

On the Gospel Accounts of Peter's Denials of Christ

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1 Introduction

The event of Peter's denials of Christ is a frequent subject of Sunday sermons. The prediction and outplaying of the denials, as recorded in the four Gospels, is a powerful reflection of a condition of our relationship with Christ---that our faith is more vulnerable than we care to admit.¹ But a small thorny issue surrounds the Gospel accounts of this event, one that is a nagging distraction to serious hermeneutic exposition. The issue has to do with Mark quoting Jesus as saying that a rooster will crow *twice* after Peter denies Him three times. The problem is that all the other three Gospels quote Jesus as saying, apparently, that the rooster will only crow once.²

2 The Gospel accounts

It is useful to consider, side-by-side, the passages from each of the four Gospels recording Jesus' prediction of Peter's denials:³

Matthew 26:31-35.

Then Jesus told them, "This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'⁴ But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee."

Peter replied, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will."

"I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times."

But Peter declared, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the other disciples said the same.

Mark 14:27-31.

"You will all fall away," Jesus told them, "for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.' But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee."

Peter declared, "Even if all fall away, I will not."

"I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "today---yes, tonight---before the rooster crows twice⁵ you yourself will disown me three times."

But Peter insisted emphatically, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the others said the same.

Luke 22:34.

Jesus answered, "I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me."

John 13:31-38.

When he was gone, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him,⁶ God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once.

"My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come.

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."
Simon Peter asked him, "Lord, where are you going?"
Jesus replied, "Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later."
Peter asked, "Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you."
Then Jesus answered, "Will you really lay down your life for me? I tell you the truth, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times!"

The four accounts are, by most reasonable standards, consistent. The most glaring inconsistency, one that is often cited by Biblical detractors as a "contradiction" in the Bible,⁷ is that Mark is the only Gospel writer to quote Jesus as saying that the rooster will crow *twice* after Peter disowns Him three times (Mark 14:30). All the other Gospel writers have Jesus as saying that the rooster will crow, without mentioning how many times, suggesting only one crow (Matthew 26:34, Luke 22:34, John 13:38). Some expositors happily ignore this inconsistency, focusing only on the hermeneutic implications of the accounts.⁸ But because this inconsistency is relatively obvious, many feel a need to find satisfactory resolution.

The first and natural inclination on noticing this inconsistency is to examine the accounts of the actual denials. Again, it is useful to consider, side-by-side, the relevant passages from each of the four Gospels:

Matthew 26:69-75.

Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. "You also were with Jesus of Galilee," she said.
But he denied it before them all. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said.
Then he went out to the gateway, where another girl saw him and said to the people there, "This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth."
He denied it again, with an oath: "I don't know the man!"
After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, "Surely you are one of them, for your accent gives you away."
Then he began to call down curses on himself and he swore to them, "I don't know the man!"
Immediately a rooster crowed. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: "Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly.

Mark 14:66-72.

While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came by. When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him.
"You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus," she said.
But he denied it. "I don't know or understand what you're talking about," he said, and went out into the entryway.⁹
When the servant girl saw him there, she said again to those standing around, "This fellow is one of them." Again he denied it. After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, "Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean."
He began to call down curses on himself, and he swore to them, "I don't know this man you're talking about."
Immediately the rooster crowed the second time.¹⁰ Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows twice¹¹ you will disown me three times." And he broke down and wept.

Luke 22:54-62.

Then seizing him, they led him away and took him into the house of the high priest. Peter followed at a distance. But when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter sat down with them. A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, "This man was with him."
But he denied it. "Woman, I don't know him," he said.
A little later someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them."
"Man, I am not!" Peter replied.
About an hour later another asserted, "Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean."

Peter replied, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about!" Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly.

John 18:15-17,25-27.

Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest's courtyard, but Peter had to wait outside at the door. The other disciple, who was known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the girl on duty there and brought Peter in.

"You are not one of his disciples, are you?" the girl at the door asked Peter.

He replied, "I am not."

It was cold, and the servants and officials stood around a fire they had made to keep warm. Peter also was standing with them, warming himself.

...

As Simon Peter stood warming himself, he was asked, "You are not one of his disciples, are you?"

He denied it, saying, "I am not."

One of the high priest's servants, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, challenged him, "Didn't I see you with him in the olive grove?" Again Peter denied it, and at that moment a rooster began to crow.

