

Dissolving the Inerrancy Debate: How Modern Philosophy Shaped the Evangelical View of Scripture

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ABSTRACT:

The debate among American evangelicals over scriptural inerrancy has received less attention in recent literature than it did during its height in the 1970s and 1980s. Nonetheless the issue itself remains unresolved; indeed, many consider it beyond hope of resolution. Recent work by certain philosophers, however, suggests that there is a way out—not by resolving the debate but by dissolving it. In particular, a model developed by Nancy Murphy for understanding the history of the split between Protestant liberals and conservatives can be appropriated for understanding the history of the inerrancy debate. Examining the history of this debate through the postmodern lens of Murphy's model reveals that certain shortcomings of modern philosophy fed into the debate, forcing theologians to overstate the significance of certain claims. As the debate progressed, there was a steadily increasing concern that Scripture be considered accurate in all matters, including the precise recording of detailed historical events and matters of science. For some conservatives this eventually became a test of orthodoxy; that theologians such as Martin Luther and John Calvin did not share this view reveals the force of modernity's influence. Looking beyond the current evangelical view of Scripture, a postmodern world provides room for an even stronger commitment to the Bible's authority, though one that does challenge certain evangelical assumptions.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s the controversy among evangelical theologians about biblical inerrancy reached its height. However, the relative silence among these theologians since that time should not suggest the controversy was ever resolved. The controversy quickly became an impasse and the impasse quickly became unspoken. As a result, evangelical theologians have, for the past twenty years, held widely divergent views of Scripture's authority with no apparent hope of coming to a common understanding.

The notion that this disagreement still persists was recently reinforced when Norman Geisler, one of the most vocal inerrancy supporters during the controversy's height, published *When Critics Ask: A Popular Handbook on Bible Difficulties*. The book is popular among many evangelical pastors and lay people and is a reference guide to apparent biblical errors, such as discrepancies in numbers, chronology, dialog, and so on. For each apparent error the book offers possible solutions, often describing several solutions for a single difficulty. In each case, Geisler argues that the apparent discrepancy is not a discrepancy after all. For example, a heading concerning the Sermon on the Mount reads, "Why does Luke say Jesus stood to teach them when Matthew declares that he sat to teach them?" [1] Geisler provides a couple of possible explanations and concludes that Jesus probably sat for some of the sermon and stood for the rest. This is a perfectly reasonable explanation; indeed, this may be exactly what happened. However, Geisler's view makes very clear that Luke and Matthew cannot contradict without undermining the authority of the entire Bible, even on the minor issue of whether Jesus was sitting or standing. The implication is that all such minor discrepancies matter very much. In fact, Geisler sees his ability to provide plausible explanations for these seeming errors as vital to defending the Bible's authority. While I will not address the book's contents in this article, the significance of its publication is that it demonstrates that attempts to provide scholarly support for the strict inerrantist view did not disappear twenty years ago. Yet that is exactly what Geisler's opponents seem to believe. Given that one side in this debate doubts the other's orthodoxy, and the other side in the debate doubts the first's faithfulness to scholarship, the impasse seems permanent. Fortunately, Geisler's is not the only recent publication with relevance for this debate.

Certain contributions by Christian philosophers, when applied to the inerrancy debate, suggest that the debate is not the impasse it might otherwise seem to be. By positioning themselves within what has come to

be known as postmodernity, these philosophers are able to observe and analyze the theology of the modern era more effectively than was previously possible. What this has revealed, in the case of the inerrancy debate, is that those points in the debate that seemed to matter most actually appear important only because of the shortcomings of modern philosophy. For example, modernity assumed that only those claims based directly on unquestionable foundations should be believed. This made it appear critical to evangelicals that the Bible meet this standard, that it qualify as an unquestionable foundation according to modernity's definition of "unquestionable." Yet, as will be discussed below, theologians as recent as Martin Luther and John Calvin did not hold the Bible to this standard. Despite their very high regard for Scripture, both Luther and Calvin acknowledge that, in certain places, the Bible is not entirely factual. For this reason it is not even desirable that inerrancy's advocates and opponents ever come to a common understanding because any such common understanding would be more a response to the constraints of modern philosophy than the pursuit of faithful theology. The evangelical inerrancy cannot be resolved. But it can be dissolved.

The need for this debate to be dissolved, and the idea that dissolution is possible, is best understood by considering the debate historically. Not just any history will reveal the effects of modern philosophy on the debate, but only one that intentionally works from outside modern philosophy. Therefore, this history draws on a model introduced by philosopher Nancey Murphy in *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*. This model brings to light the larger factors in the history of philosophy that shaped the evangelical view of Scripture.

The following section of this article will briefly define the term inerrancy (1). Next, Murphy's model is used to understand the relevance of modern philosophy to the inerrancy debate (2). This is followed by a discussion of inerrancy in the *Old Princeton Theology* (3). The section on the contemporary inerrancy debate (4) includes three subsections that analyze significant areas of the debate among evangelicals in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The final section (5) briefly considers how evangelicalism might respond to the question of biblical authority in the future.

1. Defining Inerrancy

As following sections will make clear, the inerrancy of the Bible matters a great deal to a great many evangelical Christians. In some cases this particular view of the Bible is almost the central tenet of the faith. [2] Of course, biblical authority has always meant a great deal to Christians, but inerrancy implies a very particular type of concern about the Bible. It is somewhat difficult to define the term "inerrancy," for even fellow inerrantists disagree, but for general purposes those who use the term today see it as a claim that closely ties the Bible's truth to its historical and scientific factuality.

