

The Authority and Inerrancy of Scripture

What are the reasons for believing the Bible to be the Word of God? What does that mean when we recognize that the Bible is also a human book? What kind of authority should the Bible have in our lives? What is meant by the “inerrancy” of the Bible, and how can we answer current challenges to inerrancy? This seminar will also examine several specific “problem texts” that have sometimes been claimed as examples of errors in Scripture, and suggest approaches to dealing with such texts.

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Introduction:

The Four Characteristics of Scripture:

(1) Authority: How do we know that the Bible is God’s Word? (taken from Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, chapter 4)

Definition: 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.

A) All the words in Scripture are God’s words. (73-81)

1) This is what the Bible claims for itself.(73-77)

a) “Thus says the LORD.” (Deut. 18:18-20; Jer. 1:9, 29:31-32; Ezek. 2: 7)

- b) God speaks “through” the prophets (1 Kings 14:18; 2 Kings 9:36; Hag. 1:12; Deut. 18:19)
- c) In the NT, a number of passages indicate that all of the Old Testament writings are thought of as God’s words. (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21)
 - i) In other passages in the NT, various sections of the OT are referred to as God’s words. (Matt. 1:22, 19:5; Mark 7:9-13; Acts 1:16).
 - ii) New Testament writings also referred to as Scripture. (2 Peter 3:16; 1 Tim. 5:18; 1 Cor. 14:37)

(a) Objection: 1 Cor. 7:12 cf. 7:25, 40

2) We are convinced of the Bible’s claims to be God’s words as we read the Bible. (77-78)

- a) Our ultimate conviction that the words of the Bible are God’s words comes only when the Holy Spirit speaks *in* and *through* the words of the Bible. (John 10:27; 1 Cor 2:13-14)

3) Other evidence is useful but not finally convincing. (WCF 1.5) (78)

4) The words of Scripture are self-attesting. (78)

- a) They cannot be “proved” to be God’s words by appeal to any higher authority.

- 5) Objection: This is a circular argument. (78-80)
 - a) That this is a kind of a circular argument does not make it invalid, for all arguments for an absolute authority must ultimately appeal to that authority for proof.

- 6) This does not imply dictation from God as the sole means of communication. (80-81)
 - a) Up to this point it has been argued that all the words of the Bible are God's words, yet this requires a word of caution.
 - b) When we say that all the words of the Bible are God's words, we are talking about the result of the process of bringing Scripture into existence, not the process itself.
 - c) The Bible does not speak of only one type of process or one manner by which God communicated to the biblical authors what he wanted to be said. (Heb. 1:1; Luke 1:1-3; John 14:26)

- B) Therefore to disbelieve or disobey any word of Scripture is to disbelieve or disobey God. (81)
 - 1) Jesus can rebuke his disciples for not believing the OT Scriptures (Luke 24: 25)
 - 2) Believers are to keep or obey the disciples' words. (John 15:20; 2 Cor. 13:2-3; 2 Thes. 3:14; 2 Peter 3:2)

- C) The Truthfulness of Scripture (81-84)
 - 1) God cannot lie or speak falsely.
 - a) Since the biblical writers repeatedly affirm that the words of the Bible, though human, are God's words, it is appropriate to look at biblical texts that talk about *the character of God's words* and to apply these to the character of the words of Scripture. (Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18)

2) Therefore all the words in Scripture are completely true and without error in any part. (Num. 23:19; Ps. 12:6, 119:89; Prov. 30:5; Matt. 24:35)

3) God's words are the ultimate standard of truth. (John 17:17)

4) Might some new fact ever contradict the Bible?

a) Every true fact is something that God has known already from all eternity and is something that therefore cannot contradict God's speech in Scripture.

D) Written Scripture is Our Final Authority

1) The final form of Scripture is its written form; and it is authoritative in this form.

2) Hypothetical reconstructions of what "Jesus/Paul/the apostles really said" cannot replace the Scripture itself as the final authority.

