properly understand what the Bible teaches, we are understanding what a truthful God has said and is saying to us. To understand the proper denotation of inerrancy when it is applied to the Bible, one must understand the nature of the Bible and its literary genre.

The Bible and Science. The Bible is not a textbook on math or science. When it speaks of the physical world it most often uses popular, visually descriptive terms, or it may use commonly understood figures of speech. Precise numbers are not always given (Luke 2:13; or 1 Cor 10:8 cf. Num 25:9). Many things are counted or measured in the Bible, but sometimes the mathematical descriptions are estimates, general references, or symbolic numbers. Some of the numbers seem to be quite precise when things are counted, and yet at other times they are not so precise.⁵

It is not an error in the Bible to find popular descriptions of nature or to find imprecise numerical references unless the truth being expressed in the passage somehow hangs on a specific detail. In such a case as that, the doctrine of inerrancy would expect that the biblical text would be sufficiently precise to tell or convey the truth (and it is and it does). The reason for discussing the “scientific” truthfulness of the Bible, however, is not really to dwell on whether or not certain numbers in the Bible are estimates or precise numbers. Nor is the purpose primarily one of harmonizing discrepant numbers.⁶

The concern about the Bible’s truthfulness in the area of “science” has to do with the desire to affirm the reality of creation, the historicity of the early chapters of Genesis, and the historical reality of the miraculous (especially the virgin birth and the historical, bodily resurrection of Christ). Those who believe the doctrine of biblical inerrancy believe that God protected His written Word from “scientific” error by leading His prophets to use the ordinary figures of speech and the common language

⁵If we are told in Matthew 14:17, Mark 6:38, Luke 9:13, and John 6:9 that the lad had only five loaves and two fish when in fact there were many loaves and many fish, we would have a misrepresentation of the truth. On the other hand, the truthfulness of the reference to the five thousand who were fed is in no way compromised if we learn that the text gives a round number or a fair estimate rather than a precise head-count. It would be a rare case where the careful interpreter could not recognize by context or genre the degree of precision intended by the author in a specific passage. Clark Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), 185–89. See also Feinberg, “The Meaning of Inerrancy,” in *Inerrancy*, 295–302.

⁶Numerals pose well known problems for scribal copyists, and context seldom helps to catch a transcriptional error. These problems exist, but they are relatively minor, and most of them have been explained reasonably, without denying the truthfulness of the authentic text of Scripture.

of simple visual description (the language of appearance) when they spoke about nature. When interpreted in light of the kind of language being used we find the Bible to be wholly true.

In most cases the debate about the “scientific” truthfulness of Scripture is really a debate about the essential unity of general and special revelation. So-called “spiritual” truths cannot be separated from the “scientific” things taught in the Bible. Jesus asked how we would believe the heavenly things he taught if we did not believe him when he spoke about earthly things (cf. John 3:12). Since all Scripture is inspired by God, this principle of the unity of truth applies to everything actually taught in the Bible.

The Bible and History. Scripture is not a textbook on ancient history any more than it is a textbook on science. Yet the content of the Bible is expressed, for the most part, historically. This is a special feature of biblical faith. Christianity (and Old Testament Judaism) is not Platonic, abstract, or strictly spiritualistic (as opposed to being materialistic). Biblical faith is incarnational throughout.

God has worked through physical reality and historical events from the beginning. God created a real, material universe and pronounced it good (Gen 1). He made us flesh and bone (Gen 2), and pronounced that act to be “very good.” God led Abraham to a geographical place and promised it to him and to his physical descendants (Gen 12:1–7). The ten commandments were written physically on ordinary, earthly stone (Exod 31:18). The divinely promised land was “given” only as it was “taken” in divinely aided but nonetheless real battle (Josh 24). The messianic line (cf. Matt 1) includes Perez (the son of Tamar and Judah), Ruth (a descendent of the incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughter), Boaz (whose mother was Rahab), and Solomon (whose mother had been Uriah’s wife). Christ was miraculously conceived and thus was virgin born, but He was no less physical and made of flesh than any other Adamic descendent (Luke 1–3).

Biblical theology is never isolated from fact and history. God has spoken to and through His servants the prophets (2 Kings 17:13). God Incarnate dwelled for awhile with mankind. He walked among His apostles, who knew Him personally and beheld His glory (John 1:14). Our Lord’s empty tomb was hewn in literal, physical stone (Luke 23:53). His resurrected body still bore tangible marks of His suffering on the cross (John 20:27). Misrepresentation of this historical, factual reality would be a misrepresentation of truth.

Narrative style, however, does not necessarily imply an exhaustive account, and narrative descriptions are not always used. Details sometimes vary (cf. Matt 9:18, Luke 8:41–42). The song of Moses (Exod 15) gives a poetic description of the same events described in narrative style in the

preceding chapters. Thus, use of the term “inerrancy” to describe Scripture does not imply that narrative or didactic style, or exhaustive historical detail will characterize every passage. It does imply that I do not expect to be wrong, deceived, or misled if I properly understand and accept the biblical affirmations as being what they are: truthful statements about reality. My interpretive skills enable me to know what it is that is being taught or what it is that is being affirmed as true. That is the truth “inerrancy” is concerned to defend.

The Bible and Truth. Scripture does conform to fact, but its truthfulness is not limited to the factualness of the record. Biblical truthfulness is found in the relationship between the ideas expressed in the text and the ideas in the mind of God.⁷ Scripture is factually true whenever and to whatever extent it makes factual affirmations, but at best this is only a means to an end. It is conformity to the mind of God that we seek. Scripture as a whole, in my view, truthfully reveals the mind of God.

Scripture is that divinely revealed message “preached” (proclaimed) by God’s prophets and apostles as they spoke and wrote under the special inspiration of the Holy Spirit of God (2 Pet 1:20–21). Scripture is therefore useful as a normative source of doctrine (truthful teaching). It is useful for rebuking us because of our erroneous thoughts and ways, for correcting our errors by enabling us to compare our sinful ideas or desires or actions with the revealed mind of God, and for training us in righteousness: that kind of life (thoughts and activities) that does conform to the truth and to the revealed will of God (2 Tim 3:16).

I am trying to say two things at once. We must define biblical inerrancy in light of legitimate biblical concepts of truth and error. So I am urging that we not, on the one hand, apply inappropriate concepts of error in light of what the Bible is (an ancient book, written in common language, in foreign cultures, etc.), and yet, on the other hand, let us not read the Bible as if it were not what it is (a factually truthful presentation of historically manifested divine revelation). We can misunderstand the doctrine of inerrancy as easily by applying or expecting the Bible to conform to inappropriate, modern standards of exhaustive, comprehensive, and technically precise descriptions of everything as we can by trying to immunize Scripture from critical error by mythologizing its significant theological affirmations.

⁷Two very fine discussions of the biblical concept of truth are: E.J. Carnell, *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 45–64; and Roger Nicole, “The Biblical Concept of Truth,” in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D.A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 287–98. Cf. Philip Edgecumbe Hughes, “The Truth of Scripture and the Problem of Historical Relativity,” in *ibid.*, 173–94.

Evangelical scholars today are using the term “inerrancy” to affirm that the Bible, properly understood (in light of its ancient cultural form and content), is absolutely truthful in all of its affirmations about God’s will and God’s way. Furthermore, the affirmation is that, due to inspiration, the Bible does not teach or affirm error about any area of reality. Rather, what Scripture says is what God says, and thus Scripture will speak only the truth about reality.

The biblical affirmation itself may be figuratively expressed, or it may be a straightforward affirmation of historical fact, theological doctrine, or ethical norm. In every case, however, to affirm inerrancy is to affirm the truthfulness and thus the inherent, veracious authority of the scriptural passage on its own terms. In the inerrancy debate, the issue is truth.

The Bible and Modern Criticism. Modern biblical criticism is built in a significant sense on the philosophical acceptance of biblical errancy. Attempts by evangelicals to harmonize seeming discrepancies in the biblical text are dismissed by modern theologians as if such attempts were incredibly naïve and painfully irrelevant. Moreover, modern critics often see literary discrepancies or variations as primary evidence of earlier (conflicting) sources that supposedly lie behind the canonical form of the text. To harmonize these various accounts is to work exactly at cross purposes with the goals of many modern critics.

Evangelicals do not deny that biblical writers often had normal sources of information, but we do believe that canonical Scripture was written (not just edited) by individuals chosen and directed by God.⁸ Evangelicals believe that divine revelation had cognitive content, that it therefore could be and has been propositionally communicated by the prophet to the people, that it was uniquely written under the process of Spirit-guidance

⁸Inerrancy never implies that all of the content of Scripture was verbally whispered into the ear of a prophet by God so that Scripture writing was never anything other than the transcription of a divine conversation. Such is what many who reject inerrancy would want to accuse us of believing. They call this the “mechanical dictation theory.” But this straw-man rhetoric is either simple minded, deliberately deceptive, or lacking in scholarly integrity. I do not know of any recent evangelical literature that would give sufficient grounds for such misrepresentation. Evangelicals oppose those who might hold such a docetic view of Scripture just as they do those who affirm other heresies. Those evangelicals who speak of verbal inspiration (and even those rare few who at times use the word “dictation”) do not speak of plenary verbal revelation or of Scripture being handed down from heaven pre-written on golden tablets! “Mechanical dictation” is an impersonal slur and an unfounded accusation against evangelical scholarship. It is a tactic of intimidation. It is not a fair description of the evangelical view. It tries to link orthodox Christianity with cultic doctrines and thus unfairly proposes a “guilt by association” accusation. In my view, people who continue to link orthodox Christian claims for biblical infallibility to “mechanical dictation” theories of inspiration show either their own superficiality, ignorance, or (worse) unwillingness to speak the truth.

