

THEOLOGICAL POSITION PAPER: THE INERRANCY AND
INFALLIBILITY OF SCRIPTURE

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A Paper
Presented to
Dr. Gregg R. Allison
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for 27060

by
Student's Name
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THEOLOGICAL POSITION PAPER: THE INERRANCY AND INFALLIBILITY OF SCRIPTURE

Issue

I propose to discuss the inerrancy and infallibility of scripture. Inerrancy simply means that “when all facts are known, the Scriptures in their original autographs and properly interpreted will be shown to be wholly true in everything they affirm.”¹ In addition, inerrancy means scripture is “free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit.”² Similarly, but with an important distinction, infallibility means scripture is, “true and reliable in all the matters it addresses.”³ At first glance, these two terms may seem to be so closely related that a careful distinction is not necessary. It may seem that to hold one is to hold the other. On the contrary, in many theological circles, individuals will hold to infallibility but reject inerrancy. A discussion of these issues is not a debate over semantics, but gets to the very heart of scripture. This paper will seek to explain and defend the doctrines of inerrancy and infallibility as necessary for an orthodox understanding of the nature of Scripture. This will be accomplished by examining various alternative views on the doctrines of inerrancy and infallibility, presenting a conservative Evangelical view, and showing why these doctrines are necessary for faithfulness to scripture and logical consistency.

¹Norman L. Geisler, *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: The Zondervan Corporation, 1980) 294.

²International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*, Section XII, accessed 09-20-2013. <http://www.bible-researcher.com/chicago1.html>

³Ibid., Section XI.

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Commented [EL3]: THEOLOGICAL COMMUNICATION: This paper exemplifies good theological communication by defining terms carefully here. Not only does the paper define the terms but it also relates the definitions to the issue the paper addresses.

Commented [EL4]: ARGUMENTATION & ORGANIZATION: This sentence performs an important function for this introductory section. It shows why this paper matters. Good writers give their readers reasons why reading a paper is a good investment of their time.

Commented [EL5]: THESIS: This thesis statement delineates the student's position clearly and provides direction for the rest of the paper. The QEP rubric also directs writers to provide major supporting points for their position. "An orthodox understanding of the nature of Scripture" could be a supporting point, but it is not very specific. This thesis could be strengthened by adding a preview of specific, strong points that support the thesis.

Commented [EL6]: METHODOLOGY: Which alternative views? Being specific allows the methodology statement to preview the rest of the paper most effectively.

Commented [EL7]: METHODOLOGY: Here is another place where the writer might want to summarize the specific arguments he intends to use. Which Scripture passages and logical points make these doctrines necessary?

Commented [EL8]: METHODOLOGY: This methodology statement gives the reader a clear idea of where the rest of the paper is heading—that's what it's supposed to do! However, making this sentence more specific would make it even better.

Positions on the Issue

The first leading position is a rejection of inerrancy but an embrace of infallibility.

This view is held by A.T.B. McGowan and presented in his book “The Divine Spiration of Scripture: Challenging evangelical perspectives.”⁴ McGowan rejects the idea of inerrancy. “I made the point that inerrancy is not a biblical doctrine but rather an implication of ‘inspiration’, based on an unsubstantiated (and somewhat presumptuous) view of what God could and could not do.”⁵ But he is comfortable with a form of infallibility, “The Scriptures are God’s Word and God does not mislead us.”⁶ If the Scriptures are God’s Word, why does he reject inerrancy? He says inerrancy is not a biblical word and inerrantists are simply deducing inerrancy from the doctrine of inspiration (which he has modified to be “spiration”), “this inerrantist conviction that the doctrine of the divine spiration of Scripture implies inerrancy is the weak point in their argument.”⁷ For McGowan, inspiration is clearly taught in scripture while inerrancy is not, “Those who advocate inerrancy might well (and do) argue that it is a legitimate and natural implication of the doctrine of divine spiration, but they cannot argue that inerrancy is itself taught in Scripture.”⁸ This is where McGowan derives the core argument of his book, “If we accept this argument that inerrancy, properly understood, is not a biblical doctrine but rather an implication from another doctrine, then it is reasonable to ask if it is a legitimate implication.”⁹

McGowan does not believe it is legitimate to conclude that inspiration means inerrancy because to draw that connection is to limit God, “It [inerrancy] assumes that God can

Commented [EL9]: SOURCES: A great strength of this paper is that it interacts with other people’s real ideas. It’s easy for writers to talk about positions they imagine others might hold instead of taking the time to understand what people who hold other views really believe and why they believe it.

