

The Doctrine of Scripture (cont.)

Inerrancy has been a heated topic of debate within evangelical circles ever since the American Presbyterian tradition started using it as a stronger term to refer to the truthfulness and reliability of Scripture. For many people inerrancy is the evangelical doctrine par excellence. It is, for them, a watershed doctrine. It is the litmus test of orthodoxy. It is the password for admittance into fellowship. For example, I belong to a theological society, which for many years had only one plank—the Bible is the Word of God written and inerrant. For other people inerrancy is an irrelevant addendum to the doctrine of Scripture. It is regarded by them as the product of a misguided approach to the Bible, to truth, and objectivity.

When I interviewed at Covenant Seminary, I talked to many students. In those situations it is an opportunity not only to be interviewed, but also to interview the other party. One of the questions I asked students was why they came here, because I thought it might help me in my decision of whether I wanted to teach here. Now there were many responses to that question, but one I heard repeatedly was that students at Covenant appreciated the school's commitment to the inerrancy of Scripture. So obviously we are talking about an issue that is an important concern for the community that this seminary serves. In a sense inerrancy is simply another way of saying that the Bible is infallible. Both infallibility and inerrancy are talking about the truthfulness of Scripture.

Some people regard inerrancy as simply another way of saying the Bible is inspired. I want to suggest, however, that the focus of inerrancy is different than that of inspiration. It is not the authority of Scripture which is in view with inerrancy so much as the dependability and truthfulness of Scripture. When we talk about inspiration, we are talking about the Bible's authority. When we come to the issue of inerrancy, we are talking about the Bible's truthfulness and reliability. Now certainly those two issues are related. It may appear that if the Bible is the inspired authoritative Word of God, it then has the inherent right to demand our allegiance, our agreement, and to stand as the norm for faith and action. The reality is, however, that the question of the Bible's truthfulness has been an issue of debate for some two hundred years. And it has been in the context of that debate about the Bible's truthfulness that the issue of inerrancy has arisen.

A typical definition of inerrancy is: the Bible, in its original writings—the *autographa*, or the autographs—is without error. Yet many people have objected to the term, and those objections do not come from extreme liberals, but rather from extreme conservatives. Thus the objections are not from evidence that the Bible is not truthful, but rather from philosophical or tactical problems with the term inerrancy. It is really not the case that much evidence exists that the Bible is errant; instead it is that people have problems philosophically or tactically with the term inerrancy. Now we are not here concerned to answer every possible objection to inerrancy, but I do want to make you aware of some of the issues of debate, in order to understand what is at stake. I should also be somewhat autobiographical here and tell you that I have used these objections on occasion too. For many years I was one of those who did not like the term 'inerrancy,' so to some extent this is an insiders' confession. I am now an inerrantist, however, though I have used these objections.

First on our list of objections: many people argue that the term is overly scientific, or scientific. It communicates a sense of precision, exactness, and specificity that is alien to ancient canons of science, history, and truth. The issue of inerrancy forces questions upon the biblical text that the authors were not asking. That is a very popular objection to inerrancy.

A second objection: a person might point out that the word inerrancy is a negation, meaning ‘without error.’ In using the term, one is not actually making an affirmative claim, a positive claim, about the nature of Scripture, and as such it has suggested that the term is ill-advised. We might better speak of the faithfulness of Scripture. One way of thinking about this by illustration: let us say I am going to fix you up with a blind date and you ask me, “What does she look like?” And my response is, “Well, she is not ugly.” You will notice, I have not really told you anything positive about her.

A third objection to the term might be made that, applied as it is to an *autographa*, or original writing, inerrancy is in fact a hypothetical position, and therefore a phony position. Since we do not possess the original writings, the autographs, the doctrine of inerrancy is about a ghost document, not the Bible we actually read.

Fourth, it could also be objected that the term is of relatively recent vintage. It does not belong to the classical heritage of the church. This position was popularized some years ago now by Rogers and McKim in their book, *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture* [correct title = *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible*].

