Some things need to be inerrant. If things were right only 99.9% of the time, there would be: two unsafe landings every day at Chicago's O'Hare Airport; 16,000 pieces of lost mail every hour; 20,000 incorrect drug prescriptions every year; 500 incorrect surgeries every week; 50 babies dropped at birth every day; 32,000 missed heartbeats per person, per year; and 22,000 checks deducted from the wrong checking account every hour. Inerrancy matters!

But does it matter for the Bible? For some seventeen years, Southern Baptists have been told that it does. In fact, we're told that if we will not call the Bible “inerrant,” our entire position on biblical authority is suspect.

The purpose of this series of articles is to respond to this assertion under the title, “What's Wrong with Inerrancy?” We'll begin this month with the threat which insisting on inerrancy poses to the Bible you read today. Inerrancy and the “autographs”

“Inerrancy” may be defined as the view that “1. when all the facts are known, 2. they will demonstrate that the Bible in its autographs 3. and correctly interpreted 4. is entirely true 5. in all that it affirms.”1 We will focus today on statement #2: that inerrancy applies only to the “autographs.”2

By “autographs” we mean the original documents of the Bible—what the authors actually wrote. However, we possess none of these documents, only copies made from these originals. And inerrancy is explicitly not extended to the copies we possess today. In fact, the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy admits that the copies we have “are not entirely error-free.”3

Now, here's the problem. If the Bible must be inerrant to be trustworthy, and if only the autographs are inerrant, then three damaging conclusions result:

1. The copies of the autographs which we possess cannot be inerrant;

2. Our Bibles, based on these copies, cannot be inerrant; and

3. The Bible you read today cannot by definition be trusted.

As a result, insisting on inerrancy defeats its own purpose. Rather than defending the trustworthiness of Scripture, it undermines it.

Inerrancy and the copies
The typical response of an inerrantist to this argument is based on this fact: our copies of the Bible possess “great accuracy.”4 One proponent of inerrancy claims that “there is no part of the autographs which affect doctrine where we do not know what the autograph said.”5

But this response is not enough. There are two significant questions we must ask.

How many “errors” are too many?

First, how many copying mistakes are too many for our Bibles to be inerrant? Logically, one. A single error in transmission from the originals to our copies logically contradicts the inerrancy of the only biblical manuscripts we have.

Why is this true? Because the inerrantist affirms that “the whole of Scripture and all its parts, down to the very words of the original, were given by divine inspiration. We deny that the inspiration of Scripture can rightly be affirmed of the whole without the parts.”6

6 It is clear that one cannot affirm the inerrancy of the autographs unless he or she affirms the inerrancy of their every word.

However, even the inerrantist admits that our copies “are not entirely error free” And this is the problem. The text must be inerrant to be trustworthy, but the copies we possess contain errors in transmission. By definition, then, the only manuscripts we have can be neither inerrant nor trustworthy.

Here’s the point: logically, it does not matter whether these “errors” “affect doctrine” or not. Neither does it matter how many such “errors” exist. If even one discrepancy between the originals and our copies exists, by the inerrantist’s logic the copies cannot possess the trustworthiness of the autographs.

The Bibles built on them cannot be inerrant. And the inerrancy argument defeats its purpose.

Who decides what “affects doctrine”?

Second, stating that “errors” in our copies of the autographs do not “affect doctrine” introduces a dangerous element of subjectivity into the inerrancy position. The proponent quoted above believes that the areas in question do not affect doctrine. What if I disagree? Who is to say which disputed texts affect doctrine and which do not?

For example, Mark 16:9-20 is not found in the best copies of Mark’s original manuscript, and few scholars would defend this text as part of Mark’s inspired writing.7 But can we say that these verses do not “affect doctrine?” Those who believe that baptism is essential to salvation have long quoted v. 16, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved.” Advocates of “tongues” quote v. 17, “they will speak in new tongues.” And “snake-handling Baptists” base their entire practice on v. 18, “they will pick up snakes
with their hands."8 Surely this textual question has doctrinal implications! The writer who argues that copying issues do not “affect doctrine” also quotes W.A. Criswell’s statement that the “neo-orthodox” theologians “believe that some of the Bible is inspired by God and some of it isn’t, and they are inspired to tell the difference!”9 The inerrantist seems to say that some of the Bible affects doctrine and some doesn’t, and he is inspired to tell the difference.10 Again the inerrancy argument undermines the Bible it intends to defend.