**The Inerrancy of Scripture:
Are there any errors in the Bible?**
(taken from Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, chapter 5)

A) The Meaning of Inerrancy (90-92)

- 1) The inerrancy of Scripture means that **Scripture in the original manuscripts does not affirm anything that is contrary to fact.** (Ps. 12:6; Prov. 30:5; Num. 23:19)
 - a) This definition does not mean that the Bible tells us every fact there is to know about any one subject, but it affirms that *what it does say* about any subject is *true*.
- 2) The Bible can be inerrant and still speak in the ordinary language of everyday speech.
 - a) The Bible can speak of the sun rising and the rain falling because from the perspective of the speaker this is exactly what happens.
 - b) Inerrancy has to do with *truthfulness*, not with the degree of precision with which events are reported.
- 3) The Bible can be inerrant and still include loose or free quotations.
- 4) It is consistent with inerrancy to have unusual or uncommon grammatical constructions in the Bible.

B) Some Current Challenges to Inerrancy (92-99)

- 1) Objection #1: The Bible is only authoritative for “faith and practice.” (92-95)
 - a) This view would hold that the purpose of Scripture is to teach us in areas that concern “faith and practice” only, so it is possible that the Scripture makes false statements in other areas, such as historical or scientific facts.
 - b) Often referred to as a belief in the *infallibility* of Scripture.
 - c) Response to this objection:
 - i) The Bible itself does not make any restriction on the kinds of subjects to which it speaks truthfully. (1 Tim. 3:16; Ps. 12:6, 119:96; Prov. 30:5)

- (a) The New Testament contains further affirmations of the reliability of all parts of Scripture, including numerous references to OT historical events. (Acts 14:14; Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:11; Heb. 11)
 - ii) This position mistakes the *major* purpose of Scripture for the *total* purpose of Scripture.
- 2) Objection #2: The term “inerrancy” is a poor term. (95)
- a) *Inerrancy* is too precise a term and denotes a kind of absolute scientific precision that we do not want to claim for Scripture. Furthermore, the term itself is not used in the Scriptures.
 - b) Response to the objection:
 - i) The scholars who have used the term *inerrancy* have defined it clearly for over a hundred years, and they have always allowed for the “limitations” that attach to speech in ordinary language.
 - ii) We often use non-biblical terms to summarize a biblical teaching. (examples: Trinity, incarnation).
 - iii) The term is the only one widely used in the discussion regarding Biblical truthfulness, and it is not helpful to try to eliminate the term from the discussion at this point. (note ICBI)
- 3) Objection #3: We have no inerrant manuscripts; therefore, talk about an inerrant Bible is misleading. (96-97)
- a) Inerrancy has always, only been claimed for the original manuscripts, none of which survive.
 - b) Response to the objection:
 - i) For far over 99% of the words of the Bible, we know what the original manuscripts said; therefore, we can affirm the inerrancy of the words in the manuscripts *to the extent that they are the same as in the originals*.

-- and modern translations tell you where the few significant variants are

- ii) It is extremely important to say that inerrancy applies to the original manuscripts.

If mistakes in copies: mistakes by human beings

If mistakes in originals: mistakes also by God

- 4) Objection #4: The biblical writers “accommodated” their messages in minor details to the false ideas current in their day, and affirmed or taught those ideas in an incidental way. (97-98)

- a) When the biblical writers were attempting to make a larger point, they sometimes incidentally affirmed some falsehood believed by the people of their time.

- b) Response to this objection:

- i) God is Lord of human language, and he can use human language to communicate perfectly without having to affirm any false ideas.

- ii) Such an “accommodation” by God to our misunderstandings would imply that God had acted contrary to his character as an “unlying God.” (Num. 23:19; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18)

- iii) A process of accommodation, if it actually had occurred, would create a serious moral problem for us, if we are to imitate God and God is proved to be a liar. (Lev. 11:44; Luke 6:36; Eph. 5:1)

- 5) Objection #5: Inerrancy overemphasizes the divine aspect of Scripture and neglects the human aspect. (98)

- a) Response to this objection:

- i) Yes, Scripture has both a human and a divine aspect; but this does not demand that the Scripture possesses errors to be “human.”