A fifth objection is that inerrancy is impossible to verify. How would you prove the absolute or full truthfulness of Scripture? First, you have to define truth and error very precisely. Then you have to inductively look at each and every statement and test it. That would be tiring work! But it can be done with much of the phenomena of Scripture. For instance, did Jesus die on the cross? That is an historical question open to investigation. Was the tomb empty on Easter morning? That is another historical question. Did Israel actually leave the bondage of Egypt under Ramses II? We actually have Ramses’ body. Was there a king of Syria named Sargon II? Questions like these show that looking at historical phenomena is possible. But what about claims like “God is love,” or Jesus saying “I am the way the truth and the life”? How do you test those kinds of claims?

The sixth objection follows closely from the last one in that without such historical testing, this term is really little more than deductive, a priori, dogmatic presumption which closes down real investigation and thus which closes down discussion concerning the biblical phenomena. In Sinclair Ferguson’s essay, *How Does the Bible Look At Itself*, he makes that point, right at the beginning of his piece, that many evangelicals have hidden behind the doctrine of inerrancy.

Point ‘D’ in the outline is a taxonomy of positions. In the systematic theology by Baptist evangelical theologian Millard Erickson, titled *Christian Theology*, the best chapter is the one on inerrancy. I am going to follow his discussion at this point. Noting some of the objections we have just talked about, Erickson attempts to cast the doctrine of inerrancy in more helpful, more wholesome terms. But before he does that, he also provides us with something of a taxonomy of positions. You see, the term inerrancy does not mean the same thing to all people. Many people have employed it to different degrees.

The first category in Erickson’s taxonomy is ‘absolute inerrancy.’ The absolute inerrantist says that the Bible is fully true, even exactly true. Not only is it true in matters of our relationship to God—sin, redemption, etc.—but also in its understanding of such things as science and history. In other words, the biblical writers intend to give us a considerable amount of exact scientific and historical data. Harold Lindsell’s book, *The Battle for the Bible*, which is little-read now but was popular fifteen to twenty years ago, championed that position.

The second position in the taxonomy is called ‘full inerrancy.’ The full inerrantist says that the Bible is not about science or history per se, and thus its treatment of such things is phenomenological, a word

which simply means, ‘as seen from the point of view of the human author.’ Thus when the Bible talks about issues that could be scientifically or historically reflected on, the Bible is not attempting to be objectively precise, but rather is talking about those realities from a phenomenological point of view. Thus when speaking of such things as natural phenomena or historical events, the authors often gave approximations rather than specific, scientifically exact, or historically exact descriptions. Roger Nicole is one theologian who holds this position.

A third position, and you will start to notice a continuum developing, is ‘limited inerrancy.’ This position takes the idea that the Bible is meant fundamentally as revelation of God’s person and will. A paragraph here from page 222 Erickson’s book makes this point:

The scientific and historical references in the Bible reflect the understanding current at the time the Bible was written. The Bible authors were subject to the limitations of their time. Revelation and inspiration did not raise the writers above ordinary knowledge. God did not reveal science or history to them. Consequently the Bible may well contain what we would term errors in these areas. This however is of no great consequence. The Bible does not purport to teach science and history.

Erickson cites Daniel Fuller as an example of this view. This position deviates from the last by saying that, not only does the Bible not intend to teach us science or history, but what it says about those issues may in fact be fallible.

A fourth position is ‘inerrancy of purpose,’ which is really the position of folks who do not like the term inerrancy. The thrust of this position is that the Bible faithfully accomplishes its purpose, that is, to bring people to a saving faith in Jesus Christ and an obedient life. Yet the Bible, they claim, is not about the communication of truths. It is about the communication of persons and relationships. It is therefore improper to equate inerrancy with factuality. After all, in the Bible, erring is a spiritual or moral affair, rather than an intellectual affair. Thus this position claims that the use of the word ‘inerrancy’ is inappropriate; it is a category error; it is mixing apples and oranges. The Bible is not about facts in a scientific sense; it is about persons and relationships.

