CHAPTER TWO

The Doctrine of Biblical Inerrancy

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THE DOCTRINE OF biblical inerrancy is fundamental to the identity of Wesley Biblical Seminary. But what precisely does this doctrine affirm? What are we claiming when we assert that the Bible is "inerrant"? Like the doctrine of the trinity, the incarnation, or the atonement, the doctrine of inerrancy requires careful nuance. The aim of this chapter is to provide a robust articulation of inerrancy that is both consistent with the phenomena observed in Scripture and informed by the church's centuries of reflection.

Reconciling Wesley and Erasmus

In 1763, an Anglican bishop named William Warburton wrote a treatise in which he suggested that divine inspiration prevented the authors of Scripture from making any "considerable error" but not from making "trifling errors in circumstances of small importance."[1] To this John Wesley retorted, "Nay, will not the allowing there is *any error* in Scripture shake the authority of the whole?"[2] This exchange between Warburton and Wesley echoes one which occurred two and a

1 William Warburton, *The Doctrine of Grace* (London: A. Millar, 1763), 33, 36. By "considerable error," Warburton appears to mean an error that "concerns either faith or practice" [*Doctrine*, 34].

2 "Letter to Bishop of Gloucester," II.5, in *Works*, 11:504.

half centuries earlier between the theologian John Eck and the renowned renaissance scholar Desiderius Erasmus. In his correspondence with Eck, Erasmus explained that he did not believe "the authority of the whole of Scripture" would be "instantly imperiled" if, for example, one of the Gospel writers "by a slip of memory" had misattributed a verse from Jeremiah to Isaiah. "For this," Erasmus argued, "is not a point on which anything turns." According to Erasmus, acknowledging that the Gospel writers could have made such ordinary human errors does not "deprive them of the Holy Spirit." The Holy Spirit "was present in them so far as pertained to the business of the Gospel," but "in other respects he allowed them to be human none the less."[3]

On the surface, Erasmus and Wesley appear to take opposite positions. The view of divine inspiration that Erasmus articulates seems to be precisely the position that Wesley rejects. On closer examination, however, it is not clear that Wesley and Erasmus actually disagree. In his letter, Erasmus was responding to concerns that Eck had raised about his comments on Matthew 2:6. In this verse, Matthew appears to misquote the prophet Micah. In Micah 5:2, Bethlehem is described as "too little to be among the clans of Judah," but in Matthew's quotation of this verse, Bethlehem is described as "by no means least among the rulers of Judah" (ESV). To Eck's dismay, Erasmus had explained this discrepancy by suggesting that perhaps Matthew did not have the text of Micah in front of him but instead "trusted as men will to memory and made a mistake."[4] This suggestion, however, is not much different from Wesley's own comments on Matthew 2:6. Wesley writes, "When this and several other quotations from the Old Testament are compared with the original, it plainly appears the apostles did not always think it necessary exactly to transcribe the passages they cited, but contented themselves with giving the general sense, though with some diversity of language."[5] While Wesley might object to the word "mistake," both

3 "Letter 844: To Johann Maier von Eck," in *Collected Works of Erasmus: Volume 6*, trans. R.A.B. Mynors and D.F.S. Thomson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 28.

4 "Letter 769: From Johann Maier von Eck," in *Collected Works of Erasmus: Volume 5*, trans. R.A.B. Mynors and D.F .S. Thomson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 289.

5 *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (London: Epworth, 1966), 19.

he and Erasmus seem to be describing the same phenomenon: loose citation from memory.

Furthermore, Wesley would evidently not agree with Eck. In his dispute with Erasmus, Eck objected not only to the suggestion that the NT authors sometimes relied on memory; he objected to the suggestion that they sometimes relied on books! Eck maintained that the NT authors never needed to look up a verse in the OT, not because they had perfect memories, but because the words they wrote were supplied to them directly by the Holy Spirit. On Eck's view of divine inspiration, the NT authors were simply transcribing the words that were dictated to them by the Spirit. "Heaven forbid," Eck declared, that we should envision the authors of the Gospels putting "a work together, as we do, from various written sources and authorities."[6]

Eck's mechanical view of inspiration is difficult to reconcile with Luke 1:1–4, where Luke explicitly describes conducting research and gathering information from eyewitnesses.[7] Wesley certainly had no problem with the view that the Gospel writers used sources. This is clear from his comments on the famous discrepancy between Matthew and Luke on the genealogy of Jesus. In his comments on Matthew 1:1, Wesley reasons,