- (a) God was overseeing the process of the writing of Scripture.

- (b) Human speech and writing can be free from error.

- 6) Objection #6: There are some clear errors in the Bible.

- a) Response to this objection:

i) In which specific verse or verses do these errors occur?

→ then investigate and find an answer

ii) The small number of problem texts should not be the basis of the rejection of inerrancy: all of them have been known for centuries and all have reasonable solutions.

C) Problems with Denying Inerrancy (99-100)

- 1) If we deny inerrancy, a serious moral problem confronts us: May we imitate God and intentionally lie in small matters also?
- 2) If inerrancy is denied, we begin to wonder if we can really trust God in anything he says.
- 3) If we deny inerrancy, we essentially make our own human minds a higher standard of truth than God's word itself.
- 4) If we deny inerrancy, then we must also say that the Bible is wrong not only in minor details but in some of its doctrines as well.

D) Analysis of selected "problem texts" that people have claimed to challenge inerrancy

THE CHICAGO STATEMENT ON BIBLICAL INERRANCY (1978)

(“Preface” omitted here)

A SHORT STATEMENT

1. God, who is Himself Truth and speaks truth only, has inspired Holy Scripture in order thereby to reveal Himself to lost mankind through Jesus Christ as Creator and Lord, Redeemer and Judge. Holy Scripture is God's witness to Himself.

2. Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: it is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it affirms; obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God's pledge, in all that it promises.

3. The Holy Spirit, Scripture's divine Author, both authenticates it to us by His inward witness and opens our minds to understand its meaning.

4. Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God's acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God's saving grace in individual lives.

5. The authority of Scripture is inescapably impaired if this total divine inerrancy is in any way limited or disregarded, or made relative to a view of truth contrary to the Bible's own; and such lapses bring serious loss to both the individual and the Church.

ARTICLES OF AFFIRMATION AND DENIAL

Article I: We affirm that the Holy Scriptures are to be received as the authoritative Word of God.

We deny that the Scriptures receive their authority from the Church, tradition, or any other human source.

Article II: We affirm that the Scriptures are the supreme written norm by which God binds the conscience, and that the authority of the Church is subordinate to that of Scripture.

We deny that Church creeds, councils, or declarations have authority greater than or equal to the authority of the Bible.

Article III: We affirm that the written Word in its entirety is revelation given by God.

We deny that the Bible is merely a witness to revelation, or only becomes revelation in encounter, or depends on the responses of men for its validity.

Article IV: We affirm that God who made mankind in His image has used language as a means of revelation.

We deny that human language is so limited by our creatureliness that it is rendered inadequate as a vehicle for divine revelation. We further deny that the corruption of human culture and language through sin has thwarted God's work of inspiration.

Article V: We affirm that God's revelation in the Holy Scriptures was progressive.

We deny that later revelation, which may fulfill earlier revelation, ever corrects or contradicts it. We further deny that any normative revelation has been given since the completion of the New Testament writings.

Article VI: We affirm that the whole of Scripture and all its parts, down to the very words of original, were given by divine inspiration.

We deny that the inspiration of Scripture can rightly be affirmed of the whole without the parts, or of some parts but not the whole.

Article VII: We affirm that inspiration was the work in which God by His Spirit, through human writers, gave us His Word. The origin of Scripture is divine. The mode of divine inspiration remains largely a mystery to us.

We deny that inspiration can be reduced to human insight, or to heightened states of consciousness of any kind.

Article VIII: We affirm that God in His Work of inspiration utilized the distinctive personalities and literary styles of the writers whom He had chosen and prepared.

We deny that God, in causing these writers to use the very words that He chose, overrode their personalities.

Article IX: We affirm that inspiration, though not conferring omniscience, guaranteed true and trustworthy utterance on all matters of which the Bible authors were moved to speak and write. We deny that the finitude or fallenness of these writers, by necessity or otherwise, introduced distortion or falsehood into God's Word.