My position

To summarize the threat which inerrancy poses to your Bible:

1. By this doctrine, the Bible must be inerrant to be trustworthy;
2. Only the original documents were inerrant;
3. The copies on which we base our Bibles today are therefore “not entirely error free;”
4. Our Bibles therefore cannot be inerrant, and by definition are thus untrustworthy.

Am I saying that the Bible I preach from each Sunday is not trustworthy?

Absolutely not. I believe that the Bible is God’s authoritative word. I am convinced that God inspired every word. Further, in opposition to the logical conclusion of the inerrancy position, I believe that my translation is still God’s word today. But I do not require “inerrancy” of the Bible to trust it. Neither should you.


2) The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, the most popular inerrancy document, says the same: “We affirm that inspiration, strictly speaking, applies only to the autographic text of Scripture” (Article X).

3) Chicago Statement, Exposition E.

4) Chicago Statement, Article X.

The Chicago Statement goes even further: “We deny that any essential element of the Christian faith is affected by the absence of the autographs. We further deny that this absence renders the assertion of Biblical inerrancy invalid or irrelevant.” (Article X).

6) Chicago Statement, Article VI; emphasis mine.

7) Even the original Scofield Reference Bible notes that “The passage from verse 9 to the end is not found in the two most ancient manuscripts, the Sinaitic and the Vatican.” (C.I. Scofield, ed., The Scofield Reference Bible [New York: Oxford University Press, 1909], 1069). And the Ryrie Study Bible, long a favorite of “conservative” Baptists, notes that “The doubtful genuineness of verses 9-20 makes it unwise to build a doctrine or base an experience on them.” (Charles Caldwell Ryrie, The Ryrie Study Bible [Chicago: Moody Press, 1976], 1539).

8) All quotations are from the New International version.

9) Carpenter, 13.

10) A.A. Hodge and B.B. Warfield, in a classic essay on inerrancy, make this same point in more precise language: since “no organism can be stronger than its weakest part, that if error be found in any one element, or in any class of statements, certainty as to any portion could rise no higher than belongs to that exercise of human reason to which it will be left to discriminate the infallible from the fallible” (“Inspiration,” Presbyterian Journal 2 (April 1881), 242.

Article Archive
The Real “Slippery Slope” of Inerrancy
by Jim Denison

Have you heard of the “Wicked Bible?” It was an edition of the King James Version issued in London in 1631. The word “not” was accidentally left out of the seventh commandment, so that Exodus 20:14 read “Thou shalt commit adultery.” William Laud, the Archbishop of Canterbury, ordered the printers to pay a fine of 300 pounds. Errors can have consequences.

No one can claim that our versions of the Bible are always error-free. However, many today make just this claim for the non-existent original manuscripts. One of their most compelling and popular arguments is the so-called “slippery slope” theory: if one gives up “inerrancy,” he or she will inevitably “slide” into liberalism. A Wicked Bible will lead to wicked doctrine. Biblical “errors” have consequences, indeed.

This article will examine the “slippery slope” theory, and see where the inerrancy argument actually leads.
Posting the warning sign

I enjoy hiking, but I’m not very good at directions. If the trail doesn’t have signs along the way, I’ll soon get lost. If I’m hiking a mountain path, I may slide right off the trail.

