

“The Inerrancy of Scripture: The Trustworthy Truthfulness of the Bible”

Introduction:

I. Definitions of Inerrancy

Very basic idea: Scripture is wholly true and never false.¹

Wayne Grudem's simple definition is helpful: “The inerrancy of Scripture means that Scripture in the original manuscripts does not affirm anything that is contrary to fact.”²

Millard Erickson defines inspiration as “that supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit upon the Scripture writers which rendered their writings an accurate record of the revelation or which resulted in what they wrote actually being the Word of God.”³

J. I. Packer wrote that it is difficult to see how error can be “profitable” and contribute to our “instruction” in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16-17). According to Packer, “authority belongs to truth and truth only. . . . I can make no sense – no reverent sense, anyway – of the idea, sometimes met, that God speaks his truth to us in and through false statements by biblical writers.”⁴

Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy:

“We affirm that Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit.

We Deny that Biblical infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious, or redemptive themes, exclusive of assertions in the fields of history and science. We further deny that scientific hypotheses about earth history may properly be used to overturn the teaching of Scripture on creation and the flood.”⁵

¹ Paul Feinberg, “The Meaning of Inerrancy,” in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 294.

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 91.

³ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983) 199. Charles Hodge affirms that inspiration was “an influence of the Holy Spirit on the minds of certain select men, which rendered them the organs of God for the infallible communication of His mind and will. They were in such a sense the organs of God that what they said, God said” (*Systematic Theology* [New York: Scribner, Armstrong, and Co., 1872], 1:154). B. B. Warfield proposed that “the Bible is the Word of God in such a sense that its words, though written by men and bearing indelibly impressed upon them the marks of their human origin, were written, nevertheless, under such an influence of the Holy Ghost as to be also the words of God, the adequate expression of His mind and will. It has always recognized that this conception of co-authorship implies that the Spirit's superintendence extends to the choice of the words used by the human authors (verbal inspiration), and preserves its product from everything inconsistent with a divine authorship—thus securing, among other things, that entire truthfulness which is everywhere presupposed in and asserted for Scripture by the Biblical writers (inerrancy)” (*The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* [ed. S. Craig; Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1948], 173).

⁴ J. I. Packer, *Truth & Power: The Place of Scripture in the Christian Life* [Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1996], 46.

⁵ “The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy,” in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 496.

***Let's use Paul Feinberg's definition of "inerrancy" to deal with a handful of key issues:

"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.*"⁶

Here are the key elements of his definition with brief explanation/examples:

1. "when all facts are known"- As John Feinberg points out, "We cannot now empirically prove that end-time prophecies are true, but they will be verified in the eschaton. And, comments about heaven and hell are confirmable by personal experience, but only after one dies, not before."⁷

2. "in their original autographs"- these original autographs are inspired and inerrant

An "autograph" in this discussion signifies "the first complete document of each book of the Bible."⁸ However, we don't possess any of these since each biblical book has been copied hundreds or thousands of times over the centuries since the completion of the OT and NT. During that copying process, scribes could have accidentally or intentionally introduced variants (or errors) into those texts.

The discipline of "textual criticism" involves scholars who carefully examine the existing copies of biblical books, evaluating the variants and proposing the textual arrangement that best matches what was in the autograph. Of course, they cannot do this perfectly. However, none of the variants in any copied text impacts any biblical doctrine.

**Because of the centuries of copying biblical texts that occurred between the autographs and the Hebrew and Greek texts upon which our translations are based, we would say that our Bibles have a "derived" inspiration and inerrancy.

Notice the encouraging reality:

NT copies: There are over 5,000 Greek manuscripts of NT books as well as about 3,000 texts related to those manuscripts.⁹

"... through the science of textual criticism, scholars are able to establish what the original NT books said with 99 percent-plus accuracy, and they add that variant readings that are still uncertain as to which reading is correct in no way impact any matter of doctrine or practice. The message is clear: we know what the autographs of the NT said!"¹⁰

OT copies: At least 300 Hebrew manuscripts (or fragments) from 250–65 A.D. as well as 1300 manuscripts from the medieval period.¹¹

⁶ Feinberg, "The Meaning of Inerrancy," 294.

⁷ Feinberg, *Light in a Dark Place*, 245.

⁸ Feinberg, *Light in a Dark Place*, 307.

⁹ Feinberg, *Light in a Dark Place*, 312.

