

## Inerrancy: A Reformed Doctrine?

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Inerrancy is slowly making its way into the Canadian and American Reformed church circles as an important doctrine that is believed to help maintain the authority of Holy Scripture. Out of the 36 church websites in our federation, six of them specifically affirm the inerrancy of Holy Scripture (one in Manitoba, five in Ontario). Similarly, the newly proposed joint Church Order begins by explaining that “We Reformed believers” affirm that God’s Word is the “inspired, infallible and *inerrant* book of Holy Scripture.”<sup>1</sup> In light of this relatively recent development, it is important to reflect on just exactly what we mean by inerrancy and what the implications of maintaining it as an important doctrine of the Church actually are. After briefly defining and placing inerrancy in its historical context, I will engage with the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy to reveal the real problems with affirming inerrancy. It will be argued that it is best to do away with the so-called doctrine of inerrancy in favour of the traditional Reformed affirmation, as found in the Belgic Confession (Articles 5 and 7), that Holy Scripture is *authoritative* for our faith, *sufficient* for our salvation, and the *infallible* rule in regards to doctrine.

Defining inerrancy is a difficult task because all too often it means different things to different people (which is part of the reason for so much confusion surrounding inerrancy). Stanley N. Gundry already in 1979 wrote, “It is far from evident that there is even a common, univocal meaning ascribed to the word ‘inerrancy.’”<sup>2</sup> In addition, Craig D. Allert notes that since Gundry’s

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<sup>1</sup> “*The Proposed Joint Church Order (Synod 2010)*”, 1 (emphasis mine). This can be found online ([www.canrc.org/resources/press](http://www.canrc.org/resources/press)).

<sup>2</sup> Stanley N. Gundry, “Evangelical Theology: Where Should We Be Going?” *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 22 (1979), 4.

claim “little has changed.”<sup>3</sup> Despite the difficulties, however, it seems that the most common conception and natural way to define inerrancy within a theological context is to think of the Bible as being *without error in matters of history, science, and whatever else the Bible states* (what we might call “factual inerrancy”). It is this definition of inerrancy that will be discussed and critiqued in this essay.<sup>4</sup>

The lack of agreement in the definition of inerrancy also correlates to a lack of agreement on the origins of inerrancy. The majority of scholars believe that inerrancy has been part of the Church since its inception. H.D. Macdonald who is well qualified to speak on this subject wrote, “Prior to the year 1860, the idea of an infallibly inerrant Scripture was the prevailing view.”<sup>5</sup> There are others, however, such as Rogers and McKim, who claim that factual inerrancy originated with the 17<sup>th</sup> century Swiss theologian Francis Turretin only to be further pursued by Princeton Seminary in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> D.G. Bloesch challenges Roger and McKim’s claim that inerrancy originated with Turretin; however, he too is convinced that inerrancy is a relatively new idea that quite possibly began with the publication of *The Fundamentals* in 1909.<sup>7</sup> Suffice it to say, the debate on the historical origins of inerrancy has reached no consensus (and probably will not for some time). For our purposes, however, we must realize that factual inerrancy has been a topic of intense discussion within the church and academy for at least the last century (dating back to *The Fundamentals*) and that it is still a highly relevant topic in the church today.

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<sup>3</sup> Craig D. Allert, *A High View of Scripture: The Authority of the Bible and the Foundation of the New Testament Canon* (Evangelical Ressourcement 3; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 159.

<sup>4</sup> For a brief introduction to inerrancy, see Gregory A. Boyd and Paul R. Eddy, *Across the Spectrum: Understanding Issues in Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 9-22.

<sup>5</sup> H.D. McDonald, *Theories of Revelation: An Historical Study 1860-1960* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1963), 196. McDonald’s entire chapter (pages 198-217) is well worth reading. K. Lake and J.D. Woodbridge have followed McDonald in affirming the long standing historical origins of inerrancy (Millard J. Erickson, “Biblical Inerrancy: The Last Twenty-five Years,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25 (1982), 387-388).

<sup>6</sup> Erickson, “Biblical Inerrancy,” 387.

<sup>7</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration and Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Ill; Carlisle, England: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 131-40. This section is available online (<http://books.google.ca/books?id=dYP2yehSASoC&pg=PA131>).

The Chicago Statement of Biblical Inerrancy (CSBI), drafted in 1978, has become a standard for understanding inerrancy and its implications (though it is an Evangelical statement, it has been upheld by Reformed scholars such as J.I. Packer and R.C. Sproul). For the sake of simplicity and example, it will be helpful to use the CSBI to bring out the problems of factual inerrancy. Upon reading the CSBI one cannot help but notice the extended discussion on inspiration and infallibility prior to its discussion on inerrancy. To be sure, both of these terms help to understand inerrancy, but for the purposes of our discussion, I will focus on inerrancy apart from inspiration and infallibility.

