

THE NATURE OF INERRANCY

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Few areas of theology can be considered so plain and self-evident that little danger of deviation exists. In most cases, the path of soundness lies between two abysses, somewhat like a ridge on a steep mountain. Deviation to the right and deviation to the left alike to be carefully avoided, even though the footing on the ridge itself is not always easy. Surely, this kind of situation is well illustrated in Christology, where the Church learned, sometimes through painful losses, that it must maintain the full deity and the full humanity of Jesus Christ and acknowledge these as conjoined in the most intimate manner in the unity of His person. The subject of the inspiration of scripture also falls into this category. Here too it is essential to affirm the divine authorship of the Bible with all that this involves concerning the character of the product, and at the same time to recognize the reality of the contribution of the human authors, who were not used as robots or computers, simply to register mechanically some input placed into them by God, but who were commissioned to be the bearers of the divine Word in full keeping with their background, culture, personal training, language, and individuality. How these two can be combined remains a mystery to us. Yet the point of view that fails to do justice to both elements is bound to be an inadequate expression of the Biblical doctrine of inspiration. Unfortunately, too many people have allowed themselves to move into areas of danger in which the truth of one or the other side was jeopardized. Sometimes, especially when logic has been permitted to have full sway, this has taken them down into the abyss. Their downfall must stand as a warning to others.

Similarly, when we consider the topic of inerrancy, we must be wary of abysses lying on either side of us. On one side, there are those who, apparently in order to safeguard the human element involved in the writing of the Scripture, have thought it necessary to deny that the sacred writers were protected from error in everything they wrote. Those who hold this view sometimes say that the inspired writers were protected from serious error; or again that they were protected from error in matters related to faith and practice, while they remained susceptible to error in other areas; or again that they were free from error in their major message but subject to it in peripheral areas. The common problem with this position in its various forms is that it dilutes the authority of the Scripture and seems to open a way of escape from the impact of this authority, although undoubtedly limitations set upon inerrancy were not intended deliberately as a means to eschew the authority of the word of God. This position also suffers from a lack of definiteness, so that one is left to his own judgment concerning what is serious error and what is not serious error; or again, what relates to faith and practice and what does not relate to them; or again, what is central and what is peripheral. If it is left to the individual's own judgment to determine what is authoritative and what is not, it is obvious that the supreme priority of the authority of Scripture will be damaged.

On the other side, some who have been very resolute advocates of inerrancy tend to provide their own strict definition of error and errancy, a definition often devised in terms of a rationalistic framework. Then they insist that this definition holds for all the phenomena of Scripture. In the process they sometimes press the phenomena of Scripture into conformity with this definition and thus open themselves to the charge of artificiality. Surely, this is not the appropriate way to approach

the Scripture. To move along these lines will not do justice to either the Bible or the God of the Bible.

The path of soundness will have to be recognized as falling between these two extremes. Inerrancy must be defined strictly in terms of Scripture's representation of what God is and does. At the same time we should not permit ourselves to entertain a view in which the frailties of the human authors impinge on the veracity of God. The present essay is designed specifically to ascertain the nature of inerrancy by exploring the biblical teaching and phenomena rather than bring to the Scripture an arbitrary or rationalistic expectation concerning what God *should* do.

AREAS OF COMMON MISUNDERSTANDING

1. The relationship between the autographs and the copies in the original languages.

One could argue that if God were supremely interested in inerrancy He would have seen to it that those who copied the text were always infallibly kept from slips by the power of the Holy Spirit. In this case all our manuscripts would be precisely alike and there would be no reason for a science of textual criticism. In fact, however, we do find that manuscripts differ. We find that those ancients who quoted or copied the Bible were subject to the same frailties which are found among those who copied other works. Probably no manuscript is entirely like any other manuscript, for even those who did their labors with painstaking care still introduced some slight deviations into their product. We need to take account of this in our understanding of inspiration. It was recognition of this fact which led evangelical theologians to emphasize the inspiration of the original autographs.¹ It is true that in their famous article on "Inspiration" (Presbyterian Review 2 [April 1881], pp225-60), A.A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield introduced the possibility that an early slip in the transmission of the text may be the source of an apparent error in Scripture (pp. 237, 242). They do this in the process of placing in evidence some considerations which those who would charge the Scripture with error should not be permitted to disregard. But they very seldom have recourse to this explanation as affording the solution of specific difficulties. In the article in question, as a matter of fact, neither of them invokes this as a solution of any of the difficulties which they examine. Sometimes those who object to the position of the advocates of inerrancy imagine that this qualification was designed to provide a huge loophole in case of serious difficulties that might be encountered in the Bible. Then the advocates of inerrancy could always say, "This was not in the original." While he could not prove it, no one could prove otherwise.