This is the warning we’ve heard about inerrancy. If we do not adhere to the inerrancy of the Bible, we have taken the first step in an inevitable slide down the mountain of faith. Inerrancy is the warning sign which protects us doctrinally and spiritually. In 1976 Harold Lindsell, then editor of Christianity Today, published The Battle for the Bible. His book was one of the first to raise the issue of inerrancy for Southern Baptists. In fact, his book contains an entire chapter alleging growing liberalism in the SBC. Perhaps his most powerful argument for inerrancy is the “slippery slope.” Here is Lindsell’s warning:

It is my opinion that it is next to impossible to stop the process of theological deterioration once inerrancy is abandoned. I have said that it is a theological watershed just as the Continental Divide is the watershed for the United States and Canada. The water that flows on one side of the divide ends up in the Atlantic Ocean. The water that flows on the other side of the divide ends up in the Pacific Ocean. But once the water starts down one side or the other, it continues until it reaches its oceanic destination. Errancy and inerrancy constitute the two principles, and which one a person chooses determines where he will end up.

No matter how sincere a man may be, and however carefully he guards against further theological concessions, they are inevitable once inerrancy is given up.1 Earlier in his book Lindsell makes the same argument in even stronger terms:

embracing a doctrine of an errant Scripture will lead to disaster down the road. It will result in the loss of missionary outreach; it will quench missionary passion; it will lull congregations to sleep and undermine their belief in the fullorbed truth of the Bible; it will produce spiritual sloth and decay; and it will finally lead to apostasy. 2

Dire predictions. If Lindsell is right, the struggle over inerrancy is crucial, indeed.

And his rhetoric has fueled much of the battle.

As President of the Southern Baptist Convention, Jimmy Draper staked out the same warning sign for his fellow Southern Baptists. In his book, Authority: The Critical Issue for Southern Baptists, he wrote,

There are people among us today, teaching in our institutions, laboring in our denomination, pastoring in our churches, who have not departed all that far from classic biblical doctrine. They still believe that Jesus is God. They still believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ. They still believe in the virgin birth. But, they do not believe that everything in Scripture is necessarily accurate and without error. They have started over the edge…
This stance may be almost imperceptible. There may not be a deliberate abandonment of a doctrinal position. They may not even know that they have headed downhill. But they are in an unstable position. Whether such individuals ever let go and slip further down or not, they are still in an unstable position. They are at least admitting the possibility of going further. It is also extremely likely that those to whom they minister or those whom they teach will go a lot farther down than they do.3

Furthermore, Lindsell warns that once we start down this slippery slope, we will likely never make it back to the trail: “Rarely does one hear of a journey from liberalism to orthodoxy, from an errant Scripture to an inerrant Scripture. For the most part it is a one-way street in the wrong direction.”4

It is easy to see why the inerrancy argument has been compelling for so many. Who among us wants to slide off the mountain of faith onto the rocks of apostasy?

Surely we must insist that our leaders espouse the inerrancy of Scripture, or they will lead us where we do not want to go.

Warnings about the warning sign

A trail guide can be convincing and still wrong. Unfortunately, these guides have overlooked some important facts. Their warning sign simply doesn’t work, for at least four reasons.

First, espousing inerrancy does not guarantee that one will stay on the path of orthodox biblical interpretation. As one example, consider Dr. Clark Pinnock, Professor of Systematic Theology at McMaster Divinity College in Hamilton, Ontario. Dr. Pinnock was one of the seven signatories of the “Ligonier Statement” which begins, “We believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the inspired and inerrant Word of God.”5 As Dr. Pinnock earlier wrote, “If one believes the Scripture to be God’s Word, he cannot fail to believe it inerrant.”6 Clearly he would be an “inerrantist.”

And yet Dr. Pinnock’s view of the Bible has not protected him from interpreting it in ways which would trouble most Southern Baptists. As one example, regarding the ultimate destiny of the unevangelized, he has written, “According to the Bible, people are saved by faith, not by the content of their theology… The Bible does not teach that one must confess the name of Jesus to be saved.”7 The point is not Dr. Pinnock’s position on this issue, but the fact that “inerrancy” did not keep him from “sliding” to it. Apparently the warning sign doesn’t protect him after all.