In defining inerrancy, the CSBI states, “We affirm that Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit.”<sup>8</sup> The CSBI also recognizes the various nuances inerrancy can have and therefore it immediately proceeds to explain what inerrancy does *not* mean: “We deny that Biblical infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious or redemptive themes, exclusive of assertions in the fields of history and science.” It continues, “We further deny that scientific hypotheses about earth history may properly be used to overturn the teaching of Scripture on creation and the flood.”<sup>9</sup> Now while one can appreciate the willingness to define what the term inerrancy means, the definition is not without its problems.

For the definition is not actually dealing with the inerrancy of Scripture, so much as it is dealing with the *interpretation* of Scripture itself. The statement is claiming that inerrancy is based on a particular understanding of Scripture. In this case, if you believe in inerrancy, then you *must* also believe that the creation and flood accounts are not only historically accurate, but also scientifically sound. That is, one must believe that creation was made in literally six days and that the flood was a universal flood *before* engaging with the texts themselves. It must be noted, however, that if one rejects inerrancy one does not necessarily need to claim that these texts are

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<sup>8</sup> "Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 21 (1978): 291 (Art. 12). The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy can be found online ([www.bible-researcher.com/chicago1.html](http://www.bible-researcher.com/chicago1.html)).

<sup>9</sup> *CSBI*, 291-2 (Art. 12).

unhistorical and unscientific, but this can only be done *after* the difficult task of interpretation is completed, not *before*. For it must go without saying that it is the task and responsibility of the honest student of Scripture to first seek out issues of literary purpose, genre, grammar and syntax, cultural context (etc.) of a passage *before* making claims on the historical and scientific accuracy of these texts based on the doctrine of inerrancy. Would it not be just as foolish to assert that we must believe the Synoptic accounts are chronological records of Christ's life *before* engaging with the accounts themselves in order to maintain the inerrancy of Scripture? Such a preconceived notion of the biblical texts' meaning seems to detract from faithful exegesis rather than enhance the exegetical process. Craig D. Allert writes regarding this issue,

“It is clear that certain ways of understanding inerrancy can impinge on the study of the Bible. When issues that are important in interpretation – like genre, intent, and culture – are dismissed as methodologically unsound because of a belief in inerrancy, the cart has been placed before the horse. In this case inerrancy has been raised to the level of essential Christian belief, to which all other issues must bow. But we must ask if this is proper.”<sup>10</sup>

To be fair, the CSBI seeks to understand the intricacies of faithful and honest biblical interpretation. In the exposition we are told that “history must be treated as history, poetry as poetry, hyperbole and metaphor as hyperbole and metaphor, generalization and approximation as what they are, and so forth.”<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, it is much more difficult in actual practice to differentiate when a passage is to be regarded as history or poetry, etc.

In light of all the difficulties that arise from adhering to inerrancy, I therefore believe that we should abandon the term inerrancy altogether. While this may seem controversial to some, letting go of inerrancy places us squarely back into our own Reformed tradition about the place and function of Holy Scripture. To the best of my knowledge, none of our confessions claim that the Scriptures are inerrant. Rather, the focus is on the *authority, sufficiency, and infallibility* of the

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<sup>10</sup> Allert, *A High View*, 170-1.

<sup>11</sup> *CSBI*, 295 (III.C Para. 5).

Scriptures. Belgic Confession Article 5 (“The Authority of Holy Scripture”) relates to us that the Scriptures are received “as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith.” That is, the focus is not on their inerrancy, but rather on their usefulness in all aspects of faith. The Article continues, “We believe without any doubt all things contained in them.” Again, we find no assertion that we must adhere to one particular interpretation of various Scripture texts, but that we must not doubt the teachings of Scripture. Furthermore, the reference to doubting “all things” must not be understood as a reference to the historicity of a particular biblical text *a priori*. No, it must be a reference to what the Scriptures teach once they have been interpreted. That is to say, once we have established, through faithful exegesis, what Scripture teaches, then (and only then) must “we believe without any doubt.” To be sure, this does not mean that we cannot debate and even strongly disagree with one another about the text’s meaning. Nevertheless, to claim that one does not adhere to the inerrancy of Scripture is not the issue; again, the issue is the obedience to what Scripture teaches.