A fifth position holds that the Bible is inspired but not inerrant. This position emphasizes the idea that the Bible came through normal human channels and thus it participates in all the shortcomings of human nature. Now that position can be taken to say that this participation in human limitations also pertains to the confessional matters. In short, there may even be doctrinal errors in the text. Not only are there scientific and historical failings, but there are also doctrinal failings. W.D. Davies is a supporter of this position. Such claims are made as: Paul does not agree with John at every point, or James and Paul disagree regarding works. The Bible is authoritative for us; the Bible is inspired, but it is not inerrant and there are disagreements across a spectrum of issues.

A final position is that revelation in the Bible is non-propositional, which completes the spectrum from a very high view of inerrancy to a non-view. According to this view, revelation is about acts not words, deeds not propositions. Thus the Bible is not itself revelation; it is merely a human and fallible record of God’s revelatory acts. In a real sense, that is still a position of Scripture which sees it as authoritative, but it is a long way from the evangelical or Reformed tradition, and it is still a Christian position. By way of example, it was the position of Emil Brunner.

We come to point ‘E’ in the outline: responses to these objections. Before we proceed, however, I will say something more about this list. Remember I have said that theology is not only descriptive but it is

also prescriptive. I am going to suggest that our options from an evangelical or Reformed perspective are going to be from the top of the pecking order here, the first two positions. Erickson is a full inerrantist, not an absolute inerrantist. And I will admit I am also a full inerrantist and not an absolute inerrantist. Yet I have given you the list so you will see that there is an entire spectrum of views according to how you define such terms as inspiration, authority, infallibility, etc., where people will use language in slightly different ways than what you might mean. You may not even mean exactly the same thing that your church might mean, or that I might mean. You need to be aware of that.

Now I move on to responses to the objections. First, Erickson's definition of inerrancy on page 233 will be helpful. "The Bible, when correctly interpreted, in light of the level to which culture and the means of communication have developed at the time it was written, and in view of the purposes for which it was written, is fully truthful in all it affirms." We are going to have to unpack that a little bit. Most of Erickson's counters to the objections are included in the definition if you look at it closely. First of all, he does not cite an *autographa*. He does not say, "The Bible in its original autographs, in its original documents..."

Years ago, C.H. Dodd, in his book, *The Authority of the Bible*, claimed that the *autographa* idea was the fatal flaw, the fatal qualification, of the doctrine of inerrancy. He said when you cite an *autographa*, you make an assertion of a document which is "forever inaccessible to us". Hans Kung, himself no friend of biblical inerrancy, painted a different picture in saying, "Despite the lack of original manuscripts, and the fact that in many cases authentic readings were not fixed until a late date, textual criticism has succeeded in establishing with the greatest possible certitude the original wording of the biblical writings in the earliest form available to us." So Kung is actually saying something very different from Dodd. Dodd is saying you can never get to the *autographa*. Kung is suggesting that through the science of textual criticism, we have actually come quite close to the *autographa*.

F.F. Bruce argued in much the same way in his book, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* Bruce went so far as to say that we have 99.9% of the original text, and the .1% we have does not matter. I want to appreciate that. It should be realized, however, that sometimes inerrantists have hidden behind the *autographa* idea. It is simple to do. The *autographa* is in the past. And sometimes the position is not only stated as, "The Bible in its original autographs is inerrant," but also will be added to that, "When all the facts are known, it will be shown that the Bible is inerrant." Now that latter statement is not a statement about the past. It is a statement about the future. Yet where do we live? We are stuck right here in the middle. Sometimes we conservatives hide behind our statements either about the past or the future. The Bible before it got corrupted, and the Bible in the *eschaton* when it is perfectly put together, will be shown to be inerrant. In doing so, we use the doctrine of inerrancy as an out; it is a way of not having to deal with the problems.

I want to suggest that we do not have to argue about an hypothetical document. Instead we need to speak confidently about the Bible we have in front of us. I think we must do so for the doctrine of inerrancy to mean anything. If we are simply talking about the original autographs, or the Bible in the *eschaton*, we are not really talking about the Bible we have before us.