> If there were any difficulties in this genealogy, or that given by St. Luke, which could not easily be removed, they would rather affect the Jewish tables than the credit of the evangelists; for they act only as historians, setting down these genealogies as they stood in those public and allowed records. Therefore they were to take them as they found them. Nor was it needful they should correct the mistakes, if

6 "Letter 769," 290. A similar view of inspiration is suggested in the fourteenth century by John Wyclif: "Insofar as the entirety of Holy Scripture is the unique word of God, and our authors are only God's scribes or heralds charged with the duty of inscribing his law he has dictated to them, so when compared to God they are only authors in an equivocal sense" [*On the Truth of Holy Scripture*, trans. Ian Christopher Levy (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001), 207–8].

7 Note that the "we" passages in Acts indicate that Luke traveled to Judea with Paul, where he met many eyewitnesses including James, Jesus' own brother (Acts 21:17–18). Note also that the "we" passages resume when Paul begins his travel to Rome (Acts 27:1), suggesting that Luke remained in Judea during the two years that Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea (Acts 24:27). These two years would have given Luke ample opportunity to do precisely the sort of research he claims to have done in Luke 1:1–4.

> there were any. For these accounts sufficiently answer the end for which they are recited. They unquestionably prove the grand point in view, that Jesus was of the family from which the promised seed was to come. And they had more weight with the Jews for this purpose than if alterations had been made by inspiration itself. For such alterations would have occasioned endless disputes between them and the disciples of our Lord.[8]

Here Wesley not only acknowledges that the Gospel authors used sources; he also suggests that they did not necessarily need to "correct the mistakes" in their sources, provided that those mistakes did not impact "the end for which" the sources were cited. In other words, Wesley is apparently not troubled by mistakes that do not affect the message intended by the Gospel authors. The distinction Wesley draws here resembles the distinction Erasmus made when he suggests that the misattribution of an OT quotation "is not a point on which anything turns" and does not impact "the business of the Gospel."

In conclusion, while Erasmus may appear at first glance to disagree with Wesley's insistence that the Bible does not contain "any error," the views of these two theologians can be reconciled by adding a single caveat: the Bible is without error *in all that it teaches* or *in all that it affirms*. Such a claim is compatible with Erasmus' suggestion that the Bible might contain errors that are incidental to the message, such as the misattribution of an OT quotation. This qualification is also more precise than Warburton's distinction between "considerable" errors and "trifling" errors. As Wesley recognized, such a formulation tends to undermine the authority of Scripture. While perhaps Warburton merely intended to express the same distinction articulated by Erasmus, his language suggests that the reader stands in judgment over the teachings of Scripture, determining that certain teachings are unimportant and may therefore be rejected. The claim that the Bible is without error in *all* that it teaches avoids such a disastrous conclusion while simultaneously acknowledging the obvious fact that some errors, such as spelling errors, might not have any bearing on the message of the text.

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8 *Explanatory Notes*, 15.

Maintaining Augustine's Three Caveats

According to some contemporary Wesleyan scholars, Wesley's staunch insistence upon biblical inerrancy was a regrettable mistake occasioned by the influence of Enlightenment rationalism. Jason E. Vickers, for example, presents Wesley's statements on inerrancy as evidence that he "could not avoid being caught up in the prevailing thought currents of the long eighteenth century" in which the Bible was conceived of primarily as "a repository of rational propositions."[9] Such an argument, however, fails to reckon with the indisputable fact that the view of biblical inerrancy articulated by Wesley predates the Enlightenment by well over a millennium.

Recall Wesley's response to Warburton: "Will not the allowing there is *any error* in Scripture shake the authority of the whole?" Elsewhere Wesley reasoned, "If there be one falsehood in the Bible, there may be a thousand; neither can it proceed from the God of truth."[10] While Vickers attributes such statements to the influence of the Enlightenment, Wesley is merely expressing the same concern that Augustine articulated fourteen hundred years earlier. In a letter to Jerome penned around AD 395, Augustine argues that if one concedes that the Bible contains a single "falsehood," then "the authority of the Divine Scriptures is undermined."[11] In a subsequent letter to Jerome addressing the same concern, Augustine insists that the canonical books are "free of all error" and that "not one of their authors has erred in writing anything at all. If I do find anything in those books which seems contrary to truth," Augustine explains, "I decide that either the text is corrupt, or the translator did not follow what was really said, or that I failed to understand it."[12]

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9 Jason E. Vickers, "The Holiness of Scripture," in *Wesley, Wesleyans, and Reading Bible as Scripture*, ed. Joel B. Green and David F. Watson (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 147–59, at 149–151.

