

# A Theological Case for Inerrancy

© 2012 [Paul Henebury](#)<sup>1</sup>

The battle over the inerrancy of Scripture hasn't and isn't going away. We must decide how we will approach the Bible – what our working assumptions will be. If “all Scripture is God-breathed” then all Scripture has the insignia of God upon it. This would be the bare-bones theological deduction from the relationship between the two. For the human element to be lifted above the Divine element so as to enjoy equal ultimacy over the resultant production of Scripture requires an alteration to Scripture's own self-witness. This is the reason why those who reject the idea of inerrancy (and I am far from rejecting all their work on account of their error), often plead in the vacuum of unaided reason.

Taking one prominent broadly evangelical theologian as an example, Donald Bloesch wrote,

While we grant that in one sense the Bible is the revelation of God to men, this revelation is in the form of human witness and is therefore to a degree hidden from the sight and understanding. The bane of much of modern evangelicalism is rationalism which presupposes that the Word of God is directly available to human reason. It is fashionable to refer to the biblical revelation as propositional and in one sense this is true. The Bible is not directly the revelation of God, but indirectly in that God's Word comes to us through the mode of human instrumentality. – Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* – Volume I, 75-76.

This quotation shows us how the human element can be stressed so as to compete with the Divine element. To wit, the doctrine of inspiration must be accommodated to include the “human witness.” This means that the claim to “direct revelation” from God to man is excluded (or, at the very least, camouflaged). And then we are laid open to the philosophy of God's free action reaching us through the Bible but only by His choice to employ it as His Word.

What we must say... is that in the case of Scripture just as surely as in preaching, 'fallible men speak the word of God in fallible human words' – Trevor Hart, *Regarding Karl Barth*, 38.

Taking this tack immediately places one on the horns of a dilemma. For the Bible stresses many many times its God-giveness. If it is produced by the combination of God's out-breathing and the Spirit's direction, and if every word of God is true, then unless we are prepared to engage in the futile task of separating God's words from man's words we shall have to decide to be those who accept a form of inerrancy, or else those who fail to find God's prints on the Bible at all.

For this reason contemporary attempts to rid evangelicalism of inerrancy are doomed. One such attempt is by A.T.B. McGowan:

Having freely chosen to use human beings, God knew what he was doing. *He did not give us an inerrant autographical text*, because he did not intend to do so. He gave us a text that reflects *the humanity of its authors*, but that, at the same time, clearly evidences its origin in the divine speaking. Through the instrumentality of

---

1 <http://drreluctant.wordpress.com/2012/07/24/a-theological-case-for-inerrancy-1/>

## A Theological Case for Inerrancy

the Holy Spirit, God is perfectly able to use these Scriptures to accomplish his purposes. – A.T.B. McGowan, *The Divine Authenticity of Scripture*, 124, emphasis added.

What we have here is a pragmatic God at work. Even the originals of the various books of the Bible were not inerrant, but they accomplished God's purposes. There are clear evidences of God's "speaking" so Scripture has a "Divine authenticity." It is, says McGowan, "infallible" but not "inerrant." But talking about an "infallible" Bible while denying an "inerrant" Bible, or limiting inerrancy to the conceptual world of the biblical writers is playing with words. And the one doing the playing is very often the one hiding his tracks.

Finding God's involvement under such an outlook will, let us be frank, involve weighing every historical and scientific Bible assertion against the pronouncements of "experts" and consigning Scripture to a slow death by degrees. Not, I should say, because the experts are right – they often are not. Besides, one's choice of experts usually reflects which "expertise" one wants airing. But where the voice of men is allowed to judge the voice of Scripture the voice of men is often given preference.

While history, science, and archaeology provide obvious instances where Divine authenticity could be obscured, the prophetic element of Scripture might be appealed to. Yes, but many evangelicals (McGowan would be one of them) who refuse to interpret the prophecies at face value because it crosses their theological predilections. No, even allowing for the either/or fallacy, going down McGowan's road is taking a road to nowhere.

What road is the right one to take? It is the same one which should be taken in formulating every doctrine – we see how Scripture itself attests to it.

For present purposes, I will take my own basic formulations of inspiration and inerrancy as a starting point.