Robert Johnston wrote that evangelicals faced an impasse in this debate over twenty years ago in his *Evangelicals at an Impasse: Biblical Authority in Practice*. In that work he differentiates between four views of inspiration among evangelicals: (1) detailed inerrancy, (2) partial infallibility, (3) irenic inerrancy, and (4) complete infallibility. He summarizes the views as follows:

"Detailed Inerrantists" claim that a commitment to Scripture's inspiration demands that the original copies of the Bible be considered without error, factual or otherwise. "Irenic Inerrantists" agree that the Bible is without error, but believe Scripture itself must determine according to its intent the scope of that inerrancy. "Complete Infallibilists" reject "inerrancy" as a helpful term for describing the total trustworthiness of the Biblical writers' witness, substituting the word "infallible" in its place. "Partial Infallibilists" believe that the authors' intended message is in error at points, but their witness to the gospel is trustworthy and authoritative. [3]

The heart of the disagreement, as these categories indicate, is the accuracy of the Bible's account of items not integral to salvation, for even the most liberal of these categories insists on the complete authority of the Bible's presentation of the gospel. Therefore, inerrancy tends to be a position about how precisely the Bible reports scientific, geological, and similar information, as well as whether it contains any internal

inconsistencies about historical events. The issue is not about authority per se, but about the particular view of authority to which one subjects the Bible.

What happened in the evangelical debate is that the detailed inerrancy position became a test of orthodoxy among conservative evangelicals. Throughout the twentieth century, up until the early 1980s, there was a steady push by these conservatives toward the "detailed" end of this spectrum and away from the three other options. Therefore, inerrancy has itself narrowed in meaning. Most self-described inerrantists today equate inerrancy with what Johnston labels "detailed inerrancy."

The Role of Modern Philosophy

The relevance of philosophical presuppositions to the debate on inerrancy is well documented. [4] In this debate, inerrancy's supporters usually argue that only their opponents are influenced by philosophy. For example, Geisler writes in his *Biblical Errancy: An Analysis of its Philosophical Roots* that "to 'beware of philosophy' we must be aware of it. ... It is often naïvely assumed that because contemporary theologians are evangelical in doctrine and practice they are somehow immune from adverse philosophical influence." [5] Lest the reader think Geisler is referring to himself and his own biases, he proceeds to single out Stephen Davis, "a contemporary denier of inerrancy ... [who] ironically points a finger" at the philosophical roots of liberalism. [6] It is no less ironic that only Geisler's opponents are accused having positions rooted in philosophy. The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy posed the philosophical options as follows: the "choice is between embracing 'the existential methodology of Kant, Kierkegaard, Barth, and Berkouwer,' and 'standing with Christ and the apostles for the historic view of verbal inerrancy.'" [7] No doubt some opponents of inerrancy commit the same fault, presuming themselves to be above philosophical influence. Let it be said, therefore, that both sides of this debate are rooted in very specific epistemologies and the goal should not be to "avoid" philosophy, but to employ it wisely.

The philosophical perspective of this article is based on the model presented by Nancey Murphy in *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda*. In this study, Murphy claims that it is the philosophy of the modern period that has caused the present divide between Protestant liberals and conservatives. [8] Her thesis is that "philosophical assumptions provided limited options for theologians if they were to do their work in a way that made sense in the modern world." [9] Applying this concept to the evangelical debate about Scripture, this article presents the thesis that modern philosophy also caused conservative Christians to care about detailed inerrancy in a way and to a degree that they previously had not. Where Murphy sees philosophy as limiting a theologian's options, this article investigates philosophy's role in overstating the significance of certain theological claims. Specifically, for most of the twentieth century, there was a steadily increasing concern among conservative American Christians that Scripture is accurate in all matters, including the precise recording of detailed historical events and matters of science. This is the "push" toward detailed inerrancy and away from other views of biblical authority mentioned above. Without the constraints of modern philosophy, the various views of biblical inspiration described by Johnston might all have been available to evangelicals as viable options. Within the constraints of modern philosophy, however, detailed inerrancy became the only allowable choice, at least for conservative evangelicals. After examining Murphy's model in more detail, it is to that topic I will return.

Murphy's thesis is that both Protestant liberal and conservative thought were defined by certain developments in philosophy. It is "not that liberalism supersedes fundamentalism, but rather that they are parallel developments" arising out of responses to the philosophies of René Descartes, John Locke, and David Hume. [10] She traces liberalism to those who responded to Hume in the vein of Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schleiermacher, and conservatism to those who responded to Hume in the vein of Thomas Reid and the Old Princeton Theology (especially Charles and A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield). [11] Perhaps the single most significant philosophical concept in these developments, with regard to inerrancy, was foundationalism.

Murphy traces foundationalism to Descartes' claim of "indubitable beliefs available to each individual." [12] Unlike the medieval period, which located authority in an idea's author, Descartes located authority in

foundational beliefs that each individual could not doubt. [13] The only foundations available to philosophers following Descartes were one's own experience or Scripture. [14] However, for conservative theologians who followed Descartes, a case needed to be made that Scripture was in fact an indubitable foundation. Locke's approach, which others have followed, was to refer to biblical miracles as a sign of the Bible's reliability. [15] Besides Locke, "another standard argument has been to point to the prophecies in Scripture and to argue that their fulfillment shows that the knowledge is supernatural and therefore from God." [16] Later philosophers, such as Hume and Kant, called the Bible's foundational status into question by criticizing arguments for God's existence and by claiming that miracles are themselves so unlikely that no amount of evidence is sufficient to convince a reasonable person that one has occurred. [17] According to Murphy, this argument led ultimately to Protestant liberalism; the acceptance of Locke via Reid led to conservatism.

While Hume's epistemology could be called "inside-out," in which ideas are the foundation of knowledge, Reid's "outside-in" model assumed the world itself was foundational and that human ideas faithfully represented it. [18] According to Murphy, Reid might put it: "We have simply been constituted by God in such a way that we pass immediately from sensations to beliefs about the objects that cause them." [19] It is at this point that these epistemologies begin to correspond to events in the American evangelical debate on inerrancy.