Very definitely this is not the origin or the purpose of distinguishing between autographs and

¹ B.B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1931), pp 236-51; Francois Turretini, *Institutio Theologiae Elencicae*, Locus II, Q. X (New York: Carter, 1847), vol. I, pp.96ff.; Louis Gaussen, *Theopneusite*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Delay, 1842), pp241-88.

copies. Evangelicals who hold to inerrancy should be very careful not to raise questions rashly in relation to the text when no evidence is available that an error of transmission has in fact occurred. It is true, of course, that we cannot absolutely rule out the possibility of such an error even in the case of a great consensus of the various manuscripts. Yet the very great concurrence of the manuscripts of the Bible gives us strong warrant to rejoice in the assurance that God has safeguarded for us a text which is in substantial conformity with what was originally given.² The variety of transcriptional forms in the manuscripts tends to confirm the authenticity of the Biblical text in general, particularly in the innumerable places where overwhelming agreement is found among all the written sources. At times in the presence of variants which leave the textual critic in a quandary, we may do well to acknowledge that certainty cannot be reached. Then we may not base any teaching or mandate upon the words which are in question. But in the overwhelming preponderance of cases even the variants that we do have do not impinge on the message of the Scripture, and thus the frailties of man in the process of transmission have not deprived us of the divine authority we need in faith and practice.

It must be understood, however, that inerrancy in the Scriptures does not imply that we must posit a constant miracle in transmission by which anyone who copies, engraves, or quotes the Bible will be forever protected from any kind of slip. Some will wonder: since God has not seen fit to protect His word in this way, is it important to insist that the Word as originally given was kept immune from all error? To answer this question, remember that the doctrine of inerrancy is inferred from the truth that God is the author of Scripture and that therefore God's veracity applies to the wording of the Bible. It may be helpful at this point to record some considerations which bring the matter into focus.

A. *The fact that there are various transcriptional forms tends to confirm the reliability of the text in the very many cases where there is overwhelming agreement.* The situation is analogous to that of a series of witnesses in court. The diversity of presentations indicates that no collusion has taken place and the various witnesses function independently of each other. Similarly, the variety of manuscripts and even of families of manuscripts reinforces our conviction that what we do have is not a trumped-up text but that the manuscripts in our possession are in fact related closely and vitally to the original. In this regard, our situation with respect to the Old Testament was enhanced by the Dead Sea Scrolls. Before that time the extant manuscripts had largely reflected the Masoretic school. Their close resemblance to each other gave us little basis for textual criticism, and a real possibility remained that the original text at some points may have been replaced by something else which the Masorites favored. The Dead Sea Scrolls are witnesses which antedate much of the Masoretic labors, and, while they introduce at times variant readings, they also substantially confirm the reliability of the text we have used for centuries. The possession of some autographs would, of course, be a boon, but in their absence, the textual variants may serve as a confirmation at most points of the

² This is undoubtedly the meaning of the phrase "by his singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages" (Westminster Confession of Faith, I.8). At times some of the theologians of the seventeenth century did show a certain restiveness in this area, as when they held that the force of the Hebrew vowel points had to be a part of the original deliverance (Formula Consensus Helvetica, 1675).

authenticity of what we have.

B. *A slip in the transcriptional process is always subject to human correction.* This is an area in which men are competent to act and to express meaningful opinions. A careful study has been made of the kind of slips that are likely to occur in transcriptional process, whether in oral dictation to a number of copyists, as the ancients often proceeded, or in direct copy from a written text, as was done most frequently through the middle ages. Principles have been developed which permit to achieve a very high degree of probability in reconstructing the original text in the presence of certain transcriptional variants. This type of activity is required with respect to practically all our texts from antiquity and is manifestly a science in which a high level of objectivity can be and is achieved. Errors in the original would not similarly respond to treatment by man. The analogy suggested by R. Laird Harris is helpful here. Loss or destruction of the standard yard at the Smithsonian Institution would not enormously affect the practice of measurements in the United States, for a comparison of the multitudinous copies of that yard would lead us to something very close to the original standard. On the other hand, demonstration that the standard itself was not correct would have far-reaching implications for all measurements throughout the country.³

C. *Some problems in the transcriptional process were already in existence in the days of our Lord and His apostles; yet they did not hesitate to rely on the authority of Scripture.* It is quite clear that all the autographs of the Old Testament had been lost by the first century of our era, and that some diversity in transcription had developed by that time, as made evident in the diversity of manuscripts found in various caves near the Dead Sea.⁴ Thus it is apparent that sufficient accuracy was present as to permit them to ground their teaching or arguments on what was transcribed.

D. *The possibility of transcriptional errors is not a late discovery,* even though it is only since the development of printing that the full range of possible errors became apparent. As early as Augustine already was aware of the possibility of some flaws in this respect. In fact, he would use this as a possible explanation for some difficulties that he might find in Scripture.⁵ Even in his case, however, this was hardly a loophole provided to insure that he would be safeguarded from embarrassment. In his practice as exegete he scarcely ever suggests that the text was corrupted.

E. *If God had been pleased to preserve some autographs for us,* there is reason to believe that some people might have been affected by a superstitious veneration for them. These people would have viewed the autographs as sacred relics, and a kind of “bibliolatry” might have developed which would have been injurious to the soul. It is interesting that King Hezekiah destroyed the brazen

³ R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), pp. 88f.

⁴ For more details on this cf. F. F. Bruce, *Second Thoughts on the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956 pp. 61-69. An especially learned account is found in Frank M. Cross and Shemaryahu Talmon, eds., *Qumran and the History of the Biblical Text*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975. 413 pp.