(Divine inspiration), and that we are to read it and understand it and thus come to love God more fervently as we are illumined by that same Holy Spirit; and further, that we are to apply the teachings of the Scripture to our inter-personal relationships, our business lives, our political interests, the whole of life as we are led by that same Divine Spirit.

Summary

In my mind belief in biblical inerrancy is simply belief in orthodox Christianity. Scripture is the true word of God, preserving in written form that which God has revealed to His people through His prophets and apostles.

Revelation, Inspiration, and Infallibility

Biblical prophets often said, “The Word of the Lord came unto me. . . .” Unfortunately they do not always give much of a description of the process by which that happened. Scripture says that God appeared to Moses in a rather explicit way (cf. Exod 33:11). Isaiah had a direct vision of the personal presence of God (Isa 6), as did Daniel (Dan 7:914) and a few others (Gen 28:12–13; Ezek 1:26–28; Rev 4–5). But there is no indication that all biblical writers had experiences in which God manifested His personal presence to them. Often we have no description of the manner in which God revealed Himself to the prophets (Joel 1:1).

Divine Revelation

Communication (in whatever manner by whatever means) between God and His prophets is known as divine revelation.⁹ Such communication may be a factual message, an insight, a historical event, an interpretation of that event, a moral standard, a prophecy of future events or of future divine actions, or any number of other matters that the sovereign God may choose to reveal to His prophet (Amos 3:7).

At times this communication was direct and verbal. For example, God spoke to Moses out of the burning bush (Exod 3–4). One night He called young Samuel so distinctly that Samuel thought it was the voice of Eli (1 Sam 3). Apparently God spoke directly to Noah (giving him specific dimensions and instructions for the ark, Gen 6). He spoke to Isaiah about the rejection his preaching would receive (Isa 6:9ff.)

At other times God communicated indirectly through angelic messengers. Abraham spoke with a “man” whom he called “Lord.” Many inter-

⁹The doctrine of divine revelation is very carefully treated by many evangelical theologians. I would urge an interested, beginning student to study Leon Morris, *I Believe In Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976).

pret this to have been a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ, while others think it was an angelic messenger speaking on behalf of God. In either case, the message was delivered verbally because Sarah overheard the conversation and laughed (Gen 18). Scripture is not always ambiguous about the identity of the messenger, however. The angel Gabriel delivered God's message to Daniel (Dan 9:21) and he also delivered a message to Zechariah (the father of John the Baptist, Luke 1:19). The "Angel of the Lord" came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah in order to speak to Gideon (Judg 6:11).

Thus we see that the means of divine revelation is, at times, clearly made known by the writer of the biblical material. Nevertheless we often have no such description and thus no direct knowledge of the process (or processes) involved in divine revelation.¹⁰

Biblical Inspiration

If revelation is the communication from God to the prophet, inspiration is the work of God's Spirit that guarantees the accurate recording of the content of the divine revelation and the truthful description of the circumstances in which it came. Thus inspiration completes the purpose of divine revelation by getting God's message accurately delivered from the prophet to the people.

Inspiration applies also to the written expressions of worship in the Psalms. Praise in response to the revealed goodness of God's creation or to His revealed providence, songs of repentance or of thanksgiving, or even the collection of proverbial wisdom can be elicited under the inspiration of God's Spirit just as well as the ethical and political preaching of God's prophets can. Inspiration also refers to the teaching ministry of the Spirit (John 16:13–15). Inspiration is a personal relationship between the Holy Spirit and the biblical writer. It functions in a multitude of intimately spiritual ways. It is never impersonal or mechanical even in cases when the focus is primarily fact gathering.

¹⁰Based on the references we do have (a few of which are mentioned in the preceding paragraphs), we can surely assume that God could and did use whatever means were necessary in order to guarantee that His message was adequately communicated to these prophetic spokesmen. This communication, as even our brief survey shows, was not necessarily done through ecstatic experiences or even through mystical or meditative procedures. In 1 Samuel 3, little Samuel assumed that Eli was calling him. He did not discover God through ecstasy. God simply initiated a relationship unexpectedly (though Samuel's circumstances had undoubtedly prepared him for such a relationship). Samuel experienced what at first he took to be an ordinary communication from an ordinary man. However, we have no other example exactly like that (though cf. Gen 32:24–30; John 9:35–38; Acts 9:3–5; and other places where apparently the truth was not fully realized at first). The means of divine revelation, then, seem to have varied from case to case.

Inspiration is as mysterious and as multi-faceted as is divine revelation itself. In every case, however, inspiration refers to the spiritually-guided process of writing out the message God wanted communicated to His people through the Bible. Inspiration produced Scripture.¹¹

Human Authors

Those who wrote the biblical text were not supernatural beings. They spoke normal language. They had normal knowledge. They worked, loved, lived, sinned, worshiped, failed, and made mistakes as do all humans. They lived in particular cultures, in certain geographical locations, had friends, went to visit their grandchildren and did all the other things that normal people do. They spoke (and wrote) with figures of speech and idioms just as their original hearers did. Their writing style was uniquely theirs.

All this and more, but because they were willing servants or because of certain qualifications they had, or perhaps for reasons known only to God, reasons of His sovereign will, God chose to give them a message and a commission to communicate that message to others. God's Holy Spirit then guided them and enabled them to accomplish God's purpose.

Biblical Infallibility

There is no evidence that God accomplishes His revelational purpose through error or accident. Revelation comes through truth and providence. Truth is an essential element of God's nature, for He is the only ultimate by which truth could ever be measured.

His Scripture-writing prophets and apostles were not inherently infallible nor always truthful in their personal lives. They were sinful people in need of redemption, just like we are. But as they wrote holy Scripture, delivering the message God had placed in their hearts and minds to be delivered, God spiritually guarded them from both deliberate lies and un-

¹¹We know even less of the actual process involved in inspiration than we do of the process of revelation. God once wrote the ten commandments Himself (Exod 31:18), but that was hardly typical of the Scripture writing process. Normally those who knew God's mind (because God had made His thoughts known to them) wrote down that which God wanted us all to know.

Because God revealed Himself in events and in historical circumstances as well as in direct verbal messages, the writing of biblical history was as important as the writing out of the covenant laws. The same principle applies to the New Testament. What Jesus did was as important as what Jesus said (though even with several accounts we do not have an exhaustive report, cf. John 21:25).

Like all history, biblical history is selective. It is a thematic history in which the relationship between God and man is the main theme. God's kingdom is of central interest. The promise and fulfillment of messianic prophecy is a connecting thread. Sin and salvation, rebellion and redemption, agony and atonement provide the dramatic contrasts that move us toward the heart of reality.

intentional errors. If this were not so, then we who look to God for His guiding word of truth would not be able to find it simply by turning to Scripture as such. We might still look to Scripture as a source of traditional teachings, but we would be left to our own rational abilities to discover the truth itself. However, only the intellectually gifted could ever hope to sift out all of the truth and thereby recognize all of the “human errors” in the Bible. It is naively optimistic to think that even they could do it.

The Bible was written in and comes to us from the ancient middle-eastern world. The masses of ordinary people today surely could never hope to have the academic expertise to recognize in the ancient thought forms all possible human errors that the writers could have made and thus by a process of elimination locate and come to know the sum total of revealed truth. Moreover, the truth we seek is about matters as important as the will of God for our lives or teachings that concern our eternal destiny. Thus if Scripture were not protected from fallibility and error, God would have failed in His basic purpose of revealing these truths to His people generally.

Truth cannot be finally located in the individual human mind. Truth is located in the character of God. Unfortunately even the superior human intelligence standing alone may fail. Only God and His Word may be properly thought of as infallible. Truth may be known by men, but truth is established by God alone. Though weak and liable to err as humans, God’s Spirit bore the biblical writers along as they conveyed the content and the context of God’s revelation. Scripture itself was providentially produced (2 Pet 1:20–21). What Scripture says is what God intended for it to say (cf. 1 Thess 2:13; Ps 119:89). The literary genre, the vocabulary, and the style were as human as the many human authors, but the teaching, the message, the information conveyed ultimately had God as its author and thus truthfulness as an essential quality (cf. 1 John 5:6).

In this way, God’s revelation was not lost or dissipated in the life of the prophet or the apostle (Isa 40:8). Rather it was inscripturated and thus marvelously preserved for us (1 Kings 8:56). It is only God and His Word that is by definition inerrant (Ezek 12:25). God speaks only the truth, for He is true (1 John 5:20).

Why Believe The Doctrine of Inerrancy?

One common objection to the doctrine of biblical inerrancy is that it would require omniscience to know that the doctrine is true. In other words, to know for sure that nothing in the Bible is false would require someone to know exhaustively everything about everything that the Bible mentions, and then to know the correct interpretation of everything, and

then to know exactly what it means to say that everything in the Bible is true. Surely we cannot claim to have that kind of knowledge. But if we lack that knowledge, then how could we know that everything in the Bible is true and nothing is false or erroneous?

