Some Important Aspects of Biblical Inerrancy

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Harold Lindsell's significant book, *The Battle for the Bible,*[1] has itself provoked a battle! The importance of that book lies in at least three areas: theology, history, and prediction. Inspiration and inerrancy, which underlie the doctrine of the authority of the Bible, are basic to theology. Lindsell's studies in history relative to what has happened to denominations and schools that compromised inerrancy provide significant perspective on the contemporary ecclesiastical scene. And those same historical observations give a basis for predicting what may happen to other groups in the future.

The reactions to the book have been almost as interesting and significant as the book itself. Some agreed wholeheartedly with its theses and warnings.[2] Others, named in the book, have challenged the charge that they have departed from a belief in inerrancy. To accomplish this, however, they have (a) substituted the word *infallible* or *inspired* for the word *inerrant,* or (b) qualified *inerrancy* by eliminating accuracy from its meaning, or (c) redefined it by allowing it to mean that there can be errors in nonsoteriological areas of biblical revelation.[3] Still others, while claiming to hold the view of inerrancy stated in the book, bemoan the furor and division it has generated.[4] Either they consider inerrancy not to be the high priority doctrine Lindsell judges it to be, or they assume that divisions are to be avoided at all costs.

One should recognize that Lindsell does not claim that inerrancy is *the* watershed doctrine of the Christian faith, but he insist that to be properly called an evangelical one must hold to tha doctrine. This has probably grated most on those who do not hol inerrancy but who want the label *evangelical.* However, agreemen or disagreement with Lindsell's or anyone else's definition of th term *evangelical* must never obscure the fact that inerrancy is crucial doctrine whose importance must not be eclipsed in the nam of Christian unity or by the sleight of hand of redefinition.

INERRANCY AND THE TRUTHFULNESS OF GOD

A standard deductive argument for inerrancy is this: God true (Rom. 3:4); the Scriptures were breathed out by God (2 Tim 3:16); therefore, the Scriptures are true (since they came from th breath of God who is true). This is not to imply that those wh deny or adjust the meaning of inerrancy deny that God is true rather they point out that because God used fallible men, it is t be expected that what those men produced (the Bible) contain errors.

Logic alone could lead to either conclusion, but the Scripture in 2 Peter 1:21 indicate which is correct.

English translations obscure the important parallelism in Peter 1:21. Literally it reads, "For prophecy was not borne (brought) by the will of man at any time, but men spoke from Go being borne (or brought) by the Holy Spirit." "Prophecy" here m refer to the entire Scriptures or just to the prophetic portions, b in either case the use of the same verb to contrast the will of m and the work of God is striking. Man's will, including his will make mistakes, did not bring the Scriptures; rather, the Holy Spi who is perfect and who bore the human writers along, brought m the Scriptures.

It was through the instrumentality of men who "spake from him More specifically, it was through an operation of the Holy Gh on these men which is described as "bearing" them. The term he used is a very specific one. It is not to be confounded with guidin or directing, or controlling, or even leading in the full sense of th word. It goes beyond all such terms, in assigning the effect pr duced specifically to the active agent. What is "borne" is taken by the "bearer," and conveyed by the "bearer's" power, not

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1 Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976.
2 Cf. the author's review in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 133 (October–December 1976): 356-57.
3 Cf. Jack Rogers, ed., *Biblical Authority* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1977); "Evangelicals on Inerrancy," *Christianity Today,* June 18, 1976, p. 17; Robert Mounce, "Does the Bible Contain Errors?" *Eternity,* August 1976, pp. 49, 51.
4 Cf. Clark H. Pinnock's review of Lindsell's book in *Eternity,* June 1976, pp. 40-41.

own, to the "bearer's" goal, not its own. The men who spoke from God are here declared, therefore, to have been taken up by the Holy Spirit and brought by His power to the goal of His choosing. The things which they spoke under this operation of the Spirit were therefore His things, not theirs.[5]

And God is true.

