The Inerrancy of Scripture

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The Inerrancy of Scripture (Part 1)

Over the past couple of weeks, inerrancy has become a hot topic in the blogosphere. The interest was ignited, in part at least, by comments made by Michael Spencer (aka Internet Monk and proprietor of Boars Head Tavern). It is difficult to know exactly what Michael believes about inerrancy, and I suspect he is as much in the dark as the rest of us. Whether he dislikes only the term "inerrancy" or the underlying doctrine is difficult to discern, but I suspect both are true, at least to some extent. I had first intended to write this article last week and to make it a direct response to Michael. Family illness and work responsibilities have delayed this article, so that much of the storm has passed. I may direct some comments at Michael, but will largely refrain from writing about him in particular. I feel like a guy who shows up at the party just as everyone else is leaving, but I've always been more of a designated driver than a partier, so it may be best this way.

The doctrines regarding the Bible have been discussed and debated at length throughout the history of the church. At the time of the Reformation, the main thrust of the debate had to do with the Bible's *authority*, and whether the Bible would be the sole ultimate authority over the lives of Christians over against popes, creeds, councils and the Catholic Church. In more recent days, the doctrine of the Bible's *inerrancy* came under intense discussion and scrutiny. In response, several evangelical leaders, including Francis Schaeffer, J.I. Packer, R.C. Sproul, Roger Nicole and James Boice, created an organization called The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy. This organization had as its purpose "elucidating, vindicating and applying the doctrine of biblical inerrancy as an essential element for the authority of Scripture and a necessity for the health of the church of God" (James Boice, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace*, page 68"). Three gatherings were held which produced three scholarly documents, the first of which was "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy." The second dealt with principles of biblical interpretation (hermeneutics) and the third with the application of Scripture.

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In his book *Scripture Alone*, James White has a chapter entitled "Definitions: More Than Half The Battle." He is absolutely right that properly defining terms is often more than half the battle. In reading Michael Spencer's comments, as well as those of the other contributors to his sites, I quickly found that very few terms received any clear definitions. While a term like "inerrancy" has a consistent theological meaning, this does not indicate that every person who uses the word means the same thing by it, and that the person truly understands it. One of my reasons for not responding on Spencer's sites was this just this: the terms were not defined so we may well have been comparing proverbial apples and oranges. I will suggest an appropriate definition of inerrancy shortly.

I found also that the issues at stake go far deeper than merely the inerrancy of Scripture. They extended to areas such as the canon of Scripture, the authority of Scripture and the inspiration of Scripture. Perhaps this is because, although inerrancy stands on its own biblical merits, it is also a doctrine constructed from other doctrines. While the Bible contains many passages that prove it true, it is also true that it follows logically from other doctrines of Scripture. So before we can approach inerrancy, I believe we need to step back and examine aspects of these other doctrines.

Authority

When we examine the Bible's authority, we must begin by answering the question of, "What does the Bible say about itself?". We find throughout Scripture that the Bible claims for itself a position of unique and supreme authority. In doing so it appeals only to its own authority for proof because there is no greater authority to which it can appeal. After all, if something is the ultimate authority, to what else can it appeal? Were the Bible to appeal to our reason to substantiate its authority, it would implicitly show that human reason is a higher authority. In one of Spencer's articles I found cause for concern when he expressed one of his main disagreements with inerrancy is that it did not "feel right." "My problems with inerrancy have been going on for a very long time, and I've heard it presented and taught by the best. It's never sat well with me, probably because I have a lot of literary interest in the text of scripture, plus I don't like to be bullied. I get a rash." But as I indicated, the Bible does not appeal to our feelings or our reason for its authority.

We can define the doctrine of Scripture's authority as follows: "The authority of Scripture means that all the words in Scripture are God's words in such a way that to disbelieve or disobey any word of Scripture is to disbelieve or disobey God" (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, page 73). I do not know of any Christians who claim that they have the right to disbelieve or disobey what God has taught in Scripture. They may do this in their lives (and we all do, at times) but I do not know of any who believe

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Scripture gives us such license. This doctrine forms the basis of apologetics, for we can only appeal to the Scripture when we trust its authority.