3. Inerrancy in the Old Princeton Theology

Reid's "common sense" epistemology, together with Francis Bacon's inductive-empirical method, [20] were formative in the so-called Old Princeton Theology espoused by Charles and A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield. [21] The work of the Hodges and Warfield was, in many ways, the starting-point of the inerrancy debate among American Christians. [22] The Princeton theologians were among the first to engage and criticize the Protestant liberalism that developed in America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is in the arguments employed by these writers in these debates that the effect of their epistemology is most clear. For example, arguing against a recently published book that seemed to question the authority of Scripture, Charles Hodge partially bases his claim in the Bible's authority on the Bible's "miraculously small" number of difficulties and its overall correspondence to scientific data in the fields of astronomy and geology. [23] He also writes, "It is enough to impress any mind with awe, when it contemplates the Sacred Scriptures filled with the highest truths, speaking with authority in the name of God, and so miraculously free from the soiling touch of human fingers." [24]

This argument is typical of arguments that continue to this day among inerrantists: the Bible's authority is verified by its content. It is reliable because it is factually accurate. Notice the place of foundationalism in such arguments. Indeed, this is a very clear echo of Locke trusting the Bible because it contained miracles. No longer was the Bible's content reliable because it was authoritative; it was authoritative because of its content! [25] Certainly before the world of Locke, Descartes, and Hume the Bible's content was looked to as evidence for its authority, but its authority in the modern period seems to hinge entirely on content, specifically on the factuality of its content. In other words, the Bible's validity as a Cartesian foundation had to be verified by evidence that is both external to the Bible and universally accepted.

These two factors, universal acceptance and external evidence, are also rooted clearly in modern thought. According to Stephen Toulmin's *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, Descartes had a very specific motive in his epistemology: "it is the quest for universal knowledge that drives the modern quest for indubitable foundations." [26] The standard must be one everyone can agree upon. Therefore, to stand the test as a valid Cartesian foundation, the evidence for the Bible's authority had to be something verifiable to all reasonable observers. This also explains why the evidence must be external. It does no good to build a foundation on the Bible simply because the Bible claims it is true, for only those who believe the Bible in the first place count the Bible's claims as indubitable. Hodge's argument for the Bible's reliability strikes a bold contrast to earlier theologians. For example, when John Calvin writes, "the highest proof of Scripture derives in general from the fact that God in person speaks in it," he is employing reasoning ruled invalid within modern philosophy, for this bases authority in a source's author rather than its indubitability. [27] In essence, Calvin's reasoning was not available to Hodge because of the constraints of modern philosophy.

These criteria for evidence (indubitability and universality) together cause an important change in the conservative approach to biblical authority: the source of authority must be rooted in something outside the confession of the community of faith, that is, outside the church. And in order for the Bible to have authority apart from its acceptance by the church it mattered a great deal that it was inerrant.

A much-disputed question in the evangelical debate is how Charles Hodge dealt with apparent biblical errors. Because he wrote long before the height of the debate, Hodge's testimony tends to carry weight as an example of how conservative Christians should approach the Bible. The debate generally centers on the following passage from Hodge's Systematic Theology:

The errors in matters of fact which skeptics search out bear no proportion to the whole. No sane man would deny that the Parthenon was built of marble, even if here and there a speck of sandstone should be detected in its structure. Not less unreasonable is it to deny the inspiration of such a book as the Bible, because one sacred writer says that on a given occasion twenty-four thousand, and another says that twenty-three thousand, men were slain. Surely a Christian may be allowed to tread such objections under his feet.

Admitting that the Scriptures do contain, in a few instances, discrepancies which with our present means of knowledge, we are unable satisfactorily to explain, they furnish no rational ground for denying their infallibility. [28]

According to opponents of detailed inerrancy such as Ernest Sandeen, Jack Rogers, and Donald McKim, this demonstrates that Charles Hodge did not have as strong a view of inerrancy as did his followers, A. A. Hodge and Warfield. [29] On the other hand, in *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal*, John D. Woodbridge argues that "Hodge did not accept the possibility that the 'errors' were genuine ones." [30] In support of this, Woodbridge cites, remarkably, the very same passage as Rogers and McKim. Woodbridge additionally quotes Hodge's statement that "the whole Bible was written under such an influence as preserved its human authors from all error, and makes it for the Church the infallible rule of faith and practice." [31]

What exactly Hodge meant by his Parthenon illustration seems to be the source of these varying interpretations of his work. According to Rogers and McKim, the Parthenon illustration shows Hodge "was able to dismiss such problems as minor." [32] However they also feel Hodge somewhat contradicts himself by elsewhere insisting on the Bible's inerrancy in all matters. [33] Woodbridge counters, "Hodge was apparently arguing that even if one should suppose that there were minor errors (which Hodge himself did not allow), that should not keep an inquirer from contemplating 'the sacred Scriptures filled with the highest truth.'" [34] In fact, both positions seem to miss the heart of the illustration. According to Hodge, it is still true to say the Parthenon is built on marble "even if here and there a speck of sandstone" is found. In other words, it is still true to say the Bible is inerrant even if "one sacred writer says ... twenty-four thousand, and another says that twenty-three thousand, men were slain." Such an error is so minor that it does not even "count" as violating the Bible's inerrancy. This interpretation of the illustration is further confirmed by Hodge's next sentence in the passage, in which he states that even if there are no satisfactory explanations for these discrepancies, the Bible still meets his definition of inerrancy. What is more, it should be clear that Hodge was certainly not troubled by these errors-no more than would the builder of the Parthenon have feared that structure's collapse due to specks of sandstone in its foundation. The difficulty Woodbridge and Rogers have in understanding Hodge seems due to the fact that in the time since Hodge wrote, inerrancy has come to mean only "detailed inerrancy." If, when Hodge described the Bible as "free from all error" he had in mind, not detailed inerrancy, but some other form of inerrancy, his position becomes clear. However, contemporary writers, such as Woodbridge, insist that Hodge was a detailed inerrantist. This once again reveals the push that took place away from other views of inerrancy toward detailed inerrancy.