Even the careful reader finds that the situation is not as one would have hoped---the inconsistency of Mark 14:30 is not easily resolved by an examination of the above passages. To make matters worse, footnotes in the New International Version point out that early manuscripts of Mark 14:30 and 14:72 omit the word "twice" (and "the second time" in the first part of 14:72). At the same time, another footnote points out that in Mark 14:68, at what is the first denial in Mark's gospel, early manuscripts record that the rooster crows (for the first time). Indeed, the King James Version explicitly includes this appendage to Mark 14:68: "and the cock crew."¹²

Complicating matters even further, although each Gospel records exactly three denials, the people involved in each of the denials differ from Gospel to Gospel. Table 1 summarizes the people involved in the denials, as recorded in each of the four Gospels.

Gospel	First denial	Second denial	Third denial
Matthew	A servant girl (26:69)	Another girl (26:71)	Some standing people (26:73)
Mark	A servant girl (14:66)	The same servant girl (14:69)	Some standing people (14:70)
Luke	A servant girl (22:56)	A man (22:58)	Another man (22:59)
John	A girl at door (18:17)	Anonymous person(s) (18:25)	High priest's servant (18:26)

Table 1: People involved in the three denials in each of the Gospels.

3 Exegetical solutions

In resolving the apparent problem with the Gospel accounts of Peter's denials, several exegetical solutions have been proposed. Most solutions involve simple explanations of how the two rooster crows in Mark can be reconciled with the other three Gospels. However, some have proposed that the solution lies in the realization that there were in fact *six* denials altogether, and that this explanation is necessary to account for the two-crows record of Mark. We explore both of these solution approaches next.

3.1 Three-denials solutions

Probably the more natural exegesis is to maintain that three denials were involved, but that some simple explanation underlies Mark's counting of two crows. The following explanations are typical:

Two crows in a row.

It is thought that roosters often crow multiple times in a row. If so, then saying that that rooster crowed twice is simply *additional* information about the rooster's crows.¹³ For example, the Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry (CARM) puts it this way:¹⁴ Mark does not mention when the cock crowed the first time. Therefore, it is possible that after Peter's third denial, the cock then crowed twice; that is, two times in a row. This is logically possible.

The main thrust of this solution is to discount the apparent contradiction in the Gospel accounts. The point of Jesus' speaking of the rooster crowing is to signify a particular time frame for the occurrence of Peter's denial---around midnight, not far from daybreak.

Second crow is the main crow.

Similar to the first solution, this second explains the discrepancy by considering the second crow to be the "main" crow in signifying the time frame of interest; again, Mark was just furnishing additional detail. In other words, the rooster's second crow is what Matthew, Luke, and John meant when they wrote "crow."¹⁵ As in the first approach, the point is that Jesus' reference to a rooster crow (or two) signifies midnight, and all Gospels are consistent about this time frame.

Different observers, different accounts.

Yet another solution is to point out that the differences in descriptions among the four Gospels arise from the fact that they were written under different observational vantage points.¹⁶ This solution is quite general, and has the advantage of also explaining the differences in people involved in Peter's denials---the four Gospel authors wrote from their own unique perspectives.

Later manuscripts introduced "twice."

A final solution to the apparent variance in Mark is to posit that Mark's original manuscript did not include the reference to two crows, and that this was an erroneous addition introduced into later manuscripts.¹⁷ Indeed, the New International Version's footnotes corroborate this line of reasoning. Moreover, the removal of the reference to a first crow in Mark 14:68 (present in the King James Version and other translations) in later translations¹⁸ further suggests that more recent evidence and scholarship justified this removal.

3.2 Six-denials solutions

A more radical solution to the problem is to submit that there were in fact *six* denials altogether, not three. The rationale here is that Mark's quote of Jesus saying that Peter would deny Him three times before the rooster crows twice means that there would be three denials *for each crow of the rooster*. The rooster crowed after the third and the sixth denials. One proponent of this view, Mark Smith, puts it this way: "Logic demands that either Mark got it wrong, or Peter must've denied Jesus six times."¹⁹ This proposal raises the immediate question of how the explanation can be reconciled with the fact that all the Gospels mention only three denials (each). However, one quickly realizes a further advantage of this approach: that it explains why the various people involved in the denials in the four Gospels differ

somewhat. Is it possible that the four Gospels together account for six different denial episodes altogether, but that each Gospel only describes three of them?

