

# The Inerrancy and Authority of Scripture in Christian Apologetics

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## INTRODUCTION

Scripture's call to Christians to engage in the apologetic task is markedly obvious. For example, 1 Peter 3:15 instructs believers to always be "ready to make a defense (ἀπολογία) to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you." Similarly, Jude 3 exhorts Christians to "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints." Here, the "faith" refers not to the subjective element of personal trust in the Lord God, but instead to that "body of truth that very early in the church's history took on a definite form," that is, the content of Christian faith—doctrinal truth (cf. Gal 1:23; 1 Tim 4:1).<sup>1</sup> Implicit in this verse, therefore, is the acknowledgment of the fact that a certain body of doctrinal truth exists, which in turn implies a source or origin for that doctrinal truth. For the Christian, the principle, authoritative source of doctrinal truth is the "God-breathed" holy Scriptures (2 Tim 3:16). The reliability of Scripture as a standard for Christian doctrine hinges on the fact that, as the inspired word of the true God who does not lie (Num 23:19; Titus 1:2; Heb 6:18), it is wholly true (Ps 119:160; John 17:17). To echo the words of the longstanding affirmation of the Evangelical Theological Society, "The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs."<sup>2</sup> This affirmation is not a peripheral issue to Christian theology; it is germane to the life of the church and, of logical consequence, the upholding of the Christian faith. As Albert Mohler succinctly argues, "Without a total commitment to

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<sup>1</sup> Edwin A. Blum, "Jude," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gæbelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 12:388.

<sup>2</sup> Evangelical Theological Society, "Doctrinal Basis," N.d., accessed January 23, 2017, [www.etsjets.org/about](http://www.etsjets.org/about).

the trustworthiness and truthfulness of the Bible, the church is left without its defining authority, lacking confidence in its ability to hear God's voice." Practically stated, "Preachers will lack confidence in the authority and truthfulness of the very Word they are commissioned to preach and teach." Likewise, "Individual Christians will be left without either the confidence to trust the Bible or the ability to understand the Bible as something less than totally true."<sup>3</sup> At a most fundamental level, the inerrancy of Scripture is necessary to understanding the Bible's authority and message, and thus the theological content that comprises the Christian faith. It is unavoidable, therefore, that the inerrancy of Scripture is integral to the apologetic task: It is the commitment to inerrancy which informs the apologist of the certainty and trustworthiness of "the faith" that he seeks to defend.

It is thus supremely ironic (and highly unfortunate) that the doctrine of inerrancy itself has been, in recent literature, the doctrine that some apologists have been incredibly reluctant to defend. The departure from inerrancy as a doctrine necessary to the apologetic task is showcased conspicuously in James Taylor's recent work, *Introducing Apologetics: Cultivating Christian Commitment*, where he maintains, "Christian apologists are wise to avoid insisting that the Bible is absolutely inerrant (even if this is true) and to claim instead that it is true in all it teaches."<sup>4</sup> In clarifying his view on biblical inerrancy and its relationship to the apologetic task, Taylor claims inerrancy "is difficult to defend," and speaking of Scripture, states,

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<sup>3</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr., "When the Bible Speaks, God Speaks: The Classic Doctrine of Biblical Inerrancy," in *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy*, ed. J. Merrick and Stephen M. Garrett (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 31. In surveying the history of the church's conflict over the doctrine of inerrancy, Mohler notes, "I do not believe that evangelicalism can survive without the explicit and complete assertion of biblical inerrancy" (31).

<sup>4</sup> James E. Taylor, *Introducing Apologetics: Cultivating Christian Commitment* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 269.

God inspired human authors to write it. If God allowed these authors a certain amount of creativity (and it seems reasonable to think that he did) then they were not merely God's mouthpieces. In that case, even if God does not ever say anything false, it seems possible that those he inspired to write the Scriptures did, at least about relatively unimportant matters.<sup>5</sup>

Given Taylor's statement, one is left to assume that biblical inerrancy is irrelevant to Christian apologetics.

However, this perspective is extremely problematic, as it leaves the apologist to defend a body of doctrine that may or may not be true in all of its elements due to the fact that the inspired word on which it is based likewise may or may not be true in all of its elements.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, this outlook will render apologetics an obsolete and useless discipline, as it is logically impossible to defend as absolutely true a faith that depends on a revelation that is a mix of truth and error. In defending the faith, the apologist would be reduced to the role of a human arbiter in determining what parts of Scripture are necessarily true and what parts may contain error, effectually placing human judgment over the authority of God's revealed word.

In response to the perspective represented by Taylor's remarks, this article will argue that biblical inerrancy is absolutely essential to Christian apologetics, providing governance over the task of delineating the content of the faith to be defended and granting certainty to the apologist that what he defends is in fact the truth. This article will first examine a selection of sources that have advocated a departure from

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 276.

<sup>6</sup> Another problem is present in Taylor's statement, though it is a quibble by comparison: In arguing that "God inspired human authors" to write his word, Taylor misrepresents the doctrine of inspiration. Second Timothy 3:16 indicates that inspiration, strictly speaking, is a property of the text, not the author. While the human agent writing Scripture was subject to superintending guidance of the Holy Spirit (2 Pet 1:21), it was not the author, technically, who was inspired. The *text itself* is, in its entirety, "God-breathed."

biblical inerrancy as traditionally defined, which provides the necessary undergirding for Taylor's assertion that "Christian apologists are wise to avoid insisting that the Bible is absolutely inerrant ... and to claim instead that it is true in all it teaches." It will then refute these compromised perspectives on biblical inerrancy, setting forth a succinct outline of the scriptural doctrine. The article will then move on to demonstrate the direct relevance of biblical inerrancy to the task of Christian apologetics, showing it to be indispensable to the defense of the faith and that, without it, the apologist risks utterly compromising the very essentials of Christianity. The article will then conclude with an appeal for Christian apologists to reaffirm an orthodox view of biblical inerrancy.