At least on this very specific point, Hodge appears to be closer to the views of those who went before him than those who have followed him. For example, Martin Luther writes, "The Scriptures ... do not lie or deceive" and "The Scriptures have never erred." [35] Yet Luther also expresses doubt that Moses wrote the Pentateuch, that the apostle Jude wrote the book bearing his name, and that Old Testament battle accounts

were not exaggerations. [36] For example: "When one often reads that great numbers of people were slain—for example, eighty thousand—I believe that hardly one thousand were actually killed." [37] For Luther, this exaggeration in no way contradicts his belief that "the Scriptures have never erred." Similarly, Calvin has no problem suggesting in his Commentaries that Matthew "'incorrectly,' but with 'no impropriety,' calls a comet a star." [38] These apparent difficulties simply did not matter to these writers, nor did they violate their very high views of biblical authority. As discussed above, this is possible only because, as pre-moderns, the reformers found the Bible's authority in its author, not in its inerrancy.

4. Inerrancy in Contemporary Evangelicalism

The fact that modern philosophy caused conservative evangelicals to view detailed inerrancy as the only orthodox view of Scripture became increasingly clear as the debate moved into its height in the late 1970s. Two of the most significant events were the 1976 publication of *The Battle for the Bible* by Harold Lindsell and the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI) in October 1978, which produced the "Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy." Both of these events were in response to what many evangelicals feared was a weakening of the authority of Scripture. [39]

Lindsell's presentation centers around two points. First, even though "the Bible is not a textbook on chemistry, astronomy, philosophy, or medicine... when it speaks on matters having to do with these or any other subjects, the Bible does not lie to us. It does not contain any error of any kind." [40] Second, the Christian church has always believed this. In his words, "for two thousand years the Christian church has agreed that the Bible is completely trustworthy; it is infallible or inerrant." [41] In his book, Lindsell then goes on to describe why these two points matter so much and to give contemporary examples of various organizations dealing with the question of inerrancy. Throughout, Lindsell displays great concern that his particular view of inerrancy be defended (for example, "the implications of the errancy view are tremendous" and "I am of the opinion that this is a watershed question" and so on). [42]

The ICBI was composed of a number of leading evangelical scholars and pastors, including James M. Boice, Carl F. H. Henry, Norman Geisler, J. I. Packer, and Francis Schaeffer. [43] The organization planned, and carried out, a ten-year effort to support the cause of detailed inerrancy through seminars, books, and the like. [44] The work produced by the Council tends to be considerably more scholarly and considerably less angry than *The Battle for the Bible* and its effects are still felt in the evangelical church today. Several of the founding members continue to publish on the topic.

The most significant work of this period opposing detailed inerrancy was *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* by Rogers and McKim. Their argument is well summarized as the claim that the contemporary argument for inerrancy "differs qualitatively from that of the Reformers and their most able interpreters in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries." [45] Referring to examples such as those mentioned above, they claim that what the ICBI defined as inerrancy was very different than what Luther, Calvin, and others meant by inerrancy. Philosophically, they see the difference as the result of a "significant shift ... from the Neo-platonic presuppositions of the Reformers to the Aristotelian assumptions of the Reformers' medieval opponents." [46] Specifically they connect this development to contemporary evangelicalism through Charles Hodge's admiration for Francis Turretin, a seventeenth century scholastic. [47]

4.1. Analyzing Authority and Inerrancy

A common trait among advocates of detailed inerrancy at this time, and one that demonstrates their increasing concern that the doctrine be defended, was a seemingly new view of biblical authority. In fact, the shift could perhaps be described as a step from *sola scriptura* toward *sola inerrabilis*. Because the Bible itself cannot stand on its own as a foundation within modern philosophy, it needs a further foundation: inerrancy. Therefore, a certain view of the Bible supersedes (or at least exists alongside) the Bible itself as the foundation of evangelical Christianity.

Henry demonstrated this phenomenon all-too-well in a series of lectures at Yale University titled "Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal."⁴⁸ George Hunsinger evaluates Henry's position effectively:

"Evangelical theology," writes Henry, "roots the Scripture in its divine inspiration and holds that the Bible is inerrant because it is divinely inspired." Only the doctrine of inerrancy, he continues, can finally "protect the identity and centrality of Christ" as well as "the authority and inspiration of the Bible." Note the logical order and relation of these ideas. The authority of Scripture is seen as grounded in its divine inspiration, and this inspiration is then seen as the source of inerrancy in all matters of factuality and truth. Whereas inspiration is the source of inerrancy, inerrancy is the ultimate ground of truth. [49]

In other words, the Bible alone cannot meet the demands of modern philosophy, but the Bible read through the doctrine of inerrancy can. Obviously, it matters very much that "the identity and centrality of Christ" and "the authority and inspiration of the Bible" be protected. If, as Henry supposes, protecting these beliefs depends on reading the Bible as inerrant, solid support for inerrancy is crucial for the Christian faith. Hence one sees such a great increase in concern among evangelicals about the doctrine of inerrancy during this period. This also helps demonstrate the relationship between biblical authority and one's view of biblical authority.

