

The Bible: The Inerrant Word of God

A Definition of Inerrancy

The word inerrancy means “freedom from error or untruths.” Synonyms include “certainty, assuredness, objective certainty, infallibility.” But doesn’t the concept of inspiration automatically imply inerrancy? So we might ask the question, “Why this section on the inerrancy of the Bible?” Ryrie has an excellent explanation in answer to this question.

Formerly all that was necessary to affirm one’s belief in full inspiration was the statement, “I believe in the inspiration of the Bible.” But when some did not extend inspiration to the words of the text it became necessary to say, “I believe in the verbal inspiration of the Bible.” To counter the teaching that not all parts of the Bible were inspired, one had to say, “I believe in the verbal, plenary inspiration of the Bible.” Then because some did not want to ascribe total accuracy to the Bible, it was necessary to say, “I believe in the verbal, plenary, infallible, inerrant inspiration of the Bible.” But then “infallible” and “inerrant” began to be limited to matters of faith only rather than also embracing all that the Bible records (including historical facts, genealogies, accounts of Creation, etc.), so it became necessary to add the concept of “unlimited inerrancy.” Each addition to the basic statement arose because of an erroneous teaching.⁵²

Clarifying the definition of inerrancy has become necessary because many have, in very subtle ways, retained words like inspiration, infallible, and even inerrant in speaking about the Bible while denying its freedom from error.

E. J. Young, in his classic work on the inspiration of the Bible, gives us good definition of inerrancy: “By this word we mean that the Scriptures possess the quality of freedom from error. They are exempt from the liability to mistake, incapable of error. In all their teachings they are in perfect accord with the truth.”⁵³

Concerning the definition of inerrancy, Ryrie explains:

Definitions of inerrancy are not plentiful! Errantists equate inerrancy with infallibility and then limit its scope to matters of faith and practice or to revelational matters or to the message of salvation. An example of this: “The Bible is infallible, as I define that term, but not inerrant. That is, there are historical and scientific errors in the Bible, but I have found none on matters of faith and practice” (Stephen T. Davis, *The Debate about the Bible* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977], p. 115). At least this is an honest distinction between infallibility and inerrancy.⁵⁴

In view of this, when defining inerrancy, it is always important to state clearly what it means and what it does not mean.

It does not demand rigidity of style and verbatim quotations from the Old Testament. ‘The inerrancy of the Bible means simply that the Bible tells the truth. Truth can and does include approximations, free quotations, language of appearances, and different accounts of the same event as long as those do not contradict.’ (Charles C. Ryrie, *What You Should Know About Inerrancy*, p. 16). At the Chicago meeting in October 1978, the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy issued the following statement on inerrancy: ‘Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God’s acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God’s saving grace in individual lives’ (James Montgomery Boice, *Does Inerrancy Matter?*, Oakland: International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, 1979, p. 13.)⁵⁵

Ryrie makes an important comment regarding the statement at Chicago.

The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy in its Chicago statement affirmed inerrancy in a brief statement that the “Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching....” Then followed nineteen articles to further describe and explain inerrancy.

This brief statement would be unsatisfactory to errantists. If there were any doubt about that, certainly the nineteen-article elaboration would exclude errantists’ agreeing with it.⁵⁶

It is important to bear in mind that belief in inerrancy is in keeping with the character of God. If God is true and He is (Rom. 3:4), and if God breathed out the Scripture, then the Scripture, being the product of God, must also be true. This is why the Psalmist affirms, “All your words are true” (Ps. 119:160a).

Clarifications Regarding Inerrancy

A number of different issues invariably come up when considering the doctrine of inerrancy. What about the variety of styles, or the varying ways certain events are described, or the different reports of events? How does this mesh with the concept of inerrancy? Paul Enns has done an excellent job in summarizing these fundamental issues.

Inerrancy allows for variety in style. The gospel of John was written in the simple style one might expect of an unlearned fisherman; Luke was written with a more sophisticated vocabulary of an educated person; Paul’s epistles reflect the logic of a philosopher. All of these variations are entirely compatible with inerrancy.

Inerrancy allows for variety in details in explaining the same event. This phenomenon is particularly observed in the synoptic gospels. It is important to remember that Jesus spoke in Aramaic and the writers of Scripture wrote their accounts in Greek, meaning they had to translate the original words into Greek. One writer would use slightly different words to describe the same incident, yet both would give the same meaning, albeit with different words. There is an additional reason for variety in details. One writer might have viewed the event from one standpoint while the other gospel writer viewed it from another standpoint. This would make the details appear different, yet both would be accurate.

