Inerrancy as an Issue in the Fundamentalist Movement: 1900 to the Present

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Thesis: “Inerrancy” within “Fundamentalism” was consistently redefined in the 1900’s to suit the demanding objections of liberals in main-line denominations.

Introduction

“Fundamentalism can be understood as a special, extreme case of Protestant Christianity’s seeking to preserve traditional beliefs without any change.”2 Others have said that it is simply defined as “agreeing upon the basic points.”3 As will be seen later, “Fundamentalism” is earmarked by the “five fundamentals”—the base of which is “the inerrancy of Scripture.”4 While this paper will not delve into the rich heritage reaching back to the New Testament, perhaps a quotation from Geisler concerning Thomas Aquinas will suffice:

Contrary to some today who believe that only what is essential to faith is without error, Aquinas believed that the Bible is not only true in all that it teaches but also in all that it touches, for things “incidentally or secondarily related to the object of faith are all the contents of Scripture handed down by God.”5

Infallability Versus Inerrancy

Many use these words interchangeably. Corbett speaks of Falwell and the Moral Majority as a well-known fundamentalist group that held strongly to “inerrancy” while using a quotation from Falwell that uses the word “infallible” rather than “inerrancy” and defines these words as meaning “without error in all matters pertaining to faith and practice”6—later reduced to the shorthand of “matters of science as well as salvation.”7 Yet, they are different words because they mean something differently altogether. Tom Strouse rightly wrote that “Infallibility has to do with the inability to fail or to err. Inerrancy has to do with actuality of being without error.”8 Geisler, in his critique on a book by A.T.B. McGowen, affirms a difference between the two. However, he treats “inerrancy” as if it is subordinate to “infallibility” stating that phone books can be without error, but that does not mean they are divine—and by implication incapable of ever being incorrect.9

Strouse furthermore states that so-called discrepancies are not discrepancies at all,10 and that the original giving of the Scriptures through inspiration are those without error or “inerrant.”11 Interestingly enough, some of the very issues scholars had with “inerrantists” were the “forcing[s] of harmony” between discrepancies.12 Strouse contends that these harmonies are simply, at times, separate events.

“Inerrancy” is not even found in the 1828 Webster’s Dictionary, and, in fact, appears in the mid 1800’s

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1Originally submitted to Dr. A.J. Smith In Partial Fulfillment Of the Requirements for the Course History of Fundamentalism CHHI 686 (Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary) on August 15, 2012.
3Milton L. Rudnick, Fundamentalism & The Missouri Synod—A Historical Study of Their Interaction and Mutual Influence (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), 82; which is why Rudnick takes great exception to the idea that “Fundamentalism” at its core is even divisive. The whole scheme behind Fundamentalism was to unite. However, the “Western District of the Missouri Synod, in 1927, defined it as “the sum total of all doctrines and teachings contained in the Bible.”
4Corbett, 189.
5Norman Geisler, Systematic Theology, vol 1—Introduction, Bible (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2002), 294.
6Corbett, 189.
7Ibid., 189.
10Strouse, 55.
11Ibid., 53.
12Nancy Tatom Ammerman, Baptist Battles (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 84.
as an expansion of “infallibility.”  

Even today, however, “infallibility” and “inerrancy” are often synonymous in many dictionaries. Since this assignment deals with “inerrancy,” this working definition shall be utilized: “Inerrancy” is the error-less state of the Scriptures—even those portions which do not obviously relate to faith and practice.”  

This paper will interact with the history of Scripture being believed “error-less” by Fundamentalists since 1900. “Infallibility,” while related, is still different and will therefore remain for a different time. Scripture will not ever be found to be “errant.” This gives it “infallibility” for, says Strouse, “infallible” means there are no errors that will be found.  