This seemingly formidable objection, however, would, if it were valid, apply to virtually all our doctrines and to most of the other things we think we know in science, history, or even in ordinary daily life.¹² Do we know that God exists? Yes, but surely not because we possess exhaustive empirical evidence. (We have not seen, heard, touched, tasted, and smelled God.) We do know that God is real, but our knowledge is based on convincing evidence and reasons that effectively and adequately persuade rather than on rationally inescapable proof (Rom 1:20).¹³ Do we believe in the doctrine of the Trinity? Yes, but not because we are omniscient. So it is with virtually all Christian doctrines and with human knowledge generally.¹⁴

There is something quite significant about this objection, however, because much of our evidence for our other doctrines is drawn from the teachings of Scripture itself. In other words, Scripture is the epistemological foundation for Christian doctrine (Acts 17:11; Rom 15:4). It is the teaching of Scripture that provides the basic data from which we build our doctrinal conceptions (Matt 22:31–32, 36–40).

If Scripture simply claimed its own inerrancy, and if this were the sole basis for belief in the doctrine, the argument for inerrancy would seem to be viciously circular. It would be like saying “I am telling the truth because I say that I am telling the truth, and I can prove that I am telling the truth because I can quote myself making the claim to tell the truth.” Somehow I do not think that would be accepted in a court of law (or even in a congressional hearing).

¹²We believe the law of gravity operates everywhere in the universe exactly as it does in our solar system. We assume that the mental processes of Roman Caesars and of Babylonian peasants were similar to those of modern people. We say we know about atoms and stars, and I agree that we do have real knowledge of these things. But in no case is our knowledge based upon exhaustive information.

¹³Among many fine presentations of theistic evidence by evangelical philosophers, I will mention only these three as representative: R.C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lidsay, *Classical Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 24–136; Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), 237–59; and William Lane Craig, *The Existence of God and the Beginning of the Universe*, (San Bernadino: Here's Life Publishers, 1979). See also idem, *Apologetics: An Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 57–95.

¹⁴We have (should have, can have) a basis for our beliefs (1 John 4:1; Ps 119:140), a strong, persuasive, fully adequate evidential and rational basis (1 Pet 3:15); nevertheless, we unashamedly affirm that we know by faith (Heb 11:1). Biblical faith, however, is not simply “strong wishing.” It is “trusting-obedience” to revealed truth. (Rom 1:17; Heb 11:24).

Modern critics argue that Scripture makes no such claim for inerrancy or infallibility at all. Evangelicals believe that the claim for total truthfulness is a valid inference from other clear biblical teachings. In any case, however, we would surely want more evidence than just a claim. But would not the “other evidence” have to be an independent knowledge of all the facts? Since omniscience is precisely what we do not have, inerrancy is said (by the critics) to collapse as a valid doctrine. We are then left only with “faith” in the modern existentialist sense (that is, commitment without assurance and without a certain basis for knowledge) or else we have no faith at all.

This objection seems persuasive to many modern thinkers, and therefore many have turned away from the church’s historic commitment to biblical infallibility. It is not necessary for us to be bullied by such arguments, however, because by similar reasoning we can show that it could well take something approaching omniscience to know with certainty that actual errors do exist in Scripture.¹⁵ Nevertheless, I will not ignore the real force of the original objection, because it calls us to focus on the real reason that we speak of biblical inerrancy with such confidence. Evangelicals believe that we have a clear teaching on this subject from an absolutely

¹⁵There seems to be no valid alternative to this counter-objection. If the objection from omniscience works one way it works the other. As I briefly point out in the next chapter, biblical affirmations have often been denied by the critics with great rationalistic assurance based on the empirical evidence available at that time, but later discoveries proved the critics wrong and Scripture right. Great rationalistic assurance was not enough then, nor is it now.

Supposed evidence for biblical falsity is either obviously ambiguous or it is potentially (and by precedent as well as by logical analysis, we evangelicals are convinced it is) circumstantial. There are possible explanations for supposed contradictions and problem passages. Thus I contend that it would take something like omniscience to know in the absolute sense that modern critics are right and that the Bible is at some points wrong. (Even in the more moderate sense of “knowing” the two objections seem to cancel each other out.)

A critic may reply that one need not know everything in order to know something, and the disproof of inerrancy requires only a single bit of knowledge, namely that bit that shows Scripture to be in error at some point. This reply is quite valid and rather obvious. The claim of inerrancy carries a far greater burden of proof than the claim, for example, of general reliability or trustworthiness. On a case by case basis, however, one would have to have a similar level of knowledge concerning the facts of that specific case to claim falsity as one would to claim truthfulness. Thus the claim of one or many errors in Scripture would, on a case by case basis, be opposed by evidence for biblical truthfulness and the points at times become matters of interpretation.

However, we do not prove something to be true just by showing that there are possible explanations for the problems. Evidence for biblical truthfulness is empirical and practical as well as rational. But the evidence is never exhaustive, and the basis for our faith in the Bible is not simply a large catalog of evidences, even though we do have a very large collection.

trustworthy source who was (and is) in a position to know the whole truth, Jesus Christ our Lord (John 1:1–2, 14; 3:34; 7:16; 8:28, 38, 40; 12:49–50; 14:10; 17:6–8; 18:37).

Undoubtedly Jesus believed in and taught others to believe in the utter truthfulness and the authority of the Holy Scriptures (Luke 20:37; John 10:35). His Bible was the Old Testament (Luke 4:16–17), and the pattern of divine revelation and inspiration seen in the Old Testament is the same as the pattern seen in the writing of the New Testament (cf. Jer 36:2 and Rev 1:10–11, 19).

Our Lord's disciples, taking their cue no doubt from Him, clearly everywhere assume and teach their own apostolic authority (Acts 4:29; 5:29–32; Gal 1:11–12), and they accept without question the authority and full truthfulness of inspired Scripture (Acts 26:19–23; Rom 1:1–5). The apostles may offer us some unusual (or at least unexpected) interpretations (e.g. 1 Cor 10:1–5), but they never question Scripture's truthfulness (1 Cor 10:6–11; Rom 3:1–4).

The prophets and apostles never approached the canonical biblical texts that they had in the manner of the modern biblical critic (2 Chr 36:16; Hos 4:6; 2 Pet 1:16, 19, 21; 2:1–3, 10–12, 21; 3:2–6, 14–16). Christ and His apostles believed that God's Word was unequivocally true (John 17:17). This was their foundational premise (John 6:68–69).

Scripture is always truthful, because Scripture is the result of divine revelation (1 Cor 2:10, 13). When Christ commissioned His apostles to teach all things whatsoever He had commanded them (Matt 28:18–20), He, in effect, imposed a Scripture writing task on this apostolic band. His promise of the Spirit who would guide them into all truth (John 14:16–17; 16:12–15) simply confirmed their role as the new prophets of the new covenant.

Jesus and His Bible

Jesus Himself obviously knew His Bible well. He had studied it since He was a child (Luke 2:46–47). Jesus placed a high priority on proper interpretation. For example, when Satan quotes Scripture but misinterprets and misapplies it, Jesus responds with a classic illustration of the evangelical principle (drawn directly from the doctrine of inerrancy) that Scripture must be harmonious with itself. The Bible is inerrant (fully truthful) and thus one verse cannot be properly understood to contradict the correct interpretation of another verse. Thus Jesus responds to Satan's misuse of Scripture by quoting another passage that showed why Satan's interpretation and application could not be correct (cf. Luke 4:9–12). Scripture's authentic meaning is that which always stands (1 Pet 1:24–25).

Jesus interpreted Himself and His mission as being a fulfillment of biblical teachings and promises (Luke 4:16–21). He believed that even the “hard parts” of the Bible were true. For example, the idea of particularity in God’s grace is often opposed even by some otherwise conservative Bible students. We simply do not want God to help some and not others. We want no distinctions made in God’s grace. We do not want there to be any who are ultimately lost. Yet Jesus did not hesitate to refer to Old Testament passages that clearly speak of the particularity of God’s grace (Luke 4:24–27).

His audience responded to this teaching, as many do today, with anger (Luke 4:28). Nevertheless, Jesus did not compromise or “explain away” the biblical affirmations. It is Jesus, more than any other, who speaks of final judgment, final divisions, and final punishment (Matt 7:13–27; 25:31–46; John 5:28–29).

Resistance to this kind of biblical teaching may be a major reason why many have self-consciously rejected full biblical authority and thus inerrancy. They seem to think it would be better if God just saved everyone no matter what. Men and women still “fall” for the oldest lie in the world: “Thou shalt not surely die.” By doing so they give up moral responsibility, they view themselves as highly evolved animals, and they exchange the truth of God for a lie, and thus they worship and serve created things rather than the Creator (Rom 1:25).

Jesus also used Scripture to condemn legalism (Luke 6:1–5). Conservatives who believe in the inerrancy of Scripture are constantly told by their critics that they are legalists. Perhaps some are. But rigid, literalistic legalism is not inherent in the doctrine of inerrancy. In fact if inerrancy is a “code word” for the view of Scripture that Jesus held (and that is its proper meaning), then an inerrantist could not be a legalist except in the sense that Jesus was. We must submit to the authentic meaning of the text, but we must also learn from Jesus how to understand what that meaning is (Matt 5:17ff; 22:23ff).