Admittedly, one can affirm the truthfulness of God and deny the truthfulness of the Bible, but this does not accord with the evidence of 2 Peter 1:21.[6]

SUBJECTIVISM AND LIMITED INERRANCY

Limited inerrancy means either (a) that inerrancy does not require Cape Kennedy standards of accuracy (and thus may include errors by ordinary mortals' standards); or (b) that inerrancy is limited to parts of the Bible that pertain to its saving message (and thus other parts may and do in fact contain errors). In either case one can scarcely escape the conclusion that limited inerrancy is a synonym (deliberately less conspicuous?) for errancy.

However, the limited inerrancy (= errancy) view inherently contains certain perplexing problems. One is the apparent conclusion that errors can teach truth. Hubbard, for example, states that one has a false view of the sufficiency of the Bible when "we claim it to be inerrant on the basis of minute details of chronology, geography, history, or cosmology."[7] Yet he affirms that "every part of Scripture is God-given" and that all parts have significance as they contribute to the whole which is "the infallible rule."[8] Undoubtedly the rejoinder to this conclusion would be that erroneous statements do not teach truth, but they do not hinder the communication of truth, particularly in revealing the truth about salvation. It would seem, however, to require more faith to believe that God-permitted errors do not affect the teaching of the Bible than to believe that God-guarded authors were kept from writing errors.

This leads to a second area of confusion. How can we be sure that the soteriological content of the Bible is without error? Ray Summers, after citing several examples of contradictions in the

Bible, concludes: "I confess the infallibility and inerrancy of th Scriptures in accomplishing God's purpose for them — to giv man the revelation of God in His redemptive love through Jesu Christ."[9] But how can he have confidence that the doctrine o redemptive love is true? His attempt to distinguish "historical ac curacy" (which he does not hold to fully) from "doctrinal integ rity" (which he does hold) is a false dichotomy. For all doctrina integrity has to be based on historical accuracy. If there are histor ical inaccuracies, however minute, then one can have no guarante of doctrinal integrity. Or to claim historical accuracy in statement regarding salvation and to deny it in other areas is a subjectiv distinction which is only as valid as the authority of the person wh makes it.

This leads to a third problem. If, as limited inerrantists (= errantists) hold, there are areas of biblical truth which do not hav to be inerrant, could one not expect to find agreement as to wha those areas are or some criteria by which to determine such areas But each writer seems to have his own list. Mickelson elaborates o Matthew 27:9 and says there are "hundreds of examples like th one."[10] Beegle lists Jude 14; Jude 9; 2 Kings 15:27; 2 Kings 18: Genesis 5; Acts 7:4; Acts 7:15-16; Galatians 3:17; Mark 14:3(72; 1 Corinthians 3:19; and 2 Samuel 24:1 (cf. 1 Chron. 21:1). Fuller is troubled by Matthew 13:31-32 and problems in Acts 7. Mounce cites 2 Chronicles 4:2; Numbers 25:9 (cf. 1 Cor. 10:8) Mark 2:26; and Matthew 22:42 (cf. Luke 20:41) as examples o "a kind of inerrancy that falls short of perfect conformity to wh: was actually said" and of problems to which only "highly fancifu explanations could be given.[13] Granted these writers are not attemp ing to give exhaustive lists, but what are the criteria for determinir areas in which errors are immaterial? Or more important, wh: or who decides the boundary lines between the territory of permi sible errancy and the territory of necessary inerrancy? These que

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5 Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1948), p. 137.

6 The remark by David Hubbard seems incongruous: "We seem to learn nothing from 2 Peter about the definition of inerrancy which dominates the current debate" ("The Current Tensions: Is There a Way Out?" in *Biblical Authority*, p. 175).

7 Ibid., p. 168.

8 Ibid., p. 171.

9 Ray Summers, "How God Said It, Part II," *Baptist Standard,* February 1970, p. 12.

10 Berkeley Mickelsen, "The Bible's Own Approach to Authority," in *Biblic Authority*, p. 86.

11 Dewey M. Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility* (Grand Rapid Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973), pp. 175-97.