⁵ Augustine, Letter 82.3 (to Jerome), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st series, vol. I, p350.

serpent that Moses had made, and was commended for this action (II Kings 18:4).

If the Bible were a cipher or a cryptogram of some kind, then the deterioration of some minute details, the change in the order of words, and the general condition of the texts with respect to variants would cause very serious, perhaps irreparable damage. But this is not the case.

The Bible has been inspired to provide for us a message relating to spiritual matters and on that account the measure of uncertainty which has been introduced by the presence of variants (e.g., deterioration in minute details; change in word order) does not really impair the authority of the Scripture. It can be said that copies of the Bible are inerrant to the extent that they agree with the original, and by all reasonable constructions, this extent is very considerable. It is so remarkable in fact that, except, for inscriptions made on stone or papyri, we do not have any text of antiquity which appears so well preserved as the Old and New Testaments.

It is frequently urged that, since the process of transmission has delivered to us a text which may not be in every respect identical with the autographs, it does not matter much to us whether the autographs were, in fact, free from error. This point appears to have some force if one looks simply at the character of the text that we possess. But even that force, we trust, is sharply limited by the considerations introduced above. What seems to elude the mind of those who press the claim is the fact that in the Bible we do not only have a written norm, but we have a claim of divine authorship as well. If the Bible is indeed the Word of God, can it be thought that in its original form it was blemished by numerous errors? A text of Cicero may have reached us with some attrition through the transcriptional process, and this may have damaged its style. But if a claim is made that the inferior character of text in very poor Latin is an original feature, then the likelihood of Ciceronian authorship is reduced to the extreme. This seems to be the abiding difficulty of those who deny inerrancy. They proffer to us a text which is subject to challenge at some points, and whose authenticity as a divine document is placed in jeopardy by the blemishes which they allege.

2. The Process of translation

Some people claim that translation inevitably tampers with an original pronouncement. It is true, of course, that in translation it is very difficult to provide a statement in another language which says absolutely no less and no more than the original and which conveys precisely the same impression to the hearer or the reader. Since most people do not have access to the Bible in the original languages, this may appear very disturbing, for they may fear that the human process of translating has substantially impaired the authority of the original Word of God. But here again the argument appears to raise fears that are not warranted by the facts of the case.

The same formula which we used in relation to textual variants may apply here as well: *Any translation is entitled to acceptance as the Word of God to the extent that it corresponds to the original.* This extent is very considerable for translations executed with appropriate care and without a subtle bias. If anyone should be inclined to interpret the Scripture in some unusual way on the basis of a

translation, then he should check with the original to be sure that the meaning which he perceives is, in fact, present in the text. Individuals may easily fall into misunderstanding some portion of Scripture; it should be remembered, however, that the Bible is received from God not strictly to be a private instrument, but used and applied in the fellowship of God's people. Thus we can be protected from vagaries by the insights, the wisdom, and the scholarship of our fellow Christians.⁶

It is encouraging in this respect to see that the apostles in the preponderance of cases did not hesitate to use the Septuagint translation when referring in Greek to the O.T. Now the LXX was from being a homiliary, albeit a translation, in terms of modern standards of translating, but it was well known, and was deemed adequate to convey to Greek readers the meaning of the Old Testament Hebrew. Thus we find that under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the New Testament writers did not see fit to make a new authoritative and inspired translation, but they frequently made appeal to the Septuagint as embodying in sufficient manner what they wanted to emphasize. They did not, however, base their arguments or their use of the text upon something which might be inferred from the Greek but which could not be found in the Hebrew.⁷

3. Spelling

⁶ One should be very careful not to develop this line of approach into a slavish acceptance of tradition, for the Bible must remain the judge of tradition rather than the other way around. In Matthew 15 and Mark 7 our Lord castigated human traditions which had moved far away from the intent of Scripture. He declared, "you nullify the word of God by your tradition" (Mark 7:13, NIV). With due concern not to fall into a similar defect, we should recognize, however, that in the process of interpreting Scripture, there are great benefits to be derived from a wholesome consideration of what other Christians have understood. If we take care to learn from them, we will not credit at once as God's Word certain eccentric interpretations which arise occasionally, particularly where there is no knowledge whatsoever of the original.

⁷ It must be recognized that there are some passages where the New Testament writers have been charged with doing precisely that, although this view of their use of the Septuagint is by no means necessary. A passage in point might be Hebrews 10:5, where Psalm 40:6 is quoted as saying "A body you prepared for me" (NIV). The Masoretic Hebrew reads "You have opened my ears." Some feel that the later in the same context, when the author writes "through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ" (v. 10), he is referring specifically to the form of language found in the Septuagint. The possibility does exist that the Septuagint bears witness to another form of the Hebrew text, which may be the original form. The Qumran scrolls have given us some examples of a Hebrew Vorlage for the Septuagint text, which some scholars consider as preserving the original form rather than the Masoretic text (e.g., Isa. 53:11). But in any case the author of Hebrews does not press the text of Psalm 40 beyond what could legitimately be inferred from the Masoretic text, for the presence of ears surely implies the existence of a body. Therefore, one cannot maintain that the writer of Hebrews exploited a faulty Septuagint translation to prove something that the Hebrew text could not support. One could go so far as to say that the Masoretic text would be even more appropriate than the Septuagint form in emphasizing the voluntary obedience of Christ, the suffering servant, although this emphasis was not indispensable to the point of the author of Hebrews. This complex subject would warrant a fuller discussion which we do not have the space (nor the ability) to provide here.

