WHAT IS INERRANCY?

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INTRODUCTION

The question of Scriptural inerrancy is a theological debate that is rooted in spiritual warfare, wrapped in linguistic semantics, and packed with eternally divisive consequences. The question: “what is inerrancy” probes much deeper than the syntax implies. The consistency, interconnectivity, and shared foundational components of the Christian faith demand that one’s position on biblical inerrancy shape the convictions of their individual theology – whether intentionally or by default. At its core, the question of inerrancy asks: “to what extent is the Word of God, the Bible, to be believed?”

There are generally three schools of thought when it comes to the broader issue of divine inerrancy. The first is championed by the atheist community. Atheists by definition reject the concept of any higher, involved deity. Consequently, in their opinion, there can be no documented communiqué to critique. The second paradigm is held by misguided theists. Mono-theists and pantheists alike may accept the plausibility of inerrancy but remain convinced that Christians have simply put their faith in the wrong God. The Muslim faith and its relationship with the Koran is a perfect example of this point. The last perspective is held by the foundationally-diverse Christian community. The objective of this paper is to unravel the three primary positions on biblical inerrancy within mainstream Christianity. Herein the liberal, moderate, and conservative views will be examined. Furthermore, a personal position will be espoused and defended to close out the work.

Framing the Debate

Beliefs regarding the Scripture, its origin, purpose, and authority ultimately frame one’s convictions pertaining to inerrancy. Therefore, it is paramount that one understands the three theological positions: “Neo-Liberal View, Neo-Orthodox View, and the Received View” (Dr. Wellum’s lecture notes) that represent the liberal, moderate, and conservative Christian camps respectively. The Neo-Liberal point of view stresses
Scriptures’ pragmatism while minimizing divine involvement. Those holding to this position perceive the Bible to be a work of human admiration and reverence to the Lord. The defining stance in the Neo-Liberal view is its rejection of the Bible as the actual Word of God.

The Neo-Orthodox view is what represents the widely held, middle ground of the debate. Many people seek refuge in the Neo-Orthodox camp, assuming they are safely escaping the polarized zealots that make up the extreme views of classical and liberal Christianity. The theological language of the Neo-Orthodox view sounds conservative but embraces liberal conclusions. In regard to Scripture, it is said to be a “witness” (notes) to the Word of God that also has the ability to “become” (notes) the Word of God through dynamic intervention on the part of the Holy Spirit. Once again however, the defining issue is that the Bible is not accepted as the ever-present, authoritative Word of God.

The last position, that which represents the conservative outcrops of the Reformation, is the Received View. Herein lay the roots of other critical theological truths that collectively represent the orthodox Christian world-view. Belief in verbal-plenary inspiration represents the foundation of the Received View. Consequently, the Received View holds to the fact that the Bible’s origin was with God, its purpose is revelatory, and its authority is all encompassing. It is only upon such concrete footings that other Doctrines of Christianity can stand. Without the acceptance of full Scriptural inerrancy, one is forced to introduce rational subjectivity to questions of the Trinity, Jesus’ divinity, and countless other Christological issues. In essence, the Received View believes the Bible explains the Christian world-view because it is the Word of God. Once one accepts verbal-plenary inspiration, the belief that God has given us Scripture via documented, all encompassing words of inspiration through His chosen human authors, as Received View holders do, the only logical position to hold is that of
complete inerrancy. Otherwise, one is asked the daunting question of which words, passages, themes, or books of the Bible can be ignored. Once that heretical premise has been established, the next logical question is: “and how can you be so sure the convictions you maintain and the parts you choose to accept are true?” In the Received View, inerrancy is a black and white issue. Every word is believed because each is seen as having come directly from God, in confluence with the style and personality of the human authors.

The next step in framing the discussion involves properly defining inerrancy. Grudem defines it this way: “The inerrancy of Scripture means that Scripture in the original manuscripts does not affirm anything that is contrary to fact.” He goes on to say: “in simple terms... the Bible always tells the truth... concerning everything it talks about.” J.I. Packer, while speaking at the National Biblical Inerrancy Conference in 1987, said the following in an attempt to explain the relationship between error and inerrancy:

“Error is an affirmation, an assertion which fails to be veritical when it seeks to be veritical. In essence, it is an attempt to tell the truth that fails. In assessing whether any statement constitutes an error, you first of all have to ask: ‘what did the speaker intend to express, what is the scope of his affirmation?’ Then you go on to ask: ‘does it succeed in being veritical or does it not?’ If it can be shown that the affirmation is limited in its scope, well beyond that intended scope, there can be no error.”

