A HISTORY OF BIBLICAL INERRANCY FROM THE DAYS OF FOLLOWING THE APOSTLES TO THE DAYS PRIOR TO THE REFORMATION

This writing will establish the reality that Christians have always held to the divine origin of the Scriptures. To say it more clearly: Believers in every era have believed that Scripture was God’s Word on paper. Furthermore, they have held to the reality that God “does all things well” and has therefore recorded His Word without error. This truth is known as “inerrancy.”

Another Time; Another Place

Christ and the Apostles on The Old Testament

There are more than enough sources existing already to show that the Jesus Christ saw the Old Testament as the very words of God. Matthew 5:18, Matthew 12:38-41, Matthew 19:3, and John 10:35 all show that Jesus Christ believed the words of Moses, and the prophets, and the Psalmists were the words of the Creator. Furthermore, an examination of Matthew 4 will show that Christ believed in the timeless application and emphatic dictation of God’s Word to paper when He simply introduced His retorts to Satan as “It is written.”

Inerrancy and Harmony

It seems superfluous to even consider whether Luther, Calvin, Melanchthon and others were inerrantists. Certainly, a certainty of inter-canonical harmony is true from the Reformer’s perspective if they are to say that they need Scripture only. This same assurance of harmony reaches back to those like Irenaeus, Athanasius, and Chrysostom. Inerrancy includes harmony, but harmony does not require Scriptural inerrancy.

Abundant Etymologies and Their Connotations

Many will use the words “inerrant,” “inspired,” and “infallible” as synonyms. “The term “inerrant” suggests that the Bible is free from all falsehood or mistakes, and it provides a safeguard for the confidence that Scripture is reliable in all of its assertions.” However, Princeton’s Benjamin Warfield identified “inerrancy” as the Scripture’s “not err[ing] in any of its assertions.” The reader has a choice, then: say that “inerrancy’ will be used in the sense that the Scriptures, Old and New Testament, were given by God through man without error,” or say that “inerrancy’ will be used in the sense that the Scriptures are correct in their assertions—without error.” One can see right away that these two things are not very different on the outset, but that one affects the “verbal” idea of inspiration: the words themselves were selected by God. If a person says “the Scriptures are correct in their assertions,” this does not require a verbal inspiration.

This provides quite the conundrum: does this paper tackle “inerrancy” in the eyes of the current day fundamentalist, or does it deal with “inerrancy” in the eyes of the historic evangelical who coined the term in the first place? For the sake of the context of this course within current fundamental evangelicalism, the term “inerrancy” will be used to describe the inspiration process—God gave His Word through man perfectly. Consequently, the original writers did not “err.”

Furthermore, this paper is not going to spend a great deal of time delineating what is not meant by “inerrantly given.” For example, if the context seems to show that there are untruths as in Genesis 3:3, then it will be assumed that this lie of Satan was recorded “without error.” Again, if geo-centricity is discussed by a narrator as in Joshua 10:13, it will be assumed that this anomaly was inerrantly recorded from the perspective of the observer. In other words, if it is common practice today to allow for figures of speech and hyperbole, then it seems acceptable to allow the writers of Scripture to do the same—especially if one believes the human authorship was steered by the Holy Ghost (2 Peter 1:21). Moreover, If irregularities of spelling occur; if approximations occur—accounting for slight differences in numbers—then it will be allowed as a normal
occurrence in language and considered “inerrant” as if it “proceeded from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4; 2 Timothy 3:16).

**Theories of Inspiration**

Whether dictation or a sort of conceptual inspiration—all of which have second and third order ramifications—the product of inspiration resulted in an inerrant product for the inerrantist. Some believed that authors were like a flute through whom the Holy Spirit would flow. Others believed that the human being uniqueness showed through loud and clear. “Regardless of the nuances, Christians of the first millennium held a view of the scriptures that emphasized its inerrancy and origin in God.”

**Canon Variances**

There is not space enough to investigate the history of the canon. Truly there were different canons purported by different believers at different times. Sufficient for this paper is the understanding that if those mentioned below believed a certain body of text to be Scripture, they also believed it to be inerrant.

**Who Then, From the Era to Be Examined, Believed in Biblical Inerrancy?**

An examination of one’s ministry through perusal of written records will show that at any given moment that ministry is merely yielding a snapshot of what appears to be so concerning one’s beliefs. In other words, this author may quote Jerome from a particular year that states unequivocally his adherence to the inerrancy of Scriptures—they were given by God through man, without error. Doubtlessly, beliefs change. Today’s hero can be tomorrow’s “heretic” with the stroke of the pen. In this case, one can find some evidence that Jerome, for example, may not have always believed in the inerrant Scripture. So the admission from this perspective is that “believers have always believed in the inerrancy of Scripture;” not “all believers have always believed in the inerrancy of Scripture,” or “all believers believe in the inerrancy of Scripture.” We only establish that this has been a regularly held belief within professing Christianity. There, of course, were many well-known people like Ignatius that did not ever, it seems, hold to an “inerrant Scripture” ideal—although it is just as sure that they admired these same Scriptures as though they had Divine influence.