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Commented [EL11]: STYLE: A reader could initially think that this “he” means “God” based on the beginning of the sentence. Using McGowan’s name here instead would prevent this possible confusion. Although a careful reader could easily figure out who “he” means, good writers should do the work of writing as clearly as possible to save readers the work of sorting through confusing constructions.

Commented [EL12]: SOURCES: This paper skillfully uses quotes while also interpreting the source’s words for the reader.

Commented [EL13]: STYLE: Although this paper generally reads very well, a small issue with the word “this” shows up several times. “This” should always refer back to one specific noun. Otherwise, the writer may know exactly what “this” means, but the reader’s understanding will likely be fuzzy. An unclear “this” may also mark a point where the writer needs to think more carefully about the connections between ideas.

⁴A.T.B. McGowan. *The Divine Spiration of Scripture: Challenging evangelical perspectives* (Nottingham, England: Apollos, 2007)

⁵Ibid., 209.

⁶Ibid., 212.

⁷Ibid., 114.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., 115.

only act in a way that conforms to our expectations, based on our human assessment of his character. It assumes that whatever God does must conform to the canons of human reason. In opposition to these inerrantist assumptions, we must surely argue that God is free to act according to his will.”¹⁰ Instead, God inspired a text that is divine, but also reflects the errors and mistakes of its human authors, “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.”¹¹ To summarize, McGowan represents the position of holding to infallibility, but not to inerrancy. It is infallible because it is as God intended it to be. It is not inerrant because God did not intend for it to be inerrant.

The second leading position is one that holds to a form of inerrancy, but is uncomfortable with traditional forms of it. This view is held by Dan Gentry Kent who claims to hold to inerrancy but thinks it is just another step on the historical continuum to control interpretative uniformity. “I personally think that this rather long-running struggle has been an attempt to insure that everyone will interpret the Bible the same way.”¹² He largely sees the word “inerrant” as unhelpful and misleading because it is negative, grammatically questionable, relatively new, not biblical, lacking clear definition, and controversial. His central argument is that one may hold to egalitarianism, aware of the verses that seem to contradict egalitarianism, and simultaneously hold to inerrancy. After listing the verses that seem to contradict egalitarianism, he says that he can hold to the inerrancy of scripture and egalitarianism because he holds a different hermeneutic, not a different view of scripture, than those who disagree with him. For Kent, the more important issue is not whether one holds to inerrancy or not, but how

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Commented [EL15]: GRAMMAR & MECHANICS: This semicolon correctly connects the complete sentence before the quote with the complete sentence of the quote itself.

Commented [EL16]: GRAMMAR & MECHANICS: A small capitalization error: "Scripture" and "Bible" should always be capitalized to follow the capitalization guide at the end of the *Southern Seminary Manual of Style* (although "biblical" and "scriptural" are not capitalized). The capitalization of "Scripture" needs to be corrected throughout this paper.

¹⁰Ibid., 118.

¹¹Ibid., 124.

¹²Dan Gentry Kent. “Can You Believe in Inerrancy and Equality?” *Priscilla Papers* vol. 15, no. 1 (2001): 5.

one interprets particular passages. “Even though we believe the Bible is inerrant,” Kent argues, “we may have some problems with the term and with some who use it to beat other people over the head.”¹³

