

THE VALUE AND USE OF AFFIRMING THE INERRANCY OF
THE AUTOGRAPHS OF SCRIPTURE THOUGH
THEY ARE NOT AVAILABLE

Issue

Many have charged that the doctrine of inerrancy is simply academic speculation because there is no way to confirm or deny its validity. At best, they think inerrancy is wishful thinking, but at worst, they fear it has dark implications, bringing unhealthy practical and spiritual consequences, and creating unnecessary partisan division between two groups of genuine Christians. But, more conservative and evangelical Christians are convinced that a sharp line of division must be drawn between the position that affirms inerrancy and the position that denies it. They maintain that Scripture itself demands the doctrine of inerrancy, that evidence does not refute it, and that the doctrine is useful and valuable both theologically and practically.

Positions

There are two major positions regarding the use and value of the doctrine of inerrancy. The first position denies that inerrancy can be of any value or use because the original documents are missing, while the second position affirms two things about inerrancy. First, it is valuable as an overall theological position, and second, it is practically beneficial. Those who hold the first position deny the inerrancy of the autographs, while those who hold the second position affirm the inerrancy of the autographs.

The first position is based on a strict empiricism. Since the autographs cannot be examined, there is no way to know whether they were inerrant. Everyone agrees that the copies we now possess contain certain corruptions. Therefore, since the inerrancy of the originals cannot

be demonstrated by observation, it is unhelpful to insist dogmatically with any degree of certainty that the originals were free from error. Sullivan says, “I suggest that believing that no-longer-existing autographs were inerrant is comparable to believing in the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Of what use to us is this pot of gold if we can never find it? Similarly, of what use are inerrant autographs if we can never have access to them. I perceive that inerrantists actually subscribe to a conjectured or speculative inerrancy.”¹ Sullivan believes that any practical value that might derive from an inerrant Bible is irrelevant due to the fact that we do not currently have an inerrant Bible. He also fears that the technical nuances of educated inerrantism are wholly lost on the “folks” in the pew. Sullivan thinks the terminology of “inerrancy” clogs the discussion since most people understand inerrancy to mean, “The Bible [we presently have] is void of errors, contradictions, or problematic passages. Every statement found therein is valid and believable to modern man.”² This, according to Sullivan, promotes a serious misunderstanding about the nature of the Bible. It also has the practical effect of diminishing the emphasis on biblical Christ-centeredness and replacing it with undue concentration on an “inerrant book,” which is a distraction to vibrant Christian faith.³ Hendricks, another non-inerrantist scholar, fears that inerrancy might be detrimental to serious biblical scholarship because it could imply that the source and editing theories of higher criticism are not valid ways of analyzing the Bible.⁴ Finally, Sullivan has a theological concern as well. He believes that insisting on inerrant autographs would exclude the human element of Scripture. Like Christ, the Bible is both divine and human, but the teaching that the autographs were inerrant so emphasizes the divine side of the Bible’s

¹ Clayton Sullivan, *Toward a Mature Faith: Does Biblical Inerrancy Make Sense?* (Decatur: Baptists Today, 1990), 46.

² Ibid., viii.

³ Ibid., 124-125.

⁴ William L. Hendricks, “Southern Baptists and the Bible,” *One in Christ* 17 (1981): 212.

inspiration that it wrongly overlooks the human side.⁵

In contrast to the first, the second position relies exclusively on deductive reasoning to come to its conclusion that the autographs were inerrant. It insists that the doctrine of inerrancy is demanded by explicit statements of Scripture and is implied by the theological principles taught by the Bible. While those who adhere to this position agree that the manuscripts we now have are not totally error free, this position insists that the conclusions of textual criticism are not inconsistent with an affirmation of the “practical” inerrancy of the text we now possess.

Support

The following pages will argue that the doctrine of biblical inerrancy is a valuable and useful theological assertion even though the original documents are not known to be extant. Before looking at the question of the value and use of the doctrine of inerrancy, it is important to understand generally what the doctrine teaches. A short but accurate definition would run as follows: the meaning intended by the biblical authors is true. Wayne Grudem defines inerrancy in this way: “...Scripture in the original manuscripts does not affirm anything that is contrary to fact.”⁶ Robert Reymond similarly states, “. . . the Bible does not err in any of its affirmations, whether . . . spiritual realities or morals, history or science . . .”⁷ Millard Erickson agrees, “Inerrancy is the doctrine that the Bible is fully truthful in all of its teachings.”⁸ A fuller statement by Bruce Ware says, “All the Bible and all its teachings are true in the sense that the text communicates what the author intends.”⁹ A series of articles written by B.B. Warfield in the early 1900’s forms an extended argument for the inspiration and inerrancy of the biblical autographs

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Sullivan, *Toward a Mature Faith*, 14.

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Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 90.

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Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), 70.

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Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 246.