Inspiration

Closely related to the authority of Scripture is the inspiration of Scripture. Inspiration tells us how the Bible was transmitted from God to men. We find that the Bible draws its authority and inerrancy from the indisputible fact that it is inspired by God. The Bible teaches that "All Scripture is breathed out by God" (2 Timothy 3:16). The words the ESV translated as "breathed out by God" are also translated "inspired" and this is the basis of inspiration. This is explained further by the apostle Peter who writes, "no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:20,21). The Holy Spirit was actively involved in bringing God's words to humans.

The actual form this inspiration took is much disputed. We know from reading the Scripture and observing the different styles of writing and differing levels of expertise in writing, that God did not merely use men as automatons. If He had done this, we would expect to find a consistent writing style throughout. Somehow God used the specific skills, backgrounds and situations of the authors to transmit His words. Zechariah 7:12 sheds light on this. "…lest they should hear the law and the words that the Lord of hosts had sent by his Spirit through the former prophets." We see that the ministry of the Holy Spirit extended to the whole and to the individual parts (…the words that the Lord of hosts…).

What Scripture Says

If it was God who inspired men to write the Bible, what does that teach us about Scripture? Is it possible that Scripture, as it was given from God to men, can be anything less than perfect? Would God lie? Would He write in only half-truths? The Bible tells us otherwise:

> 2 Samuel 7:28 – "And now, O Lord God, you are God, and your words are true, and you have promised this good thing to your servant."

> Numbers 23:9 – "God is not man, that he should lie,
> or a son of man, that he should change his mind.
> Has he said, and will he not do it?
> Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?"

Psalm 12:6 – The words of the Lord are pure words,
like silver refined in a furnace on the ground,
purified seven times.

Proverbs 30:5 – Every word of God proves true;
he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.

We find a consistent Scriptural witness that God does not lie, for He is incapable of telling falsehood. The men who wrote God's words, had supreme confidence in the rest of His words. If God is incapable of telling a lie, it stands that the words He spoke to those who wrote the words of Scripture must also be perfectly true. At this point, I trust we have sufficient Scriptural basis to conclude that Scripture is authoritative and that the words given by God to men were without error. But how can we know that the words we have today accurately represent those words?

Canon

Many people do not understand the concept of canon. There seems to be a misconception that when the Bible was compiled as one book made of many different books and letters, people were engaged in gathering together some writings attributed to God and publishing them in one volume, much as one might do with the writings of a favorite poem or playwrite. But this is not how the canon came together. The Bible is more than a "best of" compilation of God's writings.

The term "canon" originally referred to a stick which was used for measurement. It later came to describe a standard or rule. By extension, it came to describe an authoritative list of something. In the case of Scripture, it speaks of the authoritative list of God's writings, yet it is more than a mere table of contents. It refers to all the writings that were breathed out by God (2 Timothy 3:16). Thus without the act of inspiration, there could be no canon (James White, *Scripture Alone*, page 101).

As we have seen, canon refers to the entire body of an author's work. Allow me to provide an example. If we look at the canon of a man like John Piper, we would say that it includes *Desiring God*, *The Passion of Jesus Christ*, *Don't Waste Your Life* and so on, from the first book he wrote to the last. The canon of John Piper would only be complete when it included every word he had ever written. But who can infallibly know a person's canon? In truth, only the author really knows what he or she has written. John Piper may have many books available to us, but who is to say that every word of his has been made available to us? Who is to say that he has not released other books under a pseudonym? Only he infallibly knows his canon. Similarly, it is only God who infallibly knows all He has written. The Scriptural evidence compels us to believe, then, that if we have the

complete canon, God helped people find out what it includes. When the Bible was compiled into the book we know and love today, it represented every word God had ever written. So there is a sense in which the primary task of the men who compiled the Bible was to find the complete canon of God. The primary measure they used was whether a book was inspired by God.