12 Daniel P. Fuller, "Evangelicalism and Biblical Inerrancy," mimeograph (Pasadena, CA, 1966), pp. 18-19.

13 Robert H. Mounce, "Clues to Understanding Biblical Accuracy," *Eterni* June 1966, p. 18.

tions remind one of a similar problem which those who deny eternal security have. They agree that sin causes one to lose his salvation, but there is little agreement as to which specific sins would do this. The morass of subjectivism is composed of the quicksand of uncertainty.

Augustine and Inerrancy

The history of a doctrine is almost always a worthwhile study. But one must ask, worthwhile for what purpose? Proponents and opponents of inerrancy usually investigate the history of that doctrine. Proponents seek to show inerrancy is not a new concept, but that the contemporary understanding of inerrancy is in accord with what has been taught in the past. Opponents insist that the modern definition of inerrancy is more rigid than the historical one.

Rogers, for example, labors to show that the divines of the church taught the principle of accommodation, or that the thoughts of the writers of Scripture were more important than the words (thus undermining verbal inspiration and inerrancy), or that the authority of Scripture is derived from the saving knowledge of Christ or the inner witness of the Spirit.[14] Rogers's goal is to try to show that the Fathers did not consider the "bare word of Scripture" to be authoritative in and of itself since such teaching would demand inerrancy as its necessary corollary. His historical research leads him to conclude that "it is no doubt possible to define the meaning of biblical inerrancy according to the Bible's saving purpose and taking into account the human forms through which God condescended to reveal himself. Inerrancy thus defined could be heartily affirmed by those in the Augustinian tradition" (in contrast to Aristotelian notions which impose, in the tradition of Princeton theology, "notions of accuracy" on the Bible itself).[15]

Rogers's conclusions do not square with the facts. For one thing, the use of the word *accommodation* by some of the church divines does not mean they believed in an errant text. They simply meant that God condescended to speak in language so that man could understand.[16]

For another thing, Augustine did not connect inerrancy merely

with the Bible's saving purpose, but with errorlessness. He clearl[y] stated the following:

> Most disastrous consequences must follow upon our believing tha[t] anything false is found in the sacred books: that is to say that th[e] men by whom the Scripture has been given to us and committe[d] to writing, did not put down in these books anything false. If yo[u] once admit into such a high sanctuary of authority one false state[-] ment, there will not be left a single sentence of those books, whic[h] if appearing to any one difficult in practice or hard to believe, ma[y] not by the same fatal rule be explained away as a statement, i[n] which, intentionally, the author declared what was not true.[17]

While it is true that Augustine did stress the religious, mora[l] and soteriological aim of Scripture, it is equally evident tha[t] he taught that the historical facts of the Bible were absolutel[y] trustworthy.[18]

The Label *Evangelical*

The reactions to Lindsell's challenge as to whether a perso[n] can truly be an evangelical if he denies biblical inerrancy are pe[r]haps more significant than the challenge itself. To be fair, Lindsell['s] critics should acknowledge that he recognizes that a person ca[n] be a Christian without holding to inerrancy.[19] But because th[e] term *evangelical* has traditionally been defined as including a beli[ef] in the authority of the Bible, and because he insists that limite[d] inerrancy effectually denies full authority, he concludes that on[e] who holds limited inerrancy cannot truly be an evangelical.

Almost every definition of *evangelical* includes a statemen[t] concerning belief in the authority of Scripture. The question [is] whether limited or partial inerrancy (= partial errancy) can quali[fy] as holding to the authority of the Bible. How can one escape th[e] conclusion that limited inerrancy or partial errancy places a limit[a]tion on authority, since those passages which contain errors, ho[w]ever few or many, have either no authority or diluted authority [or] misleading authority, all of which adds up to some limitation [on] authority? By contrast, it is difficult to escape the conclusion th[at] total inerrancy means unrestricted authority.

Those who deplore this kind of logic fear that it will lead [

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14   Jack Rogers, "The Church Doctrine of Biblical Authority," in *Biblical Authority,* pp. 20-34.