“Inerrancy” is a term first found as being used by Benjamin B. Warfield—A.A. Hodge’s successor to the “Charles Hodge Chair” at Princeton Theological Seminary. He, according to Marsden, invented the term “inerrancy” and defined it as Scriptures truth in “every assertion.” The following work will show the progression of Fundamentalism’s understanding of “inerrancy.”

1900 and the “Heresy” of Arthur Cushman McGiffert

Arthur Cushman McGiffert, about ten years previously, had already tested the General Assembly—asking for a more tolerant, liberal stand. The General Assembly then declared four conservative teachings to be “fundamental doctrines” of the church: “Inerrancy of the Scriptures,” was of course the paramount doctrine. In 1900 and in 1903 many liberals were attempting revising the creedal statements of their bodies and were actually met with acceptance.  

1909 and The Fundamentals

The Fundamentals was a series of tracts from which “Fundamentalism” received its name, and these tracts based “inerrancy” upon the “inspiration of the Scripture.” That is, if something were from God, than it was contrary to His character to be erroneous in any way. Since the Scripture was “inspired” or “breathed out” by God, then it could contain no error. This project took these tracts, turned them often times into booklets, and then they were eventually published in larger volumes. A.C. Dixon, pastor of Moody Church, was the editorial committee chairman and the project took around five years. Two laymen from Los Angeles financed the project and selected the contributors. This made possible the distribution of some three million copies of The Fundamentals to any and all “Christian workers.” The tone of these articles was almost exclusively devoted to the “inerrancy” of the Scriptures identifying what was at stake if this doctrine was surrendered.  

1910 and the Presbyterian General Assembly

Union Theological Seminary of New York City had produced some unorthodox graduates. It was very difficult in that regard to ascertain who was really an orthodox believer and who was not. It was meet, therefore, in the face of Professor Charles A. Briggs’ claims of “incidental errors not central to [the Bible’s] teaching” and this Presbyterian school in New York, to classify “essential points” of doctrine: The first of which was the “inerrancy of Scripture.” These were approved by the General Assembly. In the minds of many of these ratifiers, “inerrancy” was hand-in-hand with “inspiration.” James M. Gray, for instance, wrote that it was “miraculous control” that brought the Bible into being through the human personalities involved with Scripture so as to have an “absolute transcript” of God’s mind. In other words, “inerrancy”


14Ibid., 74.

15George M. Marsden, Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism (Grand Rapids: WM B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 156; Marsden is careful to point out on page 160 of the same work that Princeton did not invent the concept. Rather, it was prominent in “Scholastic Protestantism” in the 1600’s and “American Protestantism” in the 1800’s.

16Rudnick, 34.

17Corbett, 189.

18Rudnick, 38-39.

19Ibid., 42.

20Marsden, Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism, 38.


22Ibid., 122.
is a natural extension, according to the 1910 Assembly, of the character—impeccable character—of God.

1917 and Disappointing Baptists
Both Baptists like Curtis Lee Laws—editor of the conservative Watchman-Examiner, and Augustus H. Strong—retired President of Rochester Seminary—restrained themselves from being dispensationalists or adherers to the “inerrancy” of Scripture. Strong took an expansive “tour of missions” and wrote about it. He upbraided liberalism on every hand—chiding the half-hearted theologians who rested on philosophy rather than Scripture. “New School-ism’s” Rauschenbusch, with his social gospel, had prompted such a journey. It became clear that Baptists were “losing faith in the Bible.” It seems, then, that a weak stand on “inerrancy” is really a slippery slope towards rationalism and philosophical cures which, upon embarkation, render no possible return to full faith in the Scripture or the God Who breathed them.

1921 and the Fundamentalist Fellowship
The Fundamentalist Fellowship was a pre-convention for the Northern Baptist Convention. They produced a creed of sorts that utilized portions of both the Philadelphia and New Hampshire Confessions and was similar to the Presbyterian General Assembly “essentials” “first adopted in 1910 and then reaffirmed in 1916.” They did take a year or so to propose this new “creed” to the Convention as, it is supposed, that J.C. Massee was still leading his investigation committee—searching out violators of the said orthodoxy. Of course, it should be pointed out that Massee himself was not convinced “inerrancy” was orthodox anyways. Interestingly enough, the one year that this new creed was postponed preceded the showcasing of liberalism by the Harry Emerson Fosdick. He preached “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” and fully expected, it is supposed to vilify the fundamentalists as unloving and “intolerant.”