In modern times, certain standards of spelling are established in most languages. It is a part of the equipment of culture to be able to exhibit a reasonable conformity to these standards. An author or a publisher who does not abide by them opens himself to the charge of lacking culture or care. In this connection we often use the expressions “mistakes in spelling” or “spelling errors.” It must be noted at once, however, that here we do not have an issue of conformity to or departure from factual truth. In fact, appropriate spelling varies from age to age and sometimes from one country to another. For instance, British writers will spell “favor” with a “u” (favour) which American writers omit. Obviously, extreme oddities of spelling might actually becloud a text, but this is a feature which we do not see in the Bible. At the same time, it is not necessary to imagine that the fact of divine authorship made it imperative that God should control the spelling habits of the human writers. Thus, in Matthew 27:46 the cry of dereliction of our Lord appears to have been spelled “Eli”; while in Mark 15:34, we encounter the spelling “Eloi.” Here the Gospel writers were concerned to render for us the very sound of the voice of our Lord, but there was no necessity to secure identical phonetic symbols for this purpose. Similarly, many names, particularly those that are transcribed from another language, can be appropriately spelled in a variety of ways. The phenomena of Scripture will lead us to the conclusion that while the spelling practices of the sacred authors did not disfigure the sacred text, God appears not to have been concerned to supervise their handling of this matter as if they were participating in a spelling bee! This should not surprise anyone, since spelling is merely a human convention.

4. Grammar

Grammar may be defined as a codification of the principles generally accepted in the proper usage of a language. It is indispensable for the purpose of communication and here again people of culture will manifest a certain conformity to the usage which is characterized as correct. A complete disregard of rules of grammar breeds ambiguity and in extreme cases opaqueness. We find that the Scripture was not written with such cavalier disregard. Yet there are at times puzzling cases, particularly in the state in which texts have reached us, where it is difficult to ascertain the precise construction intended by the authors. It is also a matter of plain fact that they have used various turns of speech which from the point of view of grammar might not appear commendable. We have sentences that are suspended; we have verbs where the subject is in doubt; we have forms of speech which might have fallen under the condemnation of a classical Hebrew or Greek grammarian. There were some scholars in the seventeenth century who imagined that since the Bible is the Word of God, the Hebrew and Greek appearing in it must be deemed the supreme and perfect grammatical form of these languages. This, however, is not the case. Furthermore, there is no uniform standard in the Old Testament or New. And there is no necessity to consider that the grammar of Koine Greek is lifted up above the usage of Plato and Thucydides.

Here again it must be emphasized that we do not have an area where truth is at stake, but merely adherence to a human convention of language. The convention itself fluctuates in both time and space. The biblical writers appear to have been permitted to express themselves in the idiom which was natural to them without receiving a supernatural help that would preclude expressions or turns of phrase that would offend a purist. It is therefore no disrespect to the Word of God to say

that the author of Revelation in that book has used a form of Greek which is heavily colored by Hebraisms, expressions that would be rated incorrect in terms of standard Greek grammar.⁸

5. Phenomenological use of language

In our scientific age with the many advances it has brought us with respect to dissemination of knowledge, access to information, and general acquaintance with scientific concepts, cultured people have developed ways of expressing themselves which take account of the best insights of human science. Even so, there are still expressions frequently used which reflect a phenomenological approach to reality. Very few people of culture, for instance, believe that the alternation of day and night is due to the movement of the sun. They realize that this phenomenon is produced by the rotation of the earth around its axis in twenty-four hours, and yet numerous expressions which might seem to imply the opposite are still considered quite appropriate: “the sunrise,” “sunset.” The latter two appear even in astronomical publications! These are phenomenological uses of language where events are related from the vantage point of a spectator on the earth who describes what he observes rather than give an explanation of the process by which the events in view are being caused. This is the situation throughout the Scripture. The Bible was not written in order to promote a particular view in scientific matters. It was meant as an address which would be understandable, regardless of the stance which one takes with respect to certain scientific theories. It is because the theologians of the seventeenth century failed to perceive this that they condemned Galileo. Both they and Galileo should probably have perceived that God was not taking sides in this matter and had not inculcated one particular view in Holy Writ. Warned by this egregious mistake, we should be careful to acknowledge the use of language prevailing at the time of the writing of the various books of the Bible, to accept the descriptions at face value, and not to read into the Scripture a commitment to positions about which the Bible does not give us a divine determination.