The six-denials approach was popularized by Harold Lindsell in his 1976 book, *The Battle for the Bible*.²⁰

The success of the approach relies on being able to reconstruct a cogent account of the six denials that is consistent with all the Gospels. One possible account, due to Michael Cortright, is given below:²¹

First denial:

A girl at the door to the courtyard (John 18:17).

Second denial:

A servant girl, by the fire in the courtyard (Matthew 26:69, Mark 14:66, Luke 22:56).

Third denial:

A man by the fire in the courtyard (Luke 22:58).

First crow.

Mark 14:68 (King James Version).

Fourth denial:

Another girl, at the gateway (Matthew 26:71) or entryway (Mark 14:68,69).²²

Fifth denial:

Some anonymous (standing) people by the fire in the courtyard (Matthew 26:73, Mark 14:70, John 18:25).

Sixth denial:

Another man who happens to be a male servant of the high priest (Luke 22:59, John 18:26).

Second crow.

Matthew 26:74, Mark 14:72, Luke 22:60, John 18:27.

The above reconstruction appears to be largely consistent with the Gospel accounts.

4 Inerrancy

Which of these solutions is the most plausible? Before examining this question, it is worth exploring why the question is interesting at all (if indeed it is). In general, interest in questions like this is tied to a commitment to defending the correctness of the Biblical record. This commitment comes in several forms, all under the rubric of *inerrancy*.

Biblical inerrancy is the general position that the Bible is entirely true and never false in all it affirms.²³ A lack of consensus on the exact scope of inerrancy has spurred debate among evangelicals for decades, reaching its height in the 1970s and 1980s. According to Robert Johnston,²⁴ evangelicals faced an impasse in this debate over twenty years ago. Many consider it beyond hope of resolution.

Four dominant views of Biblical inspiration exist among evangelicals:

1. detailed inerrancy;
2. irenic inerrancy;
3. partial infallibility; and
4. complete infallibility.

Johnston summarizes these views as follows:²⁵

"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.

As John Perry points out in a recent article, "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."²⁶ It is within the mire of this disagreement that we are confronted with an issue like the variance of Mark's account of Peter's denials.

The dominant view among orthodox evangelicals is detailed inerrancy---in fact, the word inerrancy in orthodox evangelicalism has come to mean detailed inerrancy. This view is well represented in the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*, produced in 1978 by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI).²⁷ It was signed by nearly 300 noted evangelical scholars, including the likes of James M. Boice, Norman L. Geisler, John Gerstner, Carl F. H. Henry, Kenneth Kantzer, Harold Lindsell, John Warwick Montgomery, Roger Nicole, J. I. Packer, Robert Preus, Earl Radmacher, Francis Schaeffer, R. C. Sproul, and John Wenham. But this view did not go unopposed, even by conservatives. For example, Rogers and McKim claim that what the ICBI defined as inerrancy was very different from what Luther, Calvin, and others ("the Reformers and their most able interpreters in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries") meant by inerrancy.²⁸

Detailed inerrancy is concerned with the *factual* correctness of the Bible, even in matters apart from salvation. Paul Feinberg puts it this way: "Inerrancy is the view that when all the facts become known, they will demonstrate that the Bible in its original autograph and correctly interpreted is entirely true and never false in all it affirms, whether that relates to doctrine or ethics or to the social, physical or life sciences."²⁹ Thus, conservative evangelicals view a commitment to inerrancy as a commitment to defending the factual content of the Bible in *all* matters, including exactly what Jesus said to Peter in His prediction of the denials.

To make my argument precise, I define *detailed inerrancy* to be a *strict* adherence to the position that the original manuscripts are *completely* free of *factual* errors.³⁰ This position was likely that of detailed inerrantists at the height of the inerrancy debate---Lindsell's position in the 1970s is a representative example. As I will argue in the next section, this strict position raises some issues that will become apparent in our analysis of the solutions to the variance of Mark's Gospel with respect to the record surrounding Peter's denials.

5 Analysis of the solutions

In light of the inerrancy debate, we now evaluate the two solution approaches to the variance of Mark's account of Peter's denials. Consider first the three-denials solutions. At the outset, these solutions indeed appear plausible, and together they comprise the most commonly held view on the issue. However, if *detailed inerrancy* is to be upheld, then the following disjunction is inevitable (i.e., one of these two statements holds):

1. either the current manuscripts differ from the original manuscripts with respect to the Gospel accounts of Peter's denials, or

2. the three-denials solutions are inadequate.