“I, however, am not one of those who believes that the honor of God requires me to have an answer, and a complete answer, for everything. You can ask me questions to which I shall have to say: “I don’t know.” Do I dishonor God and do I threaten your faith by saying: “I don’t know?” – I trust not.”

“The adage discrepancies and errors in the Bible, for the most part, dissolve away as soon as one sees clearly that the biblical books are human products of their own time, and stops expecting of them the perspective and precision of a modern laboratory report.”


2 Ibid, 91
My Position: the Received View, Inspiration, and Inerrancy

Inspiration can be best understood as the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit within the human authors of Scripture. The supernatural component ensured that the written autographs were exactly what God wanted documented and communicated to humanity. The actual Greek term used for “inspiration” is best translated to mean “God-breathed.” Needless to say, if one holds to a “God-breathed” origin of Scripture, assuming the acceptance of a sovereign God, there can be no question as to the authoritative value of Scripture. The foundation for this view is found in the self-attesting claims of the Bible (see 2 Peter 1:20-21 and 2 Timothy 3:15-16). Together these two verses combine to create the basis for a doctrine of inspiration. There is also a mystery component to inspiration. As finite human beings, we cannot fathom all the workings of God. The question is often raised about the apparent conflict between God’s sovereignty in the process and man’s free will. In technical, theological terms, the explanation is described by the “Concursive theory of Inspiration.” (notes) But what it really boils down to is that we accept what the Bible tells us: Scripture was written freely by human authors while simultaneously saying exactly what God wanted said. In reality, this is “mystery” with a name… the Concursive theory of Inspiration. It is also important to note that the inspiration of the Bible is not limited to certain passages or sections. We are told that “all Scripture is God breathed” and that is exactly what is to be accepted as God’s Word – “all” of Scripture. Lastly, one should never confuse the fact that God inspired Scripture with our need to discern its message wisely. Sound exegesis is critical to biblical interpretation. Just because God left us a map does not guarantee we will get to where He intended us to go.

The challenges most people face when considering this high view of Scripture have to do with getting their head around the idea of both God and man being co-authors of the text. Reason and rationale all but force us to choose between an understanding that supports a sovereign God dictating to humans, or a less than perfect,
errant view of Scripture. However, the Bible also tells us that there will be elements of God’s reality that we will not fully understand. In those places where a directive is given or a truth is claimed and our finite minds cannot bridge the gap with reason, mystery is claimed and faith takes over. To a certain extent, that is the case with inspiration. Without the Holy Spirit actively involved in one’s heart, faith cannot be born in and of itself. Therefore, without faith, one is unlikely, if not unable, to genuinely embrace the concept and doctrine of inspiration.

Inerrancy in its most refined definition means, without error. When the term is used in religious discussions today it is often debated but not always fully understood. One of the first things I learned is that the term is relatively new. While the implication of the word inerrant when applied to Scripture can be proven to go as far back as Scripture itself, the lightening-rod term “inerrant” arrived on the world stage about one hundred years ago. On the heels of the Enlightenment, a fundamentalist movement emerged amongst evangelical Christians which sought to establish a commitment to inerrancy. With that said, it is important to understand the context and purpose behind the term and why it is so often debated. At its core, the Doctrine of Inerrancy is rooted in evangelical apologetics. As the evangelical movement began to pick up momentum, it became apparent that Scripture needed to be shared and explained in an effort to convert lives and save souls. With the rise of critical scholarship and the doubt-ridden overtones of the Enlightenment era, the inerrancy movement sought to document and solidify the unquestionable origin and authority of God’s inspired and inerrant Word. In any effort designed to enlighten and convert someone’s opinion, especially apologetically speaking, a basis for the recommended change is needed. In the case of Christianity, one’s reasons for change and the entire story of the Gospel are contained in the Bible. Consequently, it is imperative that the Word of God be shared with lost people. At the same time, it is equally important that the Bible be accepted as
inerrant. The next natural step in the process is to affirm the Word’s validity. Those of us who hold the Received view of Scripture know there are a multitude of reasons to accept this truth. But, to those without deep roots of faith, there is one truth that is essential for early conversion – belief in God’s Word. Everything professed by the Christian community is alleged to come out of its Scriptural origin. Therefore, if the lost are to accept their need to change, as well as the exclusive process required for conversion and the guiding principles they are to embrace from then on, they typically need to know that the Bible is completely trustworthy. With that anthropological assessment taken, the evangelical movement connected the word “inerrant” with this historically accepted, but rarely highlighted view of Scripture. With the Holy Spirit’s leading, evangelical Christians began to explain the Bible’s inerrant nature as an apologetic tool in the witnessing process.