6. Approximations

Because of the ready availability of information, we often pride ourselves in our day on strict accuracy. Even so, we commonly have recourse to approximations, which are recognized as being legitimate ways of presenting truth. If someone asks me the population of Boston, I may reply “640,000,” which is the nearest figure within 10,000 to the census of 1970. Very few people would expect me to say 641,071. That figure, in fact, would not be meaningful because it would not necessarily reflect the exact population at any one time and particularly not at the time of my answer. Similarly, when people are queried about their age, assuming that they wish to convey truthful information, they do not reply: “32 years, 5 months, 4 days, 2 hours, 52 minutes, and 35 seconds”; but they usually provide an approximate figure simply in terms of years. The integrity of truth is not at stake here. God, who knows all figures without approximation, has nevertheless seen fit to use approximations repeatedly throughout the Scripture. This is undoubtedly the case in all kinds of matters like numbers of people, size of armies, as well as in chronological matters or in

⁸ To give one example, Revelation 1:4 has a phrase that would be properly translated as “from he who is!”

measurements.⁹ Punctilious accuracy in the scientific sense is obviously not an aim of Scripture. As long as approximations are appropriate, no charge of failure to observe the truth can be leveled.

The same principle would apply with respect to the use of quotations and the relating of statements made in conversation. Our present practice of scholarship has led us to insist on a very high level of accuracy whenever we transcribe the words of another. But we have no ground to insist that this standard must have prevailed in biblical days. Thus we find that the New Testament writers, and presumably our Lord Himself, quoted the Old Testament with a considerable measure of freedom, adapting the words of ancient writers in many cases to the contemporaneous situation. They freely omitted elements which did not appear relevant or inserted words that would elucidate more fully the sense in which they construed the ancient oracle. Similarly, in the four Gospels we have evidence that considerable freedom was used in the reporting of conversations in the days of our Lord. We have no right to posit a procedure which in our judgment the writers of the Bible should have used and then proceed to judge them in terms of their conformity or lack of conformity to it. We need rather to observe the facts of the situation and to be satisfied with the way in which they were led to make their sacred record. Moreover, it would be wrong to imagine that one writer arbitrarily changed something which he found in another inspired writer on the ground it did not conform to the truth. Those who hold to inerrancy will retain the conviction that a real underlying harmony exists between various accounts which differ somewhat in details.

7. Fragmentary information

It is very important to realize that absolute completeness is not indispensable for truth. If it were, we would despair of ever reaching truth at any point. The fragmentary character of information must be kept firmly in mind in relation to any account. This is the case also with respect to the Scripture. The writer led by God in their sacred writings selected data out of an immense pool of details which could have been given. This principle is specifically asserted in John 20:30, where we read: "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book." And again in John 21:25: "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would have been written" (NIV). The fragmentary nature of the information would encourage us to view the various writings as supplementing each other rather than as falling into a pattern of error due to incompleteness. A fair number of the difficulties that have been raised in relation to the Scriptures may perhaps find a solution when this principle is duly recognized.

8. Lack of uniformity

⁹ For example, all the numbers of the tribes of Israel in Numbers 1 and 2 end in a round hundred; the army size of Israel and Judah is respectively 800,000 and 500,000 in 2 Samuel 24:9; the length of reign of the kings of Israel and Judah are given in round numbers of years, except for those who reigned less than one year; the relation of circumference to diameter is approximated at 3 to 1 in 2 Chronicles 4:2 (cf. However, an ingenious and somewhat artificial other explanation in H. Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976. Pp. 165,166.)

Because a uniformity of standards frequently prevails in the modern scientific world, we usually expect that a well written book will follow a uniform standard throughout. But this requirement cannot be placed upon Scripture; we ought to recognize that varieties of standards may well prevail in measurements, in dating the reigns of kings, and in a number of other areas concerning which the ancient world had no uniform standard. Thus, a cubit may conceivably not mean exactly the same length in Genesis, Ezekiel, and the Book of Revelation. It is also probable that the principles for the dating of the reigns of kings differed in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah.¹⁰

This does not lead us to the supposition that the biblical writers were permitted to incorporate without correction faulty data which they may have found in extant records, but it does emphasize that we are not in a position to project upon their writings the expectation that in terms of accuracy they will conform to present canons of scientific writing.

9. Etymologies

Biblical etymologies have sometimes given difficulty to linguistic scholars. It is a possibility that it was never intended that we be able to trace historical origin of certain names appearing in Scripture, as modern etymological science seeks to do. Scripture merely indicates some correspondence between the name of a place and certain important incidents which occurred there, or between the name of a person and a certain divine purpose in that person's life. To accomplish this a mere alliteration is effective, as well as a truly scientific linguistic etymology.¹¹

10. Transcendent truths

There are elements of the Christian faith which so far transcend the comprehension of finite minds that it is probably impossible to formulate in terms of our finite perspective a wholly satisfactory rational harmonization of facets of the truth which confront us in the form of paradox or antinomy. By way of examples we might adduce the distinctness and integrity of the two natures

¹⁰ The brilliant labors of Edwin R. Thiele appear to have established this (The mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1965]).