1923, Fosdick’s Presbyterians, and Shailer’s “Affirmations”
Harry Emerson Fosdick, a liberal Baptist preacher turned Presbyterian pastor was interested in preaching a sermon to his “flock” on his basic disdain for Fundamentalism. He preached simple sermon entitled “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” Probably, he did not expect his layman, Ivy Lee, to publish it as he did. Following Fosdick and his 1922 sermon on Fundamentalists, the Presbyterians reaffirmed the “five points” and rebuked Fosdick. This produced a 1300-signature strong “Aubrun Affirmation” which deemed the “five essential points” as “extra-constitutional and extra biblical” showing that Fosdick was certainly not alone in his camp. This famous sermon brought a response from a Philadelphian Presbyterian pastor Clarence Macartney which basically accused Fosdick of infidelity to Scriptures and a warranted railing of insulting proportions.

Around this same time a certain Shailer Matthews, dean of the divinity school at the University of Chicago was making consistent opposition against Fundamentalists in his *The Affirmations of Faith* where he minimized the wrath of God and said nothing about “inerrancy”—while, of course, subjecting the interpretation of Scripture to human perception.

1925 and the Scopes Trial
William Jennings Bryan was the “bigot” who was prosecuting John T. Scopes for teaching Darwinism in Dayton, Tennessee. Perhaps his enthusiasm surpassed his ability to answer apologetic questions

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23 Ibid., 165.
24 Ibid., 167.
25 Ibid.
27 Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture, 2nd ed*, 171.
28 Dobson, 52.
30 Dobson, 53.
31 Ibid., 75.
32 Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture, 2nd ed*, 212.
concerning the Scriptures. At any rate, when questioned by Darrow, the ACLU-hired defense attorney, he found himself to be frustrated and seemingly unprepared when asked whether Scripture was entirely, “precisely accurate”: whether it was “inerrant.”\textsuperscript{33} Perhaps he had not thought about the ramifications of saying “You will find no errors in the Bible” prior to this point? Of course Darrow had thought about Joshua’s tenth chapter and the sun that “stood still.”\textsuperscript{34} What became clear to Fundamentalists was the greater need for more clarification within the definition of “inerrancy.” Equally as evident, perhaps, was the reality that William Jennings Bryan was far more convinced of the truth of creationism than he was aware of the debate of “inerrancy.” Hence, his desire to vindicate the truth of Genesis outran his grasp of scholastic battlegrounds such as those proposed by the likes of Darrow. It seems like people like Henry Morris and his subsequent writings like \textit{That You Might Believe (1946)} understood that all Biblical debates are really “inerrancy” debates. Either the Scripture is correct in its statements or it is not.

1929 and Westminster Seminary

J. Gresham Machen, an accomplished, respected professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, benefited from the legacy of Charles Hodge and the teaching of B.B. Warfield. He was resolute in his stand for the “inerrancy” of Scripture and this conviction eventually drove him to start the Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, PA.\textsuperscript{35} In his case, he was not dispensational—much less premillennial.