Second, there are many who refuse to espouse a strict “inerrancy” statement who nonetheless persist in a very conservative theology. As an example, the historian Mark Noll points to evangelicals in England:
When British evangelicals failed to match their American counterparts around the turn of the century and did not define a sharply-edged concept of inerrancy, it seems not to have affected their general vitality. In fact, while continuing somewhat fuzzy on biblical inerrancy, British evangelicals experienced a renewal beginning in the 1930s, and this renewal finally led in the 1950s and 1960s to sharper, more decisive statements concerning the Bible’s complete truthfulness.8

I myself refuse to use the word “inerrancy” for the Bible, since the term is too ambiguous to be useful.9 However, I believe that every word of the Bible is inspired by God, and that the Scriptures are entirely trustworthy and authoritative. I am an example of one who disavows “inerrancy” while maintaining a conservative theology. I’ve not found the slope to exist at all.

Third, proponents of the “slippery slope” argument ignore basic Baptist polity. Every Baptist church is autonomous and independent. There is no hierarchy of enforced theology in Baptist life. Even if seminaries and colleges were teaching an “errant” Bible, and their graduates were thus destined to slide into further theological decay, the churches are totally free to reject these graduates and their theologics. Unlike mainline denominations, there is no theological or social position which can be forced on a Baptist church. There is no graduate which can be forced into a Baptist pulpit. The churches are free to reject any candidate who represents genuine theological liberalism. And every Baptist church I know or have heard of, would.

I have heard no one claim that theological liberalism has infected Baptist churches. Accusations have been leveled against seminaries and colleges, and we’re told that these problems have persisted for years. And yet I’ve seen not a single charge that such “liberalism” has affected a local church. Apparently the slope isn’t very slippery.

Fourth, the “slippery slope” theory rests on faulty reasoning. We’re told that if we admit there are questions with the biblical text regarding geography or science, we’ll soon slide into questioning vital areas of faith. If we cannot be sure how many angels were at the resurrection, soon we’ll be questioning the resurrection itself.

However, this reasoning doesn’t work in life. When you find typographical errors in a newspaper, do you question everything the paper contains? If you disagree with your pastor regarding his interpretation of a particular text, do you reject every part of his theology? By the “slippery slope” argument, once you’ve started down the precipice there’s nothing to break your fall. But the fact is, the slip doesn’t necessarily lead to a slope at all.

For these reasons, the “slippery slope” warning sign simply doesn’t work. In fact, no less an authority than Mark Noll disagrees with the argument:

A modern history of Scripture does not, in my opinion, justify the famous slippery slope argument. That is, I do not feel that it is accurate to conclude that giving up traditional views of Scripture is the first mark of a slide into liberalism and unbelief.10
This slope doesn't necessarily slip at all.

The Real “Slippery Slope”

I would propose a different “slippery slope” argument regarding inerrancy. History demonstrates that any denomination which begins to use inerrancy as its test of biblical orthodoxy will inevitably slide down the slope into division and controversy. The most recent examples of this division over inerrancy are the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod split11 and of course the Southern Baptist Controversy. 12 The inerrancy warning sign doesn't keep us on the road of doctrinal purity; instead, it starts us down a slope which sidetracks our work and fractures our churches.

Perhaps some still believe that the end justifies the means, and that what we will have at the bottom of this slope justifies the damage done by the slide. I don’t. Instead of warning fellow hikers on the mountain of faith about nonexistent slippery slopes, let's proclaim the Bible to those who don't know the mountain even exists.

The slope they’re sliding down is the most dangerous of all.

(Jim Denison is pastor of Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church in Atlanta. This is the second of a series of articles on inerrancy)

ENDNOTES:


2Lindsell, Battle, 25.


Some questions have no right answers. For instance, when I taught philosophy of religion at Southwestern Seminary students used to ask me, “Can God make a rock so big he can’t move it?” or “Can God make two mountains without a valley in between?” Imagine your supervisor asking you, “Have you stopped embezzling from the company yet?” There’s no right answer to a wrong question.

The inerrantist asks, “Is the Bible errant or inerrant? Which is it?” In our next two articles, let’s see if the question of inerrancy is a right or wrong question to ask about the Bible. We’ll look at two subjects today: what the Bible says about itself, and what inspiration tells us about inerrancy.