For if the the current manuscripts correctly reflect the original manuscripts with respect to Gospel accounts of Peter's denials, and we assume detailed inerrancy, then the three-denials solutions are inadequate because their defense involves only that the general meaning of Jesus' prediction (that Peter's denials will take place before daybreak) are consistent across the Gospels. The *fact* of what Jesus actually said is still in question.³¹ If, on the other hand, we yield to the possibility that the current manuscripts do *not* correctly reflect the original manuscripts, then inerrancy has little to say about the issue at hand, losing virtually all practical meaning.

Thus, the three-denials approach is incompatible with detailed inerrancy. Which should we abandon? The answer depends on how well the other main alternative, the six-denials approach, holds up.

On careful examination, the six-denials approach is even more problematic. Although it appears at the outset to uphold detailed inerrancy, several problems arise. First, the argument that "either Mark got it wrong or Peter must have denied Jesus six times"³² commits the fallacy of *false dilemma*. The three-denials solutions are obvious alternatives, if we are willing to forgo detailed inerrancy. More serious are the exegetical implications of this approach, which involves what appears to be a stretching of exegetical boundaries for the sole purpose of satisfying detailed inerrancy. Indeed, Lindsell was harshly criticized for this "solution" by fellow inerrantist Gordon Fee, who asserts that such a move "borders on arguing for an errant text."³³

So, depending on one's commitment to detailed inerrancy, both solutions are inadequate. The conflict here is symptomatic of the conflict in the inerrancy debate as a whole. John Perry argues that there is a way out of this debate: "not by resolving the debate but by dissolving it." His main thesis is that the commitment to detailed inerrancy is a byproduct of modern philosophical presuppositions, mainly *foundationalism*.³⁴ The fervent defense of the doctrine of inerrancy has resulted in what Perry calls a shift from *sola scriptura* toward *sola inerrabilis*. He continues, "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."³⁵

6 Conclusion

Peter's denials of Christ will continue to be a frequent subject of Sunday sermons. That Mark's account of the event differs from the other three Gospels' does no violence to the hermeneutic impact of the passages. The resolution of this discrepancy remains, nonetheless, a topic of interest among evangelicals, insofar as such a resolution is needed in upholding a commitment to the doctrine of inerrancy. The more sensible and plausible of the approaches to this resolution appears to be of the three-denials category, taking a straightforward path toward reconciling the differences among the Gospel accounts. The more problematic six-denials approach seems to be the result of holding on to detailed inerrancy at almost any exegetical cost. But adopting the three-denials approach entails compromising detailed inerrancy, which goes against the grain of conservative evangelicalism.

Is it reasonable for evangelicals to relax their embrace on detailed inerrancy as the default model of Biblical inerrancy? John Perry points out that the kind of commitment to detailed inerrancy prevalent in conservative evangelicalism was not the position of the pre-modern reformers. Instead, their model of inerrancy was based on Biblical authority, not validation of its factual content by external corroboration. As Donald Bloesch points out, "Such a position actually serves to undermine biblical authority by making the truth of Scripture contingent on scientific corroboration."³⁶ In light of this, it appears reasonable for evangelicals to re-evaluate their position on detailed inerrancy. Only if they are released from the constraints of detailed inerrancy are they free to adopt solutions to Biblical difficulties like the three-denials approach to the issue of Mark's record concerning Peter's denials.

Since the height of the inerrancy debate of the 1970s and 1980s, there has been a slow but gradual release of evangelicalism's grip on (strict) detailed inerrancy. Even the ICBI's *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*, released just two years after Lindsell's 1976 book, portrays a slightly more relaxed position: "The truthfulness of Scripture is not negated by the appearance in it of ... seeming discrepancies between one passage and another." On this point, Perry observes, "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."³⁷

All the same, our interest in the resolution of the Gospels' accounts of Peter's denials reflects the ongoing inerrancy debate among Christians. John Perry proposes this solution to the debate: "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." If Perry is correct, then the sooner we dissolve the inerrancy debate, the better.

End Notes:

¹See, e.g., <http://www.fbcharleston.org/archive6.html>.

²It is interesting that this dichotomy is not along synoptic lines. Instead, it is probably more related to Mark being the earliest of the Gospels.