¹⁰ Feinberg, *Light in a Dark Place*, 313. See also John S. Feinberg, *Can You Believe It's True?: Christian Apologetics in a Modern and Postmodern Era* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 512, n. 32.

¹¹ Paul D. Wegner, "Has the Old Testament Text Been Hopelessly Corrupted," in *In Defense of the Bible*, eds. Steven B. Cowan and Terry L. Wilder (Nashville: B & H, 2013), 135.

“OT scholars, using the tools of textual criticism, believe they know what the original text of the OT said to a degree of 90 to 95 percent certainty. Readings still in doubt do not impact any matter of doctrine or practice.”¹²

2. “properly interpreted”—The expectation of “inerrancy” or “truth” in Scripture does not preclude the recognition of the presence of:

- Figurative language- a metaphorical expression with a literal point- John 14:6 when Jesus said, “I am the door”
- Hyperbole- an exaggeration to make a point- Mic. 6:7- “with thousands of rams or with ten thousand streams of oil”
- “Phenomenological” language- something written as it appears, not as a scientific statement—“the sun rose”
- Approximations- round numbers- 185,000 Assyrian soldiers or could it have been 4962? Jesus feeding the 5,000 or 4,988?
- Different genres in the Bible- Not all passages in the Bible involve historical narratives or theological statements. Parables present a key moral truth, but the details of the parable are not presented as historical realities.
- The potential for various interpretations of a passage (some of those will be flawed or erroneous)- an exegete’s interpretation of a biblical text is not inspired

According to John Frame: “Inerrant language is language that makes good on its own claims, not on claims that are made for it by thoughtless readers.”¹³

3. “wholly true in everything that they affirm”—what the biblical writer affirms as truth, not just what the biblical writer reports. The Bible sometimes includes statements by people (e.g. Cretan prophet- Titus 1:12) or Satan that (Gen. 3:4; Job 1:9-11) are not necessarily true. However, they are accurately recorded.

4. “whether that has to do with doctrine or morality or with the social, physical, or life sciences.”

Although I would take what could be called a “full inerrancy” view, there are evangelical brethren who would instead embrace “limited inerrancy” or “functional inerrancy”. They claim the Bible is inerrant in areas of faith and doctrine, but not science and history for example.

¹² Feinberg, *Light in a Dark Place*, 313; See also Ellis R. Brotzman and Eric J. Tully, *Old Testament Textual Criticism: A Practical Approach*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 3-4; Bruce K. Waltke, “Old Testament Textual Criticism,” in *Foundations for Biblical Interpretation*, ed. David S. Dockery, Kenneth A. Mathews, and Robert B. Sloan (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 157.

¹³ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010), 174.

Here are a couple of examples of limited inerrancy proponents:

Donald Bloesch (a functional inerrantist), helpfully captures the view with these representative words:

“Scriptural inerrancy can be affirmed if it means the conformity of what is written to the dictates of the Spirit regarding the will and purpose of God. But it cannot be held if it is taken to mean the conformity of everything that is written in Scripture to the facts of world history and science.”¹⁴

Another functional inerrantist, Jack Rogers, writes that “Calvin, in common with the early church fathers, held that the authority of Scripture resided in its function of bringing people into a saving relationship with God through Jesus Christ.”¹⁵

Generally, the primary emphasis of those who hold to limited or functional inerrancy is that we need to be concerned only about the *inerrancy of those passages that present truths related to redemption*.¹⁶

II. Biblical Support for Inerrancy:

A. Inerrancy is a corollary of divine inspiration.

2 Tim 3:16-17-

“inspired” = “God-breathed”- divine origin, divine authority, matches his perfect character

“The primary object of inspiration is the Bible itself, not its human authors . . . while we may speak of human authors as inspired, they are inspired only secondarily.”¹⁷

Also, lest anyone think that biblical inspiration left room for human authors to corrupt the Bible’s message, read the next passage:

2 Pet 1:20-21-

God’s making use of human authors does not corrupt the message in God’s Word. The Holy Spirit guarantees that their work matches God’s intentions and character.

B. God’s Character argues for inerrancy—God is a God of truth—All three persons of the Trinity

Num. 23:19-

¹⁴ Donald Bloesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration, and Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 107.

