

How Far Beyond Chicago? Assessing Recent Attempts to Reframe the Inerrancy Debate

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The doctrine of inerrancy has been a watershed issue among evangelicals in the West, perhaps now more evident than ever.¹ While the inerrancy debate never entirely dissipated from its last spell in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it recently surged to the forefront of discussions about an evangelical doctrine of Scripture both in North America and abroad. This transpired with recent events in the Evangelical Theological Society (hereafter, ETS) dealing with inerrancy² and fresh publications of at least a dozen books, articles, and reviews.³ With this new rally, one might say that evangelicalism is

¹ It was designated a “watershed” over three decades ago by Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 26–27, and eight years later by Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1984), 44. The degree of watershed was challenged early by Richard H. Bube, “Inerrancy Is/Is Not the Watershed of Evangelicalism: None of the Above,” *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 29 (March 1977): 46–47, who called for “revelational inerrancy,” asserting that the term “inerrancy” outlived its usefulness. Some, however, see the inerrancy debate as a watershed for other reasons—because of a “classically modern” view of truth that made inerrancy the “foundational Christian doctrine upon which all others depend.” Jeffery Stephen Oldfield, “The Word Became Text and Dwells Among Us? An Examination of the Doctrine of Inerrancy” (PhD thesis, University of St Andrews, 2007), 232–33.

² While embers for the resurgent discussion over inerrancy were burning with the Open Theism controversy and charges that Open Theists deny inerrancy, the first recent major publication challenging the standard doctrine of inerrancy was by Peter Enns, former Professor of OT and Biblical Hermeneutics at Westminster Theological Seminary, in *Inspiration and Incarnation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005). As the Open Theism controversy faded, at the 2003 annual meeting of ETS, L. Russ Bush requested that the Executive Committee recommend to the Society appropriate ways to clarify its understanding of their doctrinal basis, since the meaning of the statement might seem unclear to some. The society moved to clarify details for those unclear on inerrancy’s meaning. At the 56th Annual Meeting (November 19, 2004) the clarity resolution was passed by an eighty percent majority, stating the following: “For the purpose of advising members regarding the intent and meaning of the reference to biblical inerrancy in the Doctrinal Basis of ETS, the Society refers members to the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978). The case for biblical inerrancy rests on the absolute trustworthiness of God and Scripture’s testimony to itself. A proper understanding of inerrancy takes into account the language, genres, and intent of Scripture. We reject approaches to Scripture that deny that biblical truth claims are grounded in reality.” A disturbing feature at the meeting was how few were familiar with the Chicago Statement. This was so stark that members of the Executive Committee were prompted to print copies of it for every attending member. In 2006 the society voted to add this reference about Chicago as an amendment to its by-laws, having it serve as the standard definitional reference point referring to “inerrancy” in the doctrinal base. (I am grateful to James Borland for points of clarification here.)

³ While Enns’s 2005 work is indispensable to the debate, here is a selection of works dealing with the Bible’s inerrancy and authority since 2005 (in addition to those covered at length later in this article): Mark D. Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006); Roger D. Olson, “Why Inerrancy Doesn’t Matter,” *The Baptist Standard*, February 3, 2006 (available at http://www.baptiststandard.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=4670&Itemid=134 [accessed November 5, 2008]); D. A. Carson, “Three More Books on the Bible: A Critical Review,” *TrinJ* 27 (2006): 1–62; Justin S. Holcomb, ed., *Christian Theologies of Scripture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); William P. Brown, ed., *Engaging Biblical Authority* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007) (cf. Craig L. Blomberg’s laudatory review of Brown’s work: “Review of *Engaging Biblical Authority*,” *RBL* [August 16, 2008]; available at http://bookreviews.org/pdf/6118_6532.pdf); Ronald F. Satta, *The Sacred Text* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2007); Ben Witherington III, *The Living Word of God* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007).

in the third wave of the inerrancy debate.⁴ Few signs indicate that the discussion will subside any time soon.

This essay hopes to offer a small contribution to the discussion by answering the title question, “How Far Beyond Chicago?” By “Chicago,” this essay refers to the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (hereafter, CSBI) and not subsequent statements from 1982 or 1986. The rationale behind upholding CSBI as a relevant touchstone today and basis for any further conversation on inerrancy is as follows. (1) It is the most recent, wide-ranging, definitive attempt made by a relatively unified group of evangelicals seeking to understand and articulate inerrancy in light of non-inerrantists discounting Scripture’s authority. (2) Concerning the first meeting of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (hereafter, ICBI) in 1978 with over three hundred scholars and leaders, J. I. Packer noted that over ninety percent of the delegates present signed CSBI, which caused him to conclude, “in view of this broad representative base of support it should be able to function as an agreed platform and reference point for the debates of the next generation.”⁵ (3) CSBI is the reference that the executive committee of ETS and the overwhelming majority of recent ETS members set forth as what is meant by “inerrancy” in 2004 and 2006. (4) Arguments made today from those opposed to inerrancy are similar and often the same as the previous generation’s critics of inerrancy, which resulted in CSBI. (5) Greg Beale, the latest respondent to inerrancy’s critics, has set forth CSBI as the positive course forward, showing how the debate may build on CSBI as a foundation.⁶ (6) After his extensive study on the doctrine of inerrancy, Jeffrey Oldfield concludes, “I have yet to find an inerrantist who has argued against the Chicago Statement. For this reason I have used the Chicago Statement as the definitive statement concerning inerrancy.”⁷

The inquiry that follows is animated by three questions related to CSBI: How far *does* CSBI allow movement beyond itself? How far beyond CSBI *have* people already gone? And how far *should* those who agree with CSBI go beyond it? The study unfolds in three parts. The current state of the inerrancy debate is assessed, along with a brief sketch of its history and ethos. Recent works will then be considered, including efforts to restructure the debate. After this, suggestions will be made for moving forward in the defense and construction of an evangelical doctrine of Scripture in the current context.⁸

⁴ Cf. Peter Enns’s comment in “Response to G. K. Beale’s Review of *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament*,” *JETS* 49 (2006): 326 about the imminency of “another inerrancy war” and G. K. Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 221, referring to “the fragmentation of evangelicalism” because “the absolute authority of Scripture is under serious debate.” However much one seeks to avoid polarization, it is undeniable that a very serious new discussion of inerrancy is underway in a new context, with issues on the table that have never been discussed among those holding a high view of the Bible as inspired, inerrant and authoritative.

⁵ J. I. Packer, *Beyond the Battle for the Bible* (Westchester, IL: Cornerstone, 1980), 48.

⁶ Beale, *Erosion of Inerrancy*, 267–79.

⁷ Oldfield, “The Word Became Text,” 5n2.

⁸ Important areas outside the scope of this article include hermeneutics and the history of the inerrancy debate. From one side of the debate, one might begin with Stephen T. Davis, *The Debate About the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977); Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979); Paul J. Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999; repr. from *The Inspiration of Scripture* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980]); and Donald K. McKim, ed., *The Authoritative Word* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983). From the other side, one may find useful the relevant articles in Norman Geisler, ed., *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980); John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982); D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983); Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus, eds., *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984); John D. Hannah, ed., *Inerrancy and the Church* (Chicago: Moody, 1984).

1. Assessing the State of the Inerrancy Debate

Insight into the inerrancy debate's pedigree is necessary at this point. The present section gives a brief sketch of its historical lineage, followed by indications and causes of ambiguous aspects, along with the tone that has marked the debate's culture.

1.1. A Sketch of the Historic Waves in the Inerrancy Debate

1.1.1. The First Wave in the Inerrancy Debate: 1893

Inerrancy's current canvas spans 150 years.⁹ While the debate may have a transatlantic element, its configuration is largely an American phenomenon.¹⁰ This does not negate that many throughout church history, including some church fathers, scholastics, and Protestant theologians held the Bible to be without errors,¹¹ nor does it mean that this discussion has been totally confined to the US. So where did the recent view of inerrancy come from? An inspired and inerrant Scripture was commonly held in the US and Britain in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This is seen in John Wesley¹² and in the US with The New Hampshire Baptist Confession (1833).¹³ Yet in the midst of this, "there was no attempt to elaborate any *theory* of infallibility or inerrancy."¹⁴ Nevertheless as H. D. McDonald helpfully summarizes, "Prior to the year 1860, the idea of an infallibly inerrant Scripture was the prevailing view."¹⁵

November 1859 saw Darwin's *Origin of the Species* released, indicating a time of considerable shift for how the church viewed the Bible. Within a growing evolutionary environment, "the idea of an inerrant Bible was being discarded."¹⁶ Yet in the US, the Bible's inerrant inspiration remained the

⁹ H. D. McDonald, *Theories of Revelation* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1963), 197–99.