³All quoted in the New International Version.

⁴Zechariah 13:7

⁵Some early manuscripts do not have "twice."

⁶Many early manuscripts do not have "If God is glorified in him."

⁷See, e.g., http://www.sunnahonline.com/ilm/dawah/0009_page2.htm.

⁸See, e.g., the Bible study notes in <http://www.simplebiblestudies.com/Sdeny.htm>.

⁹Some early manuscripts, "entryway and the rooster crowed."

¹⁰Some early manuscripts do not have "the second time."

¹¹Some early manuscripts do not have "twice."

¹²Other translations also include a similar appendage, including the *New King James Version*, the *Modern King James Version*, the *Amplified Bible* translation, the *English Standard Version*, the *American Standard Version*, the *Worldwide English* translation, *Young's Literal Translation*, the *Darby Translation*, the *Wycliffe New Testament*, the *New Living Translation*, the *GOD'S WORD* translation, and *The Message*.

¹³This is the approach espoused in <http://www.biblestudymanuals.net/contradict.htm> and also in <http://thebereans.net/contra-i20.shtml>.

¹⁴See http://www.carm.org/diff/Matt26_33.htm.

¹⁵This is the view in Eric Lyons, "Cock-a-doodle-do...twice?" *Apologetics Press*, 2002, available at <http://www.apologeticspress.org/abdiscr/abdiscr52.html>.

A similar view is found in http://www.nonak.com/contractions_of_bible.htm.

¹⁶See, e.g., <http://www.behindthebadge.net/apologetics/discuss3.html>.

¹⁷This solution is proposed in <http://www.worthynews.com/apologetics/101-46-50.htm>.

¹⁸For example, the *New International Version* and the *New American Standard Bible*.

¹⁹This is a quote from <http://www.cswnet.com/~duxrow/webdoc20.htm>.

²⁰H. Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible*. Zondervan, 1976.

²¹This reconstruction is adapted from <http://www.redbay.com/ekkleisia/denypetr.htm>.

²²Cortright's account of the fourth denial appears to be inconsistent with Mark's description of the *same* servant girl (as the second denial in this reconstruction) being involved.

²³See Paul D. Feinberg, "Bible, Inerrancy and Infallibility of," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter A. Elwell, Ed., 1984, p. 142.

²⁴Robert K. Johnston, *Evangelicals at an Impasse: Biblical Authority in Practice*. John Knox, 1979.

²⁵Ibid., p. 19.

²⁶John Perry, "Dissolving the Inerrancy Debate: How Modern Philosophy Shaped the Evangelical View of Scripture," *Journal for Christian Theological Research*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2001. http://home.apu.edu/~CTRF/articles/2001_articles/perry.html.

Also, *Quodlibet Journal*, vol. 3, no. 4, Fall 2001, ISSN: 1526-6575, <http://www.Quodlibet.net>.

²⁷See <http://www.jpusa.org/jpusa/documents/biblical.htm>.

²⁸J. B. Rogers and D. K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach*. Harper & Row, 1979.

²⁹Paul D. Feinberg, "Bible, Inerrancy and Infallibility of," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter A. Elwell, Ed., 1984, p. 142.

³⁰Some refer to this as *full inerrancy*; e.g., see <http://sxws.com/Admin/articles/articles-001.html>.

³¹Unless, of course, Jesus actually made two different statements to Peter---one quoted in Matthew, Luke, and John, and the second quoted in Mark. This scenario seems highly unlikely.

³²See <http://www.cswnet.com/~duxrow/webdoc20.htm>.

³³Gordon D. Fee, "Hermeneutics and Common Sense," in *Inerrancy and Common Sense*, Roger R. Nicole and J. Ramsey Michaels, Eds., Baker, 1980, p. 183. (As quoted in Perry, "Dissolving Inerrancy," cited before.)

³⁴Roughly, foundationalism is the position that truth can be derived from indubitable knowledge, called a "foundation," available to each individual. This idea is traced to René Descartes.

³⁵Perry, "Dissolving Inerrancy," cited before.

³⁶Donald G. Bloesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration, and Interpretation*. InterVarsity, 1994, p. 298. (As quoted in Perry, "Dissolving Inerrancy," cited before.)

³⁷Perry, "Dissolving Inerrancy," cited before.

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