This is a topic that could (and perhaps should) be covered at length, but I am not writing today to defend the canonicity of Scripture. As far as I can tell, most people who struggle with inerrancy, do not deny that the canon of Scripture represents God's words to us.

Transmission

The final topic I will write about today is transmission which describes how the words of God were transmitted from the original documents to what we have today. This is a topic that can only be done justice in a much longer treatment, so allow me to merely point to some of the facts. We posess a wealth of biblical manuscripts in the original languages of Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic. John MacArthur writes, "With this wealth of biblical manuscripts in the original languages and with the disciplined activity of textual critics to establish with almost perfect accuracy the content of the autographs, any errors which have been introduced and/or perpetuated by the thousands of translations over the centuries can be identified and corrected by comparing the translation or copy with the reassembled original. By this providential means, God has made good His promise to preserve the Scriptures. We can rest assured that there are translations available today which indeed are worthy of the title, The Word of God" (John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Handbook*, page xxii).

And Now…

Having begun to define terms and provide background to the study of inerrancy, I will turn at last to the doctrine tomorrow.

The Inerrancy of Scripture (Part 2)

Yesterday I began a short series on the inerrancy of Scripture. This series is an indirect response to the questions, concerns and doubts about inerrancy raised by Michael Spencer and affirmed by many others at his personal site and at Boars Head Tavern. One of my primary concerns was that there was so much discussion based on so few concrete definitions. When I began to tackle this doctrine, I found that the doctrines of Scripture cannot be neatly separated, one from the other, for they are intertwined and interrelated. So in the first article I wrote about inspiration, canon, transmission and authority. Today

I will turn to inerrancy, first explaining what it is not and then providing a working definition.

What Inerrancy Is *Not*

I find it is often useful to define what a term does *not* mean before I learn what it *does* mean, and I will do that with inerrancy. So let's look at a few examples of what inerrancy does not entail. I should note that there is no authoritative body to which we can appeal to define what inerrancy means, for it is not a term that is defined in Scripture. Thus I am presenting information consistent with the way it has been defined by scholars who have pursued the study of this doctrine over the past century.

First, inerrancy does not preclude the use of ordinary language. A clear example of this in the Bible is where it speaks of the sun rising. We know that the sun does not rise at all but that the earth rotates to bring the sun into view. However, we can be consistent in our belief in the inerrancy of Scripture despite this type of ordinary, human, geo-centric language.

Another way this happens in the Bible is with the use of numbers. Allow me to provide an example. A few weeks ago a friend was given some tickets to see the Toronto Rock, our local professional lacrosse team. Never having attended such a game before, I had no idea what to expect. I thoroughly enjoyed the sport and was amazed at how many people were there to cheer on the team. At some point there was an official announcement of that evening's attendance and I made a rough mental note of it. Later, after I got home, my wife asked how many people were at the game and I told her "10,000." Now the actual number may have been closer to 10,243 or 9,678, but yet I had not told her a lie. My wife was clearly not interested in an exact number, but rather a useful guage to know how many people attend such games.

In the same vein, consider measurements. As many of you know, I live in Toronto, Ontario and my family lives in Atlanta, Georgia. When I make the long drive to visit them, people sometimes ask me how long the journey takes and I tell them it takes me 15 hours. Or they may ask me what the distance is, and I'll tell them 900 miles. In reality the drive time varies every time we do it based on traffic, weather, the behavior of children and so on, and the distance, according to Mapquest, is 931.96 miles. And while we are clarifying, both my parents and I live in suburbs of our respective cities and I have offered Toronto and Atlanta simply because people generally know the locations of big cities but not smaller towns and suburbs. But have I lied in any of this? Is any of this truly contrary to fact or have I been inerrant in what I have said? Here is the crux of the matter and this is particularly important to our discussion: *Inerrancy speaks of truthfulness, not the degree of precision with which events are reported.* When I say that I drive 15 hours and 900 miles to

get from Toronto to Atlanta, I have not lied. I have been truthful, but not perfectly precise. This is consistent with inerrancy.