**Irenaeus (120-202) Believed the Scriptures Were Inerrant.**

This man was a bishop in Lyons of France in the latter 100’s A.D., but penned his famous Against Heresies at some point in the 180’s A.D. Therein, he stated that the “Scriptures are indeed perfect.” This seems in keeping with Psalm 12:6-7 to be sure, but Irenaeus had the New Testament upon which he could look and apply this same complement. Now remember, if this is merely an appraisal of the Scripture’s concepts or “assertions” yet it is not an appraisal concerning the word choice of the Scripture writers, then this is no perfect Scripture at all. That is to say, how can perfect thoughts be expressed in imperfect words? Limited words, perhaps, can be chosen, but certainly not errant words. Certainly, there is an expectation of plenary or “perfect” words to go with “perfect thoughts” in order for the product to be called “perfect.”

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7 Ibid., 173.
9 Roberts, 313.
10 Allison, 100.
Clement of Rome (?-100 A.D.) Believed the Scriptures Were Inerrant.

Here is a man that believed that the Scriptures had nothing “counterfeit written in them.”\(^{11}\) Were others convinced of this conviction of his? No, there may have even been other times when this man did not hold to such a belief,\(^ {12}\) but that does not nullify the notion that Clement of Rome, nonetheless, believed in the inerrancy of Scripture at some point. He wrote epistles in which he quotes Matthew, Mark, and Luke—calling them “Scripture” which places them on par with the Old Testament from His perspective.\(^ {13}\)

Jerome (340-420) Believed the Scriptures Were Inerrant.

Jerome did not believe in anything less than an inerrantly inspired Scripture. He may have held to a less than flattering preservation of the same, but that does not affect His view of the text as it relates to its origin. Geisler and Nix speak of Jerome in this way:

In a letter to Nepotian in A.D. 394, Jerome set forth a systematic treatise on the duties of the clergy and the rule of life they ought to adopt. In it he writes, “Read the divine scriptures constantly; never indeed, let the sacred volume out of your hand.” In the same year he wrote to Paulinus to make diligent study of the Scriptures… “I beg you, my dear brother, to live among these books, to meditate upon them, to know nothing else, to seek nothing else. Does not such a life seem to you a foretaste of heaven here on earth? Let not the simplicity of the scripture offend you; for these are due either to faults of translators or else to deliberate purpose: for in this way it is better fitted for instruction.”\(^ {14}\)

Suddenly, the reader understands that Jerome was saying there are two reasons why your Bible may have errors in it: 1. Translation errors; 2. Intended tampering. He furthermore indicates that the whole reason one may find dependence in the Scripture is because they are presumably one of the only things one may trust in life—quite the understatement.

Augustine (354-430) Believed The Scriptures Were Inerrant.

“Scriptures are holy; they are truthful, they are blameless…When we have gone wrong, we don’t make out Scripture to be wrong, but it continues to stand up straight and right, so that we may return to it for correction.”\(^ {15}\) Certainly this man of faith knew that if one begins correcting the Bible, the Bible ceases to correct man. These words are those of a man who believed that there is no “wrong-ness” in the Bible—particularly from the hands of the authors.\(^ {16}\)

In his *The City of God* he spoke of “infallible Scripture” (11.6). If this was devoid of accentuating terminology, one might say this was circumstantial or unclear usage of terms. However, he also speaks of Scripture as “sacred” (9.5) and divine (10.1). One must, therefore, assume that Augustine felt words from Scripture were without error. Speaking of the gospel writers, Augustine said they wrote only what God guided their hands to write: “Whatever He wanted us to read concerning His words and deeds, He commanded His disciples, His hands, to write. Hence, one cannot but receive what he reads in the Gospels, though written by the disciples, as though it were written by the very hand of the Lord Himself.”\(^ {17}\)

\(^{11}\) Allison, 100.
\(^{12}\) Cragun, 174.
\(^{14}\) Ibid., 106.
\(^{16}\) Allison, 102.
\(^{17}\) Geisler, 107.
Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) Believed the Scriptures Were Inerrant.

He believed that the Scripture is pure and unworthy of the “dissent” of anybody from “anything contained in the books.” Later in his ministry as the leading figure of religion in England, he described Scripture as having that which was unworthy of doubt; which he “believe[d] without doubting, of course.” It is hard to fathom that a man would not allow for the slightest detraction of the information in Scripture—or that he would believe its information without qualification—if inerrancy is not being described. This man believed that there should never be anything in his life that was contradictory to Scripture. This gives quite the weight to Scripture’s inerrancy at least from his perspective: “If I say anything which is undoubtedly contradictory to Holy Scripture, it is wrong.”

Notice how there is no qualifiers like “in all matters relating to theology” or “within the scope of authorial intent.”

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) Believed the Scriptures Were Inerrant.