### **THE RECENT DEPARTURE FROM INERRANCY**

Taylor's bold assertion that the Christian apologist should not insist upon the full inerrancy of Scripture tacitly rests on a foundation exhibited in recent challenges to biblical inerrancy that seek to redefine the doctrine to allow for the presence of error. For example, A. T. B. McGowan contends,

The basic error of the inerrantists is to insist that the inerrancy of the autographa is a direct implication of the biblical doctrine of inspiration (or divine spiration). In order to defend this implication, the inerrantists make an unwarranted assumption about God. The assumption is that, given the nature and character of God, the only kind of Scripture he could "breathe out" was Scripture that is textually inerrant.<sup>7</sup>

Fleshing out his point, McGowan continues, "One can see the logic of this progression from biblical proposition (Scripture is God-breathed) to implication (therefore Scripture must be inerrant) by means of a conviction about the nature and character of God (he is perfect and therefore does not lie or

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<sup>7</sup> A. T. B. McGowan, *The Divine Authenticity of Scripture: Retrieving an Evangelical Heritage* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 113.

mislead).”<sup>8</sup> Basic to McGowan’s objection to this line of reasoning is his claim that it, as an underlying assumption in the inerrantist’s perspective, “underestimates God and undermines the significance of the human authors of Scripture,” in that it “assumes God can only act in a way that conforms to our expectations, based on our human assessment of his character” and that God having chosen to write his word by means of human agency, “did not overrule their humanity.”<sup>9</sup> McGowan does not expand further on this point or offer any notable textual defense for his position; however, it is easy to see how this perspective plays into Taylor’s reluctance to incorporate inerrancy into his apologetic.

Arguments for the “human dimension” of Scripture, along with the implication or even assumption of the possibility (or necessity) of error are advanced even more forcefully by Peter Enns in his work *Inspiration and Incarnation*. Enns states, “That the Bible, at every turn, shows how ‘connected’ it is to its own world is a necessary consequence of God incarnating himself.” He further argues, “It is essential to the very nature of revelation that the Bible is not unique to its environment. The human dimension of Scripture is essential to its being Scripture.”<sup>10</sup> More to the point, the “human dimension” of Scripture requires that the text be permeated by errant ideas (of whatever sort—scientific, historical, or otherwise) held to by the human writers of Scripture that were not overridden by the superintending guidance of the Holy Spirit in the writing process. In a later essay,

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 114, 118. For a thorough rebuttal of McGowan’s assertions, see G. K. Beale’s article, “Can the Bible Be Completely Inspired by God and Yet Still Contain Errors? A Response to Some Recent ‘Evangelical’ Proposals,” *WTS* 73, no. 1 (Fall 2011): 1–22. Beale argues that the concept of biblical inerrancy is explicitly biblical even though the word itself does not appear in the text.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 20.

Enns maintains, “I do not think inerrancy can be effectively nuanced to account for the Bible’s own behavior as a text produced in ancient cultures.” Also,

Despite its apparent interest in seeing God as so powerful that he can overrule ancient human error and ignorance, inerrancy portrays a weak view of God. It fails to be constrained by the Bible’s own witness of God’s pattern of working—that ... he reigns amidst human error and suffering, and he lovingly condescends to finite human culture.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, according to Enns, the introduction of error as a result of the human element is unescapable and should not be ignored.

The implications of this argument for the apologetic enterprise cannot be overlooked. As Enns says, “For modern evangelicalism the tendency is to move toward a defensive or apologetic handling of the biblical evidence, to protect the Bible against the modernist charge that diversity is evidence of errors in the Bible and, consequently, that the Bible is not inspired by God.”<sup>12</sup> This approach, Enns suggests, well-intentioned though it may be, ultimately detracts from the defense of the faith:

This legacy accepts the worldview offered by modernity and defends the Bible by a rational standard that the Bible itself challenges rather than acknowledges. This contributes to the stress that Christians feel in trying to maintain an evangelical faith while at the same time trying to give honest answers to difficult questions.<sup>13</sup>

Clearly, Enns views any efforts to maintain the doctrine of inerrancy as counterproductive to the apologetic task.

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<sup>11</sup> Enns, “Inerrancy, However Defined, Does Not Describe What the Bible Does,” in *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 91.

<sup>12</sup> Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 108.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*; cf. 109.