¹⁰ Daniel J. Treier comments, "Conflict over scriptural inerrancy has not defined evangelicalism elsewhere as it did in the United States" ("Scripture and Hermeneutics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology* [ed. Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007], 40). See the same sentiment in Rob Warner, *Reinventing English Evangelicalism, 1966–2001* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), 192; A. T. B. McGowan, *The Divine Authenticity of Scripture* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007), 13; and Craig D. Allert, *A High View of Scripture?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 32.

¹¹ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, "The Church Fathers and Holy Scripture," in *Scripture and Truth* (ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 199–220; idem, *Historical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 214.

¹² Note the significant quote from Wesley from his journal dated July 24, 1776: "[I]f there be any mistakes in the Bible, there may well be a thousand. If there be one falsehood in that book, it did not come from the God of truth" (cited in McDonald, *Theories of Revelation*, 197).

¹³ This states that the Bible "has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth without any admixture of error for its matter. . . ." (I am grateful to Rev. Liam Garvie for this reference.)

¹⁴ David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (London: Routledge, 1989), 13 (emphasis mine). Cf. also the description Bebbington gives of the influence that Haldane and Gausson had on leaders in England and Scotland, emphasizing the "deductive approach" to inspiration from "their *a priori* assumptions" (ibid., 89–90). This seems quite similar to the framework in which inerrancy has been articulated by evangelicals from Warfield until now.

¹⁵ McDonald, *Theories of Revelation*, 196. Compare this with Bebbington's alternate reading of the history: "[A]t a representative clerical meeting in 1861, [two years after Darwin's work] a majority still favored the traditional view that there might be inaccuracies on non-religious topics" (*Evangelicalism*, 91). It seems that in light of McDonald's reading Bebbington is mistaken that this was the "traditional view" and fails to give details of this "representative clerical meeting" he cites from the *Christian Observer*.

¹⁶ McDonald, *Theories of Revelation*, 199.

dominant position for some time yet.¹⁷ It was this scenario into which Charles Briggs introduced his view of an inspired yet errant autographical text of Scripture in the early 1880s, prompting Hodge and Warfield to articulate what was meant by inerrancy in the autographs. Briggs was eventually defrocked from the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the US in 1893, marking the climax in the first wave of the inerrancy debate.¹⁸

1.1.2. *The Second Wave in the Inerrancy Debate: 1976*

The majority view continued to pulse within evangelicalism,¹⁹ living on in American fundamentalism and into mid-twentieth century “neo-evangelicalism,” which gave birth to organizations like the National Association of Evangelicals (1942), Fuller Seminary (1947), ETS (1949), and *Christianity Today* (1956).²⁰ During this time, E. J. Young recognized that there were few definitions for the terms, and he seems to be the first evangelical to distinguish between “infallibility” and “inerrancy.”²¹ Packer’s treatment came one year later, relying on the term’s cognate origin.²² This nuanced treatment of inerrancy came into evangelicalism with little significant notice—until the debate’s second wave in the 1970s. Controversy had been brewing at Fuller Seminary, with faculty publicly denying inerrancy in 1962, while the inerrancy clause was not officially removed for another decade.²³ At this time, extensive work began to emerge providing nuanced views of inerrancy and its importance.²⁴

The second wave of the debate reached a climax with the 1976 publication of Lindsell’s *Battle for the Bible*, to which Fuller President David Hubbard summoned Jack Rogers for a response in kind.²⁵ Around

¹⁷ Mark Noll recognizes that Randall Balmer (“The Princetonians and Scripture: A Reconsideration,” *WTJ* 44 [1982], 352–65) “has argued convincingly” that Hodge and Warfield’s view was that of the Princeton tradition and “of much American theology generally to that time” (Mark Noll, ed. *The Princeton Theology, 1812–1921* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001], 43). This has been well attested both by John D. Woodbridge and Randall H. Balmer, “The Princetonians and Biblical Authority,” in *Scripture and Truth*, 251–79, and most recently in the work by Satta, *Sacred Text* (see n. 3).

¹⁸ Satta, *Sacred Text*, 91–96.

¹⁹ This paper is using the working definition of “evangelical” from Timothy Larsen, “Defining and Locating Evangelicalism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology* (ed. Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1–14.

²⁰ With the exception of the National Association of Evangelicals (which referred to the Bible as “inspired,” and “the only infallible, authoritative Word of God” since inception), the other three organizations here each had inerrancy in their statements from their beginnings. Fuller dropped the term in 1972, while ETS and *Christianity Today* maintain it.

²¹ E. J. Young, *Thy Word Is Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 113. By “infallible” he means that the Scripture “possesses an indefectible authority.” By “inerrant,” while being a close concept to infallible, he means that “the Scriptures possess the quality of freedom from error.”

²² J. I. Packer treats this topic in *Fundamentalism and the Word of God* (Leicester: IVP, 1958; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 94–101. It also appears later in his updated version of *God Has Spoken* (rev. and enl.; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1979), 110–18, though it seems peculiar that it was not included in the original 1965 edition. Cf. the interesting and challenging note on Packer’s use of this term in Stephen R. Holmes, “Evangelical Doctrines of Scripture in Transatlantic Perspective,” *EvQ* 81 (2009): 45n34. Cf. also Packer’s own journey with the term “inerrancy” without which “the structure of biblical authority as evangelicals conceive it collapses” (*Truth and Power: The Place of the Bible in the Christian Life* [n.p.: Eagle: 1996], 91).

²³ George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 200–219.

²⁴ E.g., cf. René Pache, *The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture* (trans. Helen I. Needham; Chicago: Moody, 1969). An early collaborative effort is John Warwick Montgomery, ed., *God’s Inerrant Word* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1973). For a discussion of inerrancy’s importance in ETS, see Millard Erickson, “Biblical Inerrancy: The Last Twenty-Five Years,” *JETS* 25 (1982): 387.

²⁵ The response was Jack B. Rogers, ed., *Biblical Authority* (Waco: Word, 1977), which was followed by the work with Donald McKim in 1979, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible*. See his personal account of the relevant events in Jack B. Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 7–10.

this time, ICBI formed and held its first meeting in Chicago.²⁶ However success for ICBI is defined, its publications were voluminous, and its influence reached far and wide.²⁷ It established the ethos that holds at least among ETS into the present.

1.1.3. *The Third Wave in the Inerrancy Debate: 2005*

This leads up to the contemporary third wave of the inerrancy debate.²⁸ Clearly, American evangelicalism, whose self-critique has been termed “alarmist,”²⁹ has generated and nurtured inerrancy’s current structure. And while it may have been Enns’s 2005 work that threw a rock at the hornet’s nest (though perhaps it was the subsequent stream of argumentation from Enns and others), evangelicals once again have the opportunity to engage fruitful debate that will bring them toward a God-glorifying view of Scripture in the present context. But at least two initial factors hinder this progress.

1.2. The Inerrancy Debate’s Need for Clarity

In this debate, rhetoric seems unending, and half-baked understandings of one’s interlocutors abound. An example is the reading of select theologians and exegetes in church history, a case-in-point being Calvin.³⁰ Another example concerns readings of Warfield, often mistakenly identified as having invented the doctrine of “inerrancy of the original autographs,”³¹ an idea that many find illogical and meaningless.³² But though oft-quoted, one is hard-pressed to find someone who understands Warfield’s

²⁶ ICBI’s stated purpose was “to define, defend, and apply the doctrine of biblical inerrancy as an essential element of the authority of Scripture and a necessary ingredient for the health of the church of Christ in an attempt to win the church back to this historic position” (Geisler, ed., *Inerrancy*, ix).

²⁷ Erickson notes the “close ties” ETS has with ICBI (“Biblical Inerrancy,” 393). Note that CSBI is published in *JETS* 21 (1978): 289–96, and ICBI’s Statement on Hermeneutics is published in *JETS* 25 (1982): 397–401.

²⁸ Criteria for a debate’s “wave” seem to include at least four inextricable features: (1) a standing position is challenged; (2) multiple people from various positions are engaged in the conversation at once; (3) a large amount of publication on the topic commences; and (4) at least someone leaves or is dismissed from an institution or organization over the issue.

²⁹ Warner, *Reinventing English Evangelicalism*, 4.