Thomas Aquinas was one who systemized theology as one of the leading theologians within the Roman Catholic church. He wrote *Summa Theologiae* and stated that “the Author of Holy Scripture is God.” He held to a Scripture “without error” (*Summa* 2.1.6.1). Geisler went on to say “the great scholars, theologians, and doctors of the established church believed, as did the early Fathers, that the whole Bible is the inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word of God written.” When Scripture is all one has, it seems they would be sure it would be enough by which to live. Aquinas saw that all truth was no truth when it was underlain with falsehood.

Peter Abelard (1079–1142) Believed the Scriptures Were Inerrant.

Peter believed that the finger of God had written the Scripture and that it could not possibly be tainted with error. It was as if it was written at “the dictation of the Holy Spirit.” This man had great influence in and around Paris as a teacher and writer.

A bold and original thinker, he attracted large numbers to his lectures and counted many of the great minds of the twelfth century as his students, including Peter Lombard, John of Salisbury, and Otto of Freising. Many future leaders of Christendom were in attendance: several popes, twenty cardinals, and about fifty bishops.

All this to simply point out that Abelard was not a man in hiding for his view of Scripture. It was apparently the normal view to hold of the Scripture.

John Wycliffe (1320–1384) Believed the Scriptures Were Inerrant.

Wycliffe was key in Scripture translation to the common man. He felt that the Scripture was enough to steer the believer through life with the aid of the Holy Spirit. He was clear in his belief that people do not need the institution of a state church to maintain its position with the Lord. “Wycliffe’s use of allegory in interpretation was based on his predisposition that the Words of Scripture were utterly reliable.” In other words, it seems

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19 Geisler, 108.
20 Allison, 103.
21 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.1,10. This is an excellent summary of Thomas’s view on inspiration.
23 Allison, 103.
24 Ibid., 104.
26 Geisler, 110.
that his staunch belief that the Scriptures, an object, would serve as a law for the church aside from the visible institution of the church would indicate that he had complete faith in the inerrant character of Scripture.

**Hervaeus (1300’s A.D.) Believed the Scriptures Were Inerrant.**

This man believed Scripture was spoken by God. “God cannot speak falsehood” so it must, therefore, have no errors as the words of God.²⁷ Often people have problems with things in Scripture that are clearly erroneous. Lies, for example, that are spoken by those in the Bible are “God’s Word” insomuch that they are inerrantly recorded through the author. Paul’s opinion—recorded with phrases like “I speak as a man”—are merely opinion, yes. However, they are his opinion inerrantly recorded by God through the pen of Paul.

**John Hus (1372–1415) Believed the Scriptures Were Inerrant.**

This man of Bohemia was the pastor at Bethlehem Chapel in Prague. He was a follower of the writings of Wycliffe. He was so much *sola scriptura* that Martin Luther was accused of being a follower of “error of Hus” in his insistence that the Scripture was the only thing that was essential instead of the church’s dogma or the pope.²⁸

**Girolamo Savanarola (1452-1498) Believed the Scriptures Were Inerrant.**

Here is a man, who, after he died, his books were placed on an index of “forbidden books” by the standing pope and was known as “another Luther.” He apparently believed in salvation without the hope of humanity or the works of an individual as seen in some of his *Prison Meditations*. He was also known for having the Scriptures committed to memory—evidenced by his recall in his writings done while incarcerated, without a Bible, on some selected Psalms.²⁹ He furthermore states “if you ask me about the authority of my preaching, I would say this: what I say that comes from Scripture, what I say that is Gospel, has authority; when what I say comes from elsewhere, then you are not bound to believe it.”³⁰ In other words, if you find it in Scripture, you are bound to believe it. What folly to say something so drastic to his congregation if there were, in fact, some passages that caused him doubt with their information.

Regarding the accessibility of Scripture, he stated further that “The Scriptures are very plain. They tell us, not in one place, but in many, that not only the end of our well-doing, but likewise its beginning, cometh to us from God. In all our good works it is God who works through us.”³¹ If God is not “plainly” known in the information presented in Scripture, then not even Biblical Theology is known. If Biblical Theology is unknown, then there can be no ascertainable “living” of “every Word of God” (Luke 4:4).

**Conclusion**

2nd Order Effects: Textual Criticism

One might wonder what profit there is in an “inerrant” Scripture if there are no inerrant Scriptures available to the people of God today. Al Mohler once said that to deny “God’s own perfection and truthfulness” sets one on a path to determine which texts bear “perfections” and which do not.³² Perhaps this could be thus argued to the textual critic as well—who says some of the texts are reliable and some are not.

²⁷ Allison, 103.
²⁸ Geisler, 105–111.
³⁰ Ibid.
³¹ Ibid.
A Continuing Work

One last note: While it is admitted that eleven witnesses covering twelve hundred years is seemingly paltry, this work hopefully sets the reader in mind to consider that the inerrancy of Scripture was not invented in the 16th Century Europe or in the 20th Century Chicago. This is a consistent view of the church. Meanwhile, this work will continue to grow as new witnesses to this truth are discovered in the life of this author. Hopefully, enough of the evidence has been discovered and shared to prove that inerrancy has long been held by the church. That is to say, the Bible was written by God without erring.

Bibliography


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