The conceptual connections between Enns's work and Taylor's assertions are difficult to overlook. It would appear that Enns allows for more substantial deviations from inerrancy than does Taylor, who maintains that human mistakes caused error to enter into Scripture concerning "relatively unimportant matters." In either perspective, however, the implications for apologetics remain the same: Insistence upon inerrancy will presumably leave the apologist between a rock and a hard place—either being unable to defend what the Bible says, or being forced to modify what he means in saying that Scripture is a "true" revelation from God.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> An example of this kind of retreat from taking God's word as literally "true" and also from the defense of the reliability of the Bible's claims in apologetic discussion is brazenly evidenced in Matthew Flannagan's work presented in the recently-published *Come Let us Reason: New Essays in Christian Apologetics*, ed. Paul Copan and William Lane Craig (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2012), 225–249. This book aims to be a *tour de force* of Christian apologetics; however, in Flannagan's essay, it falls remarkably short. Looking at the question, "Did God command the genocide of the Canaanites?" from an apologetic perspective, Flannagan fails to address the real issue of how such a wide-scale destruction of human life reconciles with God's character. On the contrary, he completely undermines biblical authority by reinterpreting the plain meaning of Scripture—ostensibly in order to accommodate the long-held views of liberal critics who overstate the differences between Joshua and Judges. He says,

I contend that the widely held view that the book of Joshua teaches that God commanded the genocide of the Canaanites is questionable. Joshua is accepted as part of the canon. Read in this context, taking the account of total annihilation of the Canaanite populations as a literal description of what occurred *contradicts* what is affirmed to have literally occurred in Judges. Moreover, it *conflicts* with how the command is described elsewhere in Judges and Exodus. The writers would have known this and, not being mindless, could not have meant both accounts to be taken literally. This means that one must be nonliteral. *The literary conventions Joshua uses are highly stylized, figurative, and contain hyperbolic, hagiographic accounts of what occurred.* The conventions in Judges are less so. Consequently, the so-called genocide in Joshua and the command to 'utterly destroy' the Canaanites *should not be taken literally.* (244–45; emphasis added).

### THE SCRIPTURAL DOCTRINE OF INERRANCY

The preceding charge by Enns against the defensibility of biblical inerrancy is wide of the mark to say the least! His audacious claim that the so-called “incarnational model” allows the Bible’s “historically conditioned behavior” to correct the orthodox view of inerrancy<sup>15</sup> fails because it accounts only for Enns’s own interpretation of passages that, as he claims, demonstrate how the biblical literature “behaves.” And, if *Inspiration and Incarnation* is a fair indication, Enns’s own handling of Scripture shows that he is far more prone to try to seek out suspected contradictions than he is to try to present feasible ways of reconciling alleged discrepancies. As Bruce Waltke bluntly states, “Every text on which Enns’s model of inspiration depends is open to other viable interpretations.”<sup>16</sup> Given the uncertainty of Enns’s exegesis (to say nothing of orthodoxy) it seems inappropriate to contest biblical inerrancy on the basis of Enns’s assertion that a proper doctrine of Scripture may be derived from an examination of the purported characteristics of the biblical text as opposed to the actual statements of the biblical text. James W. Scott expresses a similar

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Refutation of Flannagan’s fallacious view on the historical details and theological thrust of the books of Joshua and Judges is beyond the scope of this paper. Still, the fact remains that regardless of how the terminology is construed, even though Flannagan does not denounce inerrancy *per se*, the core point of his conclusion invariably undermines the integrity of the biblical record.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Enns, “Inerrancy, However Defined,” 87.

<sup>16</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, “Interaction with Peter Enns,” *WTJ* 71, no. 1 (Fall 2009): 117. In this article, Waltke systematically refutes Enns’s interpretation of numerous passages in the OT that allegedly contradict each other, as well as several passages in the NT that purportedly mishandle the OT verses that they quote from or allude to. Particularly insightful is Waltke’s handling of Proverbs 10:2; 24:16; and Ecclesiastes 3:15–17 with respect to the ultimate value of wisdom. Note also the harmonization he suggests between Hosea 11:1 and Matthew’s use of the verse in Matthew 2:15.



perspective: "It is illogical to suppose that the Bible's own doctrine of Scripture can be modified by any study of the data. Our understanding of what Scripture says about itself can be corrected only if meticulous exegesis of its relevant didactic statements yields a superior understanding of them."<sup>17</sup> Stated another way, Scott charges that Enns ignores what Scripture actually says about itself with respect to the doctrines of inspiration and inerrancy, allowing for his interpretation of biblical "behavior" to trump the clear meaning of biblical statements. In contrast to the method proposed by Enns, Scott maintains that the only course to follow is to determine precisely what Scripture teaches about itself in relation to inspiration and inerrancy "and see what implications that doctrine has for our handling of Scripture."<sup>18</sup>

What then does Scripture teach concerning inerrancy? Several different lines of biblical teaching have direct bearing on the concept of inerrancy. First, the Scriptures teach that they are breathed out by God, that is, that they are inspired (2 Tim 3:16). This fact effectively indicates that Scripture is without error. As Millard Erickson argues, if the biblical text is inspired, certain implications must follow: "If God is omniscient, he must know all things. He cannot be ignorant of or in error on any matter. Further, if he is omnipotent, he is so able to affect the biblical author's writing that nothing erroneous enters into the final product."<sup>19</sup> The quality of Scripture is therefore guaranteed by its

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<sup>17</sup> James W. Scott, "The Inspiration and Interpretation of God's Word, with Special Reference to Peter Enns, Part I: Inspiration and Its Implications," *WTJ* 71, no. 1 (Fall 2009): 132. As it was, this article critiquing Enns approached the length of a short book. Even so, a follow-up article by Scott was published in the next installment of the *Westminster Theological Journal* which, like the article written by Waltke, featured point-by-point refutation of Enns' exegesis of passages containing alleged errors.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>19</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 251.

unique divine origin. As Erickson correctly concludes, “Inerrancy is a corollary to the doctrine of full inspiration.”<sup>20</sup> Inerrancy cannot be dispensed with unless one is willing to seriously redefine the concept of inspiration, and any effort to redefine inspiration would in turn create major difficulties for Christian apologetics.