We should also note about Erickson's definition that he describes inerrancy not as being without error, but rather being fully truthful in all it affirms. So he has gone from "she's not ugly" to "she's beautiful". We have moved from a negation to an affirmation. That is a welcome definition, for it gets precisely at what B.B. Warfield and A.A. Hodge were after when they coined the term inerrancy in the first place. So already in his definition, Erickson addresses two of the popular objections, number two and number three from our list.

Let us then look at this other objection, under point ‘three’ here. Erickson suggests, I think rightly, that inerrancy pertains only to what is affirmed or asserted in the biblical text, rather than what is merely reported. There are falsehoods in the Bible. There are matters of opinion in the biblical texts, not as affirmations of truth, but as a report of what the historical actors believed to be the case. For instance, consider Job’s three friends—are they speaking the word of God? No, they are speaking their opinions. Often those opinions are wrong. What we have is a faithful record of their stated opinions, but the opinions themselves are false.

A second qualification of Erickson’s definition of inerrancy is that we must judge scriptural truthfulness in terms of ancient rather than modern canons of historiography, or history writing. You see, ancient canons of historiography, and even the citing of quotations, are different than ours. If I want to quote you I put quotation marks around what you said. What do those quotation marks indicate? I am recording you verbatim. Perhaps you spoke German. I will translate it as closely as I can into the English language. There were no such conventions in the ancient world. What did Jesus say verbatim to Nicodemus? Can you reproduce the sounds for me of Jesus speaking to the woman at the well? The fact is we cannot. But there is one thing we are almost absolutely certain of: Jesus did not speak Greek to the woman at the well, or to Nicodemus, or to John, or to Peter. He more than likely would have spoken Aramaic. What we already have in our Greek New Testament is a translation, however faithful—and it is faithful—but it is not a transcription of the exact words. You can see this in reading the three synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. You can put events side by side where it is very clear that they are describing the same event, yet the quotations will not be precise, will not be exact. They will be close, oftentimes very close, but oftentimes there will be slight variations. Now what this hints at is that ancient canons of historical reportage were not as interested as we are with the idea of being objective.

That does not mean, however, that they were deficient in any way. I would actually suggest that the ancient canons of historiography are superior to ours, not inferior. For, these ancients knew something about history writing that we seem to have forgotten: it is never objective. The myth of objectivity is part of the mythology of our modern scientific world. All history writing is perspectival; all history writing is a form of advocacy. It is perspectival because it is written from a point of view; it is written from a point of departure; it is written from some point on the globe. As a form of advocacy, all history writing is written for a purpose: to move people’s belief to action or agreement. While the biblical authors were committed to the truthfulness of the events, they sought to put those events into a usable history, a history which had pedagogical and redemptive force. Thus they felt free to select and arrange material, emphasize material, and interpret material. Once you put the Gospels side by side, you will notice they are not four versions of the same thing. We do not have Matthew then three more versions of Matthew out of a copier. For example, an event like the cleansing of the Temple appears in Luke around the center of Jesus’ public ministry, but in John it is found in chapter 2, right at the beginning of His public ministry.

That should not cause a problem for us. We ourselves often engage in topical statements of the truth. If I were to ask a friend I had not seen for a couple of years, “What have you been doing for the last two years?” He would not say, “Well let me see, the last time I saw you was July 17, 1996. I went home that night and put on my pajamas—” Nobody would do that. He would select two, three, four events in his life that he thought were significant and say, “My oldest daughter got married. We bought a new house,” those sorts of things. And he would arrange them according to whatever arrangement he would like. Maybe he would want to tell me about his new car first, because he is a car nut. None of that would in any way subtract from the truthfulness, the facticity of what he is saying.