A third leading position is that of outright rejection of inerrancy and infallibility, as explained by I. Howard Marshall. All those tasked with “communicating the word of God to modern people,” he says, “are faced with the all-important questions of knowing where that word is to be found.”¹⁴ Based on John 1, Jesus, as the incarnate word, would be the obvious source for knowing God through His word. As the cornerstone of divine revelation, Jesus must be the cornerstone of our understanding of scripture as well. However, the only record we have of what Jesus has done and said is in the Gospels and “anybody who knows anything at all of modern biblical study knows that it is a very big question whether the gospels do indeed lead us to a true knowledge of what Jesus said and did.”¹⁵ Men of earlier generations assumed the gospels were historically accurate, factual accounts, even though they were written at least thirty years after Jesus’s death. In contrast to the understanding of earlier generations, current scholars understand “over a period of thirty years memories may alter their form; things are seen in the light of succeeding events, and the stories are told differently.”¹⁶ Because this is so, the important task is to examine “what was happening to the Gospel material during the period between the death of Jesus and the composition of the finished Gospels.”¹⁷

Upon closer examination of the Gospel records, we find a number of problems. The first is the contradiction between gospel accounts. In the past, scholars had questioned the

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴I. Howard Marshall “The Authority of the Gospels for Interpreting Jesus.” *Cruce* vol. 11, no. 1 (Fall 1973): 1.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

Commented [EL17]: THEOLOGICAL COMMUNICATION: While this writer does an excellent job of giving different ideas a fair hearing, he may want to distance himself a little more from the ideas he describes throughout this section of the paper. Adding a phrase like “Marshall argues . . .” or “According to Marshall’s view . . .” would remind the reader that the writer is describing other’s ideas rather than his own. This kind of distance between the writer and ideas leaves open whether or not the writer agrees with the ideas. It allows careful writers to express others’ ideas fairly without affirming ideas with which they disagree.

validity of John's gospel, understanding it to be inferior to the other gospels in historical quality due to the many differences. "But more recently," he points out "it has been suggested that the same thing is true of the others, and that we cannot simply assume that they are historical records."¹⁸ Instead of keeping historical records, the "Gospel writers... have shaped the material which they used and ordered it as seemed best to them."¹⁹ Another difficulty is the theological and religious bias of those who recorded and handed down the material the original writers wrote, resulting in additional change and uncertainty. The resulting problems are two-fold, "one is that the things [Jesus] really said have been altered and distorted in transmission, and the other is that the things He really said have been surrounded by a host of things that He did not say."²⁰

Beyond this challenge, each of us interprets the words of Jesus with our own individual bias so that "we all have different understandings of what we hear" and "the words of Jesus will mean different things for each of us."²¹ Because we have different experiences and understanding, we will interpret the words differently as individuals. Jesus will be translated into as many people's circumstances as there are individuals who hear the message. Indeed, church history shows just this type of conundrum, where "Jesus has been differently understood in different ages" resulting in a considerable "variety of modern denominations and theological outlooks."²² Based on this view of inspiration, the task of the preacher and communicator "seems well nigh impossible."²³

Commented [EL18]: GRAMMAR & MECHANICS: According to the capitalization guide in our style manual, "Gospel" should be capitalized when it refers to one of the four Gospels that begin the New Testament. Check the appendix at the end of the *Southern Seminary Manual of Style* for examples of correct capitalization.

Commented [EL19]: STYLE: Using "us" and "we" throughout this section could imply the author's agreement with the ideas. The writer's later arguments reveal that he actually rejects these ideas. The first-person plural ("we," "us," "our") can often be problematic for careful writing since the group to which it refers is unclear. Does it mean the author and other students at SBTS? The author and one other person? The author and all other human beings?

Commented [EL20]: SOURCES: These sentences skillfully incorporate words from the source into the writer's sentence. This smooth interweaving of the source's words and the words of this paper's author allows the writer to interact directly with the source while still directing the focus and flow of the ideas. Using some quotations adds authenticity to the conversation, but using too much quotation can allow another author's purposes and organization to interrupt the flow of the paper.