Second, connected to the preceding point, the character of God as the author of Scripture demands its inerrancy. Scripture repeatedly reminds its readers that God cannot lie (Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29; Titus 1:2; Heb 6:18) and so Scripture must convey truth in all that it says. If God had “accommodated” his message to various false ideas common in the days of its writers (even about “minor” or “unimportant” things) God’s truthfulness and trustworthiness would rightly be called into question. Furthermore, such an act of “accommodation” would lead to serious ethical ramifications for the Christian life. Believers are repeatedly told to imitate the character of God (e.g., Eph 5:1). Additionally, they are instructed to “put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness and truth” (Eph 4:24, NASB). Christians are also called to “lay aside falsehood” and “speak truth” (Eph 4:25). If, however, it be true that God allowed error to enter into Scripture in order to accommodate the mistaken ideas of his writers living in ancient times, one is left to assume, as Wayne Grudem puts it, “then God intentionally made incidental affirmations of falsehood in order to enhance communication.”<sup>21</sup> Consequently, if God is right to do so, than why would it be wrong for believers to do the same thing? Grudem rightly concludes, “This would be tantamount to saying minor falsehood told for a good purpose (a ‘white lie’) is not wrong” and also, “Such a line of reasoning would, if we believed it, exert strong pressure on us to begin speaking untruthfully in situations where that might seem to help

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 97.

us communicate better, and so forth.”<sup>22</sup> These ethical ramifications would be very destructive to the Christian faith, to say nothing of the apologetic task.

Third, Scripture teaches that it is, as God’s word, wholly true. For instance, the Psalms affirm that God’s word is “the word of truth” (Ps 119:43; cf. v. 160). Likewise, the Psalms state that God’s “law” and “commandments” are truth (Ps 119:142, 151). The Lord Jesus Christ also, in praying to the Father for his disciples, says, “Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth” (John 17:17). Additionally, in Romans 3:4, Paul appeals to Psalm 51:4, declaring, “Let God be found true, though every man be found a liar, as it is written, “That You may be justified in Your words, and prevail when You are judged”” (NASB). John Frame discusses the implication of this verse, saying, “If there is any disagreement between [God’s] words and our own ideas, his must prevail. And if we are so arrogant as to judge what he says, he must prevail in that judgment.”<sup>23</sup> The immediate relevancy to

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 97, 100.

<sup>23</sup> John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2013), 598. In addition to these specific texts, the whole tenor of Scripture must be taken into account. As James Daane points out,

That the Scriptures regard themselves as a sure, unailing, certain, and trustworthy word of God cannot be doubted. While specific proof texts are of limited number, the Scriptures in their entirety present themselves as the true, and therefore, reliable Word of God. It is true, and should be recognized, that the Scriptures, for reasons that derive from their very nature as the Word of God, do not indulge in an apologetic effort to demonstrate their reality and truth as God’s Word by reference to something other than themselves ... For this very reason, the Word of God in the Scriptures presents itself throughout as possessing these qualities without any special, introductory, self-conscious demonstration that it is what it asserts itself to be, namely, the Word of God. It merely speaks in terms of what it is: the Word of God ... The Scriptures present the Word of God as true just because it is what it is, the Word of God, quite independent of human acknowledgment (“Infallibility,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev. ed., ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, et al. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982], 2:821).

the claims of McGowan and Enns to “know better” than God what portions of his word are correct and what portions are errant is striking!

In any case, Scripture’s assertion to be “true” should be taken as direct confirmation of its inerrancy. As Frame writes, “Inerrancy simply means ‘truth’ in the propositional sense. I wish that we could be done with all the extrabiblical technical terms such as infallible and inerrant and simply say that the Bible is true. But in the context of historical and contemporary theological discussion, that alternative is not open to us.”<sup>24</sup> He later observes,

There are several ways in which truth is used in Scripture, and in John 14:6 it is a title for Christ himself. Theologians have taken license from these facts to ignore or deny the more common propositional use of the term, or its relevance to the doctrine of the word of God .... So although I still prefer the word truth, I will hold on to inerrancy as an alternative.<sup>25</sup>

The point here is that even though the text does not use the term “inerrant” it does explicitly employ the term “truth” in the normal, propositional sense when speaking of itself. It is unwarranted, as some modern theologians have done, to drive a wedge between the concepts of “truth” and “inerrancy.” Accordingly, on the basis of the statements of Scripture surveyed here, Christians are right to affirm that the Bible is inerrant.

Fourth, Scripture clearly teaches its own authority, which necessarily demands biblical inerrancy. In Matthew 5:17–18, Jesus Christ asserts that he did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but rather to fulfill them. He then promises, “Until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished” (v. 18, NASB).