15   Ibid., p. 45.

16   Geoffrey W. Bromiley, "The Church Doctrine of Inspiration," in *Revelation and the Bible,* ed. Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1958), p. 210.

17   Augustine *Epistula* 28. 3. Evidently the "domino" idea did not origina[te] with Lindsell!

18   A. D. R. Polman, *The Word of God according to St. Augustine,* trans. A. [J.] Pomerans (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1961), pp. 52-6[.]

19   *The Battle for the Bible,* p. 210.

divisions in the church. They are right. It will, and it has. But who divided from whom? This idea that inerrancy is limited to soteriological matters only is new, and this is what has divided contemporary evangelicals (even before Lindsell's book). Even Clark Pinnock, who deplores these divisions, acknowledges that he has "deep misgivings" about where partial errancy has led Paul K. Jewett, because Pinnock recognizes that Jewett writes now from a liberal rather than a firmly evangelical theological methodology.[20]

Gerald T. Sheppard, of Union Theological Seminary, New York, is not so charitable. He labels the methodology represented by Jewett as neoorthodox[21] and observes that Fuller Theological Seminary "has orchestrated a media campaign to defend the evangelical status of the seminary."[22] Further, he declares that Fuller demonstrates "a serious inconsistency in distinguishing evangelicalism from neo-orthodoxy" because "Barth, Brunner, Cullmann, and Eichrodt provide more attractive models at Fuller for an 'evangelical' approach to Scripture" than do Strong, Hodge, and Warfield.[23]

While it cannot be denied that insistence on total inerrancy leads to divisions, neither can it be denied that limited inerrancy (= partial errancy) leads to a nonevangelical view of the Bible. Can, then, limited inerrancy be truly or at least fully evangelical?

Docetism, Ebionism, and Inerrancy

Docetism, a first-century heresy, taught that Christ did not actually become flesh but only appeared as a man, thus robbing Him of genuine humanity. Though Docetism was a Christological error, an analogy has been drawn between it and the doctrine of inspiration which allegedly overemphasizes the divine authorship of the Scriptures to the neglect of its "humanness." Divine superintendence to the extent of producing an errorless Bible is said to be a Docetic view of inspiration. Barth made this charge,[24] and more recently so also did Berkouwer.[25] Jewett, too, regards the unlimited inerrancy view (which he links with mechanical dictation) as an

20 Clark Pinnock, "Three Views of the Bible in Contemporary Theology," in *Biblical Authority*, p. 70.
21 "Biblical Hermeneutics: The Academic Language of Evangelical Identity," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 32 (Winter 1977): 94, n. 33.
22 Ibid., p. 89.
23 Ibid., pp. 89-90.
24 Cf. J. K. S. Reid, *The Authority of Scripture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), p. 218.
25 G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), p. 18.

example of the ancient heresy of Docetism, concluding that a balanced view of inspiration which recognizes fully the humanity of the writers does not require inerrancy.[26]

But if it be true (which it is not) that those who hold total inerrancy are espousing a heresy akin to Docetism, then it is equally true that those who hold partial inerrancy (= errancy) support a doctrine analagous to Ebionism. Ebionites denied the deity of Christ, regarding Him rather as the natural son of Joseph and Mary who was elected Son of God (not eternal) at His baptism. Though Jesus was a great prophet and the Christ was higher than archangels, He was not divine. If inerrancy is like Docetism, then errancy, albeit limited, is like Ebionism, since the humanity of the Bible permits errors in it. Thompson comments, "Real men living in the real world engaged in real struggle as spokesmen for God stand behind the words they inscribed. Certainly the Holy Spirit inspired, directed and taught them. But did He guarantee that their essays would never contain a single mistake?"[27] Thompson then answers no to his question and adds that he does not "regard the doctrine of inerrancy helpful or relevant."[28]

Though Docetism and Ebionism were heretical views of the person of Christ, there is an orthodox doctrine, namely, that He is fully God and sinless man united in one person forever. He was never less than God nor on any occasion a sinning man. At the Incarnation deity was joined with perfect humanity without diminishing the divine or involving the humanity in sin.