1947 and the Founding of Fuller Theological Seminary

Fundamentalists were suspected of being averse to education and intelligent thinking. The favorable ending of World War II placed a sort of utopic atmosphere of “hope” and “progress” which led many to question the veracity of dispensationalism which was marked by a sort of skepticism and pessimism about the so-called “good” of humanity. With the threat of Nazi domination now passed, it seemed as if “Fundamentalists” would do well to distance themselves from that which seemed “extreme.” In any case, Charles Fuller helped found and fund Fuller Theological Seminary and provided a sort of figure head. He left the management and bolstering of this new look to “positive evangelists” like Billy Graham\textsuperscript{36} and intellectuals like Gleason Archer and Carl F.H. Henry. These were willing to say less about dispensationalism and yet required the faculty to assent to a creed which involved Biblical inerrancy.\textsuperscript{37}

1950’s and Evangelical Fundamentalism

Led by figures such as Billy Graham and Carl F.H. Henry, Evangelicalism had respect for the “five essentials” mentioned earlier, but there was a group within Evangelicalism known as “Fundamentalists” which became adamant about two chief things: Premillennialism and the Inerrancy of Scripture.\textsuperscript{38} Although Evangelicals of any stripe found themselves involved with perceived liberals and politics, there were still those who were doctrinal fundamentalists within this group. This was often a “no-win” for this segment as those who were staunch “inerrantists” often cited this “inerrant” Scripture for proof as to why this segment should separate.

1962 and the Southern Baptist Convention

The Southern Baptists met in San Fransisco and discussed things such as the firing of liberal SBC Seminary professors and the infallibility of the Bible. The major event on the agenda was a review and redraft of the Convention’s statement of faith. The committee which cared for this issue was composed of all the state convention presidents and was chaired by Herschel Hobbs, SBC president.\textsuperscript{39} They concocted a phrase qualifying “inerrancy” as “truth without any mixture of error.” This phrase proved to be open to

\textsuperscript{33}Ibid., 186.
\textsuperscript{34}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35}Dobson, 45.
\textsuperscript{36}Marsden, \textit{Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism}, 72.
\textsuperscript{37}Ibid., 73.
\textsuperscript{38}Marsden, \textit{Fundamentalism and American Culture}, 2nd ed, 233-234.
\textsuperscript{39}Ammerman, 64.
all kinds of interpretations among seminary professors and denominational literature.\textsuperscript{40}

1970’s, The Moral Majority and The Religious Right

A natural outflow of believing the Bible has no errors is that it becomes the only “rule” for faith and practice. It seems that the further away from 1900 the history student travels, the more the emphasis is placed upon the “and practice.” That is, if Scripture is without error, then it makes sense that each thing the believer does is strained through the grid of the Scriptures. As such, Fundamentalism took on a political activist tone and even things such as abortion were seen as being related to the “inerrancy” of Scripture.\textsuperscript{41} Yea, even in the Southern Baptist Convention, concerns of all types found their watershed within the “inerrancy” issue.\textsuperscript{42}

1977, the Journal, and the Council on Inerrancy

The Baptists, headed by W.A. Criswell, and the Missouri Synod Lutherans, led by Robert Preus were taking the lead on this great Council (ICE) to establish solidarity among Fundamentalists. Among these leaders, others who took part were Fred Wolfe, Robert Tenery, and Judge Paul Pressler. Of course the major errand was to make clear the love of these men for the Scriptures that were “without any mixture of error.”\textsuperscript{43} This trans-denominational struggle was accented by Harold Lindsell and the magazine for which he authored: Christianity for Today. He revived the inerrancy issue altogether and was willing to state the stakes for those who momentarily became accustomed to the debate.\textsuperscript{44} Meanwhile, Regular Baptist Press was championing Robert Lightner through a series of booklets and articles around this time asking questions like “How can an errant Bible be God’s revelation and authoritative and trustworthy?”\textsuperscript{45} On every hand, logical questions—a sort of “all or nothing” view on faith and practice—were being asked and required an answer.