³⁰ John Goldingay cites J. I. Packer for holding Calvin as regarding Gen 1 as “theologically instructive without being scientifically true” (*Models for Scripture* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994], 271). But Packer did not observe this distinction between theology and science. He saw Calvin as defending Moses for speaking about things “as they appear rather than in scientific terms” (“John Calvin and the Inerrancy of Holy Scripture,” in *Inerrancy and the Church* [ed. John D. Hannah; Chicago: Moody, 1984], 180). While some who affirm Calvin’s “ill-advised” views on certain passages deem him to believe that “the Holy Spirit . . . was not always meticulously precise on such matters” (John Murray, *Calvin on Scripture and Divine Sovereignty* [1960; repr., Welwyn: Evangelical Press, 1979], 30–31), Calvin saw Moses writing in a “popular style,” for “common usage,” leaving “no reason why the janglers should deride the unskilfulness of Moses . . .; for he does not call us up into heaven, he only proposes things which lie before our eyes” (*Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis* [trans. John King; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.], 1:86–87). Packer understood that Calvin saw God in some cases “evidently not concerned to speak with a kind of degree or accuracy that goes beyond what those forms of speech would naturally convey” (179). Cf. also the reading of Calvin from Kenton L. Sparks for a misunderstanding of similar proportion to Goldingay (*God’s Words in Human Words* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008], 232–36).

³¹ Ronald F. Satta, “The Case of Professor Charles A. Briggs: Inerrancy Affirmed,” *TrinJ* 26 (2005): 86.

³² Cf. Olson, “Why Inerrancy Doesn’t Matter”; Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority*, 59–61; McGowan, *Divine Authenticity*, 109–12, 163, 211; and Gabriel Fackre, *The Doctrine of Revelation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 157, 173. Cf. also William J. Abraham who guesses it was the “half-hearted” acceptance of historical criticism that “led to abandoning of the term ‘dictation’ and the emphasis on the original autographs” (*The Divine Inspiration of Holy Scripture* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1981], 29). But this is not the case, for while Hodge and Warfield’s 1881 article accepted the Holy Spirit’s “superintendence” over the “process” of Scripture’s genesis, they still allowed that “some of the prophetic parts were verbally dictated.”

views here on his own terms, which assert inerrancy for the autographic *text*, not the *codex*.³³ Others have given unfair interpretations of opposing views, unwilling to recognize others' positions on their own terms and instead illegitimately reading into their views more than what they have explicitly stated.³⁴

The debate's terms also cause difficulty, creating the challenge of determining when a term refers to a particular concept in the debate's vast context.³⁵ When each does what is right in his own definitional eyes, ambiguity abounds.³⁶ An example of this is E. J. Young's and Packer's desires to nuance "inerrancy" and "infallibility" while Lindsell wished to swallow them back into one sweeping definition.³⁷ In the present context, there seems to be little consensus that each understands the other's positions. The recent example here is the Enns/Beale debate(s), with a running total of six articles and two books in three years covering much of the same issue. Before any forward progress can take place, some consensus on terms must be located. Along with this, a serious attempt at a comprehensive understanding of the history of this debate (without bowing to the often-sought question, "Did *they* take *our* view?"), replete with all the arguments set forth, needs to be made and is due to the evangelical community. The debate's scope is massive and its materials nearly incalculable. The three waves are not statically linear either, as the climaxes might lead one to think, since even the non-eruptive times had evangelicals still working with and aiming toward a high view of Scripture. But clarity is not all that is needed.

1.3. The Inerrancy Debate's Need for Charity

Much can be learned from Orr and Warfield a century ago. While their views differed, their deep regard for one another did not wane, as seen by Orr contributing to *The Fundamentals* and Warfield contributing the well-known article on "Inspiration" to the *ISBE*, over which Orr served as general editor.³⁸ Henry's wisdom from a generation ago is also outstanding. For while he ardently defended inerrancy on theological grounds, he renounced reactionary approaches and saw "the ongoing campaign to *make* inerrancy the watershed of true evangelicalism as bad politics."³⁹ Learning from these men will

³³ Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings* (ed. John E. Meeter; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1973; repr., 2001), 2:583–84. I have found no quote better than this for so succinctly capturing Warfield's position: "[W]e affirm that we have the autographic text; and not only we but all men may see it if they will; and that God has not permitted the Bible to become so hopelessly corrupt that its restoration to its original text is impossible. As a matter of fact, the great body of the Bible is, in its autographical text, in the worst copies of the original texts in circulation; practically the whole of it is in its autographic text in the best texts in circulation; and he who will may today read the autographic text in large stretches of Scripture without legitimate doubt." Mark Noll has adequately recognized the aforementioned position in *The Princeton Theology, 1812–1921* (268–74), though he is part of a short list. Cf. also David P. Smith, "B. B. Warfield's Scientifically Constructive Theological Scholarship" (PhD dissertation, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2008).

³⁴ Cf. Achtemeier's reading of Lindsell (*Inspiration and Authority*, 55).

³⁵ Cf. Kenneth S. Kantzer, "Unity and Diversity in Evangelical Faith," in *The Evangelicals: What They Believe, Who They Are, Where They Are Changing* (ed. David F. Wells and John D. Woodbridge; Nashville: Abingdon, 1975), 40–41.

³⁶ E.g., Davis, *Debate About the Bible*, 120, who affirms "infallibility" (not *a priori*), noting that some will call this "limited inerrancy," though he does not like the contradictory term. See also Stanley Grenz, who uses a standard inerrancy definition for his description of "infallibility" (*Theology for the Community of God* [repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], 398). D. A. Carson also helpfully discusses this in "Recent Developments in the Doctrine of Scripture," in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 30–31.

³⁷ Thomas Buchan, "Inerrancy as Inheritance?" in *Evangelicals and Scripture* (ed. Vincent Bacote, Laura C. Miguélez, and Dennis L. Okholm; Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 44.

³⁸ McGowan, *Divine Authenticity*, 137, stresses the "vital point" that "Orr did not argue that there *were* errors in Scripture," but that "one could not rule this out as an *a priori* imposition."

³⁹ Gary J. Dorrien, *The Remaking of Evangelical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 119; cf. also James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought* (2 vols.; 2d ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 2:404–5.

mean that at various points, one must admit that certain ground in one's position may also at times need to be given up.⁴⁰ Modifications and amendments may need to be made since rigorous thought and serious engagement in understanding, developing, and articulating a Scripture principle is an ongoing task of the church.

Inerrantists are not asking whether the Bible is inerrant. They believe it is, and the answer is not up for grabs unless one is developing a purely bottom-up Scripture principle. In that case, one would not need divine revelation, or anything besides one's logic, and whatever system informs one's view of reality (e.g., Cartesian Realism, Darwinism, or forms of postmodernism). But if the inerrancy view is sustainably the best view, the burden belongs to the inerrantist for gracious, sound argumentation, not only in constructing the doctrine further, but also in dealing with voices that have entered the debate, even challenging the status quo. Recent cases of this will now be considered.

2. Assessing Recent Attempts to Reframe the Debate

This paper has so far sought to establish that the debate about an inerrant Scripture is not held in a vacuum. American evangelicalism has a story, and inerrancy is a major character in that story. At different times, some have tried to write inerrancy out of the story. Others have tried to rewrite its role or the context in which inerrancy's part is played. Looking to the current canvas of the inerrancy debate, this section considers six of the most recent contributions, each participating in the attempted redaction. Revolving around stated or unstated relationships to CSBI, which marks inerrancy's received history in American evangelicalism, two categories give the groupings of these contributions as those either seeking to revise or reinforce the doctrine of inerrancy.

2.1. Revisioning the Debate's Context

The first five works make attempts to establish new frameworks for the debate. Two are from theologians, one is by a young evangelical student, and two are by biblical scholars. A few smaller contributions will also be considered. These efforts do not claim to be a conspired, collaborative effort, but seem genuinely offered in attempt to think carefully through critical aspects of an evangelical doctrine of Scripture. Full reviews cannot be given here, leaving assessments only to a few germane observations. However, a summary appraisal will be given after all the revisionist treatments are presented.⁴¹

2.1.1. A. T. B. McGowan's Organic Approach or New Infallibility

This work made no small waves among Reformed people on both sides of the Atlantic.⁴² Seeking to

⁴⁰ It seems clear that this is what Warfield and Hodge did. Maintaining a strong commitment to inerrancy *a priori*, at points they did permit concessions to and amendments because of critical scholarship: "[The Scriptures] are written in human languages, whose words, inflections, constructions and idioms bear everywhere indelible traces of error. The record itself furnishes evidence that the writers were in large measure dependent for their knowledge upon sources and methods in themselves fallible, and that their personal knowledge and judgments were in many matters hesitating and defective, or even wrong" ("Tractate on Inspiration" [1881], in *Westminster Doctrine Anent Holy Scripture: Tractates by Profs. A. A. Hodge and Warfield with Notes on Recent Discussions by Rev. Robert Howie* [Edinburgh: Hunter, 1891], 40). This simple acknowledgement allowed them to refine their understanding and articulation of inerrancy even more than they previously had.