Likewise the Bible is the product of the superintendence of God over human authors without involving error. This does not mean passivity on the part of the human authors nor does it mean freedom for them to include erroneous statements. It means using them in research (Luke 1:1-4), permitting them to express intense feeling (Rom. 9:1-3), transmitting direct revelation (Deut. 9:10), giving authoritative commands (1 Cor. 7:10), expressing opinion (1 Cor. 7:40), but always guided and guarded by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21) so that the product can be said to have been breathed out by God (2 Tim. 3:16).

26 Paul K. Jewett, "Bulletin, Systematic Theology 1 The Doctrine of Scripture: The Divine Word in Human Words," mimeographed (Pasadena, CA, 1978), pp. 4-5.
27 Fred P. Thompson, Jr., "The Wrong War," *United Evangelical Action*, Winter 1976, p. 10. He also labels the inerrancy view as "a species of literary docetism" (ibid.).
28 Ibid.

Because of this wedding of divine and human activity to produce inerrant autographs, the minute details of the Bible can be relied on. The Lord Jesus certainly relied on those details. When charged with blasphemy, He defended Himself on the basis of a single word from a "rather run-of-the-mill" passage (John 10:34 quoting Ps. 82:6).[29]

> Jesus puts all His emphasis on the exact word used. The argument would fall to the ground if any other word for "judge" had been employed. Yet Jesus not only appeals to the word, but says in connection with it that Scripture cannot be broken. The term "broken" is not defined . . . . But it is perfectly intelligible. It means that Scripture cannot be emptied of its force by being shown to be erroneous.[30]

To acknowledge the divine-human authorship of the Bible resulting in its total inerrancy is analagous to the orthodox doctrine of the person of Christ. And that doctrine of inerrant inspiration is affirmed by the way the Lord assigned authority to the minutiae of the text, which He could not have done had He held to so-called limited inerrancy.

The current discussion over inerrancy is highly significant and should never be relegated to the category of something only theologians speculate about. One's view of inerrancy does affect one's doctrine of inspiration, and that in turn is bound to affect the concept of the authority of the Bible which is basic to the interpretation and application of its message.

29　Leon Morris, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), p. 526.
30　Ibid., p. 527. See also Matthew 22:32, 45.

Problem Passages in the Gospel of John
Part 5

The Angel at Bethesda —
John 5:4

Zane C. Hodges

According to John 5, the Lord Jesus performed an impressive miracle of healing at a pool where many sick people were gathered. The reason for this assemblage of the ailing and infirm is specified in verse 4, which reports that an angel periodically imparted to the waters a limited curative effect. As a result one individual, and one alone, was healed at each angelic visitation.

However, since the rise of modern New Testament textual criticism the authenticity of this information about the angel of Bethesda has been almost universally doubted. Instead, John 5:4 is treated as an ancient gloss which formed no part of the original text of the Fourth Gospel. Accordingly, the verse is omitted by the most widely used critical editions of the Greek text and is relegated to the margin by many modern English translations.[1]

This expedient, widespread though it is, nevertheless leaves John's text in a rather puzzling condition. Though the gathering of the sick is noted in verse 3 (most of which is retained by modern editors[2]), with the omission of verse 4 there remains no explanation

1　John 5:3b-4 is omitted, of course, by influential critical editions such as Nestle-Aland and the United Bible Societies' Greek text (hereafter = UBSGNT). Older editors who excluded the passage include Tischendorf, Westcott-Hort, and von Soden. Among modern translations which remove it from their text are the RSV, NASV, NEB, NIV, and the New Berkeley Version.
2　The last phrase of verse 3 (usually referred to as 3b), ἐκδεχομένων τὴν τοῦ ὕδατος κίνησις (AV = "waiting for the moving of the water"), is omitted by UBSGNT and Nestle-Aland, chiefly on the authority of the leading Egyptian witnesses and their well-known allies, P66 P75 א A* B C* L 0125. D, however, which omits verse 4, includes this phrase with the addition of παραλυτικῶ before ἐκδεχομένων.