While all Christians place at least some authority in the Bible, doing so implicitly commits each and every Christian to a particular view of Biblical authority. In his article "Reimagining Biblical Authority," Brian Walsh writes: "The Bible is only received authoritatively in terms of a certain view of authority that we bring to the text." [50] This dynamic raises the question for Henry and others of what is, in fact, "on top." Does the Bible inform one's view of authority or does one's view of authority inform the Bible? "It is too often the case that what is authoritative is not really the Bible at all but the particular theology that is brought to the Bible and rules magisterially over the text." [51]

An excellent example of a particular view of biblical authority ruling over the Bible itself is found in *The Battle for the Bible*. In a section dealing with alleged errors in the Bible, Lindsell addresses the discrepancy in the gospel accounts of Peter's denial of Jesus. The alleged error is certainly a minor one, in that Mark 14:30 records Jesus as saying "Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times," whereas in the other gospels the cock is said to crow only once after Peter's three denials. Lindsell's solution is that Peter actually denied Jesus six times that night and that the cock crowed after both the third and sixth denials. [52] Such a claim makes one wonder who actually has a higher view of Scripture's authority. In fact, Lindsell was harshly criticized for his "solution" by fellow inerrantist Gordon D. Fee who says such a move "borders on arguing for an errant text." [53] The point, however, remains that the constraints of modern philosophy caused evangelicals to care so much about detailed inerrancy that all apparent difficulties must be reconciled, no matter how great the exegetical sacrifice.

Lindsell's concern for inerrancy goes beyond his concern for its exegetical implications. He could not be more clear about this when he states: "I am making the claim that had there been no Bible there would be no Christian faith today, nor, for that matter, would there be a faith called Judaism." [54] This, in contrast to Warfield, a turn of the century inerrantist, who writes: "Were there no such thing as inspiration, Christianity would be true and all its essential doctrines would be credibly witnessed to us in the generally trustworthy reports of the teaching of our Lord... Inspiration is not the fundamental of Christian doctrines." [55] Certainly many inerrantists would reject Lindsell's claim, yet it does still serve as an example of the changes that took place, even within the inerrantist position, during the twentieth century. In fact, by comparison to Lindsell, Warfield appears almost hesitant to use biblical inspiration as a foundation in the Cartesian sense.

4.2. Analyzing Jesus' View of Scripture

Inerrancy's relationship to authority is closely related to the question of how the Bible views itself. Conservative evangelicals generally argued that the writers of Scripture, as well as Jesus, all held to a view

of detailed inerrancy. John Wenham writes in "Christ's View of Scripture" that "Jesus consistently treats Old Testament historical narratives as straightforward records of fact." [56] So when Jesus says "Offer the sacrifices Moses commanded" (Mark 7:10), this is said to prove that Moses actually wrote the books containing the law of Moses and when he refers to Jonah (Matthew 12:39), this is said to prove the contents of the book of Jonah are literal history. [57]

The standard counter-argument is that just because Jesus refers to Old Testament events does not prove they are literal history. For example, saying "Arthur was king in the days of Merlin" does not mean there was really a British monarch named Arthur and a magician named Merlin. The statement is itself true, though not in the factual, literal sense that detailed inerrantists attribute to Jesus' references to Old Testament events. In his argument that Jesus' view of the Old Testament was of literal history, Wenham concedes: "It is perfectly legitimate to use avowed legends and allegories to illustrate spiritual truth... While there is no evidence to suggest that Jesus understood [the Old Testament] in any but a literal way, a literal meaning is not essential to the basic meaning of them." [58] However he concludes, "Seldom can a nonliteral meaning be applied without some loss of vividness and effectiveness."

What implication might this claim have for Jesus' statement, "There was a man who had two sons" (Luke 15:11)? No one suggests there really was such a man, nor does anyone suggest Jesus' statement is not true. Yet, even here "there is no evidence to suggest" that Jesus was not speaking literally. Contrary to the section headings in contemporary Bibles, Jesus did not introduce his story as "The Parable of the Lost Son."

None of this is to say that Jesus did not view the Old Testament with the highest authority. The issue is more properly defined as whether Jesus tied the Old Testament's authority to its factuality. In other words, can a statement be true and yet not factual? For example, can the statement "Arthur was king in the days of Merlin" be true if factually there was never a king named Arthur? This leads to an important theme in the debate-perhaps the crux of the whole debate-that of the definition of truth.

4.3. Analyzing the Concept of Truth

Geisler considers various definitions of truth in his article, "The Concept of Truth in the Inerrancy Debate." He distinguishes between a "correspondence" view of truth, which he advocates and the "intentionality" view of truth, which he considers an unbiblical definition employed by opponents of inerrancy. [59] He sees this as significant to the inerrancy debate for he criticizes those who "claim to believe in inerrancy to the point that every word of the Bible is true, and yet they hold that Jesus' statement that the mustard seed is the 'smallest of all seeds' is scientifically incorrect." [60] Geisler's argument is that anyone who can make such a claim must have a distorted view of truth.

He claims that the intentionality view of truth is not satisfactory. He defines this view based on a line in a letter he received from Daniel Fuller, an advocate of the intentionality view. He quotes Fuller as saying that the "intentionality view of truth" claims "a statement is true if 'it accomplishes what the author intended it to accomplish.'" [61] Geisler rejects this concept with the argument that, by this definition, any statement (so long as the author is not intentionally misleading) would therefore be "true," no matter how false.

Because the word "truth" seems to be used in such a variety of contexts, both in contemporary usage and in the Bible, Geisler believes a certain definition of truth is needed to reconcile these differences. For example, some biblical claims seem to assume a straightforward view of truth, as in Jesus' crucifixion. Either Jesus was or was not crucified, making truth a fairly simple concept in this case. But what of statements such as "I am ... the truth" and "let God be true" (John 14:6, Romans 3:4)? Geisler seeks a view that can apply to both types of usage.