⁴¹ Fruitful study might come from comparisons of these and future proposals for inerrancy with clear statements from CSBI.

⁴² Released in Britain in November 2007 (*The Divine Spiration of Scripture* [Leicester: Apollos]) and in the US in summer 2008.

move away from what he describes as a “somewhat mechanical,” “rationalistic,” inerrantist (“American”) approach, he opts for a “more dynamic (or organic)” (“European alternative”) view of authority that he finds in “infallibility.”⁴³ He prefers to discard the inerrancy debate altogether⁴⁴ and looks to Orr and particularly Bavinck for guidance in developing his “third option.”⁴⁵ While believing that a Scripture principle⁴⁶ cannot be divorced from one’s tradition, McGowan develops a principle of “spiration” and “authenticity,” situating Scripture “in the context of the knowledge of God that comes by revelation through the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁷ He asserts that this approach not only lends to preaching, but adequately recognizes the genuine “humanness” of Scripture’s authors, to which McGowan opines that inerrantists pay mere “lip service.”⁴⁸

Aspects of this work are commendable. A bottom-up principle that gives adequate weight to Scripture’s top-down aspect is helpful, as is his fresh reading of Bavinck.⁴⁹ However, his desire to read early theologians into today’s context is misplaced at times (and vice versa).⁵⁰ He indicts inerrantists for binding God to a certain mode of revelation,⁵¹ but cannot avoid self-indictment when speaking of what God “is able” to do with Scripture because of certain preconditions.⁵² McGowan’s organic view of Scripture has at least two significant problems. First, it does not distinguish Scripture’s substance from its end.⁵³ Second, whatever presence from God that was specially lent to *the writing* of Scripture as God’s revelation, distinction should be made between *it* and God’s presence lent to the acts of reading, interpreting, preaching, and applying the Bible.⁵⁴ McGowan’s liquid view of Scripture does not allow for this characteristic in the Spirit’s activity.

⁴³ McGowan, *Divine Authenticity*, 48–49.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁴⁶ By the term “Scripture principle,” this article means “a doctrine of Scripture” or “a component of a doctrine of Scripture.” Cf. its common usage by theologians as diverse as Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority* (1976; repr., Wheaton: Crossway, 1999), 4:386, 390; 5:178; Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991–98), 1:26, 28, 32, 33, 42, 46, 119, 125; Clark H. Pinnock and Barry L. Allen, *The Scripture Principle* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006); and Karl Barth, “Scripture Principle,” in *The Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion* (trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 1:201–26.

⁴⁷ McGowan, *Divine Authenticity*, 38–43, 164, 25, 29.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 119, 148, 158, 161.

⁴⁹ He gives minuscule regard, however, to Richard Gaffin’s 63-page article “Old Amsterdam and Inerrancy,” *WTJ* 45 (1983): 219–72. Unfortunately, McGowan limits his acknowledgement of Gaffin’s two articles on Kuyper and Bavinck (totaling 103 pp.) from *WTJ* 44 and 45 to merely one general reference (*Divine Authenticity*, 138n60). They were recently republished as *God’s Word in Servant Form: Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck and the Doctrine of Scripture* (Jackson, MS: Reformed Academic Press, 2008). Editor’s note: see the review of this book by Robert Yarbrough, “The Embattled Bible: Four More Books,” *Them* 34 (2009): 10–14.

⁵⁰ See the peculiar reference made to James Orr’s comments on inerrancy “in light of the much later International Council on Biblical Inerrancy” (McGowan, *Divine Authenticity*, 135).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 113, 114, 209.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 118. What McGowan does here with the Scriptures seems to come very close to a Barthian view, perhaps revealing bigger problems in his treatment of Scripture’s humanity and divinity. See a discussion on this by Telford Work, *Living and Active* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 80–84.

⁵³ McGowan, *Divine Authenticity*, 20.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 21. Cp. John Webster, *Holy Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 68–106.

2.1.2. Jeffery Oldfield's Nonfoundationalist Approach

This 2007 PhD thesis charts new territory for understanding theological truth while seeking common ground for inerrantists and non-inerrantists to understand biblical authority. With no desire to disprove or dismiss inerrancy, he enters the debate questioning its role as a primary doctrine in the church.⁵⁵ Examining Warfield's and Henry's philosophical bases, he finds their approaches to truth and inerrancy lacking⁵⁶ and argues that presuppositions about revelation and theology's objective, scientific nature bring Henry to a rationalistic view of Scripture that logically deduces an errant text's *incompatibility* with authority. This, then, according to Oldfield, forces Henry to hold inerrancy rather than authority as his highest Scripture principle.⁵⁷ Oldfield thus cannot accept Henry's definition of truth and authority, which seem to him to be based entirely on the past action of the Spirit.⁵⁸ He prefers something more like a nonfoundationalist structure that, like McGowan's pneumatological emphasis, depends on the Spirit's present work of establishing Scripture's present (not just past) authority and for bringing about God's purposes.⁵⁹

Henry's view of the Spirit's role in the Word of God's reception is more robust than Oldfield shows and could have been represented better. Oldfield does not acknowledge Henry vis-à-vis his detractors (e.g., Loewen and Barth), whom Henry sees making revelation's qualities highly inner and subjective.⁶⁰ This is cause for pause in a hasty dismissal of Henry. For while confronting views like these, he argued for the text's objective authority, similar to that proposed by Grenz and Franke, though they represent a nonfoundationalist or softer way.⁶¹ Oldfield pays little notice to how CSBI emerged as a response to inerrancy's detractors from the previous wave, who advanced arguments that appear to be just as rationalistic and foundationalist as Henry's are said to be. In his own context, Henry's construction should be at least adequate, especially if one recognizes the contextual nature of theological constructs. Henry's weakness, admittedly, is seen when his commitment to inerrancy effectively drifts into becoming his primary principle.⁶² When focusing on any doctrine in debate, it can inadvertently become primary, though it seems preferable to speak of inerrancy as a *distinguishing* aspect of an evangelical Scripture principle rather than *the primary one*. For when one allows inerrancy to be a part (however significant, but still a part) of a Scripture principle in today's theological context, it effectively says most and speaks loudest of one's view of Scripture.

⁵⁵ Oldfield, "The Word Became Text," 225–26.

⁵⁶ Oldfield shows that Henry views truth and propositions synonymously and sets forth a univocal understanding of propositional truth that is verifiable for both believer and unbeliever (*ibid.*, 99, 101).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 166–67.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 223, 230.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 221, 239.

⁶⁰ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 4:266–71. Compare also Henry's assertion that the objectively accessible "text," and not the individual's mind, needed to be illumined (4:266), with his later reference to the illumination of "readers and hearers" (4:259). Henry's view of Scripture is much more variegated than has been allowed by some.

⁶¹ Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 68. Yet while Grenz's program is said to reject philosophical foundationalism (Warner, 10), it seems to yield only a "chastened" or "soft foundationalism" (Brian S. Harris, "Revisioning Evangelical Theology: An Exploration, Evaluation and Extension of the Theological Method of Stanley J. Grenz" [PhD thesis, University of Auckland, 2007], 258).

⁶² Oldfield labors this point ("The Word Became Text," 166–67). He demonstrates that while Henry set out to establish "authority" first, with "inerrancy" being a subordinate doctrine, he logically ends up placing inerrancy at the fulcrum. But for Henry, it is precisely at this point that inerrancy becomes the joint at which inadequate views of Scripture (i.e., inclusion of errors = nonauthoritative) buckle.

2.1.3. Carlos Bovell's Disgruntled Approach

Bovell advocates the need for critical scholarship to inform evangelical philosophy and theology, especially a Scripture principle, and especially for the next generation.⁶³ He desires that critical scholarship and theology talk to each other, while the end result will never be inerrancy. His program intends to develop insight for understanding how the inerrancy doctrine is psychologically damaging and harmful for younger evangelicals' spirituality.⁶⁴ He asserts that if inerrancy is not plain wrong, it is "not for everyone today"⁶⁵ and definitely not for him.