Sid Greidanus, who teaches homiletics at Calvin Seminary, adds this, “If one goes to the Gospels in order to discover the exact sequence of events in the discovery of the empty tomb on Easter morning, they will come away frustrated. For no two accounts agree on the particulars outside of the fact that Jesus is risen from the grave.” He says we ought not to approach the texts as precise, objective accounts. And already you can see we are moving away from the absolutist position. We should not approach the text as conforming to modern notions of historiography. You will be frustrated if your operative question is, “What precisely happened?” Rather, if you want to do justice to the text, the interpreter’s primary question will have to be, “What message is being communicated? What response is he seeking to elicit from his hearers?” Thus part of the reading of the text according to the standards of ancient history writing is judging the truthfulness of Scripture in terms of what the words and statements meant in the cultural setting in which they were expressed. We are going to talk long and hard about this very issue when we talk about interpretation, the issue of authorial intent, and reproducing the historical horizon of the author. Just one example will suffice. For us the word ‘son’ means, ‘a first generation descendent,’ but it was not so within the biblical world. The word ‘son’ could mean, ‘a first generation descendent,’ or it could mean, ‘a great grandson,’ or it could refer to a descendant many generations removed; it simply meant ‘in the line of’.

Another important qualification is that the Bible’s assertions are fully true when judged in accordance with the purpose for which they were written. We tend to think of truthfulness in rather static terms—either something is true or it is not. I do not mean to make this sound too slippery, but there are degrees of exactness, there are degrees of precision. Sometimes the biblical writers insist that ‘X’ happened, so ‘X’ is the point. In the resurrection narratives, for example, the writers are unrelenting in their claim that the tomb is empty. The sense I get when I put all those narratives is, “Don’t ask me about the details; Jesus is not here. He is gone. He is resurrected.” That is the one thing that is clear throughout all of the narratives. Another good example is the rounding out of numbers. Are we to believe that exactly 5000 people—not 5001, not 4999—were fed loaves and fishes? What if the actual number was 4999? Would the number 5000 then be false? No; not at all. We round numbers off like that all the time. It is a matter of purpose.

If I am filling out my tax return, the Internal Revenue Service will not look kindly at me if I round my gross income to the next lowest \$1000. If I am paid \$25,100, but I report \$25,000, they would say I have told a falsehood. But is Paul speaking a falsehood in 1 Corinthians 10 when he reports an Old Testament event of 23,000 people dying from a plague, when we know from Numbers 25:9 that the report there is 24,000 people dying of the plague in the same event? It seems to me that both numbers are approximations, and both are adequate for their purpose.

Look next to point ‘d’ in your outline: reports of historical events and natural phenomena are given in phenomenological language. A common example of this is we talk about the sun rising. The sun does not rise, however; the earth rises relative to the sun. But let me use an example that is not so obvious. In 2 Chronicles, chapter 4, we are told about the molten sea. The molten sea, the text tells us, has a diameter of 10 cubits, its circumference is 30 cubits, and it is circular in shape. We know now, however, that the ratio of a circle’s circumference to its diameter is pi, which is not 3.0 as the text would claim, if it is read in an absolutist sense, but 3.14159....

John Murray said, “Everyone should recognize that in accordance with accepted forms of speech and custom, a statement can be perfectly authentic and not yet pedantically precise.” Murray belongs to what in our taxonomy here would be called the full inerrantist tradition, rather than the absolutist tradition. If anyone is responsible for coining the term ‘inerrancy,’ it is B.B. Warfield, and he said, “There’s a vast difference between exactness of statement, which includes an exhaustive rendering of details, an

absolute literalness which the Scriptures never profess, and accuracy on the other hand, which secures a correct statement of facts or principle intended to be affirmed.” What all this suggests is that inerrancy should not be thought of as scientific or historical precision. And the Reformed tradition has more often than not fit into the category of full inerrancy rather than absolute inerrancy.