Article X: We affirm that inspiration, strictly speaking, applies to the autographic text of Scripture, which in the providence of God can be ascertained from available manuscripts with great accuracy. We further affirm that copies and translations of Scripture are the Word of God to the extent that the faithfully represent the original.

We deny that any essential element of the Christian faith is affected by the absence of the autographs. We further deny that this absence renders the assertion of Biblical inerrancy invalid or irrelevant.

Article XI: We affirm that Scripture, having been given by divine inspiration, is infallible, so that, far from misleading us, it is true and reliable in all matters it addresses.

We deny that it is possible for the Bible to be at the same time infallible and errant in its assertions. Infallibility and inerrancy may be distinguished, but not separated.

Article XII: 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.

Article XIII: We affirm the propriety of using inerrancy as theological term with reference to the complete truthfulness of Scripture.

We deny that it is proper to evaluate Scripture according to standards of truth and error that are alien to its usage or purpose. We further deny that inerrancy is negated by Biblical phenomena such as a lack of modern technical precision, irregularities of grammar or spelling, observational descriptions of nature, the reporting of falsehoods, the use of hyperbole and round numbers, the topical arrangement of material, variant selections of material in parallel accounts, or the use of free citations.

Article XIV: We affirm the unity and internal consistency of Scripture.

We deny that alleged errors and discrepancies that have not yet been resolved vitiate the truth of claims of the Bible.

Article XV: We affirm that the doctrine of inerrancy is grounded in the teaching of the Bible about inspiration.

We deny that Jesus' teaching about Scripture may be dismissed by appeals to accommodation or to any natural limitation of His humanity.

Article XVI: We affirm that the doctrine of inerrancy has been integral to the Church's faith throughout its history.

We deny that inerrancy is a doctrine invented by Scholastic Protestantism, or is a reactionary position postulated in response to negative higher criticism.

Article XVII: We affirm that the Holy Spirit bears witness to the Scriptures, assuring believers of the truthfulness of God's written Word.

We deny that this witness of the Holy Spirit operates in isolation from or against Scripture.

Article XVIII: We affirm that the text of Scripture is to be interpreted by grammatico-historical exegesis, taking account of its literary forms and devices, and that Scripture is to interpret Scripture.

We deny the legitimacy of any treatment of the text or quest for sources lying behind it that leads to relativizing, dehistoricizing, or discounting its teaching, or rejecting its claims to authorship.

Article XIX: We affirm that a confession of the full authority, infallibility, and inerrancy of Scripture is vital to a sound understanding of the whole of the Christian faith. We further affirm that such confession should lead to increasing conformity to the image of Christ.

We deny that such confession is necessary for salvation. However, we further deny that inerrancy can be rejected without grave consequences, both to the individual and to the Church.

Appendix (if time):

The Canon of Scripture
What belongs in the Bible and what does not belong?
(taken from Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, chapter 3)

Explanation and Scriptural Basis (54)

Definition: The canon of Scripture is the list of all the books that belong in the Bible.

We must not underestimate the importance of determining which books belong in the Bible:

- (1) The words of Scripture nourish our spiritual lives. (Deut. 32:47)
- (2) Adding to/taking from God's words keeps God's people fr. obeying him fully. (Deut. 4:2)

A) The Old Testament Canon (54-59)

- 1) The Bible itself testifies to the historical development of the canon.
 - a) The earliest collection of written words was the Ten Commandments, which God himself wrote on two stone tablets. (Ex. 32:16)
 - b) The collection of authoritative words from God grew in size throughout the time of Israel's history.
 - i) Moses wrote additional works: Deuteronomy (Deut. 31:24-26), also the first 4 books of the Bible (Ex. 24:4, 34:27; Num. 33:2; Deut. 31:22)
 - ii) Joshua added to the "words in the book of the law of God." (Josh. 24:26)
 - (a) In view of the command that the Lord gave through Moses not to add to the law (Deut. 4:2, 12:32), Joshua must have been convinced that God authorized the additional writing.
 - iii) Others in Israel, usually those who filled the office of prophet, wrote additional words from God. (1 Sam. 10:25; 1 Chron. 29:29; 2 Chron 20:34 [cf. 1 Kings 16:7], 26:22, 32:32; Jer. 30:2)
 - c) The content of the Old Testament canon continued to grow until approximately 435 BC with the completion of Malachi.
 - i) The subsequent history of the Jewish people was recorded in other writings, but they were not considered worthy to be included with the Scriptures. (1 Macc. 4:45-46, 9:27, 14:41; Josephus *Against Apion* 1.38-42), and other literature