While there might be some virtue in the desire for a contextual theology seeking "new evangelical dogmas of Scripture,"⁶⁶ this book's other merits are hard to find. Although various parts may stand alone (papers and articles spanning three years), the book's form and structure are highly-disjointed, leaving very poor argumentation.⁶⁷ In the general summaries throughout, he claims to have an objective desire to "nudge readers to respond" in one way or another,⁶⁸ though he clearly wishes to influence them away from inerrancy. But while he does this, he provides no alternatives for them beyond a footless polemic against evangelical teachers, scholars, and inerrancy.⁶⁹ Accordingly, he leaves readers in the same position he claims inerrancy left him. His interaction with nonevangelicals is good and substantial, but he never permits evangelical scholars to answer his concerns. Although his view of an evangelical is inseparably linked to CSBI,⁷⁰ he shows no real knowledge of the document or its contemporary relevance within the evangelical community. He is therefore too sweepingly dismissive and not as sensitively constructive and thoughtfully creative as he purports to be. He paints evangelicals as unwilling to recognize problems with doctrines like inerrancy, but this simply does not represent reality.⁷¹

⁶³ Bovell later contradicts this (*Inerrancy and the Spiritual Formation of Younger Evangelicals*, 29–31), asserting that older believing evangelical scholars must "disabuse" younger evangelicals in ways that openly acknowledge the "lurking incompatibilities that beset academic study within the context of religious allegiance." Elsewhere he even disallows any role for believing scholarship (39).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 4, 12. By "younger evangelicals," he means those from teenage years to around thirty, before having a "more or less enduring sense of identity" to cling to for the rest of their lives (6). Cf. also the connection he makes to the theory of inerrancy's negative effects on E. J. Carnell as advanced in Rudolph Nelson, *The Making and Unmaking of an Evangelical Mind* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), esp. 203–6 (*Inerrancy and Spiritual Formation*, vii–viii, 8).

⁶⁵ *Inerrancy and Spiritual Formation*, 154.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 12–13.

⁶⁷ In the introduction, he doubts his own arguments for the position he takes, but nevertheless hopes that his presentation will cause some to consider the "possibility" of his position (*ibid.*, 12).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶⁹ While decrying the incarnational analogy for Scripture's composition, he recognizes that "the million dollar question" is how the Bible can be both divine and human (*ibid.*, 80). As far as a "constructive, theoretical work" that will give suggestions for a positive scripture principle after they have distanced themselves from inerrancy, readers will simply have to await the follow-up work Bovell hopes to write (*ibid.*, 162). Whatever proposal he offers will be guaranteed not to have inerrancy as an option.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 15n1, references the evangelicals to which he refers—those aligned with ETS/EPB, both of whose members must affirm the ETS doctrinal basis.

⁷¹ Cf., e.g., Michael A. Grisanti's illuminating article, "Inspiration, Inerrancy, and The OT Canon: The Place of Textual Updating in an Inerrant View of Scripture," *JETS* 44 (2001): 577–98, which reckons with problems while maintaining inerrancy. Interestingly, Bovell allows the similar position of "entelechy" (*Inerrancy and Spiritual Formation*, 144), though of course without inerrancy, which Grisanti holds.

2.1.4. Craig Allert's Canonical-Critical Approach

In his book, Allert seeks to reframe the inerrancy debate through exploring “how a historical understanding of the formation of the [NT] canon should inform an evangelical doctrine of Scripture.” He takes this understanding and seeks to locate its “implications for the way evangelicals have understood the nature and function of the Bible in our own traditions.”⁷² After surveying American evangelicalism, with its “defensive posture,” he notes the impact of “traditionalism”⁷³ and then argues that the way evangelicals understand the reception of inspired texts and canonicity is “anachronistic,” ultimately leading to an inerrantist view that does more bad than good, as in the case of the pressure on Robert Gundry to resign from ETS in 1983. Before coming back to inerrancy, he labors through an understanding of canon that sees “the indispensability of the [institution of] the church,” which he claims gave birth to the Scripture as the “embodiment of the canonical tradition of the church.”⁷⁴

Evangelicals can certainly benefit by informing their Scripture principle with canon formation, moving away from an occasional traditionalism,⁷⁵ but Allert's base here is faulty, claiming that after *The Fundamentals*, evangelicals lost a theological framework.⁷⁶ In this case he entirely misrepresents evangelicalism, since one can be assured that major evangelical leaders lost no framework whatsoever inasmuch as Warfield remained a Calvinist and Torrey a dispensationalist. Here and in his canonical views, Allert is as guilty as he claims his opponents are of “anachronism” and of imposing a “twenty-first-century perspective” onto the issues.⁷⁷ This is further seen in his view that biblical data are “surprisingly vague” on a theory of inspiration. By saying this he anachronistically assumes that the biblical writers gave technical precision by today's standards.⁷⁸ Allert also offers conjectural arguments derived from silence and from a pre-commitment to late canonical formation. As a Protestant, he admits to having no fixed canon⁷⁹ and sees it as open and “fluid” into the fourth and fifth centuries, though Allert fails to note that the inspired text was not open to change.⁸⁰ Although some fathers also may have viewed noncanonical books as “scripture,” they were not deemed to be θεόπνευστος in the same manner as γραφή in 2 Tim 3:16.⁸¹ Unfortunately, in Allert's view there is no room for canonical books to be “self-authenticating” or for the canon to be “self-establishing,” which are inseparable for an evangelical view of Scripture. Allert will not allow God's Word to demonstrate itself as such.⁸² His view of Scripture, therefore, is far too low.

⁷² Allert, *A High View of Scripture?* 12, 144.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 30, 35.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 78, 82.

⁷⁵ A point also made by David G. Dunbar, “The Biblical Canon,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon* (ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 299–360.

⁷⁶ Allert, *A High View of Scripture?* 30.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 65, 70.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 174n1. See an alternate position by Dunbar, “The Biblical Canon,” 358.

⁸⁰ Lee Martin McDonald, *The Biblical Canon* (3d ed.; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007), 54.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 171–72. Compare Allert's attempt to locate three examples to the contrary from the fourth and fifth centuries (64–65), though none of the three passages use the term γραφή as the subject, nor the modifier πᾶς. If the fathers did not say that “all scripture” maintained the “God-breathed” property, then these examples do not entirely support Allert's view. Of further interest is that in 2 Tim 3:16 θεόπνευστος is in the nominative case, whereas Allert's examples are either in the genitive or accusative cases.

⁸² Cf. Charles E. Hill, “The Canon of the New Testament,” in *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2580–81. Witherington also observes, “because these books are a revelation from God and were recognized to be the word of God written, they reflect a natural and not an artificial unity” (*The Living Word of God*, 119).

2.1.5. Kenton Sparks's Postmodern Historical-Critical Approach

This book is the latest work seeking to reframe the debate. Broad in scholarly engagement, it is written by a self-identified evangelical for a scholarly evangelical audience. Sparks makes a case for believing historical-criticism that will benefit the church, giving her a “biblically informed worldview.”⁸³ With strong aversion to “Cartesian” philosophies, Sparks moves to integrate faith and criticism, which, he asserts, offers the best in Christian scholarship.⁸⁴ He notes advances in critical scholarship that will aid the study of the Bible through the academic expertise of intellectually gifted scholars.⁸⁵ Considering postmodern epistemology, he identifies himself as a “practical realist,”⁸⁶ opining an appropriate definition of historical-criticism as “reading texts contextually.”⁸⁷ He then makes a case for the orthodox view of God’s inerrancy and that “God does not err in Scripture,” while yet paradoxically maintaining errors in the Bible attributed to the human authors.⁸⁸

Serving in the broad academic arena is good for evangelicals, breeding rigorous scholarship in demanding contexts. But one wonders if Sparks is really willing to be tested there. Specifically, the question begging to be posed to historical critics who adopt serious engagement with postmodern epistemology is whether their discipline can be performed with any confident relevancy at all. Can one rely on critical scholarship while still seeking to be dislodged from constraints by modernism? Does a postmodern or nonfoundational historical-criticism really exist? Or is “reading texts contextually” from a tamed practical realism (with little criteria to determine this and no description of how this might work) simply unrealistic? Further, with the seeming absence of little if any argumentation from recent critical scholarship, this book could have easily been written ten years ago.⁸⁹ What if historical criticism becomes passé as a modern, rationalistic, Cartesian edifice built by nineteenth- and twentieth-century German scholarship? Does Sparks have a backup plan?