¹⁸Ibid., 2.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

Support for Orthodoxy of Inerrancy and Infallibility

The doctrine of Inerrancy is based on the claim of Scripture that it is not man's words, but God's words. Second Timothy 3:16 says "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." All of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments are God's words, breathed out by Him as a self-revelation to humanity. When theologians speak of "inspiration," this is the idea they are referring to. Other theologians prefer the term "expiration" because inspiration isn't so much what God puts into man, but what comes from God. In any case, the key point is that God is the originator of Scripture. He decides what has gone into the Bible and has so supervised the process that the words of Scripture are His words. Christians have always believed that God is true and speaks what is true (Num 23:19; Heb 6:19). God does not make mistakes or errors, therefore we know and believe that God's words reflect his unerring character.

The claim throughout the Bible is that Scripture is the very word of God. This is evidenced throughout the Old Testament where hundreds of times the Bible says, "Thus says the Lord." When prophets and other messengers of God said, "Thus says the Lord," they were claiming to not speak their own words, but the very words of God. There were measures to test the authenticity of someone claiming to speak for God and consequences for those who made this claim falsely:

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.' And if you say in your heart, 'How may we know the word that the Lord has not spoken?'— when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him. (Deut 18:18-22)

Here we have a clear message from God that He would put His words into the mouths of prophets. The people were to listen to the prophet, not on the prophet's authority, but on God's authority. The prophet had no authority of his own. If it could be proven that the prophet was not speaking God's words, there was nothing to fear from that prophet. If, however, it could be

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Commented [EL26]: ARGUMENTATION & ORGANIZATION: This careful writer not only quotes the Bible to support his points but also explains what the Bible passage means. What makes a paper biblical is not just using Bible references (false teachers use Bible references too!) but interpreting the Bible correctly.

shown that the prophet was genuinely speaking the word of God, there was much to fear. Simple objective tests were given. If the prophet's words came true, they were from God. If not, they were not from God. The point here is that Scripture is clearly claiming that it is a direct word from God, inherently testable and verifiable as authentic revelation.

Even though the above passage refers just to the words of the prophets, other parts of Scripture claim total inspiration. As quoted above, 2nd Timothy 3:16 says, "All Scripture is God breathed," and was particularly referring to the entire Old Testament. Second Peter 1:20-21 says, "No prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." Again, there is a consistent witness by the Biblical authors, both Old and New Testaments that Scripture originated with, is expelled from, and spoken by God. This does not necessarily mean God specifically spoke each word to the authors while they mindlessly recorded those words, though in some passages we simply have record of God's words, but it means the authors wrote as they were "carried along" by God to ensure His words were communicated through the will, intentionality, and personalities of the authors.

Until this point, an argument could be made that these passages claim inspiration for the Old Testament. Admittedly, the two passages above likely had the Old Testament Scriptures primarily in mind. However, there are two places in the New Testament where the authors equate New Testament writings with the same inspired authority of the Old Testament. 2 Peter 3:15-16, Peter writes, "Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable men distort, *as they do the other Scriptures*, to their own destruction" (emphasis added). Peter clearly believed Paul was writing Scripture. Again, in 1 Timothy 5:18, it says, "For the Scripture says, 'Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,' and 'the worker deserves his wages.'" Here, the first quote is taken from

Deuteronomy while the second is taken from Luke. Clearly, Paul recognized Luke's writings as on par with Deuteronomy.

If God's word is in fact inspired, then it carries the same authority God does, "If the Bible contains errors, its authority is limited."²⁴ The Bible is only authoritative insofar as it is God's word. To say the Bible is not God's word is to say it is not authoritative. If the Bible is God's word, it will reflect His character and perfection in its entirety, "Inerrancy is a construction that was intended to serve the Bible's authority for the church and the world."²⁵ As an extension of His character, we expect that "Scripture does not merely witness to God's self-disclosure, but *is* his own self-interpreted, economically oriented, *pro nobis*, verbal extension of his own mind and heart."²⁶ As Warfield has said, "we cannot modify the doctrine of plenary inspiration in any of its essential elements without undermining our confidence in the authority of the apostles as teachers of doctrine."²⁷

Given the connection between inspiration and authority, is it possible to "associate divine authority with anything less than verbal inerrancy? Need we associate it with anything more than general reliability?"²⁸ Upon investigation, we quickly realize that verbal inerrancy is necessary in order to acknowledge divine authority and even verbal plenary inspiration. In fact, Scripture itself teaches inerrancy, "The biblical teaching includes an affirmation of scriptural inerrancy, so that the doctrine of inerrancy must be considered an induction from the textual

²⁴Charles R. Swindoll and Roy B. Zuck, *Understanding Christian Theology* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003), 87.