In point ‘e’ of the outline we begin discussing difficulties in explaining the biblical text. The fact that we have difficulties in explaining the text should not be taken as a prejudgment to error. Let me state that more positively. Inerrancy suggests a positive attitude toward the text. This is important because of the context in which the doctrine of inerrancy arose. You see, inerrancy is a reactionary doctrine. It arose in response to the development of the higher critical method. The higher critical method presupposes René Descartes’ principle of critical doubt. The principle of critical doubt says that all assertions must be doubted, or assumed false, until they are proven true by the light of human reason. Now that principle meant that the reader must come to the Bible in an adversarial posture. I must come to the Word of God assuming it false until I can prove it in some way. Contrary to that presumption of falsehood, the doctrine of inerrancy is the precommitment to the Bible’s truthfulness as the proper complement to the Bible’s own affirmation of its divine authority and its divine source. The principle of critical doubt suggested by the higher critical method adopts a hostile attitude towards the text. It parades as a concern for scientific integrity, but it ought not to be believed as such. It is in actuality a confessional prejudice against the Bible. And that is fairly easy to prove, because it is only talking about the Bible that this principle is enforced. I do not know any modern philosopher who denies the existence of Socrates. What is the foundation for the belief in Socrates? What is the evidence for Socrates? It is Plato’s writing. Is it possible Plato made up Socrates? I think yes. If I were to follow this principle of critical doubt, I would have to say Socrates is purely the creation of Plato’s mind. But we do not approach ancient documents besides the Bible this way. We have a tendency to give them the benefit of the doubt. But we tend not to give the Bible that benefit. Thus Warfield and Hodge sought to counter that very prejudice with this little piece of rationale: since the Bible is the inspired, authoritative Word of God, an appropriate stance toward it is one which respects its divine authorship; it is one which assumes not falsity but truth.

Another point to be made is that inerrancy cannot become a license for obscurantism. It cannot become a refusal to investigate the phenomena of the text on dogmatic grounds. Sometimes we evangelicals have said, “The Bible is inerrant because it is the inspired Word of God and God cannot lie.” And then we are done. We think that is it; that ends the argument. And we thus refuse to take problems seriously. I want to suggest to you, as Ferguson does in the piece mentioned above, that this is an intellectually illegitimate position. Such a move demonstrates an “it’s true no matter what the evidence says” attitude. Inerrancy tells us that we must be sensitive to the realities of the text. We need to run toward the text, rather than away from it. We do not have to protect it, but we start from a position of faith. We start from a position of being accepting of it.

We need to be honest. There are some difficulties in looking at the biblical text. There are some difficulties with the resurrection narratives, though there are ways of addressing them. When we put the resurrection narratives next to each other, we can ask: Who got there first? Was there an angel there or not? Was there one angel there or two? Was the rock covering the tomb or had it been rolled away? Were the angels inside or outside, sitting or standing? And we can ask numerous other questions. Many of them can be solved through an understanding of perspectivalism or of timeframe. For instance, maybe when John talks about the first visitors to the tomb being Peter and the beloved disciple, he is not aware of others. That is a possibility. But we are not going to resolve those issues by running away from the phenomena. The only way we are going to resolve them is by investigating.

Let me give you another example. In Acts 1:18 we have the account of Judas's death. Both the King James Version and the New International Version say that he fell headlong, his body bursting open. Yet if you compare the synoptic tradition, we are told that he died by hanging; he committed suicide. Well, which is it? Did he fall down the stairs and splat, or did he hang himself? At one time it was common to say we can resolve these problems by simply adding the texts together, by conflating them. So it goes: he hanged himself; the rope broke; he fell; and he burst open. Well that is in fact what some people argue. During this century, however, in that last 25 or 30 years, evidence from first century papyri has helped us. There is one little word in the Greek text, *prenes*, and that word is just glossed over by both the King James and the NIV; they didn't know what to do with it. It is what is called a *hapax legomenon*; it is a word that only appears one time in the New Testament. And they did not know how to translate it. In looking at extra-biblical sources, we find out that it is a word that can be translated as 'swell up.' What seems to have happened is that Judas hanged himself, and the consequence of a body left out in the sun is the gases in the stomach expand and the stomach explodes. So we have a description, with both texts put together, that perfectly fits the phenomenological reality of what happens to corpses after a body is hung. But again this is a resolution that comes only because we investigate the text, only because we run toward the text, rather than away from it.