At the end of the book, Sparks tries to synthesize criticism with theology.⁹⁰ Here it seems that theology is the only means by which any sort of critical methodology might be redeemed for biblical studies.⁹¹ He observes that not all criticism is healthy and helpful, referring elsewhere to that which

⁸³ Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words*, 18–20, 328, 356.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 49, 52, 170, 183, 366, 373.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 58, 70.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 42–44, 263.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 139, 227. Compare Goldingay’s similar position that the Bible is “adequately factual” but not “inerrantly factual” (*Models of Scripture*, 282–83). See also Work, *Living and Active*, 81, and John Webster, who holds a similar notion that the Bible’s authority “does not lie within itself, any more than the sacraments have inherent effectiveness, but in its testimony to the authority of the one who appoints Scripture as his servant” (“Scripture, Authority of,” in *Dictionary of Theological Interpretation of the Bible* [ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005], 726). This notion would also be allowed by Denis O. Lamoureux, who identifies “incidental statements” in the Bible regarding things such as the cosmology of the universe, to which “biblical inerrancy cannot extend” (“Lessons from the Heavens: On Scripture, Science and Inerrancy,” *The Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 60 [June 2008]: 13).

⁸⁹ This matter could have been improved with more reference than just a footnote to works like Francis Watson, *Text and Truth* (London: T&T Clark, 1997), and Christopher R. Seitz, *Figured Out* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

⁹⁰ Sparks, *God's Words in Human Words*, 203.

⁹¹ Cf., for example, the proposal by Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008).

acknowledges Scripture's authority "in word but not in deed."⁹² He employs "accommodation" for understanding differences between divine and human accounts in Scripture,⁹³ though never explaining how to determine which is which or what might decide an accommodation. It seems, frankly, that whenever normal interpretation yields something unexplainable to the reader or some presumed error based on a critical-realist reading of the text, "accommodation" then becomes the "theological explanation for the presence of human errors in Scripture."⁹⁴ So, does a literal hermeneutic guide this process for determination? If so, then in the "inerrant" parts about the "inerrant God" (wherever they may be), does Scripture speak univocally of him, allowing the reader to judge empirically whether God is in error?⁹⁵ If so, problems have shifted from a doctrine of Scripture to epistemology, theology proper, and doctrines of man and sin.

One wonders what a "practical realist" reading of Scripture looks like for Sparks, and what criterion might exist for determining where an error is not. A better position seems to be, rejecting any docetic notions, that Scripture is both human and divine; where one ends and the other begins is impossible to know, for they are inseparable. Had these matters been clearer in Sparks's work, he might have had more to contribute to the inerrancy discussion.

2.1.6. Other Contributions

Other recent noteworthy contributions remain for an evangelical doctrine of Scripture, each wanting to see the debate reframed. Roger Olson rejects inerrancy as the best word to determine one's views of Scripture,⁹⁶ though he does not suggest how American evangelicals should get past the term's indelible history.⁹⁷ Witherington suggests moving past the terms "infallible" and "inerrant."⁹⁸ Steve Holmes has set forth principles for an evangelical view of Scripture in a transatlantic perspective, perhaps even maintaining inerrancy in a more functionally sustainable role.⁹⁹ Peter Enns continues to

⁹² Sparks, *God's Words in Human Words*, 23, 356. Sparks does not seem to apply this throughout his program in any practical way. Cf., however, his historical-critical comment about conjectures of NT authors viewing extracanonical works as "inspired Scripture" (125–26). Yet he gives no room for what he calls "speculative" harmonizations of scholars like Blomberg (164). Still, whatever bearing these historical-critical observations and others may have on one's ethics (i.e., contra whatever is "in word but not in deed") escapes this author.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 202–3, 230.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 327.

⁹⁶ "Why Inerrancy Doesn't Matter"

⁹⁷ One might, however, posit synthesizing the "inerrancy" and "trustworthiness" schools, as I. Howard Marshall seemed sympathetic to a generation ago (*Biblical Inspiration* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982], 71), reflecting an earlier time in evangelical history.

⁹⁸ Cf. Michael F. Bird's interview, "Ben Witherington on Scripture" (September 15, 2007; available at <http://euangelizomai.blogspot.com/2007/09/ben-witherington-on-scripture.html> [accessed November 12, 2008]), in which Witherington asserts, "The terms inerrant and infallible are modern ways of attempting to make clear that the Bible tells the truth about whatever it intends to teach us about. I much prefer the positive terms truthful and trustworthy. When you start defining something negatively (saying what it is not) then you often die the death of a thousand qualifications, not to mention you have to define what constitutes an error. I am happy to say that the Bible has three main subjects—history, theology, and ethics, and that it tells us the truth about all three." A generation ago, Paul D. Feinberg noted that "truthfulness" was the key concept in the Scripture and the minds of those using "inerrancy," which he deemed as needing a better definition ("The Meaning of Inerrancy," in *Inerrancy*, 293).

⁹⁹ In "Evangelical Doctrines of Scripture," 63, Holmes suggests five pointed principles for a working description: divine origin, authority, accuracy, clarity, and sufficiency for salvation.

contribute to the debate¹⁰⁰ and may perhaps yet offer more refined attempts to explain inerrancy.¹⁰¹

2.1.7. *Synthesis of Revisionist Approaches*

In summary, the contributions to the debate offered by the above authors are found primarily in their due emphases on the humanness of Scripture, reckoning that evangelical scholarship apparently neglects the matter.¹⁰² That this neglect exists is questionable. Everyone assumes that the biblical documents are written by humans; there is nothing unique about that. What is unique is that inspired canonical Scripture is of divine origin. That is most unusual and what should be emphasized, for the other is so easily observed. The Bible's divine status catches one's attention. Human writing is very ordinary, whereas God's communicating in writing is extraordinary. This is why the Bible and current evangelical theology place emphasis here, not to neglect its humanness (which is not emphasized in the Bible either), but to revel in its status as God-inspired and not merely the words of mortal man. These detractors, however, do raise the need for continued discussion of how the Bible works (from inspiration [in writing] to reception [in reading] to ethics [in application]), including the need to be honest about problems, whether historical, moral, philosophical, theological, or epistemological. Beyond this, they issue a clarion call to consider both canonical and historical critical elements in the formation of an evangelical Scripture principle.

While each of the previous works makes genuine contributions to the debate, they each seem to create more problems than they solve, which seems to be the tenor of the debate's recent wave. Though data from scholarship grows deeper, arguments become more complex, and new discoveries are incorporated into the conversation, how they may integrate into and inform an evangelical doctrine of Scripture is the lingering question. While questions posed, issues raised, and proposals offered should not be minimized, none of the aforementioned contributions crafts an acceptable Scripture principle for American evangelicals. This is mainly because American evangelicals must do more than pay scant or pitiable attention to CSBI. For it seems strange that American evangelicals attempting to reframe the debate often misunderstand the very heritage from which they come. And when engaging a Scripture principle, they have little or no knowledge of the history of this debate in American evangelicalism and therefore make no reference to CSBI. But a discussion about inerrancy cannot be held without acknowledging and relating to CSBI somehow.¹⁰³ Moreover, CSBI must be part of the ongoing conversation (as displayed by ETS and Greg Beale's efforts) since it is a major part of the previous wave of the debate.

2.2. Reinforcing the Debate's Context: *Greg Beale's Inerrantist Reconstructive Approach*

While significant critique can be offered of Greg Beale's *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism*,

¹⁰⁰ Cf. the more "responsive" rather than "constructive" recent articles: "Response to G. K. Beale's Review of *Inspiration and Incarnation*," *JETS* 49 (2006): 313–26; and "Response to Professor Greg Beale," *Them* 32 (2007): 5–13.

¹⁰¹ Among Enns's recent work was a Student Fellowship at Princeton Theological Seminary initially titled, "The Nature of Biblical Inerrancy" (February 9, 2009). Meanwhile, some of his engagement on a doctrine of inerrancy is available at <http://peterennsonline.com/ii/inerrancy> (accessed November 12, 2008).

¹⁰² Cf. Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word*, 65–80, for one recent treatment addressing this concern.

¹⁰³ Cf. Oldfield, "The Word Became Text," 5n2, for a brief discussion on CSBI as the "definitive statement" on inerrancy.

evaluation cannot be made here.¹⁰⁴ The relevant question concerns how the book informs the inerrancy debate. His stated aim is “to focus on a specific debate that bears upon the broad issue of biblical authority that has arisen recently in evangelicalism,”¹⁰⁵ namely, the one with Peter Enns. Beale holds the standard inerrancy view in his interaction with Enns and theological interpretation,¹⁰⁶ both in opposing Enns’s views and offering alternate interpretations of Scripture. He sees no need to present innovative definitions of inerrancy as a Scripture principle but instead simply gives a theological and exegetical treatise that offers only CSBI for his positive course.