¹⁵ Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1979), xvii

¹⁶ In his summary of functional inerrancy, Dockery (holding to traditional inerrancy) writes: “Functional inerrancy contends that the Bible inerrantly accomplishes its purpose. This view does not equate inerrancy with factuality. The purpose of the Bible is to bring people into fellowship with Him. To the degree that this is done, the Bible can be said to be inerrant”; David S. Dockery, *The Doctrine of the Bible* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1991), 87.

¹⁷ Douglas K. Blount, “What Does It Mean to Say That the Bible Is True,” in *In Defense of the Bible*, eds. Steven B. Cowan and Terry L. Wilder (Nashville: B & H, 2013), 57.

1 Sam. 15:29-

John 3:33-

1. ***God the Father:***

Rom. 3:4-

John 17:17-

Titus 1:2-

Heb. 6:18-

2. ***God the Son:***

John 14:6-

1 John 1:5-

1 John 5:6a-

3. ***God the Spirit:***

John 14:17-

John 15:26-

John 16:13-

1 John 5:6b-

C. God communicates what is true—perfection

René Pache points out that the OT authors claim to be transmitting the very words of God 3,808 times.¹⁸
e.g., “Thus says the Lord,” “the utterance of the Lord,” etc.

1. Moses declared that the Word God gave through Him was absolutely perfect and authoritative.
All that God said and only what God said was authoritative and accurate:

Deut. 4:2-

Cf. Deut 12:32; Prov. 30:5-6

2. The Psalmists declared the surpassing value and perfection of God’s character and His expectations.

Ps. 12:6-

Ps. 19:4-7-

Ps. 119:42-

Ps. 119:60-

Ps. 119:96-

Ps. 119:128-

Ps. 119:137-138-

Ps. 119:140-

Ps. 119:142-

Ps. 119:151-

Ps. 119:160-

¹⁸ René Pache, *Inspiration and Authority of Scripture*, trans. Helen L. Needham (Chicago: Moody, 1974), 121.

Ps. 119:163-

Ps. 119:172-

3. The Prophet Isaiah presents Yahweh as the Incomparable One—Who speaks what is perfectly true

Isa. 45:19-

4. The Psalmists, Jesus and the Apostles also gave witness to the absolute reliability and perfection of the Scriptures

Ps. 119:89-

John 5:47-

John 10:35-

Rom. 7:12-

2 Cor. 3:7-

Col. 1:5-

James 1:18-

James 1:22-25-

James 4:5-

5. Various OT and NT writers regarded the Scriptures as correct to the smallest detail.

Matt. 5:17-18-

Luke 16:17-

Summary: “Although man’s limitations may indeed lead to questions and errors (cf. Isa 55:8–9; 2 Pet 3:16), Scripture is still God’s complete (John 16:12–13; Rev 22:18–19) and sufficient (2 Tim 3:16–17; 2 Pet 1:3) revelation for man, so that the proper response to perplexity and seeming contradictions is submission to God (cf. Job 40:1–5) as well as diligent study (2 Tim 2:15; cf. Job 42:1–6).”¹⁹

III. History of Inerrancy as a Belief in the Church

Many have asked this question: Is Inerrancy the consistent belief of the church down through history?

Along with a host of other non-conservative authors, Ernest Sandeen wrote that the doctrine of inerrancy in the original autographs “did not exist in either Europe or America prior to its formulation in the last half of the nineteenth century.”²⁰

While it is true that the specific term “inerrancy” is coined by scholars fighting against the tidal wave of liberalism that overran several major American denominations, the truth expressed by “inerrancy” was not at all brand new. Millard Erickson points out, “While there has not been a fully enunciated theory until modern times, nonetheless there was, down through the years of church history, a general belief in the complete dependability of the Bible.”²¹

Space and time do not allow a full coverage of examples that demonstrate the widespread view that the Scriptures were indeed inerrant, a few representative examples are offered here.²²

A. Early Church Fathers

Clement of Rome (d. ca. 99) gives us the earliest letter from one church to another outside of Scripture.

Writing around 96 AD, Clement claims, “the holy Scriptures, which are true, which were given through the Holy Spirit; you know that nothing unrighteous or counterfeit is written in them.”²³

¹⁹ One of my sharp Th.M. students wrote this helpful paragraph in an early draft of his thesis on the OT Law and the Christian. Way to go Thomas Westermann.

²⁰ Ernest Sandeen, *The Origins of Fundamentalism: Toward A Historical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 14. See also Rogers and McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible*, 265-379. Ernest Sandeen also claimed that nineteenth-century Princeton theologians A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield created the doctrine of inerrancy to combat the burgeoning threat of liberalism, Ernest Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 103-31.