Unfortunately, Clarence Stam does not recognize the underlying purpose of Article 5. In his book *Everything in Christ*, he adds an appendix to his fourth lesson in which he states that we must affirm “that the Bible is *fully* the inspired Word of God, and therefore is inerrant in every respect, normative for all times.”<sup>12</sup> While I agree with his statement on inspiration, Stam has added to the confession that we are to hold that the Bible is “inerrant in every respect.” Stam then follows the lead of the CSBI, by revealing that if anyone believes that “the first chapters of the Bible (Genesis 1-11) are today considered myths while real history starts with Abraham,” then really the “Bible is not *normative*.”<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Stam tells us that we must “reject any Bible criticism as being

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<sup>12</sup> Clarence Stam, *Everything in Christ: The Christian Faith Outlined According to the Belgic Confession* (Winnipeg: Premier Publishing, 1979), 18.

<sup>13</sup> Stam, *Everything*, 18.

contrary to our confession.”<sup>14</sup> We must level the same challenge to those who adhere to Stam’s arguments as has already been made with regard to the CSBI position on inerrancy. That is, we must not place particular interpretations on Scripture in the name of inerrancy *before* we have made an honest attempt to uncover the meaning of the text.

Where Belgic Confession Article 5 focuses on the authority of Scripture, Article 7 (“The Sufficiency of Holy Scripture”) focuses on the purpose of the Scriptures: “We believe that this Holy Scripture fully contains the will of God and that all that man must believe in order to be saved is sufficiently taught therein.” Clearly, the focus is on the reality that we are *sufficiently* equipped to know God’s will in order to have a saving faith in Jesus Christ, not on inerrancy. Furthermore, Article 7 confesses that the Scriptures are to be more highly valued than all writings of men and as such the Scriptures alone are the “infallible rule” for the doctrines of the church. P.Y. De Jong correctly acknowledges that Article 7 is about doctrinal issues when he writes, “So complete and comprehensive is its doctrine, that we acknowledge it as sufficient for our spiritual needs. Such a confession includes and implies the recognition of its infallibility.”<sup>15</sup> Yet despite De Jong’s realization that Article 7 is about doctrine, he then enters into a discussion about the relationship between infallibility and inerrancy as if the two are intrinsically linked together.<sup>16</sup> But we must keep in mind the difference between inerrancy and infallibility. Inerrancy is dealing with *facts*, infallibility with *doctrine*, and we must not confuse the two. Article 7 is an affirmation that the doctrines of Scripture are infallible (as opposed to the teachings of men) and has nothing to say about the inerrancy of Scripture. As such, the Belgic Confession does not close the door to various interpretations of Scripture in the name of inerrancy, but rather opens the door to deep and thoughtful engagement with the Scriptural texts. This is because a Reformed doctrine of Scripture

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<sup>14</sup> Stam, *Everything*, 18.

<sup>15</sup> P.Y. De Jong, *The Church’s Witness to the World* (St. Catharines: Paideia Press, 1980), 162.

<sup>16</sup> De Jong, *The Church’s Witness*, 162-5.

does not rest primarily (or even at all) on the inerrancy of Scripture, but on its *authority, sufficiency, and infallibility*.

We cannot, and must not, deny the sincerity and desire of the producers of CSBI to maintain that “the total truth and trustworthiness of Holy Scripture is essential to a full grasp and adequate confession of its authority.”<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, if the affirmation of inerrancy has the danger of forcing an interpretation on the Scriptures *before* honest engagement with the biblical text (as CSBI and Stam do), then it must be discarded. G.C. Berkouwer (writing before the CSBI and Stam) echoes the problem of inerrancy: “Even though one may hear through it all a note of serious motivation, the conclusion is valid that this earnestness cannot serve as a yardstick for the doctrine of Scripture. In the end it will damage reverence for Scripture more than it will further it.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the rejection of inerrancy does not and should never be thought of, as the CSBI believes, as a setting aside of “the witness of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit” or as a denial that it is “God’s own Word that marks true Christian faith.”<sup>19</sup> It is, rather, out of a deep desire and love for the Word of God that the so-called doctrine of biblical inerrancy must be seriously challenged and that the *authority, sufficiency, and infallibility* of Scripture should be lovingly embraced.

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<sup>17</sup> CSBI, 289 (Preface Para. 1).

<sup>18</sup> G.C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 183. This quote is part a larger discussion on the purpose and function of Scripture (170-94; esp. 179-84). This section can be read in its entirety online (<http://books.google.ca/books?id=0LLZ1vZ0JpAC>). For another critique of inerrancy, I highly recommend Allert, *A High View of Scripture*, 159-172.

<sup>19</sup> CSBI, 298 (Preface Para. 1).