10 "Letter to the Reverend Mr. Law," in *Works* (Jackson), 9:481.

11 *Letters* 28.5. Translation from Wilfrid Parsons, *Saint Augustine: Letters Volume I*, FC 12 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1981), 97.

12 *Letters* 82.3. Translation from Parsons, *Augustine: Letters I*, 392. Augustine was hardly the only pre-Enlightenment thinker to hold this view. In the opening of his magisterial *Summa Theologiae*, for example, the thirteenth-century theologian Thomas Aquinas quotes approvingly from Augustine's letter: "Only to those books or writings which are called canonical have I learnt to pay such honor that I firmly believe that none of

Notice the careful nuance in this ancient articulation of biblical inerrancy. First, Augustine acknowledges the possibility of an *error in transmission*. The scribe who copies the Bible is not infallible. Second, Augustine acknowledges the possibility of an *error in translation*. The scholar who translates the Bible is not infallible. Finally, Augustine acknowledges the possibility of an *error in interpretation*. The reader who interprets the Bible is not infallible. Each of these three caveats is important and merits further elaboration.

ERROR IN TRANSMISSION

In his comments on Revelation 13:17, the second-century theologian Irenaeus noted that the mark of the beast was 616 in some manuscripts but 666 in "all the most approved and ancient copies."[13] Now according to Irenaeus, the book of Revelation was written "toward the end of Domitian's reign."[14] Domitian died in AD 96, and Irenaeus died about one hundred years later. Irenaeus' comments on the mark of the beast thus reveal that, within only one century of its composition, the original copy of Revelation had been lost. All the church possessed in Irenaeus' day were copies of Revelation. Moreover, as Irenaeus recognized, some of these copies were less reliable than others. The third-century theologian Origen was quite explicit about this problem: "It is recognized that there is much diversity in our copies [of the New Testament texts], whether by the carelessness of certain scribes, or by someone who too rashly made a text correction, or by some others making arbitrary additions or omissions in their corrections."[15]

In a recent publication, Michael Licona argues that since the claim to inerrancy concerns the teachings of Scripture and not the incidental details, we can dispense with the caveat that the Bible we possess "is only inerrant to the extent that it mirrors the originals." According to Licona, we can proclaim that "our present Bible, the Bible you and I

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their authors have erred in composing them" [*Summa Theologiae* Ia.1.8]. Translation from Thomas Gilby, *St. Thomas Aquinas: Summa Theologiae Volume I* (Cambridge: Blackfriars, 1964), 32.

13 *Against Heresies* 5.30.1 (*ANF* 1:558).

14 *Against Heresies* 5.30.3 (*ANF* 1:560).

15 *Commentary on Matthew* 15.14. Translation from D. H. Williams, ed., *Matthew: Interpreted by Early Christian Commentators,* The Church's Bible (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 291.

hold in our hands and study, is inerrant."[16] Such an argument, however, assumes that any ongoing debates over the original text concern only incidental details that do not alter the message of the text. This assumption is simply not true.

Consider, for example, 1 Corinthians 14:34–35: "The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says. If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church" (NASB). While these two verses are present in every manuscript we possess, many scholars doubt their authenticity.[17] First and foremost, these verses appear in context to prohibit women from prophesying in the assembly. These two verses follow Paul's declaration in verse 31: "You can all prophesy one by one" (NASB). As Gordon Fee observes in his commentary, the most natural reading of 14:34–35 is that these two verses restrict the "all" of verse 31 to males.[18] However, such a restriction flatly contradicts 1 Corinthians 11:5, where Paul explicitly describes women prophesying in the assembly.

In addition to this apparent contradiction, verses 34 and 35 appear rather intrusive. If they are removed from the text, the flow of thought moves naturally from verse 33 to 36.[19] Consider how the reference to "all the churches" at the end of verse 33 leads naturally to the rhetorical questions of verse 36: "For God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints. … Or was it from you that the word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only?"[20]

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16 Michael R. Licona, *Jesus, Contradicted: Why the Gospels Tell the Same Story Differently* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2024), 202, 206–8.