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<sup>24</sup> John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2010), 170–71.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

As Paul Feinberg perceptively states, “The law’s authority rests on the fact that every minute detail will be fulfilled.”<sup>26</sup> Perhaps even more to the point, in John 10:35, Christ affirms that Scripture “cannot be broken,” which means Scripture “cannot be annulled or set aside or proved false.”<sup>27</sup> The link between this high claim of authority and the inerrancy of the text cannot be overlooked. As Feinberg notes, “While it is true that [both Matthew 5:17–18 and John 10:35] emphasize the Bible’s authority, this authority can only be justified by or grounded in inerrancy. Something that contains errors cannot be absolutely authoritative.”<sup>28</sup>

Fifth, the way that Scripture uses previously-written Scripture undergirds the doctrine of inerrancy. In other words, a passage of Scripture may, in quoting from another passage, assume the complete accuracy of even the smallest details in that passage. For example, entire arguments are sometimes based on a single word (Ps 82:6 in John 10:34–35), the implied present tense of a verb (Exod 3:6 in Matt. 23:32), or the number of a noun, that is, whether it is in the singular or plural form (Gen 12:7 in Gal 3:16). Commenting on these fine details, Feinberg again states, “If the Bible’s inerrancy does not extend to every detail, these arguments lose their force. The use of any word may be a matter of whim and might even be in error.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, the

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<sup>26</sup> Paul D. Feinberg, “Bible, Inerrancy and Infallibility of,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 157.

<sup>27</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 399.

<sup>28</sup> Feinberg, “Bible, Inerrancy and Infallibility of,” 157.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* Feinberg notes, “It might be objected that the NT does not always cite OT texts with precision—that as a matter of fact precision is the exception rather than the rule.” Nonetheless, “A careful study of the way in which the OT is used in the NT . . . demonstrates that the NT writer quoted the OT not cavalierly but quite carefully.”

assumption of inerrancy is implicitly grounded in how Scripture handles Scripture. In spite of all the talk about how the text “behaves” over against what it says, it seems apparent that latter portions of the text treat earlier portions as absolutely and certainly true in all of their details.

These arguments, in concert, show that the doctrine of biblical inerrancy is scripturally valid, and that (as the fifth point especially highlights) it may not be denied even with respect to the minor details or the so-called “relatively unimportant matters” of the text.<sup>30</sup>

What may be said, however, concerning the charge brought on by Enns, McGowan, and Taylor that, since Scripture is just as much a human product as it is a divine product, some error has entered the text, at least as it relates to purportedly “nonessential” or “unimportant” matters? First, it should be pointed out that there is a logical problem embedded in this assertion. As R. C. Sproul fittingly states, “If the classic statement is *errare est humanum*, to err is human, we reply that though it is true that a common characteristic of mankind is to err, it does not follow that men always err or that error is necessary for humanity.”<sup>31</sup> If error is the necessary nature of man, it must be assumed that even Adam in his pre-fall state erred, and also that the glorified human inhabitants of heaven must err, lest they not be truly human.<sup>32</sup> Vern Poythress argues similarly, about the

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<sup>30</sup> It should be noted that there are other arguments in addition to these five. For instance, it might be noted that Deuteronomy 13:1–5 and 18:20–22 require a prophet’s predictions to invariably come to pass in order for his message to be considered authoritative. To use a modern term, the prophet’s message must be “infallible,” true and thus not subject to failure. The fact that Scripture demands such a high standard of its prophetic messengers arguably implies that Scripture itself is not subject to error, lest it fail to pass its own test for authority.

<sup>31</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Scripture Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2005), 145.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 145–46. This objection to biblical inerrancy has often been referred to as the *Barthian Challenge*, after Karl Barth, arguably the

human authors of Scripture, noting that “Since they were human beings, they had the possibility open to them of speaking the truth; they were under no innate constraint, belonging either to their humanity or to their fallenness, necessarily to lapse from the truth.”<sup>33</sup> The second half of Poythress’s argument, however, is what makes for an even more compelling case: “God wrote, using their abilities; and his superintendence of them as full persons, the involvement of the Holy Spirit both in them personally and in their writing, and God’s commitment to the truth assure us that what was possible for them became actual. They wrote the truth and did not fall into error.”<sup>34</sup> In short, the human element involved in the writing of Scripture does not override the fact that God, who does not lie (Num 23:19; Titus 1:2; Heb 6:18) supernaturally guided the human authors in the writing process, the Holy Spirit overseeing the selection of even the very words of Scripture (1 Cor 2:13; cf. 2 Pet 1:21). There is consequently no room for denial of the inerrancy of Scripture on the basis of human involvement in its authorship.<sup>35</sup> To

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most prominent individual to advance it. For an expanded response to the challenge along the same lines as the response given by Sproul, see especially the arguments detailed by Norman L. Geisler and William C. Roach in *Defending Inerrancy: Affirming the Accuracy of Scripture for a New Generation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 273–75.

<sup>33</sup> Vern Sheridan Poythress, *Inerrancy and Worldview: Answering Modern Challenges to the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 248.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Analogy may be found in the person of Jesus Christ who, though fully human in His incarnation, was entirely without sin, and thus not subject to error. Charles Ryrie explains, “Just as in the incarnation, Christ took humanity but was not tainted in any way with sin, so the production of the Bible was not tainted with any errors” (*Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* [Chicago: Moody, 1986], 94). Ryrie then further draws out the analogy, saying,

In the humanity of Jesus Christ, there were some features that were not optional. He had to be a Jew. He could not have been a Gentile. He

summarize then, biblical inerrancy should be unwaveringly affirmed and, by implication, the Christian should be willing to take into account whatever significances that bears for apologetics.

### THE APOLOGETIC RELEVANCE OF INERRANCY

The foregoing overview has shown that the doctrine of inerrancy is indeed an accurate reflection of what the Bible says about itself. However, the question remains whether the apologist should insist upon the doctrine of inerrancy in his defense of the faith. While it can certainly be granted, as Taylor says, that inerrancy can be difficult to defend, this reason alone is an insufficient one to dismiss as irrelevant to the apologetic task the doctrine of inerrancy.