According to Geisler, only the correspondence view can account for the various ways the word is used in the Bible. He defines this view as "that which corresponds to the actual state of affairs, 'to the way things really are.'" [62] While a non-correspondence view distinguishes between truth and fact, "true" in the

correspondence view cannot apply to people but only to propositional statements; "only affirmations (or denials) are true or false." [63] But how can this definition account for biblical statements that apply "true" to people? Geisler explains: "One can safely say that the normal and consistent New Testament usage of 'truth' is of truth in the cognitive, propositional sense ... any passage where truth is used in reference to a person can be understood as meaning a person who speaks the truth or one Whose word can be trusted." [64] He concludes, "Every Christian should get his view about the Bible from the Bible." [65] In his study of Scripture and its authority, evangelical theologian Donald Bloesch offers an alternative to Geisler's view. "The point is not whether Scripture is inerrant in all factual details but whether it is true. We must affirm that the writers of the Bible, being human, had a capacity for error. But we must also insist that what the Holy Spirit teaches in and through their words is completely truthful." [66] Here, truth is separated from fact in what Geisler would label a non-correspondence definition of truth. But Bloesch sees the danger of Geisler's position and points out, "Such a position actually serves to undermine biblical authority by making the truth of Scripture contingent on scientific corroboration." [67] Very clearly, the effect of modern philosophy is yet again visible. Because status as a foundation depends upon factual inerrancy, a view of truth that demands factual correspondence is essential. Therefore, one again sees the increasing dependence on inerrancy in evangelical theology: inerrancy and its accompanying view of truth matter very much.

That modern philosophy has shaped the inerrantists' view of truth is indeed an ironic twist for Geisler. In Geisler's *Biblical Errancy: An Analysis of Its Philosophical Roots*, Thomas Hobbes and Gottfried Leibniz are accused of sowing the seeds of errancy. However it is precisely Hobbes and Leibniz that Bloesch cites as two of the originators of the idea that "truth consisted in the correspondence of a proposition with reality." [68] As Bloesch presents them, Hobbes' words even sound oddly familiar: "'truth and falsity' can be predicated only of 'propositions,' never of 'things.'" [69] While Geisler may sincerely intend to follow his own advice and "get his view about the Bible from the Bible," doing so is perhaps not as straightforward as he imagined. His view of truth bears the unmistakable marks of Hobbesian ancestry.

Bloesch contrasts the modern, correspondence notion of truth with what he believes is the Bible's view. He writes: "In biblical perspective the true is the spiritually and redemptively transformative. For moderns the true is that which can be empirically verified. ... The biblical conception of truth makes a place for the factual but insists that the factual neither exhaust the meaning of truth nor constitutes the essence of truth." [70] Under such a view of truth, the Bible's authority clearly does not hinge on empirical precision and detailed inerrancy would therefore not matter nearly so much; the desperate need for detailed inerrancy to be true could, in effect, dissolve.

5. Authority Without a "Foundation"? The Future of the Evangelical View of Scripture

Since the height of the inerrancy debate in the late 1970s and the early 1980s there has been a clear quieting among evangelicals on the subject. Though there have been relatively few books or articles published since that time, the above presentation does not seem to offer much hope for a clear understanding of biblical authority in evangelicalism due to the constraints of modern philosophy.

One development, even during the debate's more volatile days, has been a steady redefining of what constitutes an "error" to inerrantists. In 1976, Lindsell went to great lengths to reconcile seeming discrepancies in Old Testament battle accounts and the like. [71] Just two years later, the "Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," produced by the ICBI of which Lindsell was a member, states, "The truthfulness of Scripture is not negated by the appearance in it of ... seeming discrepancies between one passage and another." [72] And just three years after that, in a collection of essays produced by the ICBI as a defense of the doctrine, one reads:

In cases where the claim is made that a biblical statement is historically or scientifically false, one may respond that the critic fails to understand that the statement is not being used to teach history or science. Instead, it is being used to teach some moral or religious truth. Thus, to require exact factual accuracy as if the statement were being used to teach history or science would be to mistake its use. [73]

Does such a statement even belong to the same school of thought as that which forced Lindsell to attribute six denials to Peter? Perhaps due to the weakening of modern philosophy and the development of alternatives to foundationalism, the push towards detailed inerrancy has relaxed, at least somewhat, and the door seems at least somewhat open to evangelicals considering views of biblical authority besides detailed inerrancy. Clearly something has changed. Yet, not everything has changed.

On the academic front, the Evangelical Theological Society requires a yearly affirmation of detailed inerrancy-that "the Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs"-as a qualification for membership. In addition is the above-mentioned popularity of Geisler's *When Critics Ask*, in which detailed inerrancy is treated as the only orthodox view of biblical authority. The effects of modern philosophy are still very apparent.

Clearly, modern philosophy's demand for an indubitable foundation has constrained theology in the modern era. What is more, because Scripture could not "qualify" as a genuine Cartesian foundation on its own, the doctrine of inerrancy was required to legitimate it as a viable alternative to Protestant liberalism's experiential foundation. Therefore, inerrancy came to matter a great deal to evangelicals in a way that it otherwise would not have. Unfortunately, "the inerrantist doctrine turns out to be much more vulnerable to criticism than the contents of the Scriptures themselves." [74] The foundation is therefore weaker than the structure built upon it. Likely the first concern of many evangelicals at this point would be what place there is for the Bible in a nonfoundational world. Does not rejecting the Bible as a Cartesian foundation lead to rejecting the Bible as authoritative? This is no doubt a concern that supporters of detailed inerrancy would want addressed, and it is a valid one.

In fact, even in an epistemology that has discarded foundationalism, there is still an authority. The distinction between Cartesian foundationalism and authority is a vital one. Basing conclusions on a particular source of information is not necessarily Cartesian foundationalism. What Descartes (and modern philosophers who came after him) advocated was a particular definition of foundational knowledge, that which is contained in his "knowledge as a building" metaphor. [75] Foundationalism is so ingrained in contemporary thought that it is easy to make the mistake in assuming that without a foundation there can be no authority. But textual authority, obviously, pre-dated foundationalism, so foundationalism represents not authority but a certain kind of authority. Pre-modern medieval writers (including, for example, Luther) understood authority as resting in authorship. In foundationalism, authority rests in indubitability. The medieval view has some important similarities to how postmodern philosophy regards an authoritative text.