²¹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998), 251. In an earlier edition, Erickson added at this point: “Whether this belief entailed precisely what contemporary inerrantists mean by the term “inerrancy” is not immediately apparent. Whatever the case, we do know that the general idea of inerrancy is not a recent development,” *Introducing Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), 62.

²² Two key sources with abundant examples of the presence of the concept of the “inerrancy of Scripture” throughout church history are John Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982); and John Hannah, ed., *Inerrancy and the Church* (Chicago: Moody, 1984). See also Jonathan Moorhead, “Inerrancy and Church History: Is Inerrancy a Modern Invention?,” *Master’s Seminary Journal* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 75-90. I draw on Moorhead heavily in this section.

²³ *Letter of the Romans to the Corinthians*, 45:2–3 in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd edition, edited and translated by Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic), 105.

Another early church father, Irenaeus (115–202), writes, “We should leave things of that nature to God who created us, being most properly assured that the Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God and His Spirit”²⁴

Justin Martyr (d. ca. 165), a greatest apologist of the second century, affirms that Scripture does not contradict itself when he writes, “I am entirely convinced that no Scripture contradicts another.”²⁵

Bromiley summarizes the viewpoint of these (and other) early church fathers: “there can be no mistaking that they held to divine, inerrant inspiration.”²⁶

B. Fourth Century Church Fathers

According to Moorhead, “The great eastern Cappadocian Fathers (Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil of Caesarea) are unanimous concerning the full trustworthiness of the sacred writings. Gregory of Nazianzus (329–390), also one of the great four Eastern doctors of the church, writes, ‘We, however, who extend the accuracy of the Spirit to the merest stroke and tittle, will never admit to the impious assertion that even the smallest matters were dealt with haphazard by those who have recorded them, and have thus been borne in mind down to the present day.’”²⁷

Another Eastern Church Father, John Chrysostom (349–407), upheld the inerrancy of the canonical writings. In his sermons he was careful to explain to his audience how differing Gospel accounts were complementary, and not contradictory. In his famous sermons “Concerning the Statues,” Chrysostom declared, “For the Scripture by no means speaks falsely.”²⁸

C. Augustine

Augustine (354–430) is arguably one of the greatest theologians in church history and is generally thought to usher in the Medieval Period because of his theological contributions. Notice these two statements that relate to his view of God’s Word:

“For it seems to me that the most disastrous consequences must follow upon our believing that anything false is found in the sacred books: that is to say, that the men by whom the Scripture has been given to us, and committed to writing, did put down in these books anything false. . . . For if you once admit into such a high sanctuary of authority one false statement . . . , there will not be left a single sentence of those books which, if appearing to any one difficult in practice or hard to believe, may not by the same fatal rule be explained away, as a statement in which, intentionally, . . . the author declared what was not true.”²⁹

He goes on to say:

²⁴ *Against Heresies*, II.XXVIII.2 in in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, edited by Philip Schaff (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 1:399. See also III.V.1, *ibid.*, 1:417.

²⁵ *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*, LXV in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, edited by Philip Schaff (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 1:230.

²⁶ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Historical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 27.

²⁷ Moorhead, “Inerrancy and Church History, 79; “Orations,” II.105, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, edited by Philip Schaff (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 7:225.

²⁸ “Concerning the Statues,” II.22 in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, edited by Philip Schaff (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 9:352.

²⁹ Letter XXVIII.3, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, edited by Philip Schaff (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 1:251–52.

“For I confess to your Charity that I have learned to yield this respect and honor only to the canonical books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error. And if in these writings I am perplexed by anything which appears to me opposed to truth, I do not hesitate to suppose that either the manuscript is faulty, or the translator has not caught the meaning of what was said, or I myself have failed to understand it.”³⁰

D. The Reformation Church

1. Martin Luther (1483–1546)

As Moorhead points out, “It is no surprise that the Reformation, which was known for *sola scriptura*, would emphasize the power, authority and inerrancy of the Bible. The great German Reformer, Martin Luther wrote that Scripture ‘never erred’ and ‘cannot err.’³¹

He also wrote: “It is impossible that Scripture should contradict itself, only that it so appears to the senseless and obstinate hypocrites.³² Luther found it unacceptable that God’s Word contained any falsehood or errors: “For it is established by God’s Word that God does not lie, nor does His word lie.”³³