- ii) No record of any dispute between Jesus and the Jews over the extent of the canon, Neither Jesus nor NT authors cite Apocrypha as having divine authority, but cite OT over 295 times (frequently as Word of God).
- iii) What about the Apocrypha?
 - (a) These books were never accepted by the Jews as Scripture.
 - (b) The early church was of a mixed opinion on the issue, although most of the evidence is decidedly against viewing the Apocrypha as Scripture.
 - (i) The earliest Christian list of Old Testament books (AD 170) by Melito of Sardis does not include the Apocrypha.
 - (ii) Eusebius and Athanasius both rejected the Apocrypha as being part of the canon.
 - (iii) The Roman Catholic Church did not officially declare the Apocrypha (excluding 1 and 2 Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh) to be part of the canon until 1546 at the Council of Trent.
 - (c) Thus the writings of the Apocrypha should not be regarded as part of Scripture: (1) they do not claim for themselves the same authority; (2) they were not regarded as canonical by the Jews; (3) they were not considered Scripture by Jesus and the NT authors; and (4) they contain teachings inconsistent with the rest of the Bible.

B) The New Testament Canon (60-68)

- 1) The New Testament canon begins with the writings of the apostles, who were given the ability from the Holy Spirit to recall and interpret accurately the words and deeds of Jesus. (John 14:26, 16:13-14)
 - a) Furthermore those who have the office of apostle in the early church claim an authority equal to that of the Old Testament prophets. (2 Peter 3:2; Acts 5:2-4; 1 Cor. 2:9, 13, 14:37; 2 Cor. 13:3)
- 2) Some of the New Testament writings are placed alongside the Old Testament canon as part of Scripture. (2 Peter 3:16; 1 Tim 5:17-18 [cf. Luke 10:7])
- 3) If we accept the arguments for the traditional views of authorship of the New Testament writings, then we have most of the New Testament in the canon because of direct authorship by the apostles.

- 4) What about:
 - a) Mark, Luke, Acts
 - i) All three were commonly acknowledged very early, probably because of the respective authors' close association with an apostle (Mark with Peter and Luke with Paul).
 - b) Jude
 - i) Not accepted as early because of his quotation of 1 Enoch, but accepted in virtue of the author's connection with James and the fact that he was the brother of Jesus.
 - c) Hebrews
 - i) Acceptance was urged by many in the church on the basis of assumed Pauline authorship. However, many others rejected Pauline authorship (e.g. Origen). Therefore its acceptance was not due primarily to a belief in Pauline authorship, but rather the intrinsic qualities of the book.
 - d) Ultimately for a book to belong in the canon, it is absolutely necessary that the book have divine authorship.
- 5) Should we expect more writings to be added to the canon?
 - a) There is a finality to the revelation of God in Christ and once this revelation has been completed, no more is to be expected. The apostles and their close companions report Christ's words and deeds and interpret them with absolute divine authority; therefore the canon is now closed. (Heb. 1:1-2, Rev. 22: 18-19)
- 6) How do we know that we have the right books in the canon of Scripture?
 - a) Primarily based on the faithfulness of God.
 - b) For the individual based on the work of the Holy Spirit and the historical data.
- 7) Are there any books, hypothetical or actual, that deserve a place in the canon or are there any strong objections to any book currently in the canon?
- 8) The canon of Scripture today is exactly what God wanted it to be, and it will stay that way until Christ returns.