

Inerrancy

We hear often enough in ministry that you must pick your battles. You cannot go to war over every issue, nor should you. Not every error of doctrine is what we would call a catastrophic error – something that threatens the whole faith. Not every error is even an urgent error, something that if left to itself will become a catastrophic error. Some errors are isolated, and left to themselves, do not greatly affect the system of faith.

Some voices out there feel that inerrancy is one of those isolated matters, much ado over nothing, an American controversy imported into South Africa, and not really something we should be concerned about.

I am going to argue that if you define inerrancy correctly, and understand the logical implications of denying it, it is no isolated error, and no peripheral error. If you believe that the Bible as given by God contains errors, it is going to have effects on your faith which will be at best, serious, and at worst, catastrophic.

But as in all theology, we cannot make much progress, unless we have precise definitions. We will talk past each other if we don't know what we mean by certain words. In particular, we need to clearly define three 'I' words. Inspiration, Infallibility, and Inerrancy. From there, we'll consider the implications of denying inerrancy. Third, we'll defend inerrancy, first by defining inspiration, and then showing that inerrancy is implied by that definition, and then by giving some qualifications. Lastly, we'll consider the objections to inerrancy.

So, to begin with, I want to set out a few definitions that will have an orderly mental environment to work in.

A. Definitions

Inspiration: the result of the act of the Holy Spirit working upon the authors of Scripture, enabling men to write accurately whatever God wanted humanity to read and know.

Infallibility: The Word of God never fails to guide us correctly, or report the truth. Infallible and inerrant do not mean the same thing.

Inerrancy: the implication of inspiration: *God-breathed texts do not contain error, or affirm anything contrary to fact.*

On this definition, **biblical errancy** would be the belief that *what was written by the authors of Scripture contained factual errors, and in some places, affirmed things contrary to fact.*

B. Implications of errancy

1. *Biblical errancy distinguishes between spiritual truth and historical fact.* It's common to hear that the Bible delivers truth necessary for our soul, even if it gets it wrong about historical events, numbers, or scientific data. Wishing to retain the Gospel and essential doctrine, it suggests that errors in historical fact are not significant for the authority of Scripture. But as J. Gresham Machen pointed out: "Christ died"—that is history; "Christ died for our sins"—that is doctrine. Without these two elements, joined in an absolutely indissoluble union, there is no Christianity."

2. *Biblical errancy distinguishes between words and 'statements'.* Happy to say that Scripture is

infallible in its statements, an errantist feels he has distanced himself from the 'crudeness' of verbal plenary inspiration. But Scripture can only affirm in human language, using propositions and predications, composed of words. How would Scripture be correct in statements, while being possibly erroneous in its words? It's an attempt to distinguish between doctrine and the words that teach the doctrine. This distinction has not helped anyone. Furthermore, infallibility is not (strictly speaking) a lesser term. It is used that way. But infallible means without fault. Websters: "incapable of making mistakes or being wrong."

3. Biblical errancy requires interpreters to become the highest standard of truth, submitting Scripture to what we find plausible, possible or probable. If part of Scripture contains error, the readers today must become not merely interpreters, but editors. Instead of the Reformation cry, "Scripture interprets Scripture," we will be forced to say "The reader's plausibility structure interprets Scriptures" or "what we find probable interprets Scripture" or "what naturalistic science deems possible interprets Scripture."

4. If the text of Scripture contains error, may we imitate God and intentionally lie? If Scripture has dual authorship, then God has done what He otherwise forbids us from doing: knowingly communicate what we know is contrary to fact. Some errantists assert that the Bible Writers accommodated their messages in minor details to the false ideas in their day. This would implicate God in falsehood. Titus 1:2 tells us that God cannot lie. Nothing the biblical writers say represents history or science contrary to fact. Early church fathers believed in Phoenixes, but nothing like this is found in Scripture itself.

5. Biblical errancy means Scripture could be wrong not only in minor details, but in doctrine as well. If errancy is true, all doctrine becomes unstable. An errant text is vulnerable to correction or editing not merely on what is deemed 'insignificant', but on matters crucial to Christian doctrine. No doctrine is safe if errancy is true. Inerrancy may not be a fundamental of the faith, **but it is crucial to having any fundamentals of the faith.** Without inerrancy, we do not really have plenary inspiration, and without plenary inspiration, the superstructure of Christian doctrine must collapse.