The book, however, offers something constructive to the inerrancy discussion. While Beale himself does go beyond CSBI, though only minimally,¹⁰⁷ he simultaneously yields a relatively consistent use of CSBI. Seeking to construct an exegetical theology by theological exegesis, he continually emphasizes the Bible’s authority while adhering to CSBI as his major reference point. Beale’s work makes the first substantial defense of the inerrantist position in perhaps over twenty years. It is a determined, reasonable, theologically-oriented response to current elements in the debate,¹⁰⁸ entering the discussion from a forthright commitment to inerrancy as articulated in CSBI. By this, Beale has skillfully shown that inerrancy provides a platform for confidently resting in Scripture’s authority so that serious exegesis of the inspired text and the resultant theology can be performed in constructive (not de[con]structive) ways. Evangelicals must learn from this step he has taken in a positive direction of offering a chastened reconstruction of inerrancy without replacing or abandoning the Scripture principle that has marked American evangelicalism and ETS for sixty years.

2.3. Summary of the Recent Attempts to Reframe the Debate

Those who easily dismiss the place of CSBI within American evangelicalism are seeking to do theology either in a vacuum¹⁰⁹ or with a presupposition against inerrancy. Recent revisionists reflect little willingness to consider CSBI with any semblance of objective openness; when they do consider it, it appears to be a deeply upsetting matter to them. Though assessments of the first and second waves of the inerrancy debate are becoming more acute, there still seem to be no new positions, and few new arguments on the table.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁴ See forthcoming reviews by Mark Thompson in *Them*, Peter Enns in *BBR*, and Jason Sexton in *JETS*.

¹⁰⁵ Beale, *Erosion of Inerrancy*, 21.

¹⁰⁶ Oddly, an underlying assumption seems to be that Beale thinks that he is safe by avoiding “myth” as a description of biblical events, but generates a temple-theology throughout (esp. chaps. 6–7) that seems to function similarly, at least potentially.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Beale, *Erosion of Inerrancy*, 24, where he says CSBI “represents generally my own understanding of what should be considered the evangelical view of the authority of Scripture.” Cf. the note on the “very minor adjustments” that Beale wishes to make concerning *language* in CSBI (267n1, italics mine).

¹⁰⁸ This may be the major strength and weakness of the work. While Beale performs theological interpretation, he ends up presenting not a restated Scripture principle, but theological exegesis that indirectly avoids the debate.

¹⁰⁹ One cannot do this, as the late Stanley J. Grenz made clear in *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 95–99.

¹¹⁰ Each proposal already marked the debate’s previous history to one degree or another. This reason makes it a good idea for Beale’s third appendix (281–83), which gives sixteen quotations from Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* that depict his view of Scripture. Students of an evangelical doctrine of Scripture should be aware of connections between recent (and second-wave) attempts to reframe inerrancy and Barth’s views on Scripture. They are strikingly similar at points, which may cause more evangelicals to migrate toward a Barthian view of Scripture, but also might lead them towards a more evangelical one. Two recent works interacting with Barth on this issue are Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “A Person of the Book? Barth on Biblical Authority

Challenges from revisionists, however, should be heard, but this should be reciprocal, with all evangelicals willing to recognize problems in their views. Biblical scholars (canonical and historical critics) must be informed by theology (not divorce their discipline from it), and theologians need to interact with a theology of the Spirit's role in the text's origin, development, and contemporary reception.¹¹¹ Inerrantists should interact with pertinent data demarcating distinctly human aspects of Scripture, either in the historical context or in the formation of the canon. Evangelicals of all kinds from both groups need grounding, both theologically and historically. Whether this dialogue can actually occur between the two disciplines (historical criticism and theology) and between divergent evangelical groups remains to be seen. It may come down to whether critical scholars are truly willing to converse with inerrantists, even to the point of considering the integration of aspects of the inerrantist position into their views of Scripture. CSBI should be the starting point for an inerrancy discussion in the present context, and a commitment to it as a significant factor allows evangelicals to interact with recent scholarship while offering new constructions that do not abandon dearly held commitments. Quite positively, these new constructions of inerrancy bring those dearly held commitments to a new conversation that echoes a 150-year-old debate.

3. Some Suggestions on the Way Forward

At this point, with so many claiming to take the Scriptures "seriously,"¹¹² charting the way forward is no easy task. Suggestions here flow from a desire to cultivate dialogue, not solve every problem for inerrancy. What is hoped for is a theologically grounded, astute,¹¹³ and modifiable view of inerrancy that builds upon the current conception of the doctrine with great care. The final section of this paper raises three factors for a move forward. It reconsiders the theological and contextual development of inerrancy's framework, followed by inerrancy's intellectual defensibility. Suggestions are then made for moving beyond CSBI with constructions that do more than "pay lip service" to the faithful, courageous work done a generation ago in CSBI.

and Interpretation," in *Karl Barth and Evangelical Theology* (ed. Sung Wook Chung; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006); and Mark D. Thompson, "Witness to the Word: On Barth's Doctrine of Scripture," in *Engaging with Barth* (ed. David Gibson and Daniel Strange; Nottingham: Apollos, 2008).

¹¹¹ It seems, however, that observing the Spirit's primary place in Scripture's reception is treating as central something that conservative evangelicals already affirm. I.e., serious exegetes who genuinely wrestle with Scripture's text, meaning, and application intensely depend on the Spirit's active work and presence to illumine and guide. Conservative evangelicals have focused on the inerrancy of the text (perhaps leading to inadvertent exclusion of the Spirit's role [not in practice, but in scholarly discussions]) because of where the battleground is. It becomes purely a contextual, historical, and theological matter focusing on the issue at hand that serves to articulate the Bible's authority. Compare the focus on the text post-1860, and even some of what Carl Henry's agenda focused on in light of inerrancy's detractors. One does not have to adopt a Barthian view of Scripture to speak of the Spirit's present role of bringing Scripture to bear on the reader.

¹¹² This includes evangelicals and non-evangelicals, each considering its own to be the most serious construction available. Compare Daniel Treier's statement about evangelicals taking Scripture's self-testimony seriously ("Scripture and Hermeneutics," 36) with Blomberg, who refers to a collection of non-evangelical scholars who "take the Bible seriously" ("Review of 'Biblical Authority'"). Compare also I. Howard Marshall, who asserts how his position takes certain elements in Scripture "seriously" (*Biblical Inspiration*, 43), with Geisler's alleged threat during the Gundry controversy in 1983 to start a new society that would take inerrancy "seriously" (in Allert, *A High View of Scripture?* 167n9).

¹¹³ This would involve, for example, a conscious awareness of historical-critical issues with sensitivity to canon-formation. This is a significant part of the debate. One cannot accuse others of imposing an outside "code" onto the Bible if the theologians and exegetes accused are aware that external ideas (from modernist philosophy, forms of rationalism, etc.) are available, causing them to steer clear of them.

3.1. Recognizing Inerrancy's Contextual Development

All theology is done in a context. While the contextual, corporate effort of inerrancy's development may be contested¹¹⁴ and unwelcomed by some,¹¹⁵ its present coming of age cannot be denied. But what does this mean for evangelical scholars today?

3.1.1. Corporate Theological Constructs Should be Valued

No evangelical group is an island, and theology neither starts nor stops with any individual or group. As such, evangelicals cannot dismiss the current context in which all three waves of the inerrancy debate occurred nor its reception as an important doctrine. And though the degree of its importance may be debatable, evangelicalism has been deemed a movement marked by “theological *emphases* that are largely determined by context.”¹¹⁶

The inerrancy discussion happened primarily within American evangelicalism over the past 130 years. Those wishing to have an informed Scripture principle must understand arguments therein. While desiring to include those abroad who wish to engage in “some serious transatlantic scholarship”¹¹⁷ on the issue, the British (and European) heritage is not marked by inerrancy as acutely as the American. Therefore limitations and difficulties will be part of the conversation.¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, American evangelicals should dialogue with challenges that have been offered by their evangelical counterparts across the Atlantic.¹¹⁹ Indeed, while seeking to locate the debate primarily in the US, how does this bode not just for a transatlantic, but for a global view of Scripture? These questions are beyond the reach of this paper. Currently, in one form or another, inerrancy is held by many in the US,¹²⁰ and a voluminous number of articles and books by reputable scholars have been written in support of the doctrine. While this article is unable to explore unique challenges of inerrancy's incarnation outside the US, the point is largely moot since the debate regarding the nature and essence of inerrancy belongs primarily in the American arena.

The received tradition that American evangelicalism inherited from the inerrancy debate is at least CSBI. Lest some think that inerrancy can be swiftly discarded, it still contains a doctrine adhered to by many if not most evangelicals.¹²¹ Further, CSBI is set forth as the reference point for evangelicals to look to, vis-à-vis ETS, when beginning to wrestle through what is meant when speaking of the Bible's authority. For them, the Bible's authority is reflected through a commitment to the doctrine of inerrancy.