One thing is clear. Jesus always accepted the verbal authority of the Scripture when it came to matters of doctrine (Luke 20:37–38). For example, even in the midst of physical suffering and enormous mental stress, His mind was filled with Scripture. On His way to die He warned of God’s future judgment by referring to the teachings of the prophetic Scripture (Luke 23:26–31). Perhaps the greatest indication of our Lord’s love for Scripture and His thorough mental saturation with Scripture is the discovery that His dying words are words from Scripture (Matt 27:46; cf. Ps 22:1; see also Luke 23:46; cf. Ps 31:5). His resurrection task centered on the explanation of Scripture to His disciples (Luke 24:27), and He com-

missioned the preaching of the Gospel by re-affirming the truth of the message of Scripture (Luke 24:44–48).

The Word of God in person and in print were and are virtually inseparable. To love one is to love the other. To trust one is to trust the other.

The Lord's Apostles and Their Bibles

Jesus believed the Scriptures to be true. He adopted none of the modern critical methods or principles that deny the inerrancy of the text.¹⁶ His apostles clearly agreed with Him. His stance was their stance when it came to the doctrine of Scripture. Everywhere it is assumed implicitly or taught explicitly that Scripture is the Word of God, fully truthful and authoritative.

Twice Paul says "Scripture" when his reference clearly is to "God." In Galatians 3:8 Paul speaks of the Scripture foreseeing what God would do. Then Paul says that the Scripture preached or announced the gospel to Abraham in advance. To illustrate this prior announcement Paul quotes Genesis 12:3, the explicit promise of God Himself to Abraham. Thus Paul has virtually equated the written Scripture with the specific, unequivocal Word of God. Then again in Romans 9:17 it is, for Paul, the Scripture that says to Pharaoh what Exodus 9:16 attributes to God.

Paul does not hesitate to think of Scripture itself as the Word of God (cf. Romans 3:2). In light of this commonly held attitude, it is nothing less than remarkable to read Peter's affirmation of Paul's writings, putting them on a par with the "other" (Old Testament) Scriptures (2 Pet 3:15–16).

The New Testament always treats the Old Testament as if it were the true and decisive expression of God. The chief New Testament proof of Christianity's divine origin (and thus its truthfulness) is the fact that Christianity represents the fulfillment of the prophetic Scriptures (cf. Acts 2:16ff; 3:18ff; 7:52; 10:43; 13:27ff; 17:2–3; 18:28; 26:22–23; 28:23). Christ clearly proclaimed that He had not come to destroy the law and the prophets but to fulfill them (Matt 5:17; 26:52–56; Luke 18:31). It is no wonder, then, that the disciples learned to cite prophetic texts as being utterances of God or of the Holy Spirit of God (Acts 1:16; 3:21; 4:24–26; 13:32–35; 13:47; 28:25ff).

¹⁶For a more scholarly analysis of our Lord's view of Scripture see John W. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1972). For a readable yet comprehensive study of the whole question of biblical self attestation see Wayne A. Grudem, "Scripture's Self-Attestation and the Problem of Formulating a Doctrine of Scripture," in *Scripture and Truth*, 19–59.

Permanent Truth and Changing Applications

Note well: these messages from God cited by the apostles were spoken hundreds of years earlier, but because they are authentically from God they retain their authority. It is not only what God said, but it remains what God says.

God does not change, and truth remains relevant, because God is eternally the source and standard of truth. We must always keep the message in context (and within its stated and its appropriate range of application); but given that, the Word of God remains true and binding (whether the message is a simple statement of fact, a command, or a promise). Isaiah 40:8 (cited in 1 Pet 1:25) proclaims the eternal significance of the Word of God. Jesus tells us that not even a jot nor a tittle will pass away from the Law until the divine intention of and purpose for the Scriptural passage has been accomplished (Matt 5:18). Even then it forever stands accomplished. The plain fact is that God's character and God's ultimate moral and redemptive goals for human life do not change.

Of course the prophetic Scriptures of the Old Testament have now seen their most significant fulfillment. The promised Christ has come. The sacrificial, substitutionary atonement has been made, once for all. Thus Old Testament teachings concerning ritual sacrifices and the coming Messiah must now be interpreted Christologically, and this is exactly what the New Testament does. We no longer offer animal sacrifices even though Old Testament Scripture commands it, for that command in its contextual application has now been completed and fulfilled. It is still true in its historical setting. God then, now, and always requires a blood sacrifice for the remission of sins. God does not change, but we now interpret God's requirements Christologically (cf. Heb 8–10). Jesus paid it all.

Some culturally conditioned commands in the New Testament are not literally relevant today due to changes in the social and cultural conditions. We probably do well not to greet all other Christians with a kiss in our Western society, though the custom is not out of place in some cultures even today. But the principle of greeting with warmth and appropriate intimacy should still be practiced among Christians. The actual meaning of the teaching of the Bible (cf. 1 Pet 5:14) remains true even when the specific application changes.

The Blessing of God upon Biblical Faith

Our foundational assumption, then, remains. The Scripture is assuredly truthful. We can trust it to reveal God Himself to us. We appropriately build our doctrine from it. We do not deny that some parts are hard to understand (cf. 2 Pet 3:16), and we do not claim to have solved every problem. Evangelicals do not claim omniscience nor infallibility for them-

selves or for their own interpretations. Only God has those characteristics, and thus we expect God's Word to manifest nothing else but truthfulness.

Church history records the common faith in the utter truthfulness of the Bible by almost every theologian of note until relatively modern times.¹⁷ I have done extensive research in the writings of our own Baptist theologians, pastors, and missionaries.¹⁸ Their defense of biblical truthfulness has been pervasive and persuasive. Scripture, they claim, has truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter, because its author ultimately is God.

Those pastors and church leaders who have been blessed with unusual evangelistic success have almost always been quick to affirm their complete trust in the total truthfulness of the Holy Scripture. Such belief does not guarantee evangelistic success (the belief is not a pragmatic tool with which to manipulate God's favor), but it is notable that God has so often chosen to bless those who do believe the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. Is God not saying something to the Christian community by bestowing this most significant manifestation of His grace on those pastors and churches that unequivocally trust and obey His revealed Word, the Bible?

Common Misunderstandings About Inerrancy

Some people think (mistakenly, I believe) that "inerrancy" is strictly a code-word for a political "power grab" in denominational institutions. Others think that belief in biblical inerrancy will destroy the scholarly study of the Bible. Still others warn that the doctrine of inerrancy will somehow prevent scholars from properly interpreting the Bible.

Inerrancy and Denominational Controversy

Some Baptist leaders have rather consistently avoided the central theological elements in the recent inerrancy debates in order to focus on institutional concerns such as who will be elected as trustees and what policies will be followed in the days ahead. Efforts to influence or change institutions, agencies, and boards are not unique to Baptist life, of course,

¹⁷For extensive primary source documentation (in contrast to the less reliable work offered by Jack Rogers and Donald McKim) see John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983).

¹⁸See L. Russ Bush and Tom J. Nettles, *Baptists and the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980). All of the references found in the main body of this book are from primary source materials. Our goal was to provide an objective scholarly reference work drawn from Baptist writers from the seventeenth century until the modern day. In my mind, the historic position of mainstream Baptists is not in doubt. Affirmations of the total truthfulness of the authentic canonical text of the sixty-six books of the Old and the New Testaments are as characteristic of Baptist theology as are affirmations of believer's baptism.

nor to this period of our history, and we should be concerned about the integrity of denominational institutions. I contend, however, that biblical inerrancy is an important theological issue in its own right, and that it can and should be discussed separately and apart from matters relating to denominational politics.

When it comes to their denominational activities, I do not wish to judge or defend the motives or the activities of other people who may also affirm biblical inerrancy. There may be some activists with purely political motives and methods. However, Jesus clearly warns us against judging one another unfairly (Matt 7:1) and I surely hope that self-serving motives would be rare among Christians on either side of this issue. The utter hypocrisy of using a theological issue of such central importance to the spiritual health and well-being of the church as a “cover” for a purely personal desire for power or privilege is so blatant that to act with such motives would require a severely dulled conscience. I pray that that might never be the case, and if it is or has been that those thus described would repent and make appropriate efforts to restore proper Christian attitudes and relationships wherever possible.

Neither do I wish to defend those who ignorantly (or through superficiality) misread Scripture, who fail to study, who assume inappropriate dictatorial authority in the congregation of the Lord, who lack hermeneutical skills, who are anti-institutional, non-cooperative, unfair in their attitudes, misinformed in their accusations, or excessively narrowminded. I love scholarly activities. I expect my students to read widely, to think clearly, to analyze carefully, and to seek truth wherever it is to be found. (I believe all truth is God’s truth, and I have no fear that the real truth will ever contradict Scripture or harm the faith of a well-grounded believer.)

I cannot and will not defend biblical inerrancy as an issue of denominational politics. It is strictly a theological issue having to do, with the truthfulness of Holy Scripture. It is, however, understandable that many who believe in the full truthfulness of Scripture became seriously concerned when they discovered that their church offerings partly paid the salaries of some individuals who are or were in positions of influence and sometimes used that influence to oppose (even at times to ridicule) the beliefs of those who affirm biblical inerrancy. Negative attacks against well-known and much loved pastors among us, who are known for their strong affirmation of biblical inerrancy and whose lives and ministries have been unusually blessed with spiritual fruit, are a case in point.

Even more serious, however, is the matter of non-evangelical theology and negative biblical criticism that is found in some classrooms. These questions are being asked even by some who think they only apply to a few cases: Should the sacrificial gifts of dedicated Christians be used to

support the propagation of views that directly oppose the views held by those who made the sacrificial gifts believing they were giving to God? In light of 2 John 10–11 and other related passages, should evangelical Christians support those who do not teach evangelical theology or who promote views inconsistent with evangelical theology?¹⁹ Could evangelistic and mission-minded people honestly provide financial support for the denial of biblical infallibility?