Those implications of errancy are daunting, but by themselves they do not prove inerrancy. Inerrancy is only properly understood as a subset of inspiration. Define inspiration rightly, and you have inerrancy as an implication. Deny inerrancy, and you have an unbiblical idea of inspiration.

C. Defending Inerrancy

I. The Explanation of Inspiration

2 Timothy 3:16

πᾶσα γραπὴ Θεόπνευστος = "All Scripture [is] God-breathed"

Verbal plenary inspiration means the very words are God-breathed, and all of them are God-breathed. Whatever God-breathed writings exist are Scripture, whatever is Scripture is a God-breathed writing.

a) Inspiration does not describe a process, it describes a result. Inspiration does not refer to what the authors felt or experienced or did. The documents were inspired, not the men. We are not told much about the process that resulted in inspiration, except in 2 Pet 1:21.

b) Inspiration involves human authors writing their own words, which are simultaneously the words God desired. We do not need a mechanical dictation theory for a biblical view of inspiration. Indeed, you wouldn't be able to explain differences in style if the Bible were dictated. God worked through the vocabulary, unique perspective, and style of the men He chose to write Scripture. The books of Scripture are genuinely human documents as well as being God's Word.

i) Inspiration does not preclude the authors using human sources, records, existing material for their material (Josh. 10:13; Luke 1:1-4, Acts 17:28; 1 Cor. 15:33; Titus 1:12). Not all Scripture was prophetic revelation. (Indeed, not all prophetic revelation became Scripture.)

ii) Inspiration does not preclude the authors using a secretary, or amanuensis. Paul clearly did (Rom 16:22).

iii) Inspiration does not preclude the human process of writing, editing, and re-writing. Again, what is inspired is the finished and completed writings.

iv) Some biblical writers write of their awareness of the Holy Spirit's control (Ezek. 3:24-27, Rev. 1:10).

c. Nevertheless, Scripture is conscious of its own dual authorship (Acts 1:16, Heb. 3:7; 10:15)

d. Inspiration applies equally to all Scripture. Whatever is Scripture is inspired, and only what is inspired is Scripture. The Bible has no doctrine of containing God's Word, or becoming God's Word. All Scripture is inspired to the same degree. Red-letter Bible. The question of what is Scripture gets us into canonicity, which is a separate matter. Recommended resource Canon Revisited, by Michael Kruger.

II. The Implication of Inspiration: Inerrancy. Inspiration gives a written document, the source of which is God, and therefore is free of error. Inspiration resulted in writings that were without error. Why? Because God does not breathe untruths! He is the God who does not lie (Titus). Truth is part of His nature.

Inerrancy can be likened to the doctrine of the Trinity. Explicit Biblical statements create the logical necessity of the doctrine of the Trinity.

(1) There is only one God.

(2) There are three distinct persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) who are God, but who are not the other.

From these premises it necessarily follows that

(3) There are three persons in this one God.

(1) God cannot err.

(2) All Scripture is God-breathed.

(3) All Scripture is without error.

The Bible contains no errors in anything that it affirms. It contains the records of errors, but the Bible never affirms error, nor unintentionally commits an error itself.

III. The Qualification of Inspiration and Inerrancy:

a. Inspiration applies properly to the original documents, not to copies of them. What God inspired was the finished original writings. To the extent that the copies reflect the originals, we may speak of them as inspired. But it is properly the originals that are God breathed. We are authorized to treat good copies and faithful translations with the same level of authority as the original. Now if someone objects that this then makes the whole issue irrelevant, since we don't have the originals, Geisler reminds us:

Geisler: First of all, it is not true that we do not possess the *original text*. We do possess it in well-preserved copies; it is the *original manuscripts* we do not have. We do have an accurate copy of the original text represented in these manuscripts (see Geisler and Nix, GIB, chapter 11); the nearly 5,800 New Testament manuscripts we possess contain all or nearly all of the original text, and we can reconstruct the original text with over 99 percent accuracy.

Our embarrassment of riches when it comes to extant manuscripts means that we have little doubt as to what was originally written. Discrepancies between texts represent errors – human errors. The comparison between texts essentially eliminates these errors. Functionally, our copies are for the most part accurate copies of the original. Therefore to assert a broad errancy to what we have textually, is to assert errancy in what God breathed out.