Does the Bible call itself “inerrant”?
First, does the Bible require us to consider it “inerrant”? Is this an issue the Bible raises about itself?

Of course, the word “inerrancy” is not found in the biblical text. But neither are “trinity” and “incarnation.” The real question is whether or not the Bible teaches that it is inerrant. There are several passages which inerrantists cite to claim that it does. Let’s find the actual, intended meaning of each text.

Supposed synonyms for inerrancy

First, we’ll look at passages which contain words inerrantists commonly consider synonyms for inerrancy. We’ll survey them as they occur in the biblical text, highlighting the crucial word in each verse.

(1) Psalm 12:6: “And the words of the Lord are flawless, like silver refined in a furnace of clay, purified seven times.” “Flawless” would seem to mean “inerrant.” But the Hebrew root, “taher,” actually refers to “ritual or moral purity,” and describes a person as clean enough to return to life within the nation of Israel.1 Obviously the Bible would never describe a person as “inerrant” (see 1 John 1:8); “flawless” therefore cannot be a synonym for inerrancy. In this text “taher” points to the function of the Scriptures, as they fulfill their purpose within the nation. The Psalmist intends no connection with the inerrancy argument.

(2) Psalm 18:30: “As for God, his way is perfect; the word of the Lord is flawless” (see Prov. 30:5, where the same Hebrew word is used for the Scriptures). This is a different Hebrew word, the root of which is “sarap.” The word usually refers to the refining of metal before it is worked into a fine vessel (see Prov. 25:4). As metal could never be “inerrant” or completely perfect, the word does not imply inerrancy. In connection with the Bible it means that “what God says is authentic.” 2 As with Ps. 12:6, this word shows that God’s word is reliable for its intended purpose (see John 20:30–31)

(3) Psalm 19:7: “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple.” “Perfect” translates the Hebrew “tamam,” which means to “be complete.” It claims that something contains all it needs to accomplish its purpose. This word does not guarantee inerrancy, as it is used of Moses in Genesis 6:9. In Ps. 19:7 it simply means that the Bible contains all it needs to fulfill its intended purpose.3

(4) “Trustworthy” in this text translates the Hebrew “aman,” which means to be firm, certain, or faithful. We use this word when we say “amen.” The word simply claims that the Bible is “faithful” to its task.4 Again, the Psalmist intends no reference to an inerrancy argument.

(5) Psalm 119:142: “Your righteousness is everlasting and your law is true.” “True” translates “emet,” which is a derivative of “aman,” discussed with reference to Psalm
19:7 above. It simply means that the Bible is trustworthy or faithful to its intended purpose.

(6) John 17:17: “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.” “Truth” translates “alatheia,” the Greek parallel to the Hebrew “aman.” The root meaning of “alatheia” is “nonconcealment.” Here it means that the Bible reveals God, rather than concealing him from us. In this text Jesus intends no reference to the inerrancy argument.

(7) Romans 7:12: “So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous, and good.” “Holy” translates “hagios,” one of the most important words in the New Testament. Both “hagios” and its Hebrew parallel (“qodesh”) carry the basic idea of being dedicated or set apart to God. In this sense Scripture is “holy” because it belongs to God. In our text Paul in no way refers to inerrancy.

(8) 2 Tim. 3:15: “…and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures…” Here “holy” translates “hieros”; this word, like “hagios,” has the basic meaning of “belonging or being consecrated to God.” Here it expresses the power of the Scriptures, as they belong to God Himself. This verse does not deal with the question of error in the Scriptures, but with their power. Once again inerrancy is not a question addressed by the text.

In each case, a study of the word in question reveals no intended connection with an argument for inerrancy. One must extend his logic beyond the text to make such an argument; i.e., “something ‘holy’ must be without error,” or similar statements. Whether such logic is valid or invalid is not our point here; the fact is that no text speaks directly and specifically to the inerrancy issue. If inerrancy is so important, why is there not a single verse in the Bible which intentionally addresses it?