²⁵Jason S. Sexton, "How Far Beyond Chicago? Assessing Recent Attempts to Reframe the Inerrancy Debate," *Themelios*, No. 1, April 2009 34 (2009): 46.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield: Revelation and Inspiration*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 181.

²⁸Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, vol. 4 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), 162.

phenomena.”²⁹ Back to the passages in 2nd Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:20-21, if God did genuinely inspire and guide the authors of the Scriptures, what would an error mean? It would have to mean that God was mistaken, which is contrary to His character. Instead, “The prevailing evangelical view affirms a special activity of divine inspiration whereby the Holy Spirit superintended the scriptural writers in communicating the biblical message in ways consistent with their differing personalities, literary styles and cultural background, while safeguarding them from error.”³⁰

Objections to Orthodoxy of Inerrancy and Infallibility

One of the most popular positions on inerrancy and infallibility is a rejection of inerrancy but an embrace of infallibility. As referenced above in the work by A.T.B. McGowan, to draw inerrancy from inspiration “assumes that God can only act in a way that conforms to our expectations, based on our human assessment of his character.” But is this legitimate? Is God merely conforming to our expectations? A brief survey of the scriptural passages will show this to be a false criticism. In fact, God is conforming to the expectations and character He has ascribed to Himself. Scripture is a self-revelation of God to man, not man attempting to describe God. When God says, as 2nd Peter 1:20-21 makes clear, “No prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” If the Holy Spirit carries men along, then our expectations for inerrancy merely reflect this claim from God. We have not ascribed inerrancy to Him, He has claimed it for Himself. If God is true and perfect, then His word is true and perfect. In Deuteronomy 32:4, for example, God is described, “He is the Rock, His work is perfect; For all His ways are justice, A God of truth and without injustice; Righteous and upright is He.” If the Scripture which is His word is found to be less than perfect, less than

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Commented [EL28]: ARGUMENTATION & ORGANIZATION: Questions can be an effective way to move an argument forward, but it is best not to overuse them. Statements that give the content of the argument should be the default rather than questions about the argument.

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²⁹Ibid, 163.

³⁰Ibid,166–167.

true, less than righteous, what does that say about God? Inerrancy is not a doctrine that can be passed over flippantly. Ultimately, to question the inerrancy of Scripture is to question the very character of God.

Another common position is an outright rejection of both inerrancy and infallibility. This is perhaps the most common position in modern times. While the true message of Christianity and the Bible is hopelessly opaque, some social justice and social good can be derived from Scripture. The Bible is just one more “holy book” among many which is helpful and informative, but not entirely relevant to our modern era. Of course, this is exactly contradictory to what Scripture itself teaches. If the Bible is nothing more than another book, it is a very dangerous, self-deceived book. Hebrews 4:12 says, “For the word of God *is* living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” If the bible is merely a book, why does it claim to be alive and powerful? How can it pierce to the bones and discern the thoughts and intents of the heart? Similarly, 2nd Timothy 3:16 says, “you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.” The Scriptures are able to make wise for salvation? That’s a large claim for a book. Finally, Revelation 22:19 says, “if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and *from* the things which are written in this book.” The Bible claims to be a “Book of Life” from the “holy city” and is a book of “prophecy.” The question is whether these claims are true. If true, the Bible is inspired of God and deserving of authority. If not true, the Bible should be despised and rejected as making outlandish claims. True believers have had their eyes opened to the truths of Scripture, “Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.” The Bible is a more sure guide than any experience, “And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts (2nd Pet 1:19).” To believe Scripture is to believe God, to reject Scripture is to reject Him.

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Commented [EL36]: SBTS FORMAT: The first author's name should have a comma rather than a period after it, and the second author's name should not be written last-name-first.