17 So Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 699–708. For a defense of the authenticity of these verses, see Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives: Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 74–75.

18 Fee, *First Corinthians*, 706.

19 Hans Conzelmann considers the interpolation to extend from 33b to 36. On this view, 37 followed immediately after 33a in the original text. See Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, trans. James W. Leitch, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 246.

20 Translation taken with slight modification from NASB.

Finally, in some manuscripts, verses 34 and 35 are placed at the end of the chapter after verse 40.[21] At minimum, this displacement underscores the intrusive nature of these two verses; they can be removed from the text without disrupting the flow of Paul's argument. Furthermore, according to Fee and others, the discrepancy in the location of these two verses is best explained by positing that these verses were not originally in Paul's letter but were added to the margin by a later hand. On this theory, subsequent scribes confused the marginal note with the original text, but since they did not know where the verses belonged, different scribes placed the verses in different locations in the text.

To be sure, the fact that verses 34 and 35 appear in all extant manuscripts is a powerful argument in favor of their authenticity. Nevertheless, it is at least *plausible* that these verses are a scribal interpolation that contradicts Paul's authentic teaching on the role of women in the assembly. Therefore, we cannot declare that the modern text of 1 Corinthians is inerrant without cutting short the ongoing debate about the authenticity of 14:34–35. If these two verses are indeed an interpolation that contradicts Paul's authentic teaching, then they should not be considered inerrant, inspired, or in any sense authoritative for the church. As Fee observes, if these verses are not authentic, then they are "certainly not binding for Christians."[22]

Like Licona, Michael Bird is also hesitant to restrict inerrancy to the original text. Bird argues that such a restriction "creates a host of problems when we realize that our biblical texts sometimes had secondary additions and subsequent editions."[23] For example, scholars often suggest that John's Gospel originally ended at 20:31. On this view, the twenty-first chapter is an epilogue that was added at a later

21 Witnesses which place verses 34 and 35 at the end of the chapter include a sixth-century Greek manuscript (D), two ninth-century Greek manuscripts (F, G), Old Latin translations (ar, b, d, f, g), and Ambrosiaster's fourth-century commentary on the Latin text. According to Fee, "All the surviving evidence indicates that this was the only way 1 Corinthians appeared in the Latin church for at least three hundred years" [*First Corinthians*, 700].

22 Fee, *First Corinthians*, 708.

23 Michael F. Bird, "Inerrancy Is Not Necessary for Evangelicalism Outside the USA," in *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy*, ed. Stephen M. Garrett and J. Merrick (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 145–73, at 152.

time.[24] The book of Jeremiah, moreover, indisputably exists in different editions. The version of the book preserved in the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) is "more than 10 percent shorter" than the version preserved in the Masoretic Text (the Hebrew text on which modern English versions are based).[25]

Bird does well to caution against an oversimplistic view of the original text. While some books in the canon were likely produced in a single day, like Paul's brief epistle to Philemon, other books evidently went through a process of development and evolution spanning years. For example, portions of Deuteronomy were apparently written down by Moses and read to the ancient Israelites as authoritative Scripture (Deut 31:9—13), but Deuteronomy clearly did not reach its final form until years after Moses' death (see Deut 34:5–6). However, recognizing that there could be multiple inspired editions of a biblical text should not of course lead us to the absurd conclusion that any addition made by any scribe at any time is authoritative Scripture. Augustine's first caveat thus remains important and should not be discarded.

ERROR IN TRANSLATION

The NT writers frequently quote Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible as authoritative Scripture. It hardly follows, however, that no translator can ever introduce an error that corrupts the teaching of Scripture. Consider, for example, the English translations of 1 Corinthians 7:21. The New Jerusalem Bible (NJB) renders the verse as follows: "So, if when you were called, you were a slave, do not think it matters—even if you have a chance of freedom, you should prefer to make full use of your condition as a slave." The Revised Stand Version (RSV), on the other hand, gives this translation: "Were you a slave when called? Never mind. But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity." The RSV translators understand Paul to be saying that slaves should use freedom if available. The NJB translators understand Paul to be saying precisely the opposite: slaves should remain in slavery even if they have the opportunity to attain freedom.