One sticking point that has created a lot of confusion has to do with what exactly is defended as inerrant. In short, it refers to the original autographs as being wholly true and without error. The Bible shows us that translations are to be accepted as authoritative when deemed by God (the second writing of the Law by Moses is a direct example). God’s command to Moses to make a second copy of the law establishes the principle of translations being accepted by God so long as they continue to communicate the intended message of God. Herein lies the sticking point for many people… the question is often asked how one can be sure that the Scriptures we have today are still perfectly reflecting God’s intended message. There are three main points that need to be addressed in answering this issue. First, one of the cornerstones of the inerrant position qualifies the final judgment to take place when God reveals all his truths. What that means is that not all answers will be revealed in this lifetime. Consequently, there is a need for genuine faith. The believing that occurs because the Holy Spirit quickens one’s heart to believe and the kind of faith that responds to the Word of God is a requirement of
authentic Christianity. For those who are challenged by such statements and cling instead to the “truth” of science and knowledge need only to be reminded of the earth’s reported flat surface a few hundred years ago – science changes but God’s Word is eternal. Next, the differences found in wording used between translations cannot be used as evidence in support of an errant position. God promised that His Word is inerrant in its original, autograph form. It is also apparent through Scripture that God wanted us to use inscripturation to replicate His Word and use it to fulfill the great commission. Consequently, the combined affects of translation and subsequent inscripturation guaranteed change in wording without the necessity of errant transmission. At the same time, however, Scripture never guarantees the inerrancy of every copy and translation. Hence, we treat copies and translations of Scripture as authoritative while not fighting over individual questions of inerrancy – so long as the text in question continues to mirror God’s original message. 2 Timothy 3:16 and Jeremiah’s account with King Jehoiakim in Jeremiah 36 are just a couple of examples of biblical support for this principle from both the Old and New Testaments.

An insightful and helpful truth from Dr. Wellum’s lectures was the simple phrase: “Loss of the codex does not entail loss of the text, for the text is preserved in the extant copies.” This reality took root in my heart through a very simple and ordinary illustration that the Holy Spirit shared with me while I was contemplating the depth and meaning of this truth. I will be celebrating a birthday soon. I have had 37 previous birthdays and God willing I look forward to seeing many more. December 10th is my birthday – always has been and always will be. I know this is true. However, I cannot remember the last time I saw my birth certificate. I would venture to say that the original is long since lost, if not destroyed. Nonetheless, I have treated December 10th the same way all my life, never once requiring the “codex” of my birth certificate to validate what I knew in my heart to be true. While my birth certificate in no way reflects the nature of
Scripture, the principle of proof does apply. Moreover, if I trust my earthly parents who originally told me things about my birthday, how much more should I believe my heavenly Father who tells me in Spirit and Word that His Scriptures are true? In the end, I trust God’s providence in matters of preservation of Scripture and the Holy Spirit’s direct guidance in applying them correctly. I know that all of God’s Word is ALL of God’s Word. That means that it needs to be looked at in its entirety and interpreted by Scripture itself. Too often context is ignored and hermeneutics are twisted in attempts to get Scripture to say something someone wants to hear. Thorough exegesis and conservative hermeneutics are to be applied throughout the entire Word of God to properly hear its message. This matter is particularly important given the Bible’s use of phenomenological language. In a bit of a paradox, the very issue that makes the Scriptures so useful and effective is the same thing that requires the most diligent approach to interpretation. We have to be careful not to get caught in a semantic or syntax trap of exact translation and thereby miss the truly intended message delivered through the language of the day.

My personal opinion regarding inerrancy is directly linked to my support of the Received view of Scripture overall. In my mind, there is no genuine Christianity without acceptance of inspiration and inerrancy. There are far too many links between the claims of Christ, the Bible itself, and the disciples who later wrote the New Testament books to separate the two issues. If one is not perfect and complete, neither is the other. Obviously, I accept both inspiration and inerrancy as the by-product of a loving, active, and sovereign God. Jesus said that He is the only way to the father. Jesus also told us that Scripture was God’s Word. Scripture itself attests to its own authority as God’s Word. Everything rings true with the Holy Spirit’s working in my heart, and the only truly congruent theology on the planet is that which accepts the Received view of...
Scripture and its under girding foundation – Scripture is the inspired and inerrant Word of God.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