In most postmodern philosophy the Bible's authority rests in the church's recognition that the Bible is inspired, and therefore authoritative. The response of evangelicals to the challenges of modern philosophy all-too-often served to play into the hands of modern philosophers. It is important to realize that rejecting the modern philosophy of foundationalism is not an admission that the Bible is errant. Rather, it is a strong claim that foundationalism's categories of "errant versus inerrant" are wrong-headed. For someone who has abandoned foundationalism as an epistemology, recognizing minor discrepancies such as in Peter's denial or the number of deaths in a given battle does not undermine the Bible's authority. As we have seen, this is how Luther and Calvin approached the issue; thanks to the developments of postmodern philosophy, contemporary theologians can do the same.

There is, therefore, a place for biblical authority in a nonfoundational world. But many evangelicals will likely still be concerned that anything less than detailed inerrancy will lead to unbounded relativism in Scripture reading. Perhaps the Bible can be authoritative without being a foundation, but can it be authoritative enough to protect its message without being received as inerrant in all details? In short, how does one ensure (without an indubitable foundation) that the Bible is interpreted faithfully? The response to this concern is one that some evangelicals will find disturbing, but one that is important nonetheless. The evangelical church must be willing to recognize that its reading of Scripture is a community-based activity that embodies the ongoing history of a church's tradition.

Evangelicals have long been suspicious of the strong role tradition plays in Roman Catholicism, so perhaps evangelicals would want to reject outright any epistemology dependent on tradition. But there are good

reasons for evangelicals to give serious consideration to this approach. First, as Jonathan R. Wilson points out, "We may begin the process of disarming this objection by noting that foundationalist epistemologies and other formulations of biblical authority have not been terribly successful in avoiding or dissolving conflict." [76] So, it would not take much to improve the situation. Second, as Mark Noll points out, antitraditionalism does not free evangelicals from tradition, for they have their own tradition, however unspoken:

It is a problem arising from the universal human need for traditions that exists even among those who profess to be without traditions. The problem is analogous to Chesterton's dictum that where God has died, the demons prevail. American evangelicals who profess to live without ecclesiastical, denominational, and theological traditions do in fact sustain a virile ideological traditionalism in its place. That is, they have oriented their thinking around a set of principles, ideas, and assumptions that serve evangelicals much as institutions, creeds, or denominations have served the church in the past. [77]

Noll is making the claim that evangelicals might as well recognize their traditions, seeing as they exist regardless. In fact, such a move could be an exciting and powerful development in the history of American evangelicalism. Church tradition can therefore help ensure faithfulness to the Bible's meaning throughout history.

Such a move also counters the symptom of foundationalism, discussed above, in which only a foundational text validated by evidence external to the community of believers can be a valid foundation for the community of believers. Wilson puts it well: "In the new paradigm that I am seeking to develop, biblical authority is centered in the community of disciples, not in the work of the expert. Before the watching world, the church is called to live in such a way that the authority of Scripture is displayed as a witness of the gospel of Jesus Christ." [78]

In conclusion, the model described by Murphy in *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism* helps reveal the relationship between the evangelical inerrancy debate and modern philosophy. In fact, given the presuppositions of a foundationalist epistemology, the push by evangelicals toward detailed inerrancy and away from other views of scriptural inspiration is quite understandable. Now, however, philosophical resources are available to theologians that allow this push to be abandoned without undermining the Bible's authority. The fine distinctions between errancy and inerrancy can be allowed to dissolve: they may have been vital to biblical authority under the constraints of modern philosophy, but they can become virtual non-issues to postmodern theologians, just as they were virtual non-issues to pre-modern theologians.

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Endnotes

[1] Norman L. Geisler and Thomas Howe, *When Critics Ask: A Popular Handbook on Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 388.

[2] Evangelical author Richard J. Foster provides an excellent example of this, which helps set the scene for this article: "One [evangelical] institution I know of has a mural of a thirty-foot Jesus holding out a Bible. Now I hope that image gives you pause as you consider whether our primary mission is to give the world the Bible or give the world Jesus. Perhaps that artist would have done better to have painted a thirty-foot Bible holding out Jesus" (*Streams of Living Water* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 231). It is this world, in which Jesus' primary gift to humankind might be depicted as the Bible, that this article studies.

[3] Robert K. Johnston, *Evangelicals at an Impasse: Biblical Authority in Practice* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979), 19.

[4] Against inerrancy see Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979); in support of inerrancy see Norman L. Geisler, ed., *Biblical Errancy: An Analysis of its Philosophical Roots* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981).

[5] Geisler, *Biblical Errancy*, 7.

[6] Geisler, *Biblical Errancy*, 7, emphasis added.

[7] "Council Maps 10-Year Push for 'Historic, Verbal' Inerrancy," *Eternity*, Nov. 1977, 10.

[8] Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism*, 1. In this article, "modern" is used in the technical, philosophical sense to refer to those philosophical developments commonly said to originate in the Enlightenment and with René Descartes. The most relevant aspect of modern philosophy for this article is its epistemology, which depicts knowledge as a building. In this view, all beliefs must be based on solid, foundational beliefs. These foundational beliefs are not themselves based on any other beliefs and they must therefore be both universally held and indubitable. These details are developed below in the summary of Murphy's model.

[9] Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism*, 2, emphasis added.

[10] Nancey Murphy, "Philosophical Resources for Postmodern Evangelical Theology," *Christian Scholar's Review* 26 (1996): 185.

[11] Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism*, 5.

[12] Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism*, 12.

[13] Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism*, 12.

[14] Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism*, 2.

[15] Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism*, 14.

[16] Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism*, 15.

[17] Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism*, 20.

[18] Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism*, 32.

[19] Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism*, 32.

[20] Bacon is a mysterious figure in this debate. In his *Systematic Theology*, Hodge uses a theological method of Baconian inductivism to support to biblical inerrancy (quoted in Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism*, 34). At the same, Geisler, a supporter of Hodge, considers Bacon one of the root causes "that undermine inerrancy" (*Inerrancy*, 310-314).