In evaluation and summary, J. Theodore Mueller wrote that “Luther unfailingly asserts the inerrancy of Scripture over against the errancy of human historians and scientists.”³⁴

2. John Calvin (1509–1564)

In his commentary on 2 Timothy 3:16, Calvin wrote: “we know that God hath spoken to us, and are fully convinced that the prophets did not speak at their own suggestion, but that, being organs of the Holy Spirit, they only uttered what they had been commissioned from heaven to declare . . . we owe to the Scripture the same reverence which we owe to God; because it has proceeded from him alone, and has nothing belonging to man mixed with it.”³⁵

J. I. Packer summarizes Calvin’s view of Scripture: “Calvin could never have consciously entertained the possibility that any mistakes, whether of reporting or of interpreting facts of any sort whatever, could have entered into the text of Scripture as the human writers gave it.”³⁶

³⁰ Letter LXXXII.3, in *Ibid.*, 350.

³¹ Moorhead, “Inerrancy and Church History, 82; *Works of Martin Luther* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), XV:1481.

XIX:1073.

³² *Works of Martin Luther*, IX:650.

³³ *Works of Martin Luther*, XX:798. These statements do not ignore Luther’s struggles with interpretive difficulties in Scripture. For example, with regard to biblical chronologies, Luther writes that he refuses to agree with “those rash men who in the case of a Bible difficulty are not afraid to say that Scripture is evidently wrong; I conclude the matter with a humble confession of my ignorance, for it is only the Holy Ghost who knows and understands everything,” *Works of Martin Luther*, XX:798.

³⁴ J. Theodore Mueller, “Luther and the Bible,” in *Inspiration & Interpretation*, ed. John Walvoord (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 99.

³⁵ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, trans. William Pringle, (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1856), 248-49.

³⁶ J. I. Packer, “John Calvin and the Inerrancy of Holy Scripture,” in *Inerrancy and the Church*, ed. John Hannah (Chicago: Moody, 1984), 178; Edward Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), 104.

Edward Dowey concurs, “To Calvin the theologian an error in Scripture is unthinkable.”³⁷

This all-encompassing notion of the truthfulness of Scripture resulted in Augustine affirming the divine creation of the universe out of nothing; the origin of humanity no more than six thousand years before his time; the great age of people who lived before the flood; and the scientific possibility of the worldwide flood and of Noah’s ark to save eight people and the animals on board. Clearly, he believed that biblical inerrancy extended to matters of cosmology, human origins, genealogy, and the like. Scripture’s infallibility also meant that no contradictions exist in the Bible. Accordingly, Augustine underscored that ‘we are bound to believe’ everything in Scripture.³⁸

E. Summary

As Gregg Allison writes,

The church has historically acknowledged that Scripture in its original manuscripts and properly interpreted is completely true and without any error in everything that it affirms, whether that has to do with doctrine, moral conduct, or matters of history, cosmology, geography, and the like. Over time, the church has expressed this conviction by applying several terms to the Bible, such as truthful, inerrant, and infallible. No matter what term it used, the church from its outset was united in its belief that the Word of God is true and contains no error. The first significant challenge to this belief did not arise until the seventeenth century.³⁹

R. Laird Harris confirms this when he writes, “It is safe to say that there is no doctrine, except those of the Trinity and the deity of Christ, which has been so widely held through the ages of Church history as that of verbal inspiration.”⁴⁰

IV. Conclusion: Key Points about Inerrancy

³⁷ Edward Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), 104.

³⁸ Gregg Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 103.

³⁹ Allison, *Historical Theology*, 99. According to John Hannah, a historical theology scholar: “... the position of the church, as it has been delineated by scholars, clerics, and teachers, is that of the absolute authority and inerrancy of the Scriptures. That was the view of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, as well as of the entire church; inerrancy is the ‘central church tradition.’” The novel interpreters of the doctrine of Scripture were not Turretin, Hodge, and Warfield, but Orr, Barth, Berkouwer, and Rogers. Those who argue that belief in an inerrant Bible is a novel historical position, that accommodation has been its ‘central tradition,’ grievously err in calling the great figures of the church to witness for them.” John D. Hannah, “Introduction,” in *Inerrancy and the Church*, ed. John Hannah (Chicago: Moody, 1984), ix.

⁴⁰ R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1969), 72.

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