Inerrancy does not demand verbatim reporting of events. “In times of antiquity it was not the practice to give a verbatim repetition every time something was written out” (E. J. Young, *Thy Word Is Truth*, p. 119). A verbatim quote could not be demanded for several reasons. First, as already mentioned, the writer had to translate from Aramaic to Greek in recording Jesus’ words. Second, in making reference to Old Testament texts it would have been impossible to unroll the lengthy scrolls each time to produce a verbatim quote; furthermore, the scrolls were not readily available, hence, the freedom in Old Testament quotes (William R. Eichhorst, *The Issue of Biblical Inerrancy: In Definition and Defence*, Winnipeg, Man.: Winnipeg Bible College, n.d., p. 9).

Inerrancy allows for departure from standard forms of grammar. Obviously it is wrong to force English rules of grammar upon the Scriptures. For example, in [John 10:9](#) Jesus declares, “I am the door,” whereas in verse 11 He states, “I am the Good Shepherd.” In English this is considered mixing metaphors, but this is not a problem to Greek grammar or Hebrew language. In [John 14:26](#) Jesus refers to the Spirit (*pneuma* = neuter) and then refers to the Spirit as “He” (*ekeinos* = masculine). This may raise an English grammarian’s eyebrows, but it is not a problem of Greek grammar.

Inerrancy allows for problem passages. Even with so vast a work as the Holy Scriptures it is impossible to provide solutions to all the problems. In some cases the solution awaits the findings of the archaeologist’s spade; in another case it awaits the linguist’s research; in other cases the solution may never be discovered for other reasons. The solution to some problems must be held in abeyance. The answer, however, is never to suggest there are contradictions or errors in Scripture. If the Scriptures are God-breathed they are entirely without error.

Inerrancy demands the account does not teach error or contradiction. In the statements of Scripture, whatever is written is in accord with things as they are. Details may vary but it may still reflect things as they are. For example, in [Matthew 8:5-13](#) it is noted that the centurion came to Jesus and said, “I am not qualified.” In the parallel passage in [Luke 7:1-10](#) it is noted that the elders came and said concerning the centurion, “He is worthy.” It appears the elders first came and spoke to Jesus, and later the centurion himself came. Both accounts are in accord with things as they are.⁵⁷

What Happens If Inerrancy Is Denied?

How important is inerrancy? What happens when this doctrine is denied? There are those (and some are even evangelicals) who believe that inerrancy is not important. We do not need to defend the Bible, particularly as it relates to the details of chronology, geography, history, or cosmology or the so-called alleged discrepancies. But how sound is this kind of thinking and how does it stack up with the teaching of the Bible and particularly with what Christ taught?

If the Bible teaches inerrancy, then to deny it is to deny that which the Scripture claims is true. Further, if the Bible contains some errors, how can we be sure that its claims concerning Christ, salvation, man, etc., are true? Also, the chronology, geography, and history of the Bible are often woven together like strands of a

basket with vital spiritual truths. As you cannot start pulling strands out of a woven basket without doing damage to the whole, so it is with the Bible.

For instance, is the history of Adam and Eve important? Absolutely, for Paul developed a theological analogy between Adam and Christ which essentially breaks down if it is historically not true. The Old Testament has dozens of prophecies of the coming Messiah that detail his lineage. If the genealogy of [Matthew 1](#) and [Luke 3](#) are historically inaccurate, then this raises questions about whether Jesus is the one anticipated as well as about the rest of His life.

As Ryrie points out, “Even if the errors are supposedly in ‘minor’ matters, any error opens the Bible to suspicion on other points which may not be so ‘minor.’ If inerrancy falls, other doctrines will fall too.”⁵⁸ If we can’t trust Scripture in things like geography, chronology, and history, then how can we be sure we can trust it in its message of salvation and sanctification?

I recently received an email question regarding the story recorded in the gospels where Jesus delivered two demon possessed men and sent the demons into a herd of swine. Assuming that the owners of the pigs were Jews (which they were not), the person sending the email doubted the historicity of the account because they could not imagine Jews raising pigs since it was contrary to the law for them to eat pork. A person believing in the inerrancy of the Bible, would know that the account was historical and accurate. Therefore, the apparent problem was not in the accuracy of the Scripture, but in their understanding of the event, which was precisely the case.