Second, inerrancy does not preclude the use of loose and free quotations. Wayne Grudem makes a critical distinction between our culture and the New Testament Greek culture when it came to reporting the words of another person. In our culture we consider it a terrible sin to misquote another person so that precision in quoting a person's exact words is of tantamount importance. The Greek language, at the time the New Testament was written, had no quotation marks or similar construct. What was considered of utmost importance was to accurately represent the *content* of what a person said. There was no expectation that a writer needed to transcribe the speaker's exact words when quoting him. Thus the Bible is inerrant if it accurately and truthfully describes the content of what a speaker said. Whether the actual words Jesus spoke are "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life," or "I am The Truth, the Way and the Life," the Bible is still inerrant in how it transcribed these words, for the content remains intact.

Third, the Bible can be inerrant even if it contains unusual grammatical constructions. It is commonly known that there are various writing skills represented in the Scripture. Some authors were stylistically excellent while others were much more rough and common in their style. Sometimes this means the writers did not follow the accepted rules of grammar or used stylistic irregularities. My Greek is not what it once was, but I believe these irregularities show up especially in Revelation. But once more, the issue of inerrancy is not precision but truthfulness.

A Working Definition

Now that we know what we should *not* expect in inerrancy, let's attempt to define it. I was surprised to find, as I consulted many books on this issue, that very few clearly and concisely defined inerrancy. Most use the term, as Michael Spencer and others have, without defining it. For example, James Boice, in *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace* writes several pages on the topic, but provides no definition. In *Scripture Alone*, James White refers to the Council on Biblical Inerrancy and the desire of the participants to create a "concise statement on the meaning and importance of inerrancy" (page 68). He turns to and provides commentary on the council's definition, which may be precise by theological standards, but still extends to 24 articles. Nowhere does he provide a concise definition. Of the few definitions or attempts at definition that I found, Wayne Grudem's seemed most clear. Here is a solid working definition of inerrancy: "*The inerrancy of Scripture means that Scripture in the original manuscripts does not affirm anything that is contrary to fact*" (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, page 90). So what we affirm in this definition, is that a perfect God moved human authors, by His Spirit, to perfectly

transcribe what He wanted to communicate. It is important to note that this definition does not apply to the transmission of Scripture through the ages and the translation into other languages. We affirm that only the original autographs are inerrant. This definition is based on the clear teaching of Scripture, several passages of which I presented yesterday, as well as the character of God. If God is unable to lie and if he inspired Scripture, it must have been completely consistent with fact at the moment of transcription.

Conclusion

At this point we have defined our terms and indicated what we mean and what we do not mean by inerrancy. Tomorrow, in what I anticipate will be the final installment in this series, we will turn to common objections and to the problems that may arise if this doctrine is denied.

The Inerrancy of Scripture (Part 3)

This is the third and final article in the series on Biblical Inerrancy. Yesterday we defined what inerrancy is *not* and then attempted to define the term. I suggested the following definition: *The inerrancy of Scripture means that Scripture in the original manuscripts does not affirm anything that is contrary to fact*. Today we will look at some common objections to this doctrine as well as some problems that may arise if we deny it.

Objections

There are many objections that are commonly raised against inerrancy. For the sake of brevity I will address only the most common objections, and the ones I have encountered in recent discussions on this topic.

We Do Not Have The Original Manuscripts

The first objection has to do with the transmission of Scripture. Many people argue that since we no longer possess any of the original manuscripts, it is irresponsible to speak of inerrancy. What is the purpose in affirming an important doctrine based on documents we no longer have? I answered this, in part, in the first article of this series, when I quoted John MacArthur. "We posess a wealth of biblical manuscripts in the original languages of Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic. John MacArthur writes, "With this wealth of biblical manuscripts in the original languages and with the disciplined activity of textual critics to establish with almost perfect accuracy the content of the autographs, any errors which have been introduced and/or perpetuated by the thousands of translations over the centuries can be identified and corrected by comparing the translation or copy with the

reassembled original. By this providential means, God has made good His promise to preserve the Scriptures. We can rest assured that there are translations available today which indeed are worthy of the title, The Word of God" (John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Handbook*, page xxii). We can be certain that we have accurate copies of over 99% of the inerrant words as they were first transcribed. When we focus on the less than 1% of the text that contains errors, we must realize that these are human errors and that God is in no way responsible for them. The fact that there are some errors in Scripture as we have it today, does not negate inerrancy which speaks only of the original documents.