For many, the vast good of our denominational missions programs outweigh all theological concerns no matter how serious they might seem to be. Quite a few of the brethren seem to think that theological issues are esoteric and irrelevant to daily Christian life. For others, however, these theological concerns are so serious that they have felt compelled to work within the system to effect change. The resistance to change has been very strong (though this resistance did not always arise from a desire to defend or perpetuate aberrant theological positions), and indiscretion and impatience (perhaps even intolerance) has at times bubbled up to the surface on all sides. There has been a great deal of misunderstanding and many unfounded accusations (again from all sides). This must cause our Lord grief. We must seek the mind and the Spirit of Christ our Lord in any and every area of life. His way should be our way, else the name “Christian” loses its meaning.

May I summarize: some denominational political activity has undoubtedly arisen out of serious theological concerns, but I do not identify biblical inerrancy itself as a political issue. The inerrancy of the Scripture was believed by many of us long before any particular contemporary political activities began in our denomination. Many (perhaps most) Baptist theologians have taught this view throughout our history from the beginning until now.

Inerrancy, however, is an evangelical doctrine that is truly interdenominational. Inerrancy denotes a doctrine focusing exclusively on the truthfulness and the authentic canonical text of the Bible.

Inerrancy and Biblical Scholarship

Some critics claim that belief in inerrancy will destroy scholarly activity. Rather than destroy, however, it has been the touchstone of some of the best in recent scholarship.²⁰ Whenever someone turns away from

¹⁹It is to be remembered that evangelical theology is not monolithic in its biblical interpretation. Many different views and interpretations can be encouraged as long as biblical truthfulness is not compromised. Denominational distinctives such as the various views of the ordinances or of church government may also be involved here, but evangelical theology as such focuses more on orthodox doctrines and attitudes toward Scripture that are interdenominational in the evangelical tradition of Christian Protestant orthodoxy.

²⁰Evangelical book publishing has literally boomed in recent years. Many technical

the givenness of the objective truthfulness of the biblical text and substitutes the supposed truthfulness of even the most reasonable speculation, the epistemological structure of orthodox Christianity is at that point lost. Time and time again the reasoned speculations of dedicated theologians have eventually fallen to the ground while our Lord's confidence in the "unbreakableness" of Scripture has been reaffirmed (John 10:35).

Speculation once said that Babylonian king lists clearly demonstrated the non-existence of Belshazzar, just as Assyrian materials supposedly found Scripture to be in error about the existence of Sargon. Speculation doubted the existence of Hittites in the Fertile Crescent with what seemed to be good and reasonable evidence. Even many conservative scholars were at one time convinced that men in Moses' day could not write. The available evidence seemed to suggest that alphabetic language had not yet been invented. Some of the "oldtime" conservatives argued that it must have been a miracle that enabled Moses to write (since Scripture [cf. Exod 24:4] clearly seems to teach that he did). As another example, non-evangelical speculation once denied that any harmony could be achieved that would satisfy the chronological data given for the kings of Israel and Judah. None of those speculations stand today. It is the authentic canonical

research tools for biblical study and serious academic theological works have recently been published by Zondervan Publishing House, Baker Book House, Moody Press, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, InterVarsity Press, and many other evangelical publishers. Distribution of these scholarly tools is exceptionally high even at the most theologically conservative seminaries and Bible schools as well as among pastors and Bible teachers and students. Since inerrancy applies only to the actual meaning of the authentic text, many evangelicals who accept inerrancy have dedicated much of their scholarly activities to textual criticism, using their best available insights and procedures, trying to determine the original form of the authentic canonical text. Others have with equal dedication pursued studies in biblical backgrounds, ancient customs, technical linguistics, and other philosophical and theological disciplines. They have given themselves to studies in history and chronology, literary (genre) criticism, and the whole range of ancient near eastern studies. Evangelical scholars (as well as many fine nonevangelical scholars) have devoted themselves to biblical (Old and New Testament) archaeology, to the study of the Graeco-Roman period in particular, to studies in Jewish rabbinical literature, to the comparative study of ancient religions, and to a host of related scholarly activities. Those who believe in the integrity and the truthfulness of the authentic biblical text have also produced analytical as well as devotional commentaries on the biblical books. The *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* is a good place to sample some of the current work done by evangelical scholars. But scholarly Evangelicals are not all members of that particular professional Society and the range of scholarly contributions to biblical studies from Evangelicals world-wide is much broader, of course, than that one small Journal. A more representative source of Evangelical scholarship would be the academic book catalogs from Zondervan, Baker, Moody, and the many other fine conservative religious publishers. Evangelicals even publish with some of the scholarly publishers that are more eclectic in perspective, such as Harper and Row, or Oxford.

text of Scripture that stands vindicated.²¹ We know through more recently discovered archaeological evidence the location and much of the content of both Sargon's and Belshazzar's headquarters. Today students can study firsthand the Hittite language and artifacts reflective of their culture. Reasonable chronologies have been achieved by evangelical scholars who patiently sought and finally discovered the biblical pattern for counting and thus for recording the years ancient kings reigned. Writing is now known to antedate Moses by at least several centuries.

I do not claim that all of these new discoveries were made by people committed to biblical inerrancy. That is not the case. But I do claim that the better the evidence gets, the stronger the claim for inerrancy becomes. Belief in inerrancy has not impeded the advance of true scholarship in any major area. In fact, if it has had an effect at all it has been to caution speculative scholarship against a too hasty dismissal of biblical testimony. Inerrantists have (or should have) a strong commitment to honest scholarship that helps us to understand better God's Word.

Inerrancy and Proper Interpretation

The doctrine of biblical inerrancy does not prevent proper biblical interpretation, it fosters it. As evangelical Christian interpreters, we seek the actual meaning of the biblical text in its authentic context, and we accept that meaning as true. To misinterpret the text is to misunderstand that which God wants us to understand.²²

²¹Even the cherished Pentateuchal documentary theories of Wellhausen (as "perfected" by Eissfeldt) have been seriously challenged in recent years by solid historical and linguistic evidence. Speculations about the late dating of New Testament books has recently encountered substantial rebuttal arguments even from non-evangelical scholars like the late John A.T. Robinson, formerly of Trinity College, Cambridge.

Among other sources, I would encourage the serious student to familiarize himself with at least these works: John A.T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976); William Sanford LaSor, David Allen Hubbard, and Frederic William Bush, *Old Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982); K.A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1966); J.A. Thompson, *The Bible and Archaeology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972); Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970); Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, rev. and exp. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986); E.M. Blaiklock and R.K. Harrison, eds. *The New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, Regency Reference Library, 1983); and Frank E. Gaebelien, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 1: "Introductory Articles" (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979). Solid reference works such as the *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* and the new *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, should also be consulted by those readers who wish to build their faith on reliable evangelical scholarly sources.

²²If we were to read a figure of speech as if it were literalistically true, we would seriously misrepresent that actual teaching of the text. Unfortunately, even evangelicals may

Inerrancy then is not opposed to good interpretation; rather, it demands it. Good interpretation requires that one seek the harmonious, authentic meaning of the whole passage in its whole context given the legitimate parameters of word and phrase meaning provided by the ancient cultural setting. We must first of all interpret the Bible on its own terms, and then, when we fully understand what the text meant to its original author and his readers, we can make legitimate applications to our own cultural and personal situations.

The Real Meaning of Biblical Inerrancy

Inerrancy is not a political issue. It is not an anti-scholarly attitude, and it does not support poor interpretive methods. What then does belief in biblical inerrancy actually mean?

Biblical inerrancy means that the authentic canonical text of Scripture is to be accepted as being truthful. We study the Bible in its canonical form to discover its specific and its contextual meaning. We then are to take that holistic meaning as being truth delivered with the authority of God.

All truth is God's truth. All authority ultimately proceeds from God. He stands as the veracious and the imperial authority of which there is no greater.

God, having graciously revealed Himself, having made known to us the truths He deemed good for us to know, having conveyed through His servants His will for human history and for our individual lives, expects us to hear His Word, to love Him and our neighbor, to be baptized (1) upon repentance from sin (as God defines it in Scripture), and (2) upon a public profession of faith in God's Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, as our resurrected Lord, and then to live a consistent, Spirit-filled life of service to God and to our fellow humans.

at times read out of a passage something other than what the author put in.

If we must err, however, it would seem to be better to stand before God's throne at the final judgment and plead guilty for taking something in Scripture too seriously than to be condemned for not taking it seriously enough, or worse for spiritualizing away the true meaning. How could it ever be acceptable to set our rational conclusions in opposition to the clear teaching of Christ our Lord? Remember, Christ Himself will be our judge (John 5:27; 1 Cor 4:4-5; Rom 14:10)!

Not everything in Scripture is perfectly clear, however, and we must always be open to better interpretations and new insights that others may have. We should not, on the other hand, take the position that Scripture itself is wrong at any point. Our understanding may (and does) need to be improved, but the Word of our Lord stands forever (1 Pet 1:24-25).

What Difference Does it Make?

Though many continue to think of biblical inerrancy as a cause of division, rightly understood it is actually the essence of Christian unity. In addition to our common recognition of Jesus as Lord, the Bible we have in common is the Christian's legitimate "common ground" with other Christians. Differences in matters of interpretation obviously do exist, and they are sometimes a strain on Christian unity. Denominational distinctives for the most part are due to interpretive differences among Christians. Some of these differences are more serious and some are less serious. Some, I think, are destructive and some are not. But as Christians seek the unity spoken of in Ephesians 4, we must never forget the source by which we know what the one faith is and who the one Lord is.