Biblical inerrancy is tremendously important to Christian apologetics because it is the doctrine upon which all other doctrines stand (or fall). If the Bible is not inerrant, then it cannot be relied upon as a trustworthy and dependable record of doctrinal truth. There could, in the end, be no certainty therefore of anything that the Bible says. In practical terms, the Christian

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had to be a man, not a woman. He had to be sinless, not sinful. But some features of sinless humanity might be termed optional. Jesus could have possessed perfect humanity within a variation of a few inches in height at maturity, though a dwarf or a giant would have been imperfect. He might have varied a little in weight at maturity and still have been perfect. Surely, within limits, the number of hairs on his scalp could have been a sinless option. However, the humanity He exhibited was, in fact, perfect humanity. (94–95)

This reality presents a similar picture to that which is seen in Scripture:

The writers of the Bible were not passive. They wrote as borne along by the Spirit, and in those writings some things could not have been said any other way. Paul insisted on the singular rather than the plural in Galatians 3:16. But conceivably there were some sinless options in Paul's emotional statement in Romans 9:1–3. Yet the Bible we have is in fact the perfect record of God's message to us. (95)

Indeed, human authorship does bear an impact on the wording of Scripture, but not such that its inerrancy is tampered with.



would be without any basis for knowing precisely what to believe or for knowing how God expects him to live. There would be no real meaning behind the biblical statements in Deuteronomy 8:3 and Matthew 4:4 that the man who fears the Lord is to “live . . . on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.” Erickson expands on this point, saying,

Our basis for holding to the truth of any theological proposition is that the Bible teaches it. If, however, we should conclude that certain propositions (historical or scientific) taught by the Bible are not true, the implications are far-reaching. We cannot continue to hold to other propositions simply on the grounds that the Bible teaches them.<sup>36</sup>

It is not that the demonstration (or suspicion) of error in one aspect of the biblical text automatically makes the other aspects errant; however, the presence of error at any one point in the biblical text definitely makes all other aspects suspect—their accuracy and truth is uncertain. Thus, if the Bible is regarded as errant at any point, the remainder cannot be wholly trusted. Erickson notes that on all other aspects of the Bible’s teaching, “We either must profess agnosticism regarding them or find some other basis for holding them. Since the principle has been abrogated that whatever the Bible teaches is necessarily true, the mere fact that the Bible teaches these other propositions is an insufficient basis in itself for holding them.”<sup>37</sup> This being the case, the believer is left largely without any sort of doctrinal stability or certainty, because many of Scripture’s teachings (especially about salvific and moral matters) cannot be confirmed independently from other sources. As a result, the believer’s whole justification for his belief in Christianity is called into

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<sup>36</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 253.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

question, which would destroy any attempt at apologetic defense.<sup>38</sup>

Biblical inerrancy is thus a foundational presupposition to orthodox Christian theology that must be held to unwaveringly by the apologist, at the risk of otherwise being stripped of his ability to defend the certainty of any other biblical doctrine. Even the core element of the text, the Gospel message, would be subject to irresolvable suspicion—for what kind of inerrant and trustworthy Gospel could possibly be present in an errant text? This is a point brought out well by Craig Parton in his overview of the apologetic contribution of John Warwick Montgomery. He says,

Montgomery saw immediately and early in his career that a gospel contained in a text with errors and contradictions was intellectually indefensible. If the texts which give us the gospel ... cannot be trusted in what they say on what the temple in Jerusalem looked like, how can it be trusted when it speaks of the heavenly Jerusalem?<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Erickson suggests a particularly helpful analogy on this point:

It is as if we were to hear a lecture on some rather esoteric subject on which we were quite ignorant. The speaker might make many statements that fall outside our experience. We have no way of assessing their truth. What he or she is saying sounds very profound, but it might simply be just so much high-flown gibberish. But suppose that for a few minutes the speaker develops one area with which we are well acquainted. Here we detect several erroneous statements. What will we then think about the other statements, whose veracity we cannot check? We will doubtlessly conclude that there may well be inaccuracies there as well. Credibility, once compromised, is not easily regained or preserved in other matters. (*Christian Theology*, 253–54)

<sup>39</sup> Craig Parton, “John Warwick Montgomery as Evangelical, Evidential, and Confessional Lutheran Apologist,” in *Tough-Minded Christianity: Honoring the Legacy of John Warwick Montgomery*, ed. William Dembski and Thomas Schirrmacher (Nashville: B & H Academic), 484.

This point is inescapable: If the Christian apologist abandons inerrancy, he fatally compromises his ability to defend all other aspects of Christian doctrine—the Gospel of Jesus Christ included.