Consider an original painted masterpiece. From that masterpiece, about 10 photographs are taken. Later, before those photos fade, photos are taken of the photos, and then the process is repeated. One day, we are able to gather up 7500 photos. They vary in quality. None of the individual photos is perfect the way the original masterpiece was. But by comparing all those photos, they correct each other, where one is blurry, torn, overexposed, underexposed. Perhaps a very few have even been photoshopped, but we can quickly detect them because of the wealth of photos we have. Perfection does not exist in one photo, but in the resultant picture reconstructed from them all.

That's what our abundance of texts does. There is no perfect manuscript, but the resultant text is 99% certain.

b. The Bible can be inerrant and still speak in the ordinary language of everyday speech.

The Bible can use language as we use it, without being in error. It can use metaphorical descriptions of nature, such as the sun rising, or the four corners of the Earth, or the pillars of the Earth, without becoming scientifically inaccurate. The Bible can use literary devices like metaphor, simile, allusion and not have fallen to error.

Another example is that the Bible can use approximations of measurements or round numbers, and not be in error. We do that all the time, when we say that we are five minutes from the shops, when it is exactly seven minutes and thirty seven seconds. Or we say, there were 100 people in church, when there were 98. Depending on the context, we require differing degrees of precision. Rounding off measurements is fine for a conversation between friends, but it is not acceptable for a scientific paper. Now the Bible is the same. It can round off numbers of soldiers or people in a tribe in one place, and give you a more precise number in another, depending on what the author is trying to do.

A further example of how we use language is that we can make general statements without them being universal statements. You can say, God's people will be blessed as a general statement, without it meaning that every one of God's people in every circumstance from now to eternity will experience nothing but blessing. Scripture can make general statements in the same way we do, and not contain error.

c. An inerrant Bible can include loose or free quotations.

Modern Western culture uses quotation marks to signify the exact words of a person. Quoting someone precisely has become standard journalistic practice. But loose quotations, paraphrases, or representing the content of what another said, is common in the historical cultures of the world. Whether Scripture is giving dialogue, or quoting another Scripture, it does not have to do so in a precise fashion to remain inerrant.

Very often the NT quotes the OT not as word-for-word quotations, but rather verbal allusions. In some cases, they may have had access to an earlier text than we possess. In others, they may be quoting the Septuagint, for their Greek-speaking audience.

But the bottom line is, no one is abusing or perverting the text, or treating it as something less than inerrant.

d. An inerrant Bible can possess unusual or uncommon grammatical constructions.

Sometimes Scripture will have a plural verb where a singular is expected, or a feminine adjective where we expected a masculine one. But these are not errors in the way Scripture stating $1+1=3$ would be an error.

First, there is no absolute standard for grammar. There are regular and irregular usages, but grammar is something that develops over time. Second, truths can be expressed in regular or irregular grammar, just as error could be expressed in perfect grammar. The issue is the truthfulness of what is stated, Third, irregular grammar is often a more forceful expression of an idea, as slang reveals. Sometimes a deliberately chosen irregularity is chosen to make a point.

e. An inerrant Bible can use divergent accounts or partial accounts.

Two differing accounts, or accounts which are partial relative to one another do not constitute error. One angel at the tomb (Matthew), or two (John), one blind man (Mark) or two (Matthew). But where there are two, there is definitely one! Had Scripture given a negation (there was one sitting alone, with none by him) we would have a definite contradiction. But to give one part of the account, or to focus on one person exclusively does not constitute error.

f. An inerrant Bible can record what it does not approve of.

Not everything recorded in the Bible is approved by the Bible. A fully inspired Bible contains the record of much that God hates. Accounts of sin, accounts of deceptions and lies, accounts of Satan's work do not cast error on Scripture. On the contrary, Scripture is truthfully recording those sins! A record is not an affirmation; one must read those records in the broader context of Scripture to understand what God loves or hates.

This applies to polygamy, to the practices of the patriarchs, to many incidents in Israel's history. Helpful source: *Is God a Moral Monster?* - Paul Copan

D. Objections to Inerrancy

a. A human book must contain errors.

This assumes that to be human is to be fallible, that humans by their very nature are prone to error. The fact that something is human does not mean it has to be flawed. I have used inerrant textbooks and manuals, and so have you. It is entirely possible to have a book without error – that's what proof-readers are there for. Now when that book begins to span 1500 years, three continents, 40 authors, it becomes exponentially more difficult, and therefore miraculous when it is.

But the humanness of the Bible does not necessitate error.