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24 For a critique of this proposal, see Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 1:113.

25 John Goldingay, *The Book of Jeremiah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 43–44.

Since the advice that Paul gives to slaves in the RSV is directly contradicted by the advice that Paul gives to slaves in the NJB, we cannot simultaneously affirm that both the RSV and the NJB are inerrant. Clearly one of these verses proclaims error. Now in the view of most contemporary scholars, recent research on 1 Corinthians 7:21 has refuted the interpretation represented by the NJB.[26] Paul did not forbid slaves from obtaining freedom; he encouraged them to do so if possible. Thus the version of 1 Corinthians 7:21 presented in the NJB should not be considered inerrant, inspired, or in any sense authoritative for the church.

ERROR IN INTERPRETATION

As we saw above in our discussion of Wesley and Erasmus, the doctrine of biblical inerrancy is best formulated as follows: the Bible is without error *in all that it affirms*. But determining what the Bible affirms requires interpretation, and interpretation requires sensitivity to genre and literary convention. This point is clearly articulated in the following passage from the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (CSBI), a conservative formulation of the doctrine produced in 1978:

> In determining what the God-taught writer is asserting in each passage, we must pay the most careful attention to its claims and character as a human production. In inspiration, God utilized the culture and conventions of his penman's milieu, a milieu that God controls in his sovereign providence; it is misinterpretation to imagine otherwise. So history must be treated as history, poetry as poetry, hyperbole and metaphor as hyperbole and metaphor, generalization and approximation as what they are, and so forth. Differences between literary conventions in Bible times and in ours must also be observed: since, for instance, non-chronological narration and imprecise citation were conventional and acceptable and violated no expectations in those days, we must not regard these things as faults when we find them in Bible writers. When total precision of a particular kind

26 Key studies include J. Albert Harrill, *The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity*, HUT 32 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1995), 108–21; David G. Horrell, *The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence: Interests and Ideology from 1 Corinthians to 1 Clement*, SNTW (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 165–66. On the scholarly consensus, see John Byron, *Recent Research on Paul and Slavery*, RRBS 3 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008), 114.

> was not expected nor aimed at, it is no error not to have achieved it. Scripture is inerrant, not in the sense of being absolutely precise by modern standards, but in the sense of making good its claims and achieving that measure of focused truth at which its authors aimed.[27]

Many of the purported errors in the Bible may in fact be errors of interpretation that arise from oversimplistic or anachronistic readings of the text.

Consider, for example, the purported conflict between modern science and the early chapters of Genesis. Because Genesis 1:24–31 states that God created land animals and humans on the same day, many assert that the doctrine of biblical inerrancy is incompatible with the modern scientific consensus that dinosaurs lived and died millions of years before humans appeared. However, one can affirm that Genesis 1:24–31 is inerrant without affirming that the text was intended to be read literally.

The literal reading of Genesis has been challenged for millennia. Some of our earliest extant commentary on Genesis comes from Philo of Alexandria, an older contemporary of Jesus. Philo clearly did not read the early chapters of Genesis as straightforward history. For example, Philo believed that the reference to a "tree of life" in Genesis 2:9 was "intended symbolically rather than literally."[28] Philo also rejected a literal reading of Genesis 4:17: "Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. When he built a city, he called the name of the city after the name of his son, Enoch" (ESV). Since there was apparently no woman for Cain to marry, Philo concluded that both wife and son are intended symbolically.[29] Likewise, since one person has neither the need nor the ability to construct an entire city, Philo concluded, "It is better to take the words figuratively, as meaning that Cain resolves to set up his own creed, just as one might set up a city."[30]

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27 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, https://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI_1.pdf.

28 *Creation* 154. Translation from F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, *Philo*, 12 vols., LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929), 1:123.

29 *Posterity* 33–36.

30 *Posterity* 51. Translation from Colson and Whitaker, *Philo*, 2:357.