What does this mean practically? It means that the apologist's argumentative strategy in the defense of the Christian faith must rest on the presupposition of biblical inerrancy whether or not the topic of inerrancy becomes a point requiring direct, detailed defense. Viewed broadly, different apologetic methods have advocated different perspective on how a defense of inerrancy fits into the larger apologetic case. Apologists of a presuppositional stripe tend to intertwine the defense of inerrancy into the very fabric of their opening gambit, arguing that unless Scripture is both inerrant and authoritative, the skeptic is without basis for either proving or disproving the Christian faith in the first place.<sup>40</sup> Apologists who lean more toward an evidentialist approach are more likely to present a case for the resurrection and deity of Jesus Christ and then go on to defend the inerrancy and authority of the Bible on the basis of Christ said about it.<sup>41</sup> Other apologists have sought a mediating

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<sup>40</sup> See especially on this point Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 4th ed., ed. K. Scott Oliphant (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2008), 169-70, 241; as well as Greg L. Bahnsen, "Inductivism, Inerrancy, and Presuppositionalism," *JETS* 20, no. 4 (December 1977): 289-305. In this article, Bahnsen goes so far as to say, "At the heart of contemporary evangelical Bibliology and apologetics is the question of Scriptural inerrancy" (289). The present author is very reluctant to affirm that Bahnsen's apologetic methodology is entirely sound, as he does not allow for a robust view of how the Bible itself appeals to external evidence. But his claim is, in principle, still very telling and significant.

<sup>41</sup> See, Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1976), 353-77, and Gary R. Habermas, "Jesus and the Inspiration of Scripture," *Areopagus Journal* 2, no. 1 (January 2002): 11-16. Compare also the tact taken by John Feinberg set forth in *Can You Believe It's True? Christian Apologetics in a Modern and Postmodern Era* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013). In discussing the reliability of the Gospels, Feinberg writes,

approach, which centers both on the uniqueness of the Bible's claim to be inerrant (along with its internal consistency and assertions of prophetic fulfillment), as well as on multiples lines of evidence corroborating the Bible's claims.<sup>42</sup> The point is that regardless of the exact methodology employed by the apologist, eventually the concept of biblical inerrancy enters into the apologetic task. Consequently, if the Christian abandons the

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I should distinguish a theological defense of Scripture's reliability from an apologetic one. The theological doctrine most closely associated with this concept is inerrancy, and of course, inerrancy and inspiration go together. In theology classes on the doctrine of Scripture, as an evangelical, my concern is to set forth what Scripture teaches about its own inspiration and truthfulness. Questions about whether texts that speak of inspiration and inerrancy are themselves reliable are not the focus of the discussion. Rather, the theologian assumes that philosophers and apologists have made the case that Scripture is reliable and should be believed, regardless of the topic. So the task of the apologist is to make the case that the Bible is reliable in what it teaches about any topic. The usual starting point of such a defense is the historical claims the Bible makes. (p. 359)

Arguably, Feinberg's assessment does not seem to take full inventory of how interpretive perspectives may influence the nonbeliever's ability to agree with the interpretation of data presented by the apologist in order to back his claim of the Bible's reliability. That is another issue to be settled on another occasion. What is important to note, however, is that Feinberg's statement does not diminish the *need* to defend biblical inerrancy (it simply suggests a particular tactic of how to do so in the long run); nor does it detract from the fact that inerrancy must be assumed in order for the Christian apologist himself to have an accurate perspective on the content of the faith he seeks to defend.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, the approach outlined by Ronald B. Mayers in *Balanced Apologetics: Using Evidences and Presuppositions in Defense of the Faith* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1984), 70–73. For a practical outworking of this “both/and” type of defense at a layman's level, see Nathan Busenitz, *Reasons We Believe: 50 Lines of Evidence that Confirm the Christian Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 71–152. Busenitz lists twenty overlapping lines of biblical and extrabiblical evidence in support of Scripture's authority.

defense of inerrancy (perhaps, as Taylor suggests, arguing that the Bible is only true in all that it teaches, but allowing for error in historical or scientific details), he fatally compromises his ability to defend all aspects of Christian doctrine—that is, the sum total of “the faith” (cf. Jude 3).

It is true that the defense of inerrancy does not necessarily need to be front and center in the Christian’s apologetic presentation, as there are many other aspects of the defense of the faith that require attention. However, if pressed on the subject of the Bible’s accuracy or authority, the apologist needs to be both willing and able to defend its full inerrancy. John Frame affirms that the Christian apologist must possess “a clearheaded understanding of where our loyalties lie and how those loyalties affect our epistemology” and also “a determination above all to present the full teaching of Scripture in our apologetic without compromise, in its full winsomeness and its full offensiveness.”<sup>43</sup> Both of these qualifications demand an unwavering adherence to inerrancy regardless of whether the apologist chooses to explicitly center his defense of the Christian faith on that doctrine. As for the particulars of the apologetic defense, “The important thing is not to talk about our presuppositions but to obey them in our thought, speech, and life.”<sup>44</sup> In this case, inerrancy must be a presupposition on the part of the believer that is affirmed uncompromisingly whether or not it arises as a

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<sup>43</sup> John M. Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1994), 88. While some might suspect that these qualifications are unique to presuppositional apologetics, they ought to be considered a requirement of all *orthodox Christian* apologetics. Although the Bible does allow for liberty in the argumentative style of the apologist (i.e., his apologetic method), never does Scripture suggest that the apologist ought not to present all of its claims as anything less than the full truth. This reality is what stands behind Frame’s statement that apologists must have “a clearheaded understanding of where our loyalties lie.”

<sup>44</sup> John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1987), 350.

topic of conversation in an apologetic exchange. This presupposition serves to inform the apologist's loyalties and, presumably, may in many cases help to direct him in the formulation of apologetic arguments. Frame is thus right to insist, "Our apologetic must always be an obedient apologetic—subject to God's revealed Word and thus governed by our own ultimate presuppositions. But whether we talk about presuppositions or not will depend on the situation."<sup>45</sup> If the inquirer is willing to accept the apologist's arguments without engaging the apologist on the topic of inerrancy, so be it; but if the believer is challenged on the topic of the Bible's accuracy or authority, he will surely have to defend the text's inerrancy.