The Bible is Full of Errors and Contradictions

This is a common objection that has been levelled at the Bible too many times to count. It has been answered just as often. As often as not, this objection is made by people who really have no clear idea of where these errors can be found, as they are merely passing along what they have heard from others. For those who are honestly seeking information on the alleged contradictions, there is a wealth of resources available to prove that there are no errors or contradictions within the text of the Bible.

Many of the alleged errors within the Bible have to do with historical facts. Allow me to provide one example. Only a couple of generations ago, scholars pointed to the Bible's claim that there was a king of Assyria named Tiglath-Pileser as an obvious error, for archaelogical evidence had not proven that any such king existed. But a few years later, archaeologists excavated Tiglath-Pileser's capital city and found his name carved into bricks which read, "I, Tiglath-Pileser, king of Assyria…" It is a fact that "the results of sound scholarship have *not* tended to uncover more and more problems…Rather they have tended to *resolve* problems and to show that what were once thought to be errors are not errors at all" (James Boice, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace*, page 70). R.C. Sproul writes, "The Christian has nothing to fear from rigorous historical research. Rather, we have everything to gain" (Reason to Believe, page 27).

Consider the following quote from Dr. William Foxwell Albright. "For much too long a time the course of New Testament scholarship has been dictated by theological, quasitheological, and philosophical presupposition. *In far too many cases commentaries on New Testament books have neglected such basic requirements as up-to-date historical and philological analysis of the text itself*…The result has often been steadfast refusal to take seriously the findings of archeological and linguistic research. We believe that there is less and less excuse for the resulting confusion in this latter half of the twentieth century. Closely allied with these presuppositions is the ever-present fog of existentialism, casting ghostly shadows over an already confused landscape. Existentialism as a method of interpreting the New Testament is based upon a whole series of undemonstrable

postulates of Platonic, Neo-Platonic, leftwing scholastic, and relativistic origins. So anti-historical is this approach that it fascinates speculative minds which prefer cliches to factual data, and shifting ideology to empirical research and logical demonstrations" (emphasis mine). The Christian has nothing to fear from scholarship, science or archaeology.

Inerrancy is a Poor Term

Generally people who make this objection believe that inerrancy is too strong a term. They believe that such a word demands a type of scientific precision. And furthermore, they may claim that this term is not used in the Bible and was unknown through much of the history of the church.

To the first objection, I point again to the definition of inerrancy, and that it refers to truthfulness and not precision. The Bible claims to be perfect Truth, but nowhere does it claim to contain perfect precision. As we saw yesterday, the Bible may round numbers, speak in human terms and contain odd grammatical constructions and still be inerrant. In response to the second objection I would point to any number of terms we use that are foreign to Scripture. The word "Trinity" does not appear within the pages of Scripture, yet the doctrine of the Trinity is clearly affirmed in the Bible and the term is very useful in summarizing the doctrines of the persons of the Godhead. The doctrine of inerrancy is taught within the pages of the Bible as clearly as if the word "inerrancy" was used.

Proving Inerrancy is a Circular Argument

The fourth objection is that we can only prove Scripture's inerrancy by circular argumentation. After all, we say that the Bible is inerrant because the Bible tells us it is inerrant. In *Reason to Believe* R.C. Sproul addresses circular argumentation in proving the Bible's infallibility and we can extend this line of reasoning to inerrancy. Consider the following premises and the subsequent conclusion:

- **Premise A**–The Bible is a basically reliable and trustworthy document.