While the “Fundamental” or “Fundamentalist” movement was trans-denominational—consisting mostly of Presbyterians and Baptists, it was also cherished and found adherence from the “Disciples of Christ”\textsuperscript{46} and other lesser-known sects and denominations. Rudnick almost shuts to think that there was mutual influence between his Missouri Synod and the Fundamental movement. He stated that it was exceptional when a Lutheran of any type referenced a prolific “Fundamentalist,” but rather that, almost stereo-typically, you could trace their doctrine back to the New Testament.\textsuperscript{47}

1978, the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI), and the “Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy”

A group of Evangelicals, led by James Boice,\textsuperscript{48} drafted both a shorter statement and a longer statement stating a position that the “Holy Scripture is God’s witness to Himself”; that it is infallible in all that it “touches and embraces”; that God is the Author; that it is “without fault”; and that believing in any form of error therein brings “serious loss” to all believers.\textsuperscript{49} The longer statement known as the “Chicago Statement...” was a nineteen-article treatise denying the authority of any institution or “church” over the Scripture, and it was intended to remove all ambiguity in the term “inerrancy.”\textsuperscript{50} It furthermore denies the mistaken notion that human language is inadequate to express God’s revelation to man (Article IV).\textsuperscript{51}

This article is especially salient to the debate as to whether the Scripture adequately expresses scientific

\textsuperscript{40}Ibid., 65.
\textsuperscript{41}Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture, 2nd ed, 239.
\textsuperscript{42}Ibid., 244.
\textsuperscript{43}Ammerman, 70.
\textsuperscript{44}Marsden, Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism, 76.
\textsuperscript{45}Dobson, 8.
\textsuperscript{46}Rudnick, 34.
\textsuperscript{47}Ibid., 73.
\textsuperscript{49}Geisler, Systematic Theology, vol 1—Introduction, Bible, 418-419.
\textsuperscript{50}Allert, 160.
\textsuperscript{51}Geisler, Systematic Theology, vol 1—Introduction, Bible, 419.
or historical fact. It superbly listed things like “observational descriptions of nature, the reporting of falsehoods, the use of hyperbole, round numbers, and variant selections of material in parallel accounts” as items not affecting the Fundamentalist’s understanding of Scriptural “inerrancy.”

1985 and Inerrant Figurative-ism

By the time 1985 had come around, various polls could be found which confirmed that 85% of Southern Baptists believed the Bible to be inerrant. 62% of SBC members had very little criticism for the notion that Genesis was figuratively describing God’s involvement and was not for describing “how and when.” However, among SBC’s 85% of inerrantists, only 44% of them believed the Scripture was to be taken literally whenever possible. In other words, 38% of Southern Baptists believed the Scripture—Genesis in particular—was both inerrant and meant to be interpreted literally. Incidentally, this low percentage of literalist-inerrantists corresponded with the 59% of SBC members who held to premillennialism—which is largely based on the literal interpretation of Scripture.

Jerry Vines, future president of the SBC, said a year later that all other doctrines rest upon a literal, inerrant Bible. It is “the first domino to fall.” Not all Baptists held to this idea, however—which is why they could not be called “Fundamentalists.” James Draper, a “disciple of Criswell” would never concede to the idea that one could not be fundamental in the other “essentials” mentioned earlier while denying the “inerrancy of Scripture.”

Some among moderates like Richmond religion professor Robison James argued that a predisposition to “inerrancy” does not allow the Scripture to speak or move within moods and/or genres of the past—the first century in particular. Ironically, it seemed that he had a predisposition against the education of “fundamentalists”: “they did not know how to even read Hebrew or Greek.”

1985-1989 and the Peace Committee

Within the Southern Baptist Convention were pockets of non-Fundamentalists. That is, they did not hold to “inerrancy.” As such, SBC folks did not wish to pay salaries for those who did not affirm “inerrancy.” Supposedly, issues as this—as well as women in the pastorate, universalism, capital punishment, abortion, and others—were the discussion of this Committee between 1985 and 1989. However, countless hours of debate found hard-liners and moderates resigned to a lack of middle ground. They were simply “not wired the same.” Fundamentalists were staunchly entrenched within the notion that “inerrancy” was a “theological issue” as it reflected upon the character of God. The liberals drafted the “Glorieta Statement” pledging a belief in the Bible that was “inerrant in any area of reality.”