The apologist may well be tempted to maintain only that the Bible is "a generally reliable historical text," leaving open the possibility that it might err in various ways. And, while there is certainly nothing wrong with seeking to show the Bible's historical reliability (using both its own claims and external evidence), the apologist does the Bible a disservice in shying away from his ultimate commitment to Scripture as much more than "a generally reliable historical text," but the inspired word of God, wholly inerrant and authoritative. Commitment to what the Bible actually says does not leave the apologist the option of avoiding altogether the issue of inerrancy. No, the case for inerrancy need not be the first line of the Christian's defense, but, in view of what the Bible asserts about itself, it is certainly illegitimate to dodge the objections of skeptics by saying, as Taylor does, that the Bible might, because of its human characteristics, err in some details. An infallibly true revelation of God cannot reside in an errant text.

### **THE NEEDED REAFFIRMATION OF INERRANCY**

This article has argued, in direct contrast to the view expounded by Taylor, that biblical inerrancy is absolutely essential to Christian apologetics. It undergirds the apologist's understanding of the content of the faith to be defended and

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

provides certainty to the apologist that what he defends is indeed the truth. This article has examined the perspectives of McGowan and Enns on inerrancy, perspectives that have advocated a departure from biblical inerrancy as traditionally defined, and which thereby provide the necessary support for Taylor's assertion that "Christian apologists are wise to avoid insisting that the Bible is absolutely inerrant ... and to claim instead that it is true in all it teaches."<sup>46</sup> This article has shown these views to be lacking, as they fail to take account of what the Bible claims for itself, and also of how Scripture uses Scripture. Passages of Scripture that quote from other passages invariably assume the complete accuracy of even the most minute details in those passages. In accordance with this understanding, biblical inerrancy is essentially relevant to the task of Christian apologetics. As stated previously, Scripture's inerrancy is necessary both to understanding and defending the Bible's authority and message. Moreover, it is a commitment to inerrancy that informs the apologist of the certainty and trustworthiness of the Christian faith that he seeks to defend. Accordingly, biblical inerrancy, while not necessarily comprising the central thrust of every apologetic argument, is nonetheless vital to the apologetic task. The biblical text does not permit for the abandonment of inerrancy, as Taylor suggests, simply in order to account for the human element in Scripture.

In view of this conclusion, it seems that an appeal is in order for Christian apologists to reaffirm with one voice the inerrancy of the Bible and to uncompromisingly stand upon it in their defense of the faith. Scripture's explicit claims to be "truth" (Ps 119:160; John 17:17) simply do not permit for the intrusion of error, regardless of how such error might be qualified as the fault of the human authors of the text rather than of God himself. Surely, there is no biblical charge that can be leveled against Christian apologists who both assume and assert the full inerrancy of the text. After all, it can do no harm for the believer to assert about Scripture what Scripture already asserts about itself, that it, as the word of God, is true.

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<sup>46</sup> Taylor, *Introducing Apologetics*, 269

Wayne Grudem has passionately urged fellow believers to “consider the possibility that God may want us to quote his Word explicitly in private discussions and in public debates with nonbelievers.”<sup>47</sup> Doing so necessarily demands that the Christian has a high view of Scripture’s inerrancy and authority. When Christian apologists abandon the biblical claim to full inerrancy, and thus downplay the authority of Scripture in their defense of the faith, they are, as Grudem asserts, “often reduced to pragmatic arguments that are not decisive or to moral arguments that have no apparent transcendent moral authority behind them, and as a result the Church is anemic and has no influence in the world. But what should we expect when we leave our sword at home?”<sup>48</sup> On the contrary, Christian apologists must stand fast on the doctrine of inerrancy both implicitly in how they think of the authority of God’s word and, when appropriate, explicitly in how they argue for God’s word as wholly true. Only

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<sup>47</sup> Wayne Grudem, “Do We Act as If We Really Believe That ‘The Bible Alone, and the Bible in Its Entirety, Is the Word of God Written?’” *JETS* 43, no. 1 (March 2000): 23. Grudem, speaking to Christians, continues,

Most of you have some influence in some spheres of non-Christian activity, whether you are a parent and there are ‘values’ curricula in your schools, whether you are a school board member, whether you are discussing something of ethical import with your neighbors, whether you are involved in ethics debates in the community, whether you are on radio talk shows in local secular stations, or whether you even have national influence in congressional committees or on ABC’s *Nightline* and other such venues. If we believe that ‘the Bible *alone* ... is the Word of God written,’ then shouldn’t we quote it in these contexts?

He further notes that there is “a common attitude that assumes that non-evangelicals and non-Christians don’t believe the Bible, so we don’t quote it. But I seriously doubt the wisdom of that approach. If ‘the Bible *alone* ... is the Word of God’ out of all the writings of the whole world, and if we hide it from unbelievers, where will they ever hear it?” (Ibid.). There is, therefore, a very practical apologetic (and evangelistic) tie-in to the affirmation of biblical inerrancy.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 24. “Sword” here is of course a metaphor for the word of God (Eph 6:17).



in affirming the full inerrancy of God's word can the Christian apologist have a firm basis for confidence in Scripture's authority, and so ultimately remain faithful to Jude's great apologetic directive, "contend earnestly for the faith" (Jude v 3).