Two centuries after Philo, the Christian theologian Origen also rejected a literal reading of Genesis. He argued that no "man of intelligence" would believe that there was an "evening" and a "morning" before the sun was created (see Gen 1:5, 8, 13), or that God planted "a visible and palpable 'tree of life,' of such a sort that anyone who tasted its fruit with his bodily teeth would gain life." Origen concluded, "I do not think anyone will doubt that these are figurative expressions which indicate certain mysteries through a semblance of history and not through actual events."[31] Even Augustine, who insisted on the inerrancy of Scripture, suggested that the six-day framework of Genesis 1 was not intended literally. Augustine, who apparently thought creation was instantaneous, proposed that the account in Genesis 1 was "broken down most conveniently as if in periods of time so that the very arrangement which weaker souls could not look upon with a firm gaze could be discerned as if by these eyes, when it is set forth through the order of such a discourse."[32]

Of course, these ancient interpreters might be wrong. The early chapters of Genesis may indeed be literal history. However, no one can claim that the non-literal interpretation of Genesis is a recent innovation to rescue the Bible from modern science. Philo, Origen, and Augustine lived many centuries before Charles Darwin was born. Furthermore, even if these ancient interpreters were mistaken, one cannot refute them by simply insisting that Genesis is inerrant. It is not the truthfulness of Genesis that is disputed; it is the *interpretation*.

Consider also the many apparent contradictions in the Gospels. According to Mark, for example, Jairus learns of his daughter's death only after Jesus pauses to address the woman who touched his cloak (5:35). According to Matthew, however, Jairus was already aware of his daughter's death (9:18). A careful comparison of the Gospels produces scores of similar discrepancies. However, recent research by Michael Licona and Craig Keener has demonstrated that such discrepancies were consistent with the literary conventions that governed the ancient

31 *First Princ*iples 4.3.1. Translation from G. W. Butterworth, *Origen: On First Principles* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 288.

32 *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis: An Unfinished Book* 7.28. Translation from Roland J. Teske, *Saint Augustine: On Genesis*, FC 84 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1991), 164–65.

genre of biography. Licona examined the writings of Plutarch, a second-century Roman author who produced many biographies of famous Greeks and Romans. Since some of these people lived at the same time and participated in the same events, Plutarch often reports the same event in more than one biography. Licona found that a comparison of Plutarch's various reports of the same event produces discrepancies similar to those that emerge from a comparison of the Gospel accounts. Plutarch "compresses stories, conflates them, transfers what one character said to the lips of a different person, inverts the order of events, rounds numbers, simplifies, and displaces a story or an element of a story from its original context and then transplants it in a different one."[33] In a subsequent publication, Keener argued that these literary techniques identified by Licona "extend well beyond Plutarch to many other ancient biographers."[34]

In short, ancient biographers "did not practice writing with the same commitment to precision as us moderns."[35] Just as affirming the inerrancy of a text does not entail affirming that the text was intended to be read literally, affirming the inerrancy of a text does not entail affirming that the author of the text wrote with a particular degree of precision. Recall the words of CSBI: "When total precision of a particular kind was not expected nor aimed at, it is no error not to have achieved it." To return to the story of Jairus, it is not Matthew who has erred by compressing the narrative; it is the reader who has erred by anachronistically applying modern standards of journalism to the genre of ancient biography.

Affirming both Rome and Lausanne

While the doctrine of biblical inerrancy was not articulated in the earliest creeds, it was addressed in later confessions. Vatican II, for example, affirmed inerrancy in the following passage from *Dei Verbum* ("Word of God"), published in 1965:

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33 Michael R. Licona, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?: What We Can Learn from Ancient Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 197–98.

34 Craig S. Keener, *Christobiography: Memory, History, and the Reliability of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 303.

35 Licona, *Differences in the Gospels*, 198.

> In composing the sacred books, God chose men and while employed by him they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with him acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which he wanted. Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation.[36]

Some have suggested that *Dei Verbum* does not affirm that the Bible is "without error" in all of its teachings but only in those particular teachings that relate to "salvation."[37] However, the text explicitly affirms that "everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit." According to *Dei Verbum*, there is nothing that the Bible asserts that is not asserted by the Holy Spirit. The Bible is thus "without error" in "everything" that it asserts.

Nine years after the publication of *Dei Verbum*, biblical inerrancy was affirmed in the Lausanne Covenant, "the most representative and authoritative statement of Evangelical belief in modern times."[38] According to the Lausanne Covenant, the Bible is "the only written word of God, without error in all that it affirms."[39] John Stott, who drafted the document, also published an "exposition and commentary" providing further clarification. Along with Vatican II, Stott rejects a dictation theory of inspiration. Just as *Dei Verbum* affirms that the authors of Scripture "made use of their powers and abilities" and wrote as "true authors," Stott affirms that the authors of Scripture "spoke and wrote freely." Yet, along with Vatican II, Stott also affirms that the Holy Spirit oversaw this process of free composition in such a way that the result is rightly described as the word of God. Just as *Dei Verbum* affirms that

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36 *Dei Verbum* 3.11, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.