¹¹ For example, in Genesis 11:9 the name Babel is traced to the confusion of language which occurred there. The footnote of the NIV is very aptly worded: "Babel sounds like the Hebrew for confused." It is the practice of the NIV to use expression "sounds like" whenever a popular connection rather than a strict linguistic etymology is in view. In Genesis this occurs in connection with the names Cain (4:1), Noah (5:29), Japheth (9:27), Reuben (29:32), Issachar (30:18), and Ephraim (41:52). When the possibility of an etymological connection exists, the formulation is "sounds like and may be derived from" (2:7, 29:34,35; 41:51; 49:8) or again "may mean" or "can mean" (21:30; 25:25; 26:33; 30:11,20; 38:30; 49:19). When the derivation is obvious, the footnote bears the word "means" (4:16; 16:11,14; 17:5, 15, 19; 19:22; 21:3; 25:26,30; 26:20,21,22; 28:19; 30:6, 8, 13, 24; 31:47, 49; 32:2, 28, 30; 33:17; 35:8, 10, 15, 18; 38:29; 49:16; 50:11.)

in the unity of the person of Christ, or the confluence of the sovereign action of God and the responsible decisions of rational agents, or again the unity of essence and trinity of persons in the Godhead. Obviously we should never commit the grievous mistake of regarding as error or contradiction in Scripture what simply transcends our finite minds by simultaneously asserting complementary aspects of the truth whose ultimate harmony is perceived in infinity but is not accessible to finite rational investigation.

A Definition of “Inerrancy”

Other aspects of the veracity of the Bible might be investigated, but for the present purpose this will suffice.¹² When the phenomena adverted to above are duly taken in consideration, certain parameters for the meaning of “error” may begin to appear, parameters established not on the basis of a preconceived opinion as to what the Bible may or may not contain, but at least in good part on the basis of the phenomena manifestly exhibited in the performance of those who wrote. Within this framework it appears possible to assert with confidence the “inerrancy” of the Bible as an inevitable implication of the veracity of God and of the divine authorship of Scripture. Inerrancy will then mean that at no point in what was originally given were the biblical writers allowed to make statements or endorse viewpoints which are not in conformity with objective truth. This applies at any level at which they make pronouncements. Notably, this will serve to corroborate the truth of external sources which they might have used in the preparation of their text and whose data were embodied in the text. Obviously, this does not confer a divine endorsement on all statements made by all the individuals who appear in the drama of the Bible. Surely the words of Satan, the friends of Job, Esau, Pharaoh, Sanballat, and the unbelieving leaders in Palestine in Christ’s day do not receive God’s approval by the mere fact that they are recorded in Scripture.¹³ According to John 11:49f. Caiaphas was led to prophesy a truth which transcended what he had consciously in mind. Thus God may at times use even rebellious people to speak His truth, but this does not confer automatic reliability on everything they say! We needed John’s comment (vv. 51-52) to be assured about the divine stamp of approval on this utterance of Caiaphas. Similarly, some written documents quoted in

¹² Further very helpful elaboration may be found in Robert Perus, “Notes on the Inerrancy of Scripture,” *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 8, no. 4 (Autumn 1965), pp. 127-38. One should also consult his important chapter on “The Truthfulness of Scripture” in *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1970), pp. 339-62, 394-400. Of great importance also, although not supporting inerrancy as we view it here, is the article by G. Courtade, “Inspiration et Inerrance,” in L. Pirot, *Supplément au Dictionnaire de la Bible* (Paris: Letouzey & Ane, 1949), vol. IV, pp. 482-559.

¹³ In I Corinthians 3:19 Paul quotes with approval a statement of Eliphaz the Temanite (Job 5:13), but it may well be urged that here Paul does not rely on this statement as a divine authority for asserting the limitations of human wisdom, but simply finds in the ancient text an impressive formulation of that truth, which he adopts for his present purpose. This might well be analogous to certain quotations from extra scriptural sources (cf. Aratus in Acts 17:28, Menander in I Corinthians 15:33, and Epimenides in Titus 1:12).

Scripture would not necessarily receive divine endorsement.¹⁴In these cases the inerrancy of Scripture means that the writers of Holy Writ were guided by God to record in a perfectly adequate way what people in question said or wrote. Throughout history this point was always clear in the mind of wise advocates of inerrancy.¹⁵

Those, however, who have attempted to expand this principle into the position that God does not vouch for the accuracy of material from other sources which the sacred writers used and transcribed appear to us to dilute the authority of Scripture.¹⁶ If God did not guide the sacred writers in the choice of the material that they decided to incorporate into their own text, then it will be forever impossible to distinguish between what is truly God's Word and what may be simply an accurate record of a fallible source. To the extent that any material appears endorsed by the sacred writer, it must be viewed as endorsed by God as well.

The Problem of Apparent Discrepancies

Some scholars strongly emphasize that the phenomena of Scripture *do* lead us to posit errors of fact, and for this reason these scholars naturally wish to avoid the whole language of inerrancy. Undoubtedly, there are some cases in which the statements of Scripture might appear to fall into this category, and one can easily understand how it might seem more tempting to account for the "error" by assuming an original mistake in a peripheral matter rather than to have to labor to explain away the apparent contradiction between what the Scripture says in one place and other passages of Scripture or some elements of truth that we have culled from other avenues of endeavor. In our judgment this temptation must be resisted, because the assumption that the original erroneous material was introduced into Holy Writ jeopardizes both the authority of the Bible as a norm and the divine authorship. Meanwhile, it should be strongly emphasized, as B. B. Warfield has done,¹⁷ that the authority and inerrancy of Scripture are not dependent upon our ability to provide in every case a rational explanation of difficulties encountered. The authority of Scripture is not dependent upon the ability or resourcefulness of any man to vindicate its truth at every point.