Apparently, if it was an extravagant genre being expressed, nobody—including God—expected it to be strictly “without error.”

2002, Norman Geisler, and Scientifically Religious Assertions

Geisler rightly points out that historical statements like “Christ’s three days of death” and biological tenants like a virgin birth are entirely too intertwined with religious dogma to say things like “The Bible is ‘inerrant’ in all matters relating to faith, but not necessarily to science or religion.” His affiliation with Baker Book House could never be, at this point in history, confused with neo-evangelicalism or pseudo-fundamentalism.

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52Allert, 161.
53Ammerman, 74.
54Ibid., 75.
55Ibid., 80.
56Ibid., 82.
57Ibid., 85.
58Ibid., 84.
59Ibid., 221.
60Ibid., 222.
61Geisler, Systematic Theology, vol 1—Introduction, Bible, 497.
2007 and God-Inspired Errors

Developments in arguments are no new thing. McGowen apparently believes that God could produce an error-filled document if He so desired. In other words, he did not feel that it was contrary to the character of God to produce error, and that He did not believe God was required to produce an inerrant document. McGowen felt as though the Chicago Statement assumes something which God did not intend—scientific precision. The conclusion, therefore, is that God moved upon writers to make scientific inaccuracies because these were peripheral situations. Unfortunately, Geisler failed to give the reader an example of these proposed, God-inspired errors.

Conclusion

Implications to Preservation

Following Geisler’s line of reasoning—that a single letter changes words; words have meanings; paragraphs are a conglomerate message of words en mass, and the meaning is changed with the slightest of errors, it is hard to sell the concept of modern versions with the notion that “doctrines are not affected” as coined by so many in this day. Indeed, expositional preaching—built upon sound exegesis—has an intrinsic desperation to know the very words of God. It is incumbent upon believers to know the translation philosophy of various committees so as not to take for granted that all translations are of equal value—let alone equal accuracy. As Lightner asks, the reader must ask as well: “How can ‘errant preservation’ be trustworthy? How can we trust a process that is ultimately devoid of all ‘power of inspiration’? How can we place our eternity upon a science such as textual criticism?” To this author, the answer has not been satisfactorily answered.

On the other side of the matter, Geisler thought through this line of reasoning and has rightly said that well over 95% of the over 5,500 manuscripts agree to the point that over “99% of the original text can be reconstructed.” He further states that there "is a difference between 'text and truth.'" See below:

...Recall that if you received a notification that “Y#U HAVE WON 10 MILLION DOLLARS,” you would have no problem understanding 100% of the message, even though the text is nearly 4 percent in error (1 letter out of 26)." To illustrate, were the original U.S. Constitution to be destroyed, we would not lose the constitutional authority for our country...The original could be reconstructed with enough certainty to assure the continuance of our constitutional republic. The same is true of the Bible in our hands.

Final Thought

The Roman Catholic Church’s Council of Trent, notwithstanding, Christians in general surrender to the essential authority of the Bible. Moreover, “Few great religions have been so dependent as Christianity upon a sacred book.” That is to say, only “liberalism” and “modernism” adopt other forms or sources of authority. One should not be surprised that people of the book, with so much to lose should their “authority” be proved erroneous, rest all certainty upon the Scriptures. If the Scriptures were given by the Spirit of God (2 Samuel 23:2; 2 Peter 1:20-21)—Who is the Spirit of Truth (John 14-16), then one is left with explaining how the Spirit of Truth can utter error. So from the tracing of the “heresy of 1900” to the latest, seemingly widely-received excurses on “inerrancy,” the reader should notice the development of an idea and that the realm of inerrancy—even after 1978—is not free from qualifications. Anything intended on being stated as error-free, is indeed error free.

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63 Ibid., 24.
64 Ibid., 20.
65 Geisler, Systematic Theology, vol 1—Introduction, Bible, 503.
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