If humanness by definition produced error, this would have implications for the Incarnation. Christ, without sin, was without error. Also difficult to say how people being borne along by the Holy Spirit can be recording errors, more difficult to say how a text that is God-breathed can, simultaneously, be erroneous.

b. Inerrancy is a poor term. Once again, we have passed the point of definition. This is similar to saying, hypostatic union is a poor term, or Trinity is a poor term. The point is, what we mean by inerrancy has now been repeatedly defined and qualified for over 100 years. It is going to remain the term that will distinguish those with one view of inspiration from those holding another. Since we have reached the doctrinal turning point, inerrancy is now the chosen term to qualify what we mean by inspiration: that what God-breathed out was without error, and that what we possess today in the reconstructed text of Scripture.

c. We don't need to say the Bible is inerrant, we can say it is authoritative for faith and practice. Scripture sees itself as accurate when recording minor details. Christ saw it as accurate in the historical details of Jonah, Solomon or David. Scripture will quote other Scripture, often making a point based on a fine point of grammar, as in Galatians 3:16.

Grudem: "This position mistakes the major purpose of Scripture for the total purpose of Scripture. The major purpose is to give us faith and practice. But the total purpose includes giving us minor details. Better to say the whole purpose is to say everything it does say on whatever subject."

d. Some of the Bible's own statements imply non-inspiration.

Doesn't the Bible itself seem to distinguish between levels of authority within itself?

i. Romans 3:5 ("I speak as a man") – was Paul disavowing the inspiration and authority of what he says? NASB says, "I am speaking in human terms." Paul is carrying on an argument with an imaginary foe. Paul makes an assertion, knows there is an objection someone will raise, so he just inserts it into the text, usually phrasing it as a question. That's what Paul is doing. What Paul is saying this is a man, a human-type question, i.e., I am asking just the kind of question a man would ask at this point.

ii. 1 Cor. 7:6 ("I speak this by permission, and not by commandment") – has the Lord given Paul permission to include some of his own non-inspired views in the text? No. In context, Paul is addressing the question of whether husbands and wives are ever obligated to abstain from a sexual relationship. He says that husbands and wives should have a regular sexual relationship however often the other partner needs it. Stop robbing your partner . . . except (1) by agreement; (2) for a time (for a limited period, not indefinite); (3) to devote yourselves to prayer, i.e., a spiritual purpose, not arbitrary or capricious; and (4) definite, stated period when the abstinence ends. Thus, in reference to this voluntary period of sexual abstinence, Paul says that this period of sexual abstinence is never an obligation to the Lord – you have permission to abstain, subject to Paul's stipulations, but it is never obligatory. Far from backing away from Paul's apostolic authority, this is an assertion of Paul's authority.

iii. I Cor. 7:10, 12 ("Not I but the Lord . . . not the Lord but I") – on the one instance Paul says "this is me, not the Lord," on the other instance, "this is the Lord, not me." When Paul says, "I'm not saying this: the Lord did," he is saying that this is something that Jesus taught. (Jesus taught on His rule of divorce, and it was "don't!"). The question is: unbelieving husband abandons (not divorces) believing wife. Paul: Jesus didn't specifically answer, but here's the (authoritative) answer I (Paul) give to the question. In essence, Paul takes two questions--one question answered by Christ (the authoritative answer), and the other question not answered by Christ, but rather by Paul, who gives the authoritative answer--thus placing his own teaching on the same level of authority as Jesus' authority when He was on earth. This is about as blunt an avowal of inspiration as you can find (far

from denying or contracting inspiration).

e. There are errors and contradictions in Scripture.

You can find lists on the internet of contradictions in Scripture. Many of the arguments place emphasis on parallel accounts – Sam/Kings vs. Chron., different synoptic accounts of Jesus' life, etc. Almost invariably the claims of contradictions involve faulty assumptions.

Handful of genuine problems – sometimes with the textual tradition, sometimes because a writer is speaking generally while another is speaking specifically. Not irresolvable.

Some of the resources for handling Bible difficulties:

The Big Book of Bible Difficulties – Norm Geisler

Encyclopaedia of Bible Difficulties – Gleason L Archer

When we combine a right definition of Inspiration, the implication is inerrancy. We qualify that with certain statements regarding what inspiration does and does not require, and what inerrancy does not require. When we do that, the objections to inerrancy must disappear. We come back to the simple truth: all Scripture is God-breathed. God does not lie. Therefore, all Scripture is without error.