**The Inspiration of Scripture** – *Proposition: "The Scriptures come from the God who breathed them out and caused them to be inscripturated through men who were 'borne along' by the Spirit. That is what makes them Scripture."* – 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:20-21; Matt. 4:4; Jn. 17:17; Psa. 119:89-91

**Inerrancy** – *Proposition: "The inspired Scriptures are the Word of God before they are the words of men. They must be up to the job of transmitting truth from He who is True. This truth will be as reliable in one area of knowledge as in any other, even if exact precision is not necessary."* – 2 Tim. 3:16; Psa. 12:6; Jn. 17:17; 2 Pet. 1:19-21.

## A Theological Case for Inerrancy

Both doctrines appeal to 2 Timothy 3:16. The verse presents us with the clearest statement about the inspiration of Scripture. But this statement is in direct continuity with very many statements in both Testaments regarding the Bible's Divine provenance. Scripture itself always stresses its God-givenness far more than it does its human provenance; a fact hardly ever given the attention it deserves. Paul views the Bible is, in truth, the voice of the Lord in inscripturated form.

This is why Paul can praise the Thessalonian believers for receiving the spoken Word of God, “not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers” – 1 Thessalonians 2:13b.

In the production of the Scriptures, the roles of God the Holy Spirit and the roles of the human authors bear an asymmetrical character which must *never* be brought into equal balance. Assuredly, this was not done by Jesus (cf. Matt. 4:4 and Jn. 17:17), or the OT prophets, or the Apostolic authors: why then should we be out of step with them?

Carl Henry wrote of the doctrine of inspiration:

Inspiration is primarily a statement about God's relationship to Scripture and only secondarily about the relationship of God to the writers. – Carl F.H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 4.143

This is most important for us to understand as conservative evangelicals. B.B. Warfield recognized the same truth.

These acts could be attributed to Scripture only as the result of such a habitual identification in the mind of the writer of the text of Scripture with God as speaking, that it became natural to use the term 'Scripture says' when what was actually intended was 'God has recorded in Scripture said. – B.B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, 299-300.

Let us consider the full import of Christ's words in John 17:17:

**Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.**

Jesus is praying to the Father regarding the sanctifying of His disciples. He tells the Father “Your word is truth.” This “word” is the same “word” which will sanctify them. They have kept it (v.6) as it was given them (v.14), but where is this word? I maintain it is Scripture (v.12), and this text associates the word with God's own holy and truthful character. There is no room for human frailty.

This text also separates Jesus from the Scripture. Jesus is going away, but the word of the Father must now keep His disciples. Thus, it is a mistake to too

## A Theological Case for Inerrancy

closely equate Jesus the Word with the Scriptures. There does exist a close connection between the two, but we cannot push the association too far. Indeed, we cannot push it even as far as personification. The Scriptures are the written product of the Divine revelation, but they are a product all the same.

Talking about partially inspired Scripture is like talking about partially dirty bathwater. If Titus 1:2 tells us that it is impossible for God to lie, and if Scripture is the Word of God then it is true in the sense that there can be nothing in it that bears false witness. If God says something about the world or about history which is untrue, His word cannot be truth. When we say “Word of God” we ought to mean “Word from God.” By “Word from God” we should mean a written deposit of course, not some voice in the ether.

To summarize, most arguments against inerrancy stress the human element over the Divine in spite of the fact that Scripture emphasizes the exact opposite. This point cannot be over-emphasized and is fundamental for understanding the divide between inerrantists and errantists.

We must deal with what the Bible says and then decide whether we are going to believe it. We must not fool ourselves that the Bible doesn't say something, or more commonly, doesn't mean what it says, because we have trouble with it. I'm thinking here specifically of the creation account and the history of Jonah.

Inerrancy doesn't mean either that errors are not reproduced by the biblical writers *as errors*, or that painstaking exactitude is being aimed for, or, as a matter of fact, even considered.

Inerrancy is a corollary to inspiration. It may state truth in anthropomorphic, metaphorical, phenomenological, generic, or symbolic language. But it does state inspired truth.