Without getting into too much detail, I would like to briefly illustrate the way biblical inerrancy helps us to distinguish between legitimate differences of interpretation and destructive differences, and why this doctrine is able to help us make that kind of distinction. With apologies to my scholarly friends for the over-simplifications involved in the next few pages, I want to relate the true doctrine of biblical inerrancy to one of the controversial issues of biblical interpretation that is, in my view, a legitimate difference. Then I want to apply biblical inerrancy to a type of biblical interpretation that seems to me to have the potential for leading to destructive differences.

Diversity Within Unity

The so-called "millennial question" has to do with the interpretation of biblical prophecy.²³ The implications, however, of the various interpretive systems that grow out of this matter extend to virtually every part of the Bible (not just to "prophetic" portions). Differences over the "millennial question" often result in different interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount, or of the parables of Jesus. Millennial views include different interpretations of the time, number, and nature of the judgment, the time, manner, and purpose of the second coming of Christ, and many other matters of interpretation in both the Old and the New Testaments that are significant in our Christian faith.

Some of us are amillennial and others of us are pre-millennial.²⁴ Some of us believe in a pre-tribulational rapture of the church. Others of

²³The word "millennium" is from the Latin words for thousand (*mille*) years (*annum*) and is taken from the description found in Revelation 20. Some take the passage literally and others do not. Some identify the kingdom of God with that thousand year period and others do not. This seemingly simple distinction results in vastly different ways of interpreting the rest of the Bible, however.

²⁴These terms carry vast meaning to informed Bible students. Amillennialists do

us believe in a post-tribulational rapture.²⁵ These and other related interpretive issues are real, and they are significant, but they are issues that are secondary to the inerrancy debate.²⁶

No doubt many feel very strongly about these interpretive issues. Furthermore, there certainly have been, and perhaps there still is, in some circles, an unofficial bias against premillennial teaching. In the past, for example, Sunday School literature produced by our Sunday School Board has exclusively taught the amillennial system of interpretation. This unfortunate stance has proven to be very divisive, because it excluded a legitimate difference of interpretive opinion. Premillennial leaders in our convention often, unsuccessfully, sought fair and balanced treatment of millennial questions.²⁷ Nevertheless, millennial views have not been, and in my judgment should not become, a fellowship test within our denomination.²⁸

not expect a future historical kingdom. They believe the kingdom of God is spiritual and exists now and is manifested by the existence of the church. Christ will return at the end of time. A pre-millennialist, on the other hand, expects Christ to return in order to establish (historically) the kingdom of God where His will is done on earth just as it is in heaven (Matt 6:10). The return of Christ, then, is not at the end of time but rather is prior to (pre-) the time of the millennial kingdom. Though they are rare in Baptist life today, there are a growing number of Bible scholars who are renewing interest in an older view known as post-millennialism, the belief that a historical manifestation of God's kingdom will occur prior to the return of Christ: thus the Lord comes after (post-) the kingdom age.

²⁵The tribulation is the time of God's great judgment on the earth at the end of this age (Matt 24:21; Rev 6:15–17).

²⁶Inerrantists are found on all sides and inbetween on these eschatological matters. See Millard J. Erickson, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977). Sometimes evangelicals debate Calvinism (in particular the doctrine of election). Once in awhile we differ on some other issue such as church government, ordination, baptism, even evangelism and social ministries. We even debate non-theological issues. Inerrancy relates to all of these matters, because no one seriously debates issues that are unrelated to truth values. If we did not believe one view was correct and the other view was wrong, we would not argue the point. Modern dialectical theologians tell us that truth is always somehow "both/and" rather than "either/or." Such an argument may stun us temporarily with its superficial appearance of profundity, but in our minds and in our hearts we know that truth is not infinitely eclectic. Truth is everlastingly narrow. Not every "either/or" is valid, however. I often urge students to look for "both/and" answers to certain kinds of questions. We must be as broadminded as the truth is broad, but when we adopt error as if it were simply a form of truth, we have been deceived. It is an error to assume that any authentic teaching of Scripture is false.

²⁷I was pleased to read in August of 1984 that the trustees of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board had affirmed new editorial guidelines giving equitable treatment to various millennial interpretations in our church literature. This is a positive step toward convention harmony. It should have been done years earlier.

²⁸Amillennialists and pre-millennialists agree on the fact of the personal return of Christ at the end of this "church age," and fellowship lines may be properly drawn there. We could not support someone who denied the reality of the Second Coming. Fellowship

Inerrancy as Common Ground

The various millennial views are built on varying interpretations of Scripture, but they are important to us because we believe in common that the correct interpretation, whatever that is in this case, is the truth of God's Word. What happens, however, if we lose this common foundational assumption? What if we decide that Scripture may be wrong, that it may teach some things that are not true?

What if we use all our skill to determine the correct reading of our text, we use every bit of archaeological and historical information to discover the cultural setting and the original contextual meaning, we examine every bit of available linguistic evidence to discover grammatical nuances, and we study every serious commentary to gain insight from the research done by others, and thus arrive at the best interpretation we can, perhaps even the correct interpretation? Do we then have the real and final truth?

Could we discover, with certainty, the authentic meaning of the text and still be deceived, misled, or misinformed by the Bible? "No," say proponents of biblical inerrancy. "Yes," say those who deny inerrancy.

Here we reach the bottom line. Can we trust the Bible completely? Can we believe everything it teaches? If we agree that we can, then we will continue, perhaps, to debate our millennial views, our various degrees of acceptance of Calvinism, or any of our other theories with full seriousness yet with real potential for resolving our differences. But if we can agree on the authentic meaning of the text in its context and still disagree on what we are to believe, we have lost our common ground. We are left to our own subjective opinions, our own rational theories, our own futile speculations. This is how the secular world lives, but Christians claim to have a revelation from God. Because God is God, that revelation is infallible and authoritative. The inerrancy of Scripture is, therefore, our only truly foundational, rationally coherent, common ground.

does not require a total agreement, however.

It is simply and obviously false to claim that both views of interpreting the prophetic Scriptures are correct, or to claim that such interpretations really don't make any difference. They do make a big difference, but it is not the kind of difference that must organically divide us if fair and balanced treatment can characterize our academic discussions.

I don't expect a pastor to preach both sides in every sermon. I expect him to persuasively argue for the interpretation that he believes. But I do expect him to be aware of the issues involved, and I expect him to be truthful and fair.

Even more I would expect a trained academician, a college or seminary professor, to be fair. He may also have a view that he may persuasively argue, but because of his position as a teacher, supported financially by Christians of various persuasions, he is doubly under obligation to be fair, open-minded and balanced at this point.

The Loss of Christian Unity

There is something that is often classified simply as a “matter of interpretation” which actually is the destruction of our common ground. That something is modern negative biblical criticism.²⁹ Its specialized theories of “community” authorship, conflicting sources, and doctrinal evolution removes from the ordinary reader the ability to interpret the Bible and gives it to an intellectual elite.

Modern biblical criticism often intimidates preachers and causes them to hesitate. It leaves them in perpetual uncertainty before their scholarly peers. It often dampens their spiritual fervor and sometimes discourages them from giving themselves fully to God.

It has never produced a spiritual revival. It does not contribute to evangelistic or missionary success. This spiritual loss would be expected of error, but it is not to be expected as a result from God’s truth.

Modern critics often work on naturalistic assumptions. Even when individuals deny personally having or using those assumptions, their critical conclusions may, nevertheless, remain compatible with them. They may downplay the miraculous for example, or they may discount predictive prophecy. They work with the Bible as if it were in its origin strictly a human book. (Modern critics and evangelicals have such different views about the sources and nature of the biblical text that it is almost as if they were looking at two different books.)

Is naturalistic humanism instead of Christianity the truth after all? No! God’s revealed Word is truth, even if every man turns out to be a liar (John 17:17; Rom 3:4).

Summary

Legitimate differences of biblical interpretation do exist. These differences may be very serious, and they may produce much controversy. But among those who hold in common their belief in the infallibility of Scripture, the differences do not become destructive. Christian fellowship exists centered around a common commitment to seek the truth and a common agreement that doctrinal truth will be found in the Holy Scripture which we have in common.

Modern criticism, however, at times concludes that even the correct interpretation of the authentic text is erroneous. The Bible is not always

²⁹Not all biblical criticism is negative, of course. A sane and balanced discussion of contemporary evangelical thought on some aspects of critical studies is found in Carl F.H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 6 vols. (Waco: Word Books, 1979), 4:385–404. See also J. Barton Payne, “Higher Criticism and Biblical Inerrancy,” in *Inerrancy*, 83–113; and D.A. Carson, “Redaction Criticism: On the Legitimacy and Illegitimacy of a Literary Tool,” in *Scripture and Truth*, 115–42.

right or truthful, according to this view. Hence the “search for truth” shifts away from the Scripture we have in common, and it shifts to the persuasive reasoning of the scholarly mind. This subjective basis for faith does not finally submit to the objective Word of God, and thus the speculations are seldom more than intellectual and/or cultural biases. There is no compelling authority of God in the speculative reasonings of men, even devout men.