Other texts used to support inerrancy

The texts which follow contain no “synonym” for inerrancy, but they are nonetheless often cited by inerrantists.

(1) Numbers 23:19: “God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should change His mind. Does He speak and then not act? Does He promise and not fulfill?” (see 1 Samuel 15:29 for a similar statement). Here the key assertion is that God would not “lie.” Since the Bible is inspired by God (2 Timothy 3:16), it cannot “lie” either, and thus we’re told that it must be inerrant.

The flaw in this logic is that “lie” and “error” are not the same thing. Webster defines “lie” as “to make a statement that one knows is false, especially with intent to deceive.” It defines an “error” as “something incorrectly done through ignorance or carelessness; mistake.” Thus Number 23:19 does not speak to the question of error/inerrancy, but rather to the trustworthy character of God.
If a person does not subscribe to inerrancy, this does not mean that he or she accuses God of “intent to deceive.” Even the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy claims that the Bible we have is “not entirely error free” (Exposition E), but this does not mean that it deliberately deceives us. The author of Numbers 23:19 in no sense intended to address the issue of inerrancy.

(2) John 10:35-36: “If he called them ‘gods,’ to whom the word of God came— and the Scripture cannot be broken—what about the one whom the Father set apart as His very own and sent into the world?” “Broken” translates “luthanai,” from “Iuo.” Here the word means “to break, to set aside, to nullify.”7 The basic meaning of Jesus’ words is that His hearers must not set aside or ignore God’s word. They might ignore Jesus, but they could not ignore or “break” the Scripture He cited. Thus this text contains no reference to inerrancy, despite its common citation to this end.

Once again, the inerrantist must extend these texts beyond their intended meaning; i.e., “if the Bible doesn’t lie, then it must be inerrant…” He can find no text which states the inerrancy argument itself.

Not only are there no biblical synonyms for inerrancy, there are no texts which address this subject specifically or directly. If the inerrancy argument is so crucial to Scripture, wouldn’t we expect to find it in the Bible?

What about inspiration?

But there’s another approach inerrantists take in using the Bible to support their argument: the issue of inspiration. To “inspire” literally means to “breathe in.” If God “breathed” the Bible, surely it must be without error, we’re told. As one writer states the position,

God breathed in (and out) of the sacred writers of Scripture what He wanted them to write, and thus it was God’s Word, complete and without error. A holy and perfect God could not conceivably produce error in His Word!8

This argument has been compelling for many. But there’s more to the story. Clearly the Bible claims to be inspired by God (cf. Jer. 36:2; Ezek. 1:3; Acts 28:25; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pt. 1:20-21). The real issue is the relation of inspiration to inerrancy.

The most definitive text on inspiration is 2 Tim. 3:16: “All Scripture is God-breathed…” “God-breathed” translates the Greek word “theopneustos,” which literally means “to be breathed out by God.” Here’s a good summary of its meaning:

The rabbinical teaching was that the Spirit of God rested on and in the prophets and spoke through them so that their words did not come from themselves, but from the mouth of God and they spoke and wrote in the Holy Spirit. The early church was in entire agreement with this view.9
Paul’s statement thus points to the origin of the text, not specifically its character. He differentiates between God’s word and secular works,10 emphasizing “the creative act of God in producing the Scripture.”11

This text and others like it guarantee that the Bible came from God. They do not speak directly to the errant/inerrant nature of the text. An inerrantist must again extend the argument beyond the text; i.e., “if the Bible comes from God, and God doesn’t make mistakes, then the text cannot have errors…” Once again we find inerrancy to be a philosophical argument, not an exegetical position. No biblical author on inspiration intends to speak to the question of inerrancy.

A right or wrong question?

In our next article we’ll discuss the real origin of the inerrancy argument, and show the disastrous results of applying it to the actual text of Scripture. Then we’ll close the series by proposing a biblical, positive approach to Scripture.

For now, let’s remember that inerrancy is neither a word nor an argument found in the biblical text itself. Does it seem right or wrong to create a question the Scriptures nowhere ask, and then make one answer to this question the only “biblical” position?