¹⁴ II Kings 19:10-13; Ezra 1:2-4; 4:11-16, 17-22; 5:7-17; 6:3-12; 7:12-26; and Acts 23:26-30 might be examples in point.

¹⁵ Turretini, *Institutio*, Locus II, Q. IV, #IV (vol. I, pp. 59f); R. Pache, *The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), pp. 133f; Tenis Van Kooten, *The Bible: God's Word* (Grand rapids: Baker Book House, 1972). P. 97; John H. Gerstner, *A Bible Inerrancy Primer* (Grand rapids: Baker Book House, 1965), pp.55f.

¹⁶ James Orr, *Revelation and Inspiration* (London: Duckworth, 1910), pp. 179-81, 213-15; E.J. Carnell, *The Case for Orthodox Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959), pp. 102-09; Courtade, "Inspiration," pp 549-50.

¹⁷ Warfield, *The Inspiration of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), pp. 127f., 215f., 225, 439. "Our individual fertility in exegetical expedients, our individual insight into exegetical truth, our individual capacity of understanding are not the measure of truth. If we cannot harmonize without straining, let us leave unharmonized." (P. 219). cf. Also James I. Packer, "Fundamentalism" and the Word of God (London: Inter-varsity, 1958), pp. 108f.

Therefore, we should never be reluctant to acknowledge that we may not at the present time be in possession of the solution of particular difficulties. This would surely be a wiser course of action, and more conformed to scholarship, than to present a scheme of harmonization that would be so obviously contrived and artificial that those who hear it might gain the impression that we are insincere and that we can hardly entertain seriously the thought that such an explanation is valid. This kind of approach would only promote suspicions concerning our own integrity, and it is surely far better occasionally to acknowledge ignorance, than incur the distrust of people who will think we are not dealing squarely with them.¹⁸ in small details.

At times there may be a variety of ways in which a particular difficulty may be resolved, none of which may be so manifestly superior to the others that we are compelled to judge it must be the solution. In such cases it has been common practice in the history of biblical exegesis to present these various explanations together with their strong and weak points, and leave it to the reader to decide which one, if any, he prefers. Even if none of the suggestions advanced commends itself at the present time to the point of acceptance, this fact does not constitute an invalidation of the truthfulness of the sacred records, which may be presumed true unless they are cogently demonstrated to be in error that not only is no acceptable solution presently in view, but no conceivable solution can even be envisioned.¹⁹

In the wise providence of God many features of Scripture which were very puzzling in previous times received satisfactory explanation when additional knowledge was secured which permitted us to understand better the purpose of the writers. It doesn't seem unreasonable to expect that the small residue of problems that presently remain will similarly be solved by an increase in the

¹⁸ John Calvin did not hesitate to acknowledge that he was puzzled in the presence of certain difficulties of Scripture. But far from viewing any of these as indicative of a mistake in the original, his language implies precisely the opposite.

In his commentary on Matthew 27:9 he says: "How the name of Jeremiah crept in, I confess that I do not know, nor do I give myself much trouble to inquire. The passage itself plainly shows that the name of Jeremiah has been put down by mistake, instead of Zechariah." Here Calvin, perhaps rashly, assumes a textual corruption, the origin of which he does not feel obligated to explain. Similarly in his commentary on Acts 7:14-16 Calvin suggests that the text must be emended. He is unwilling to consider that either Stephen or Luke could have committed a mistake even

¹⁹ Cf. The fine statement by Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, p 225. Calvin frequently lists a variety of explanations in his *Commentaries*, sometimes indicating his own preference for one among them. The concern which he shows to provide explanations for apparent discrepancies (e.g., in relation to the raising of Jairus's daughter [Matt. 9:18ff., etc.]; or the healing of the blind near Jerico [Matt. 20:29-34, etc.]) manifests clearly that he did not entertain the possibility that the Scripture might be in error. It is strange that some of these passages of Calvin have been quoted by some (notably Emile Doumergue) as implying that Calvin did not hold to inerrancy. This evidence boomerangs, as was well shown by John K. Mickelsen, "The Relationship Between the Commentaries of John Calvin and His *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, and the Bearing of that Relationship on the Study of Calvin's Doctrine of Scripture," *The Gordon Review* 5, no.4 (Winter 1959) pp. 155-68.

knowledge of Bible times. As it is, God has shed enough light on His Word so that we may recognize it as undoubtedly the Eword of God; and He has permitted sufficient difficulties to remain so that those who wish to close their eyes may seem to have some reason for doing so.²⁰

In some respects the sinlessness of our Lord Jesus Christ presents an analogous situation. The reality of His deity completely precludes the possibility that He should commit any sin, and the Scriptures bears witness to the fact that He remained sinless throughout His days (John 8:46; 14:30; II Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 9:14; I Peter 2:22; I John 3:5). Now, there are some actions which He did or words that He uttered which in the life or on the lips of any other person might be deemed questionable. Our assurance of the sinlessness of Christ inevitably leads us to interpret these incidents in keeping with His deity, or else serious heresies will follow. Meanwhile, we do not go about fretting in the fear that some sin in the person of Christ might be discovered, but we maintain with confidence the sinlessness of our Lord in the assurance that the data will ultimately support our faith. The same principle applies to our attitude toward the Scripture. Even though we may not at present see the complete harmony at every point, we trust that such harmony does exist and that it will in due course be made manifest by God Himself.