Scripture, however, viewed as inerrant, gives all of us a common source of knowledge about the faith. What we affirm together is our legitimate common ground: Inerrancy does not settle all specific interpretive issues, but it does provide an objective basis for an authentic orthodox faith. This is the true meaning of the doctrine of inerrancy. May God give us grace to renew our commitment to the ground and sole basis of “contentful” knowledge about our Lord and thus about our faith.

A Philosophical Postscript

I make no claim to being a good philosopher, much less a profound one, but philosophical thinking is at its best simply clear thinking, logical thinking, thinking that searches out the implications of alternative ideas and tries to develop ideas that are intellectually strong. My reasoning may be inadequate—truth is often inadequately defended—but I am persuaded that sound thinking supports biblical inerrancy. One simply cannot argue logically from errancy to divine authority.

In the paragraphs that follow, I want to set forth one line of reasoning that supports the validity of believing in divine revelation. It is because we believe that “God has spoken” that we believe in the authority of the Bible.

In academic theological circles a highly specialized vocabulary has been developed in order to sharpen up our ideas. I will not hesitate to use this vocabulary to set forth my case, but I am aware that for that reason some readers will find this chapter to be more difficult or complex than some of the other chapters.

My purpose, however, is not to cloud the issues but rather to clarify them. If I fail to do that, or if my reasoning is unpersuasive, that means only that I have failed, not that truth has failed. The truth of God will stand whether I defend it successfully or not.

Essential Elements of Knowledge

In the first place I contend that skepticism is the logical result of all forms of non-theistic humanism and non-biblical theisms.³⁰ It seems

³⁰The Greek word for God is *theos*, from which we get our English terms, “theism”

to me that we must have at least these two elements in any valid knowledge claim: (1) a valid, cognitive starting point; and (2) a basis for trusting reason itself.³¹ Biblical theism offers both. Non-theistic humanism and nonbiblical theisms seem to offer neither. Thus they tend to collapse into skepticism when pressed by Socratic inquiries.³²

A Basis for Trusting Reason. The biblical God is no abstract monad. Rather, He is a complex, personal being living eternally in a dynamic, spiritual relationship. From eternity He has been producing and experiencing communication and love within His triune nature.

God is the absolute creator of all things, thus His knowledge is complete. He created by His Word. He spoke reality into being. This means that rational propositional knowledge of the universe is not only possible but is a part of the essential nature of the universe. Science is, therefore, a valid enterprise. The universe is rationally ordered and lawfully operating. It is not an accidental, unintelligible product of impersonal chaos and explosive disorder.³³

According to the Bible this personal God by His rational Word also created mankind in His own image. Biblical theism, then, teaches that we are like God in that we too are personal beings with rational minds. We can act rationally. We can communicate and love. We can think and know.

If, however, my “rational” mind is not a product of divine creation but rather is a direct product of random mutations and impersonal, natural changes and chance processes, then why should I trust it to be a valid tool for the discovery of truth?

Undoubtedly the mind has a pragmatic usefulness. Our ideas can often be implemented and expected results can be achieved. But if the origin of mind is chance, then it is only by chance that it happens to work correctly. Chance processes are far more likely to be fundamentally unreliable. Surely randomness is an excessively weak basis on which to ground rationality and truth.

Whatever pragmatic usefulness our rationality may have, it ultimately must base its nature in its origin. If the source of mind is impersonal

and “theistic,” referring to systems of thought based on the existence of an all powerful, supreme, personal Being. Biblical theism is built on the assumption that the God of the Bible is that supreme Being.

³¹Knowledge claims, of course, also need empirical support and/or rational coherence and perhaps a measure of relevance as well, but we could never validate a knowledge claim that lacked the two elements mentioned in the text.

³²A Socratic inquiry is a series of probing questions that forces one back to his or her primary, foundational presuppositions and assumptions. This was the dialog style followed by Socrates of Athens, one of the most famous of the early Greek philosophers.

³³Some scientists accept a chaotic origin for the universe, but their complex, orderly, rational explanations of this original state don't sound like products of chaos.

matter in chaos plus time (and that alone), then if we affirm that mind ever achieves “personality” or in any significant sense transcends chaos, we will have affirmed that a great evolutionary miracle was performed by the impersonal decay process described as “time.” That is incredible. The assumption that time produces order out of chaos may be held only by one whose mind goes contrary to all known logical principles and all known scientific regularities.³⁴ Chaos produces more chaos, not order, and the verifiable facts of scientific research are all consistent with this conclusion, though some speculative, naturalistic cosmological theories still grasp at straws and argue otherwise.

If, on the other hand, our mind is a creation gift of a rational God, then our rationality originates and is based in ultimate personal rationality itself. Our minds are in the likeness of God’s own mind. Our reason, our logic, and our mental comprehension may be limited and often imperfect, but human rationality is not grounded upon nothingness. Biblical theists have a basis for trusting in the validity of reason itself, and the recognition of the fact of divine revelation by one or more of those devout human minds provides a valid starting point for knowledge itself.

A Valid Cognitive Starting Point. Non-revelationists must accept experience alone as the starting point of knowledge. More sophisticated thinkers try to modify this by emphasizing collective experience, publicly reported experiences, and perhaps a series of confirming experiences. These are all part of the Christian theory of knowledge as well. As Kant³⁵ clearly realized, however, unless there is some sure connection between perception and reality, which he believed there was not, we are doomed to ultimate agnosticism, if not skepticism. What could possibly bridge the gap between things as they are and things as we perceive them to be? We certainly know how things appear to be, but do we perceive them correctly? How could we know one way or the other?

We could know reality if we were given a body of truth as a valid starting point, and if we knew that perception and reason were valid tools. If we had some truth to start with, we could test our collective experiences by that truth and thus rationally expand our ideas with some confidence. This starting point must be epistemologically relevant and it must come from an utterly truthful source. Divine revelation is that kind of a starting

³⁴The very fact that it is possible for a mind to think independently of both logic and scientific law is evidence that its nature is not strictly natural. Thought processes are not bound by natural laws to think only in natural cause and effect patterns. The human mind gives evidence of its natural component (the physical brain) and its non-natural component (its ability, among other things, to conceptualize, worship, and reason).

³⁵Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was a Prussian philosopher who, among other things, is well known for his contributions to the modern theory of knowledge.

point. Revelation and reason come from God Himself, an utterly truthful source.

Revelation, Truth, and Meaning

According to the world-view of biblical theism, human knowledge ultimately depends on divine revelation. God spoke to Adam first and gave him a responsible starting point and a direction for thought and action (Gen 1:28–30). Adam then could use the mind God gave him to respond, to learn, and to initiate new ideas (Gen 2:16–23).

Naturalism, on the other hand, has only evolutionary processes to fall back on to account for mind and rationality. The origin of true grammatical language is effectively unaccounted for in evolutionary theory. Naturalism offers only chance, or perhaps faith in some as yet undiscovered principle of nature, as a basis for trusting reason itself.

Biblical theism, however, does support rationality. The Bible accounts for reason. As Bible-believing Christians, (1) we can base reason in reality; (2) we can potentially know the real truth; (3) we have the rational potential to interpret the world correctly; (4) we can account for the existence of personality; (5) we can realistically have hope and meaning for life; and (6) last, but not least, we can have a moral base. Scripture reveals God's views concerning right and wrong, good and evil, truth and error. Divine revelation could not be false, else we would have a false god. The true God always speaks the truth. If God were not always truthful, we would fall right back into uncertainty as our ultimate epistemological principle. Knowledge would have no stability, truth could fluctuate into error and back again. The world would be ultimately meaningless! This hard reality is recognized and accepted by many of the more consistent naturalistic thinkers.³⁶ It is

³⁶See, for example, Joe E. Barnhart, *Religion and the Challenge of Philosophy* (Totowa, NJ: Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1975), 182–83: "Indeed, according to the naturalist, humanity was not begun for any cosmic purpose and has no cosmic aim, goal, or meaning.... Naturalists concede that for many human beings who are taught that they are eternally and cosmically important, the philosophy of naturalism is indeed a bitter pill to swallow." The dream of cosmic significance, such as that God made you for a purpose, and that God loves you in particular, is "born of both wishful thinking and the undisciplined vain imaginings of a finite species resentful of its mortality."

In his discussion of biblical authority, on p. 48, Barnhart explains: "In my own opinion, the infallibilists were right to fear that once the Bible is admitted to be not infallible in some minor parts, then it might very well turn out to be not infallible or trustworthy in any of its major doctrines. At the same time, I think that . . . a great many . . . biblical scholars have pretty well shown that there are errors in the Bible. The conclusion, I regret to say, is that the Bible seems not to be authoritative as a guide to such metaphysical doctrines as salvation, life after death, God's existence, and various other matters."

Barnhart is a very consistent naturalist, and thus, in chapter 12, p. 240, he tells us that: "The hypothesis to be considered in this chapter is that Jesus Christ did not exist in the first century, and therefore did not suffer under Pontius Pilate. Nor was he crucified

nevertheless devastating to those who, because they are made in God's image, naturally seek the meaningful relationships God intends for them to have with Him and others.

The Existence of God

Chance and chaos are always alternatives to logic and biblical theism. There are no rationally inescapable arguments that can rule out the possibility that there might be no God. All may be ultimate chaos. This little eddy of human civilization may be just that, an accidental eddy.

But we do have strong reasons to argue differently. After all, chance never gives us more than a possible cause for something, yet we have an actual universe, and an actual human civilization on this special planet. This actual, contingent universe must have been actually caused, not just possibly caused. Contingency is not infinite, for if "something" is truly existentially dependent upon "something else," then that "something else" must actually exist or else the contingent "something" would not exist. For an "actual something" not to exist is self-contradictory and impossible. Thus arguments leading to such a conclusion must be false.