Erickson does end with one more qualification. He says it is only when the Bible is correctly interpreted that it is inerrant. That may be a shocking statement, but Erickson is simply taking a page from the history of the Reformed tradition in talking about inerrancy. You see, inerrancy does not allow one to subtract the Holy Spirit from the equation. In the last few lectures, I have been pointing to the fact that the Holy Spirit is involved at every point, not only in the generation of Scripture, but also in illumination and every other event. Inspiration is part of the entire organism of the Word of God, under the sovereignty of the Spirit. In other words, inerrancy is never an over-there, objective, static reality. Sinclair Ferguson said, "Scripture erroneously interpreted is no longer God's Word." Other Reformed theologians have spoken similarly on the subject. David Jones, who has taught this course in years past, comments, "It is the God-intended meaning of Scripture as expressed in the Spirit-inspired words that is inerrant, and not some other meaning that anybody thinks the words convey." J. Oliver Buswell, past president of Covenant Seminary, said, "Inerrancy means that what the Bible says when correctly understood grammatically and in its historical setting is absolutely true. We contend for the inerrancy of the meaning which the inspired writers intended to convey in their original manuscripts." And finally, you cannot find better credentials as an American Presbyterian than John Murray, who said, "In all questions pertinent to the doctrine of Scripture we must remember that the intent of Scripture is Scripture. It is what Scripture means to say that is Scripture. We cannot deal, therefore, with the inerrancy of Scripture apart from hermeneutics." These comments shaped and reflect the tradition from which the term inerrancy comes.

What about the allegation that inerrancy is a recent addition which does not belong to the history of the church? Well, that is true. The term inerrancy does not belong to the grand history of the church. It arose at the turn of the twentieth century within American Presbyterian circles. But this is really an insignificant argument. Even though the term inerrancy is relatively young, the idea behind it is very old. We can find statements in Augustine, in Calvin, and even Luther, which come amazingly close to Warfield's term. Let me give you one example. In Augustine's letter to Jerome, he said, "I admit to your charity that it's from those books alone of the Scriptures which we now call canonical that I have learned to pay them such honor and respect as to believe most firmly that not one of their authors has erred in writing anything at all." He goes on to say that he finds nothing in the canonical Scriptures which is contrary to the truth. He did not use the word inerrancy, but he certainly fleshed out, or affirmed, the same notion. And Augustine is an early fifth century Christian.

One last issue is the question, “Who cares?” which I do not mean flippantly. The authority, the reliability, the truthfulness of Scripture is inevitably bound up with the question of truth. If the Bible was capable of error, it would then be subject to correction by some other means, some higher source of truth. In that case, Scripture’s competence as supreme and final authority would be seriously jeopardized. The traditional exegetical task has always been understood as being comprised of three actions: first of all, determine the text—what is called textual criticism; second, exegete the text—determine what the text means; and third, apply or interpret the text for contemporary needs. A critical attitude would have us insert a fourth crucial step, one between exegesis and contemporary interpretation. Somewhere here in this process we would actually have to adjudicate the truthfulness of the text. We would have to decide the true status of the text, and it is in that step that authorities which are extraneous to Scripture appear and become dangerous.

Yes, the doctrine of inerrancy has often been dismissed as a kind of fundamentalism. Yet the confessional affirmation of the full truthfulness of Scripture has a long and distinguished historical pedigree. You could read the statement from the French confession of faith to see for yourself. Today, when we talk about the classical commitment to the truthfulness of Scripture, we use the term inerrancy. There are some ways in which that term could be thought of as unfortunate. It should not be pushed too far. It is going to be qualified by everyone in one way or another. Unfortunate though it may be, it is the term that our heritage has handed us and I think we need to affirm. It may be a clumsy way of saying that the Bible is true, but at the end of the day I would rather live with it than without it. Because if I am to live through the biblical story, if I am to see the world through its eyes, I need that obedient, believing predisposition of Scripture that the term inerrancy was coined to protect and has protected for some three generations of American evangelicals.