Inerrancy and Evangelical Truth

Some strong advocates of inerrancy have occasionally expressed themselves as if this doctrine were the necessary and sufficient standard of evangelical truth. Important as this tenet is, we should say here that it is not strictly either sufficient or necessary.

It is not sufficient because there are many other tenets that need to be maintained if a person is to be seen as clearly evangelical. Some who have turned to cults still adhere to the inerrancy of Scripture.²¹ Thus while the Evangelical Theological Society has made its confession of faith to pivot in this area,²² This is not to say that no other doctrine matters. Meanwhile, our Roman Catholic friends who do use the word *inerrant* a good deal and have it incorporated in certain official statements²³ seem to have shown at times considerable laxity in the critical approach to the Scripture.²⁴ The restrictions on the concept of *inerrant* presently in vogue in many circles of the

²⁰ Cf. Pascal, *Pensees*, no. 736 (Brunschvicq, no 564) (London: Harvil Press, 1962), p. 332.

²¹ E.g., Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons, to name only two groups by their popular designation.

²² "The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written, and therefore inerrant in the autographs."

²³ Leo XIII, Encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, 18 November 1893, Denz 1952-53 (3292-93); Benedictus XV, Encyclical *Spiritus Paraclitus*, 15 September 1920, Denz 2186 (3652); Pius XII, Encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 30 September 1943, Denz 2294 (3830)' "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation," #11, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. W. M. Abbott (New York: Guild Press, 1966), p119.

²⁴ Jean Levie, *The Bible, Word of God in Words of Men* (New York: P. J. Kenedy & Sons, 1962),

Roman Catholic Church are not reassuring. Thus, no one should imagine that the use of the word inerrant is an infallible preservative against any loosening of the faith. It is indeed a link in the chain but it does not constitute the whole chain.

On the other hand, inerrancy is not strictly a necessary tenet of evangelical truth. Some people who assert a limited errancy remain in other respects very solidly aligned with the evangelical movement. Here the much cited case of James Orr might be advanced. He did not rule out the possibility of errors of detail, but he averred that he never found anything in Scripture which would compel him to say that the Bible was wrong.²⁵ It would seem unfortunate to frame a definition of evangelical faith that would oblige us to deny the title of membership to a man like James Orr. Warfield himself, who surely showed no hesitancy in his advocacy of inerrancy, was ready to recognize in Orr a man of faith with whom he was pleased to collaborate.

What is supremely at stake in this whole discussion is the recognition of the authority of God in the sacred oracles. Are we going to submit unconditionally to the voice of God who has spoken? Or, are we going to insist on screening the message of the Bible, accepting only what appears palatable and remaining free to reject what does not conform to our preconceived criteria? This is really the great divide, and those who stress inerrancy are simply aiming to maintain what they view as the consistent biblical stance on this issue.

At the close of the Chicago Statement on Inerrancy this point is admirably expressed:

pp.214-46; J. T. Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories of Biblical Inspiration Since 1810* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); Hans Kung, *Infallible? An Inquiry* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), pp. 209-21.

²⁵ Orr wrote: “Inerrancy’ can never be demonstrated with a cogency which entitles it to rank as the foundation of a belief in inspiration” (*Revelation and Inspiration* [London: Duckworth, 1910], p. 199). Yet he also wrote a few pages later: “The Bible, impartially interpreted and judged is free from demonstrable error in its statements and harmonious in its teachings, to a degree that of itself creates an irresistible impression of a supernatural factor in its origin” (p. 216).

In our affirmation of the authority of Scripture as involving its total truth, we are consciously standing with Christ and His apostles, indeed with the whole Bible and with the main stream of Church history from the first days until very recently. We are concerned at the casual, inadvertent and seemingly thoughtless way in which a belief of such far-reaching importance has been given up by so many in our day.

We are conscious too that great and grave confusion results from ceasing to maintain the total truth of the Bible whose authority one professes to acknowledge. The result of taking this step is that the Bible which God gave loses its authority, and what has authority instead is a Bible reduced in content according to the demands of one's critical reasonings and in principle reducible still further once this has started. This means that at bottom independent reason now has authority as opposed to scriptural teaching. If this is not seen and if for the time being basic evangelical doctrines are still held, persons denying the full truth of Scripture may claim evangelical identity while methodologically they have moved away from the evangelical principle of knowledge to an unstable subjectivism, and will be hard put not to move further.²⁶

²⁶ "Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," pp. 10-11. Printed, e.g. Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority* (Waco Texas: Word Books, 1979) vol. 4, p219.

The confession of biblical inerrancy, in the biblical sense of that concept, is simply one emphatic way to assert what Scripture says, God says. To Him be the glory and the authority. Amen.