37 See Tony Lane, *A Concise History of Christian Thought*, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 313–14.

38 This description of the Lausanne Covenant is from Lane, *Concise History*, 263. Lausanne is the city in Switzerland were the conference that produced the document was convened.

39 Lausanne Covenant, §2, https://lausanne.org/statement/lausanne-covenant.

"everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit," Stott affirms that the authors of Scripture "were 'moved by the Holy Spirit' (2 Pet 1:21) to such an extent that it could be said of their words, 'the mouth of the Lord has spoken it' (Isa 40:5)."[40]

Note, however, that *Dei Verbum* and the Lausanne Covenant do attest a profound disagreement concerning the Bible. According to the Lausanne Covenant, the Bible is "the only infallible rule of faith and practice," but according to *Dei Verbum*, both the Bible and the non-written apostolic traditions transmitted through the Church "are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence." The Bible is "so linked and joined together" with the teachings and traditions of the Church "that one cannot stand without the others."[41] In short, while *Dei Verbum* certainly agrees with the Lausanne Covenant that the Bible is an "infallible rule of faith and practice," *Dei Verbum* does not agree that the Bible is "*the only* infallible rule of faith and practice."

Furthermore, while not explicitly addressed by either *Dei Verbum* or the Lausanne Covenant, Roman Catholics and Protestants also disagree on the boundaries of the canon. In the letter to Jerome cited above, Augustine explains that he considers inerrant only those books "which are now called canonical."[42] Elsewhere, however, Augustine acknowledges ongoing confusion and debate about the canonical status of certain books.[43] Even today, Christians do not always agree about which books belong in the Bible. While Roman Catholics include in the Old Testament certain books that are not found in the Hebrew Bible, such as Tobit and Judith, most Protestants exclude these books. Wesley, for example, asserts, "We dare not receive them as part of the Holy Scriptures."[44]

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40 John Stott, *The Lausanne Covenant: Complete Text with Study Guide* (The Lausanne Movement, 2009), 28.

41 Lausanne Covenant, §2; *Dei Verbum* 2.9–10.

42 *Letters* 82.3. Translation from Parsons, *Augustine: Letters I*, 392.

43 *Christian Instruction* 2.8.12. For an English translation, see John J. Gavigan, trans., *Saint Augustine: Christian Instruction*, FC 2 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1985), 69–70.

44 "Popery Calmly Considered," I.4, in *Works* (Jackson), 10:141.

Nevertheless, despite these profound disagreements, Rome and Lausanne agree on inerrancy. The doctrine of biblical inerrancy is clearly more fundamental than the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* ("Scripture alone") or even the precise boundaries of the canon. Christians often disagree on the relationship between the Bible and church tradition. They even disagree over which books should be included in the Bible. They certainly disagree on how the Bible should be interpreted. But for Christians around the world, through the centuries, and across denominations, everything the Bible teaches is true. The notion that certain teachings of the Bible are erroneous and can therefore be rejected runs contrary to two millennia of Christian reflection on the nature of divine revelation.

Conclusion

Biblical inerrancy is the doctrine that the Bible is without error in all that it affirms. This doctrine does not deny the possibility of error in the copies or translations of the Bible, and it certainly does not deny the possibility of error in the interpretation of the Bible. The doctrine does, however, insist that everything the Bible teaches is true.

At Wesley Biblical Seminary, our commitment to biblical inerrancy undergirds our approach to biblical studies. For example, we reject approaches that begin with a modern ideology such as feminism or Marxism and attempt to read the text in ways that serve the political or social goals of that ideology.[45] Instead, we begin with the text and seek to understand the text in its own historical context. Because we believe the Bible is the inerrant word of God, our approach to biblical interpretation is marked by a "radical openness" that seeks to allow "the text to speak for itself."[46] ❊

45 For a description of such approaches, see Sandra M. Schneiders, "Feminist Hermeneutics," in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 349–69, at 349–50.

46 David R. Bauer and Robert A. Traina, *Inductive Bible Study: A Comprehensive Guide to the Practice of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 19.