J.I. Packer reminds us of what “inerrant” means:

Inerrancy is from the Latin *inerrantia* meaning ‘the quality of being free from any error of any kind – factual, moral, or spiritual.’ Protestant usage favors this too; the words may carry slightly different nuances. Infallibility suggesting that Scripture warrants a faith commitment. Inerrancy of Scripture undergirds orthodoxy. But it has been standard evangelical practice for a century now to treat the words as mutual implicates.” – J.I. Packer, *Beyond the Battle for the Bible*, 51

Hence, Peter Enns must reject this connectivity between truth and inspiration:

To put it better, the scientific evidence showed us that the worldview of the biblical authors affected what they thought and wrote and so

## A Theological Case for Inerrancy

the worldviews of the biblical authors must be taken into consideration in matters of biblical interpretation. – Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 14.

This encroachment of “scientific evidence” from the present and the worldviews of the ancients shows us that Divine superintendence over Scripture is given but a half-share in the end product. Human fallibility has equal rights. The Bible itself does not give him that option.

I call your attention to the support-texts I have given for the two doctrines above. Three of the passages used in support of inspiration have been used again to support inerrancy. I have also run these verses through the “[Rules of Affinity](#)” so as to show how sure these proposals are (even though more texts could be mustered to support the propositions). Let us examine the outcomes.

2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:20-21 tell us the Scripture comes from God and those who wrote it were superintended, nay, “carried along” by Him in their production of it. They do not deal with the collection of the Canon, since that is a separate (though related) issue. The **C1** tag corresponds with the places in the first proposition where phrases from the texts make up the proposition. Matthew 4:4 connects with 2 Tim. 3:16 because of the reference to “the mouth of God” and the connection between “every word which proceeds from the mouth of God,” and the Scripture as “God-breathed out.” Palpably, Jesus was referring to and quoting from the Scriptures in His Temptation.

John 17:17, as already stated, refers to God’s Word as “Truth.” That “Word” is inscripturated. The link with Matt. 4:4 is in the way a man ought to live. He must live in Truth, not in falsehood. Psalm 119:89f. connects the settled Word “in heaven” with the discipling Word which the psalmist observes. We have that Word.

When we turn to see how the doctrine of inerrancy utilizes these texts we get the following:

2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:19-21 are now rated **C2** since they provide the support in the first two statements in the proposal upon which inerrancy is based (they do not testify to inerrancy with the same clarity that they do for inspiration). In Psalm 12 I am only interested in the first assertion about the words in verse 6 (“the words of the LORD are pure words, etc.”), not the preservation in verse 7, which I hold to be referring to the people in the context. The purity of the words of God relates there to their ability to “keep” the people safe, and their trustworthiness, not just their moral clarity. I believe a good (**C3**) inference can be made that the dependability of the words (“refined seven times”), logically applies comprehensively to all they claim. John 17:17 calls the Word of God “Truth.” This truth separates believers from unbelievers in the world. It could

## A Theological Case for Inerrancy

hardly do that effectively if it enunciated scientific or historical error, since error in those cases would lessen the force of any ethical assertion made in the Bible, and throw immediate suspicion upon its authorship. But then we are back to the matter of the sustained voice of Scripture that it comes from God, and that it is His Word not mans.

There seems to be no way out of concluding that the theological case for inerrancy is sound if the witness of Scripture is to be our guide. The only theological case against inerrancy which is weighty is the Barthian view which effectively makes it irrelevant. But inerrancy is irrelevant to Barth because he constructs his doctrine of Scripture upon the hiddenness of the revealing God (see Sections 4 through 6 in the *Church Dogmatics* I.1). Barth distinguishes revelation from Scripture, thereby leaving Scripture open to be a word of man as well as a word of God. The Spirit reveals by the Bible, but the Bible itself is not the revelation. This denudes the Bible of its innate power and authority, and it renders its self-witness mute.

But does not the Bible itself witness to what God spoke? Yes it does, but (and this is crucial), what God spoke in the past is only the Word of God to us if it is a scriptural Word. In point of fact, the scriptural Word is the only Word of God we have! It is the written Word which has authority. What God said to men in times past, even if it is reported in the Bible, is only the Word of God to Everyman because it is in the Bible. If God spoke to Moses then Moses heard the Word of God. But until Moses wrote it under inspiration that revelation to him was not revelation to us.

Even the words of Jesus can only be the Word of God to us if we find them in the Bible. Until He returns, even our notions of Jesus' stature as *the Logos* depend upon what Scripture says about Him. That kind of preeminent declarative power demands both inspiration and inerrancy.



[www.SpiritAndTruth.org](http://www.SpiritAndTruth.org)