An actual, contingent entity needs an actual cause. I am an actually existing contingent being and thus whatever logic I may or may not use, I cannot existentially deny that there must be some actual, necessary, non-contingent reality that enables me to exist, to live and move and have my being. That reality is God. Theism provides an actual cause for existence, a source of knowledge, and a means for comprehending the truth.

The Existence of Truth

If God were false, then there would be no source and basis for truth. But to claim that God is false is to claim that one knows what is true, or

and subsequently raised from the dead. The teachings attributed to him came mostly from Jewish history, and over a period of time the 'story' of Jesus, like many legends, was woven together from numerous pagan and Jewish sources. In short, the movement of Christianity came about without a historical Jesus."

While I respect Barnhart as a scholar and while he has always exhibited in every way kindness and respect toward me and my views, I must point out that his defense of naturalism, his denial of the existence of the biblical God, his denial of biblical infallibility, and his denial of the historicity of Jesus do set him apart from orthodox Christianity in very serious ways. Thus, I am puzzled by the positive comments some Southern Baptists have made about Barnhart's treatment of recent Southern Baptist history in his *The Southern Baptist Holy War* (Austin: Texas Monthly Press, 1986). Conservatives could use the book to document their claims that some Baptists believe that the Bible is fallible. But those Baptists who wish to use the book to expose the evils of "Fundamentalism" must be aware of the hook that lies in that bait. If inerrancy is denied, as Barnhart thinks it must be, the result, as Barnhart sees it, is the loss of Christianity altogether. Politics still makes strange bedfellows. Barnhart, a former Southern Baptist, is currently a member of a Unitarian Universalist church.

at least that one can know what truth is not. But where could this idea and standard of truth originate? What universally agreed upon standard of truth could exist apart from God? Without a God of truth, truth itself would be nothing more than a relativistic subjectivism, and thus would not be truth. It seems that without God our intellectual categories would reduce to individual choice and fallible human opinion. Judgment then could only be based on someone's sincerity. Biblically speaking, judgment implies an ultimate standard, and that can only be an unchanging God. Ultimately God must stand as the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. He is the only source of absolute truth. Only the God of Holy Scripture can be the foundational source of truth and at the same time provide a foundational basis for comprehending the truth by making us in His image with individual, personal rationality.

Revelation from this God would then always be a revelation of truth. Scripture is an essential product of divine revelation. Scripture flows from truth, and truth does not of itself produce error. Therefore we expect to find Scripture to be inerrantly true.

Holy Scripture surely claims to be from God and thus to be truthful. Over and over again Scripture calls itself the Word of the Lord, and the New Testament apostles speak of the inspiration of God's Spirit. Scripture is evidenced to be truthful by archaeology, history, and a multitude of other confirming evidences. Reason recognizes these evidences for what they are and draws the conclusion that Scripture is truthful.

Not only that, but Scripture meets the best tests for truth. Reason examines Scripture and finds it to be rationally coherent and supported by adequate empirical evidence. Moreover, Scripture is also spiritually and existentially relevant to human life.

Conclusion

These philosophical evidences are able to be elaborated in much more detail, but at least the trend and the flow of the argument has been given. To me this type of reasoning is sound. It is able to be tested by reason and evidence, and it is simply, yet definitely, confirmed by the attitude toward Scripture that Christ taught His apostles to have.

Reason tells me that if the Son of God believed Scripture to be the truth of God that I should believe it. I have at least five valid, independent historical testimonies collected in the New Testament (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Paul) that give inter-locking confirmation that this is exactly what Jesus did believe and teach.

If I am wrong, I will be wrong trusting Jesus to be right. The teaching of Christ stands above any and all philosophical reasoning. Christ taught

that Scripture was wholly trustworthy and that it would stand unbroken until the day of its final fulfillment. Even then it stands fulfilled forever.

A Summary and a Plea

Holy Scripture is the written form of God's divine revelation to us. Therefore, as it was originally given, it is fully trustworthy, or inerrant.

Much of modern biblical criticism has assumed that Scripture is a composition of many wonderful accounts of deeply moving and profound religious experiences, but that these human accounts are often filled with personal opinion, theological bias, and human error. Evangelicals, on the other hand, reject the modern idea that Scripture is primarily a production of the religious community. Evangelicals reject the notion that biblical theology is only a composite of the theological and moral diversity of the ancients.

Evangelicals still adopt the older prophetic model of biblical authorship. We accept the Bible's own account of its origin whenever it provides one, and we seek to learn about the times and places and the cultural setting of each writing prophet or apostle. Furthermore we listen to Moses and the prophets and primarily to Christ and His apostles and adopt from them our belief in the inspiration and authority of Scripture. This view is then confirmed by substantial supplemental evidences that persuade us that the scriptural accounts are factual and historically real. Our God-given reason recognizes the truth that Scripture is and must be inerrant if it is in any real sense the Word of God.

The inerrancy of Scripture is not a purely semantic issue. It reaches down into the philosophical depths of our soul and challenges us at the door of our very being. Christians, I believe, have a responsibility to study the Word of God prayerfully and learn as much as possible about who God is and what God is doing in our world. Then we must proclaim the Word of God to a lost and dying world. We should flee from any insignificant controversy and seek to obey Christ by following His example in life, in death, and in relationships to others. In particular we ought to follow His example by believing that Scripture is ever and always true.

In light of the clear, historic commitment of Baptist people to the full truthfulness and authority of Scripture, Baptist agency heads should reaffirm their continuing effort to seek the finest evangelical, Bible-believing, Christ-honoring leaders to work in the various agency programs. But the responsibility for perpetuating true Christian faith is not primarily in the hands of institutions or agencies. It is in the hands of local bodies of believers. Every pulpit committee should know how their prospective pastor stands on biblical authority and biblical truthfulness. The pulpit is no place

for the modern critic who doubts the Word of God. The under-shepherd must feed the sheep the truth of God's Word. Hesitation here is deadly for the missionary expansion of the church.

It is the content and teachings of Scripture and Scripture only that we must preach to the people of the world. It is Christ only who died that we might be saved from the wages of sin. It is the God of the Bible who created us and who will judge us both now and at the end of time. Obedience to God's will as revealed in Scripture characterizes the Christian lifestyle.

The Bible is God's truthful revelation written down by men moved to do so by the Holy Spirit. It inerrantly tells me that He loved me while I was yet a sinner. Scripture inerrantly tells me that Christ died in my place, making a substitutionary atonement for my sin. The Bible also inerrantly tells me that I must be born again, that the Christian life can be full of hope and meaning, and that one day Christ Himself will return to earth as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Amen! Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

An Important Addendum

My intent in these pages was to explain and from my perspective defend the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. I have done that in the context of theological concerns that are currently being debated in our Southern Baptist circles. Nevertheless, there is another word that needs to be said concerning our Baptist academic life.

I must speak frankly in saying that problematic theological issues can be documented in Baptist life, and they are of serious concern to many of us. It is quite misleading, on the other hand, to ignore the many positive aspects of academic life and theological education in the Southern Baptist Convention.

The faculty of which I am a part is well known for its commitment to careful exegesis, biblical theology, missions, and evangelism. I have friends teaching on other campuses, both at the college and at the seminary level, who I know personally and in whom I have the greatest confidence. Southern Baptists must not solve their theological controversies by methods of wholesale destruction.

Deeply committed servants of God may differ in serious ways and yet find common ground in our Baptist heritage centered around the Christ of Scripture. The diversity we sometimes boast of is not infinite, however, and just any and every view will not do. We must never compromise the truth. To do so is to fail to take God's nature seriously enough.

In our concern to defend biblical inerrancy, however, I would urge my conservative brethren to realize that scholarship is a valuable commod-

ity. We must not arrogantly destroy a valued resource over what in many cases actually is a problem of semantics or misunderstanding.

Most of my faculty colleagues treat the Bible as the utterly truthful Word of God even when they refuse to speak of Scripture as “inerrant.” Some of them at times may differ with me over the nature and use of critical methods. We sometimes differ in matters of interpretation. Nevertheless, I can still learn from them when I have confidence in their integrity and when I know their heart and their commitment to Christ.

Inerrancy to me is a theological concept that embraces philosophical and hermeneutical methods as well as doctrines of biblical inspiration and authority. I know of many Baptist scholars who stand theologically in the evangelical tradition, who reject neo-orthodoxy, naturalistic humanism, and negative biblical criticism. These scholars love God and they love the church. They desperately need encouragement and support. They are too often overshadowed by suspicion due to over-generalizations and undue criticism.

We urgently need to rekindle fires of warm trust, not blind trust, nor apathetic trust, but sincere, informed trust that issues in communication and dialog. Devout scholarship is the energy that can hoist a new steeple over our convention that will point us to God. Anti-intellectualism and apathy are the drains through which our babies may be thrown out with our bathwater. At the same time we must be willing to admit that appropriate drains are essential to ‘the health of our little ones. May God help us find the solid rock of common ground in these days of testing.

My prayer is that this small volume can contribute to the inerrancy discussions in a serious way to bring about better understanding and a renewed commitment to biblical faith. Where we must disagree we can do so with integrity in dialog.

Jesus looked toward heaven and prayed:

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (John 17:20–23; NIV).

I too pray that we might all be one.