- **Premise B**–On the basis of this reliable document we have sufficient evidence to believe confidently that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

- **Premise C**–Jesus Christ being the Son of God is an inerrant authority.

- **Premise D**–Jesus Christ teaches that the Bible is more than generally trustworthy; it is the very Word of God.

- **Premise E**–The word, in that it comes from God, is utterly trustworthy because God is utterly trustworthy.

- **Conclusion**–On the basis of the inerrant authority of Jesus Christ, the church believes the Bible to be utterly trustworthy; i.e., inerrant.

Where this model of linear reasoning may break down, is that some of what we accept about the Bible we accept by faith. Faith does not render reason invalid, but the Holy Spirit helps us believe in what our sinful, human minds will not accept. Therefore, I do not believe that an unbeliever – one who does not have the Spirit's help – can accept the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy. But this line of reasoning ought to be sufficient for the believer. I trust that all Christians believe in the first premise, as even most non-Christians, who have made the effort, can see that the Bible is basically reliable and trustworthy. But what the unbeliever cannot do is accept that Jesus is the Son of God and that He is thus an inerrant authority.

Problems With Denying Inerrancy

Having answered some common objections, let's move on to our final section, which is problems that may arise as a result of denying inerrancy.

First, if we deny inerrancy, we make God a liar. If there are errors in the original manuscripts, that were breathed out by God, one of two things must be true: either God purposely lied or he mistakenly lied. This indicates that God is capable of making errors or of producing errors. We might conclude from this that we are likewise able to intentionally lie, even if only in small matters.

Second, if we deny inerrancy we lose trust in God. If there are errors in Scripture, even if in the smallest detail, and these were placed there intentionally by God, how are we to maintain trust that He did not lie in other matters? When we lose trust in the Scriptures, we lose trust in God Himself and we may consequently lose our desire to be obedient to Him.

Third, if we deny the clear testimony of Scripture that it is inerrant, we make our minds a higher standard of Truth than the Bible. At the outset of this series I indicated a concern I felt towards those who deny inerrancy is when they indicate that the doctrine does not "feel right." But nowhere does the Bible appeal to our feelings or our reason for its authority or inerrancy. We must submit to the Word, for it will not submit to us.

Fourth, if we deny inerrancy, and indicate that small details are incorrect, we cannot consistently argue that all the doctrine the Bible contains is correct. Admitting error in

even the smallest historical detail is the thin edge of the wedge, for we then allow the possibility that there may be error in doctrine as well.

Conclusion

My intent for this series was to do two things. First, I wanted to define inerrancy and separate it from the other doctrines of Scripture such as authority, inspiration and transmission. While the basic sense of the word "inerrancy" is clear, the theological meaning is not always as lucid. Second, I wanted to answer some objections to inerrancy and show why this is a critical doctrine and why it is important that the church continues to affirm it.

Ultimately, inerrancy is true because perfection is consistent with God's character and because He has told us it is true. We must be careful with any objections to this doctrine, for if we indicate that we believe there are errors with the original manuscripts, we strike at the very character of God. The Bible is inerrant because it was breathed out by an inerrant God. Because of this we can have full confidence, today and always, that Scripture in the original manuscripts does not affirm anything that is contrary to fact.

Addendum

Before I close this series, I would like to add one brief exhortation: We need to be certain that we do not confuse our issues. In reading ongoing discussions of inerrancy I often found objections to inerrancy based on deeper objections to other issues, and most notably, to young earth creationism. I had to ask myself the question, "Does a belief in inerrancy necessarily mean that we are forced to believe in a young earth?" I believe that it does not, for I know that many old earth creationists hold a high, inerrant view of Scripture. While I have not researched this issue extensively, and while I affirm my belief in a literal six-day creation, I believe that a case for old earth creation can be built from an inerrant view of Scripture. These differences may owe to hermeneutics or exegesis, but not necessarily from a lowered view of Scripture. Thus we must not confuse the doctrine of inerrancy with other doctrines, allowing ourselves to unfairly do away with one doctrine on the basis of another.

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