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Bruce A. Ware, “Inerrancy” (Classroom lecture notes, 27060 B – *Systematic Theology I*, Fall 2003).

that is still of immense value.¹⁰ A more concise treatment is found in the “Chicago Statement of Biblical Inerrancy,” which is the most complete and generally accepted statement of the doctrine today.¹¹

Inerrantists are inerrantists because they believe the Bible teaches the doctrine, not because the phenomena of the text require it. Second Timothy 3:16 says, “All Scripture is God-breathed (θεο/pneustoj, theopneustos) and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training and righteousness.” According to Scripture, the Holy Spirit moved the authors to write down God’s own speech (2 Pet 1:21), teaching them His very words (1 Cor 2:13). In fact, numerous passages of the Bible describe the total perfection of Scripture.¹² Most pertinent to the question at hand, though, is the fact that 2 Timothy 3:16 grounds the usefulness of Scripture in its God-breathed nature. That is, Scripture is profitable precisely because it is God-breathed. Therefore, inerrantists maintain that their doctrine is valuable and useful primarily because the Bible says it is. Inerrantists are satisfied that the Bible’s statements about itself are sufficient to settle the matter, apart from any examination of the originals.

Clearly then, the Bible teaches us that the original documents are the breath of God and were therefore perfect, but has the substance of the originals been distorted by careless transmission through the ages? If so, we cannot trust the copies of the Bible as Scripture. However, if the copies we have are faithful to the originals, then for all practical purposes we may rely on them as the Word of God. The question of whether copies should be trusted is one that can be answered both by examining textual evidence and by looking at what the Bible says about them. So, unlike the question of inerrancy, this question can be approached both inductively and

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Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philipsburg: P&R, 1948).

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The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy [on-line]; accessed 10 November 2003; available from <http://www.reformed.org/documents/icbi.html>; Internet.

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See Num 23:19; 2 Sam 7:28; Psa 12:6; 119:89, 96; Prov 30:5; Matt 24:35; Jn 17:17; Tit 1:2; Heb 6:18.

deductively.

First, it is important to examine the evidence from textual criticism in order to determine whether or not the biblical text is reliable. Due to space limitations, the conclusions of textual scholars will have to suffice as evidence. Regarding the Old Testament text, F.F. Bruce says, “The conditions in which the Hebrew text was transmitted give us ground for greater confidence than might be supposed.”¹³ He concludes that “in general [the Septuagint] confirms that no serious changes were introduced into the text of the Old Testament . . .”¹⁴ He also mentions “the meticulous care which the scribes and Masoretes took to avoid errors in copying.”¹⁵ Bruce asks the question of whether the Masoretic text faithfully represents the text originally written by the authors of the Old Testament. His answer is, “The Qumran discoveries have enabled us to answer this question in the affirmative . . .”¹⁶ Therefore, according to textual scholars, the Old Testament has been preserved in transmission.

Regarding the New Testament text, “. . . evidence points to the careful and painstaking work on the part of many faithful copyists,” pronounces Metzger.¹⁷ He says, “Even in the incidental details one observes the faithfulness of the scribes.”¹⁸ In the concluding paragraph of his section on textual criticism, Metzger writes, “. . . in very many cases the textual critic is able to ascertain without residual doubt which reading must have stood in the original . . .”¹⁹ F.F. Bruce also offers conclusions about the faithfulness of the copies to the originals. He argues that

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F.F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, rev. ed. (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1991), 112.

¹⁴

Ibid., 113.

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Ibid., 114.

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Ibid., 115.

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Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford, 1992), 206.

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Ibid., 206.

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Ibid., 246.

evidence for the New Testament “. . . is ever so much greater than the evidence for many writings of the classical authors, the authenticity of which no one dreams of questioning.”²⁰ He then goes on to demonstrate that compared to remarkable attestation of the New Testament, Caesar’s *Gallic Wars*, and Tacitus’ *Histories* and *Annals*, for example, have remarkably weak proof of authenticity, yet no serious scholar would argue that their authenticity is doubtful. Therefore, an honest examination of the evidence from textual criticism should not lead to the conclusion that the biblical text has been seriously corrupted by transmission.

Second, it is necessary to hear what the Bible itself has to say about the authority of its copies. This argument is deductive in nature because it looks to Scripture, rather than to external evidence, to ground the authenticity of its copies. Ultimately, of course, if one believes the final authority of the Bible, the question has to be settled here. Scripture never guarantees totally perfect transmission, but it does assume the full reliability of copies. According to the Old Testament, copies of the Bible were recognized as God’s Word.²¹ The New Testament too affirms the authority of copies. Christ taught from the copies of the Old Testament existing in His day and referred to them as Scripture (Lk 4:17-21). Matthew 1:22 quotes a copy of Isaiah as “what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet.” Copies of the Psalms (Matt 22:43) and Daniel (Matt 24:15) are both recognized as Scripture. In fact, Jesus Christ regarded the extant copies of every part of the Old Testament as Scripture (Lk 24:44). Finally we must rest content to rely on God by His powerful providence to keep His promise to preserve faithfully His Word. “For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law or the Prophets” (Matt 5:17). Therefore, according to the Bible, the copies we currently have can and should be seen as faithful to the originally inerrant documents, and thus authoritative

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F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*, 6th ed. (Downers Grove: IVP, 1981), 10.