A denial of inerrancy is a serious matter and will lead to the following kinds of problems doctrinally and practically:

When inerrancy is denied one may expect some serious fallout in both doctrinal and practical areas.

Some doctrinal matters which may be affected by denying inerrancy include the following.

- (1) A denial of the historical fall of Adam.
- (2) A denial of the facts of the experiences of the Prophet Jonah.
- (3) An explaining away of some of the miracles of both the Old and New Testaments.
- (4) A denial of the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch.
- (5) A belief in two or more authors of the Book of Isaiah.
- (6) A flirting with or embracing of liberation theology with its redefining of sin (as societal rather than individual) and salvation (as political and temporal rather than spiritual and eternal).

Some lifestyle errors that may follow a denial of inerrancy include the following.

- (1) A loose view of the seriousness of adultery.
- (2) A loose view of the seriousness of homosexuality.
- (3) A loose view of divorce and remarriage.
- (4) “Cultural” reinterpretation of some of the teachings of the Bible (e.g., teaching on women, teaching on civil obedience).
- (5) A tendency to view the Bible through a modern psychological grid.

Inerrancy is an important doctrine, the denial or even diluting of which may result in serious doctrinal and life errors.⁵⁹

Support for Inerrancy from the Teachings of Christ

A study of what Jesus said about the Bible reveals not only His belief in its verbal, plenary inspiration, but that He also believed it was inerrant. In fact, the greatest testimony to the authenticity of the Bible as God’s inspired and inerrant Word is the Lord Jesus. Why is His testimony so important? Because God authenticated and proved Him to be His own divine Son by the resurrection (cf. [Acts 2:22-36](#); [4:8-12](#); [17:30-31](#); [Rom. 1:4](#)). Christ not only clearly confirmed the authority of the Old Testament, but He specifically promised the New Testament.

Note what Christ taught about the inspiration of the Old Testament:

(1) Its entirety; the whole of the Bible is inspired ([Matt. 4:4](#); [5:17-18](#)). In [Matthew 4:4](#), Jesus responded to Satan’s temptation by affirming verbal plenary inspiration when He said, man is to live by *every word* (plenary) that proceeds out of the *mouth of God* (inspiration). In [Matthew 5:17-18](#), Christ promised that the entire Old Testament, the Law and the Prophets, would be fulfilled, not abolished. In fact, He declared that not even the smallest Hebrew letter, the *yodh*, which looks like an apostrophe (’), or stroke of a letter, a small distinguishing extension or protrusion of several Hebrews letters (cf. the extension on the letter R with its absence on the letter P), would pass away until all is fulfilled. Christ’s point is that it is all inspired and true and will be fulfilled.

(2) Its historicity; He spoke of the Old Testament in terms of actual history. Adam and Eve were two human beings, created by God in the beginning, who lived and acted in certain ways ([Matt. 19:3-5](#); [Mark 10:6-8](#)). He spoke of Jonah and his experience in the belly of the great fish as an historical event ([Matt. 12:40](#)). He also verified the events of the flood in Noah’s day along with the ark ([Matt. 24:38-39](#); [Luke 17:26-](#)

27). He verified God's destruction of Sodom and the historicity of Lot and his wife (Matt. 10:15; Luke 17:28-29). These are only a few illustrations; many others exist.

(3) Its reliability; because it is God's word, the Scripture must be fulfilled (Matt. 26:54).

(4) Its sufficiency; it is sufficient to witness to the truth of God and His salvation (Luke 16:31).

(5) Its indestructibility; heaven and earth will not pass away until it is all fulfilled. Nothing can stop its fulfillment (Matt. 5:17-18).

(6) Its unity; the whole of the Bible speaks and witnesses to the person and work of Christ (Luke 24:27, 44).

(7) Its inerrancy; men are often in error, but the Bible is not; it is truth (Matt. 22:29; John 17:17).

(8) Its infallibility; the Bible cannot be broken, it always stands the test (John 10:35).

52 Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, Victor Books, Wheaton, IL, 1987, electronic media.

53 E. J. Young, *Thy Word Is Truth*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1957, p. 113.

54 Ryrie, electronic media.

55 Enns, p. 167.

56 Ryrie, electronic media.

57 Enns, pp. 167-168.

58 Ryrie, electronic media.

59 Ryrie, electronic media.