[21] Mark A. Noll, ed., *The Princeton Theology 1812-1921: Scripture, Science, and Theological Method from Archibald Alexander to Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 31; and Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism*, 32-33.

[22] This is not to say the Old Princeton Theology originated the concept of inerrancy (though some claim just that). The present concern is to analyze the importance placed on inerrancy by evangelicals who followed the Hodges and Warfield into the twentieth century.

[23] Noll, Princeton Theology, 136-141.

[24] Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology (New York: Scribner, 1871), 1:170, emphasis added.

[25] The same could be said of Warfield, for whom "it was also legitimate to argue from the objective phenomena of inspiration to the Bible's authority." See B. B. Warfield, Studies in Theology (New York: Oxford, 1932), 3-21, cited in Ray C. W. Roennfeldt, Clark H. Pinnock on Biblical Authority: An Evolving Position (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews UP, 1993), 58.

[26] Murphy, Beyond Liberalism, 13.

[27] Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1.7.4, quoted in Donald G. Bloesch, Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration, and Interpretation (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), 60. Like Hodge, Calvin did mention the Bible's remarkable content as a possible reason to trust the Bible. However, this argument played only a secondary role in Calvin's doctrine of Scripture and, regardless, bore none of the weight of a Cartesian foundation that Hodge's argument did.

[28] Hodge, 1:170.

[29] Rogers, 285-289.

[30] John D. Woodbridge, Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 130.

[31] Woodbridge, 130.

[32] Rogers, 286.

[33] Rogers, 286.

[34] Woodbridge, 131.

[35] Quoted in Geisler, Inerrancy, 379.

[36] Bloesch, Holy Scripture, 90.

[37] Quoted in Bloesch, Holy Scripture, 90.

[38] Quoted in Roennfeldt, 25.

[39] In Lindsell's case, he cared particularly about a change in the Fuller Theological Seminary Statement of Faith that removed a clause about inerrancy (Harold Lindsell, The Battle for the Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 116). The developments at Fuller are described in more detail and with more balance in George Marsden, Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

[40] Lindsell, 18.

[41] Lindsell, 19, emphasis added. Lindsell does not distinguish between the concepts of inerrancy and infallibility, whereas writers today usually do make such a distinction.

[42] Lindsell, 21-23.

- [43] Norman L. Geisler, *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), x.
- [44] Johnston, 18.
- [45] Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 137.
- [46] Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 132.
- [47] Rogers, 289-292.
- [48] *Trinity Journal* 8 (1987): 3-19.
- [49] George Hunsinger, "What Can Evangelicals & Postliberals Learn from Each Other?" in *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation* (ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm; Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 141.
- [50] Brian J. Walsh, "Reimagining Biblical Authority," *Christian Scholar's Review* 26 (1996): 209.
- [51] Walsh, 209. Lest the analogy be missed, Walsh's choice of the word "magisterially" is likely no coincidence, but rather a pointed reference to magisterium, the infallible teaching authority of the Catholic Church and of the Pope, a concept most evangelicals are very uncomfortable with.
- [52] Lindsell, 175.
- [53] Gordon D. Fee, "Hermeneutics and Common Sense," in *Inerrancy and Common Sense* (ed. Roger R. Nicole and J. Ramsey Michaels; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 183.
- [54] Lindsell, 18.
- [55] Quoted in Johnston, 40.
- [56] In Geisler, *Inerrancy*, 6.
- [57] Geisler, *Inerrancy*, 6-7.
- [58] Geisler, *Inerrancy*, 7.
- [59] Norman L. Geisler, "The Concept of Truth in the Inerrancy Debate," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137 (1980): 328, 332.
- [60] Geisler, "Concept of Truth," 327.
- [61] Geisler, "Concept of Truth," 328.
- [62] Geisler, "Concept of Truth," 328. Here he cites Aristotle's *Categories* and *On Interpretation*.
- [63] Geisler, "Concept of Truth," 329.
- [64] Geisler, "Concept of Truth," 333.
- [65] Geisler, "Concept of Truth," 336.

[66] Bloesch, Holy Scripture, 128.

[67] Bloesch, Holy Scripture, 298.

[68] Bloesch, Holy Scripture, 286.

[69] Bloesch, Holy Scripture, 286.

[70] Bloesch, Holy Scripture, 191.

[71] Lindsell, 161-184.

[72] Quoted in Geisler, Inerrancy, 501.

[73] John S. Feinberg, "Noncognitivism: Wittgenstein" in Geisler, Biblical Errancy, 191.

[74] Murphy, "Philosophical Resources," 187.

[75] There are some who critique authority of any kind (Cartesian or otherwise), but this has more to do with notions of plurality and relativism than with a postmodern epistemology. Even some Christian postmodern philosophers sometimes do not draw this distinction clearly. For example, Rodney Clapp critiques a passage from C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity* as being incoherent for today's "sufficiently pluralistic" society because Lewis posited a "standard" of ethical debate ("How Firm a Foundation" in Phillips, 85). He attributes the failing of Lewis' argument to foundationalism. Leaving Lewis' relationship to modern philosophy aside, Clapp should recognize that "standards" of ethical debate vastly predate Descartes and are therefore not necessarily instances of foundationalism. Another example is Murphy herself, who attributes an "explicitly foundationalist" view to Bloesch, even though Bloesch's "explicit" use of the word "foundations" is not necessarily Cartesian given its context (*Beyond Liberalism*, 17).

[76] Jonathan R. Wilson, "Toward a New Evangelical Paradigm of Biblical Authority" in Phillips, 159.

[77] Mark A. Noll, "Evangelicals and the Study of the Bible" in *Evangelicalism and Modern America* (ed. George Marsden; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984): 118.

[78] Wilson in Phillips, 159.

John Perry
Fuller Theological Seminary
wendyjohn@netzero.com