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See Deut 17:18; Prov 25:1.

themselves.

What exactly is the value and use of this affirmation? The doctrine is valuable for a number of theological reasons. Inerrancy affirms the divine attribute of truthfulness. If God breathed an untruth in the originals, it suggests that God Himself is untruthful. Inerrancy is consistent with the divine attribute of omniscience. If God were to have spoken errantly, it would call His perfect knowledge into question. It guards the divine attribute of omnipotence. If the originals had errors in them, then the power of God to speak truth alone through human beings might be called into question. Without inerrancy, the inspired character of Scripture itself must be questioned. How can the text be inspired if its meaning is flawed? Without inerrancy, the authority of Scripture may rightly be questioned. If human beings must decide whether a statement of Scripture is an error, then the ultimate locus of authority shifts from the Bible to the human being. The doctrine of the Bible's sufficiency is also partly protected by inerrancy, since if the Bible contains perfect divine revelation of truth, then the motivation to look outside the Bible or to a personal "inner light" for specially revealed truth should be diminished. Inerrancy protects the doctrinal character of Christianity by removing truth from the subjective realm to the objectively revealed doctrinal propositions of the Bible. So, there is remarkably high theological value in affirming the inerrancy of the autographs.

There is significant practical use for the doctrine of inerrancy as well. Inerrancy helps to protect against total disbelief in the Bible. If any part of the Bible is fundamentally flawed, then it is completely rational to think that other parts of the Bible might be flawed as well. Inerrancy guards the proper hermeneutical method. If the exegete does not assume the Bible to be true, then at the end of his analysis, he must ask himself, "Is this really true?" This question sends him hunting for flaws and makes his mind the judge of the Bible's truth. The exegete's answer to the question of the Bible's truthfulness also determines the practical application of the meaning he has

worked so hard to ascertain. The doctrine of biblical inerrancy is essential to expository pastoral preaching, which should be the center of the life of the local church. Martin Lloyd-Jones tells why he thinks there has been a decline in good preaching. He says, “I would not hesitate to put in the first position: the loss of belief in the authority of the Scriptures. . .”²² If inerrancy were recovered in the church, then perhaps the pulpits would be aflame with God’s Truth once more. Inerrancy is important to the study and devotion of the church since when it is affirmed, the church studies the Bible in order to hear from God, but when it is denied, the role of Scripture in devotion must be marginalized because the Bible is not necessarily true. Finally, it has been shown time and again that when the church loses its confidence in the total truthfulness of Scripture, it begins a faithless downward spiral.²³ Therefore, the doctrine of inerrancy is of immeasurable importance to theology and life of the church of our Lord.

Objections

A first objection to this argument is that it relies heavily on the fallacy of circular reasoning. In response, there is one important sense in which circularity is always unavoidable, and that is with regard to the ultimate authority within any given worldview structure. If an ultimate authority tries to ground its authority in something outside of itself, then it relinquishes its status as the “ultimate” authority. On the Christian worldview, the Word of God is the ultimate authority because God says in His Word that it is the ultimate authority. On today’s prevailing worldview, autonomous human reason is the ultimate authority because it seems reasonable to believe that autonomous human reason is the ultimate authority. Any attempt to prove that reason is the final authority will result in the use of reason; therefore, the authority of reason cannot be proven but by the use of reason. Hence, at the worldview level, there is no way finally to prove an

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Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 13.

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Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 72-160.

ultimate authority, but by circular argument, even though final authorities may be corroborated by external evidence.

A second objection to this argument is that evidence from textual criticism can be argued either to support the reliability of copies or to deny their reliability. It is true that the arguments from textual criticism only produce probabilistic arguments, and counter arguments are available. But this is true of all evidential arguments. If all the evidence were known with certainty and if a perfect argument could be presented, certainty by means of the evidence alone would be achievable, and no counter-arguments would exist. However, since we are limited human beings, we cannot know all the evidence, and since we are fallible and sinful human beings, we often present imperfect arguments. Therefore, the evidence from textual criticism can be marshaled in support of either position. Nevertheless, on balance, according to the scholars in that field, the evidence still swings in the favor of the position that sees very close alignment between the autographs and the extant copies.

A third and final objection comes from Sullivan and Hendricks. If God thought it was so important to guarantee that the autographs were inerrant, then He would have ensured the inerrancy of the copies.²⁴ But this does not follow. First of all, it has already been shown that the Bible only claims inspiration (and thus inerrancy) for the original documents, and this affirmation is indispensable for theological reasons. All that is required for inerrancy to be of practical benefit is that the copies we possess faithfully represent the originals. The Bible never says explicitly or implicitly that the copies of the autographs must be perfect. On the contrary, it explicitly affirms that the “less-than-perfect” copies of Christ’s day were rightly regarded as the Word of God. We are not told exactly why God allowed errors to creep into the copies at various places. Therefore, in the final analysis, we must trust God to have kept the copies free from any significant

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Sullivan, *Toward a Mature Faith*, 47 and Hendricks, “Southern Baptists and the Bible,” 211.

corruption by His omnipotent providence.