¹¹⁴ Buchan, “Inerrancy as Inheritance?” 53–54.

¹¹⁵ D. G. Hart, *Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the Age of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 131–51.

¹¹⁶ Allert, *A High View of Scripture?* 33 (italics in original).

¹¹⁷ Acknowledging the plea by McGowan, *Divine Authenticity*, 214.

¹¹⁸ While McGowan states that “inerrancy” is “rarely used in Europe,” some British scholars are willing to consider a Scripture principle including inerrancy, as McGowan later suggests (*ibid.*, 48, 214). It seems, however, that those holding inerrancy in the UK have major connection to the North American scene.

¹¹⁹ McGowan, *Divine Authenticity*, 214.

¹²⁰ This includes major denominations like the Southern Baptist Convention, which has not changed its position on inerrancy through two significant revisions of the original 1925 Baptist Faith and Message, and the Evangelical Free Church of America, which recently strengthened their position on inerrancy (cf. Collin Hansen, “It's Not Broke, So Fix It,” July 14, 2008, *Christianity Today*, available at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/julyweb-only/129-11.0.html> [accessed February 23, 2009]).

¹²¹ “Many evangelicals,” Randall Balmer observes, “regard biblical inerrancy as one of the touchstones of orthodox theology” (“Inerrancy,” in *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002], 292).

3.1.2. *Will Inerrancy Be Necessary in Fifty Years?*

Inerrancy is relevant for coming generations who want to locate their doctrine of Scripture historically, especially in American evangelicalism. A discussion on defining what doctrinal constructs classify as “time-transcendent” cannot be had here, but suffice it to say that the term has not fallen into disuse, especially in the US, in spite of challenges to its relevancy.¹²² One good reason for this might be that inerrancy was deemed most conducive to the gospel’s advancement as the message that truly saves sinners, who are located in real-time-space present and are looking to a real-time-space Savior whose work in both creation and redemption is not subject to any passing cultural or ideological whims since he stands outside of them.¹²³ Ideologies, philosophies, or systems trying to muzzle it will find the gospel’s rays of divine light bursting through to communicate the message written for all peoples in all generations, completely sufficient for salvation. Here is the significance of a high view of Scripture that affirms the Bible as inspired, inerrant text, which is able to break through all hermeneutical barriers when Spirit-effected and believingly read, since it is the penetrating Word of God.¹²⁴

Forward progress in the inerrancy debate will mean that the American construct and context must be understood. At points, it was a debate held in the context of Scottish-realist philosophy, and at points with language of other theories of truth. Scholars must know what was said, and if one’s position resembles or mimics a previous idea, then one is located in that line and should appropriate that doctrine for the church today where appropriate. A better definition of the doctrine is still in order, as Paul Feinberg stated a generation ago.¹²⁵ If evangelicals believe themselves to be part of a Spirit-led movement, it seems wise to acknowledge God’s work within inerrancy’s development and in CSBI for seeking to pick up the task of an evangelical Scripture principle today.

3.2. Reasserting Inerrancy’s Intellectual Defensibility

3.2.1. *Inerrancy’s Defensibility*

Being forged in the fires of American evangelicalism, the doctrine of inerrancy provides the platform for a gospel-advancing movement and a defensive strategy to ward off invaders.¹²⁶ Each proponent of inerrancy must be understood in context. In the present context, a line (albeit of varying shades) is traced to CSBI, which is an inextricable part of evangelicalism and therefore what evangelicals today have inherited. This means that evangelicals currently attempting to reframe the debate misunderstand the very heritage from which they have derived and developed and from which

¹²² E.g., consider Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), who chooses not to use the term in the book, though stating elsewhere, “it doesn’t follow that the idea is absent” in the book (available at <http://exiledpreacher.blogspot.com/2007/09/kevin-vanhoozer-interview.html> [accessed October 25, 2008]). Compare also the discussion in Carson, “Recent Developments,” 30–31.

¹²³ Recently, a relatively new Christian in a church where I served as “Planting-Pastor” said that when evangelizing someone, an objection to Christianity came from the non-Christian whose purported roadblock to believing the gospel was that there are “errors” in the Bible and therefore it cannot be trusted as from God.

¹²⁴ Cf. Paul Wells, “The Doctrine of Scripture,” in *Reforming or Conforming*, 61, for comments relating to the rich, manifold ways that God speaks.

¹²⁵ “The Meaning of Inerrancy,” 293. Carson, “Recent Developments,” 7, suggests that nobody should comment on the definition of inerrancy without having read Feinberg’s article.

¹²⁶ Each robust articulation of inerrancy from previous waves came about as responses to what believing scholars deemed assaults on the trustworthiness of Scripture.

they are drawing historically and theologically.¹²⁷ But how does inerrancy fare in the marketplace of ideas?

First, inerrancy responds appropriately to historical-criticism and has been described as “modern language responding to historical-critical controversies.”¹²⁸ Developed in nineteenth-century Germany, historical criticism “approached the Bible with [the] presupposition of skepticism” to miracles and to the historical Jesus, “[i]n the name of scientific objectivity.”¹²⁹ It was thus a means of muting divine accounts of Scripture. This, for Christians, posed a threat to faith in Scripture and in Scripture’s God.¹³⁰ Today, historical-criticism and its negative effects seem like a far-removed, academically disastrous ideology whose shelf-life nears extinction.¹³¹ As such it may be a dying field groping for ideas like postmodernism to survive (which only then yields equivocating constructs like the flaccid “practical realism”), while confused on what to do with it.¹³² What about historically-oriented referents and lucid statements Scripture makes about specific historical events about which archaeologists, for example, have garnered clear and ample evidence for today?¹³³ What about the need for some kind of view on essential history?¹³⁴ There are major implications for holding or not holding to the historicity of texts of Scripture that claim to be from God and appear to reflect essential history,¹³⁵ and major repercussions for rejecting other aspects that a doctrine of inerrancy addresses.

Second, inerrancy responds appropriately to postmodernism. At least one evangelical has developed an approach to Scripture that seeks to be sensitive to issues raised by postmodernists.¹³⁶ One is hard-pressed, though, to find a work sensitive to postmodern issues that works directly from and relates consistently to CSBI. Operating from the base of the inerrantist position, however, seems to be

¹²⁷ Cf. Erickson, “Biblical Inerrancy,” 387–89. Cf. also the argument offered by Carl F. H. Henry to show that “the real objection to inerrancy is philosophical and speculative” (“The Bible and the Conscience of Our Age,” *JETS* 25 (1982): 403–4.

¹²⁸ Treier, “Scripture and Hermeneutics,” 39.

¹²⁹ Richard E. Burnett, “Historical Criticism,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 291.

¹³⁰ Compare this to the approach of believing scholarship, which is committed to “the academic study of Scripture within a confessional framework” and therefore also “a commitment to Christian witness in the contemporary world” (I. Howard Marshall, *Beyond the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004], 12).

¹³¹ Seitz, *Figured Out*, 194–97.

¹³² Examples of this confusion appear in divergent positions where on the one hand Sparks synthesizes postmodernism, historical-criticism, and an evangelical blend of inerrancy while on the other hand William J. Abraham resolutely argues, “We must either abandon critical historical study and honestly admit this or we must abandon the theology of inerrancy” (*Divine Inspiration*, 27–28).

¹³³ Cf. Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 58–62.

¹³⁴ John H. Sailhamer, *Introduction to the Old Testament: A Canonical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 225–26.

¹³⁵ Cf. Beale, *Erosion of Inerrancy*, 59, 70, 75; and also Witherington, who says, “theology and ethics are grounded and indeed based in real historical events in space and time. A theological approach to the Bible that is not properly historical and incarnational in approach is docetic at best and Gnostic at worst” (*The Living Word of God*, 184 [italics in original]).

¹³⁶ Cf. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Lost in Interpretation” *JETS* 48 (2005): 89–114, though he states explicitly, “Evangelicals should no more emerge out of postmodernity than modernity” (113). Reviewing Vanhoozer’s recent work, however, Paul Helm comments, “*The Drama of Doctrine* is a post-modern work in a sense in which, were he to be persuaded of the fact, would not please its author” (available at <http://paulhelmsdeep.blogspot.com/2008/08/analysis-17-unexpected-help.html> [accessed September 8, 2008]).

at least one good way to keep one's doctrine of Scripture from being swallowed by postmodernism.¹³⁷ It is only non-inerrantists who enjoy the free liquidity inherent in postmodernism that allows them to emphasize whatever they want in a doctrine of Scripture.¹³⁸ Some temporarily use empiricism to dismiss inerrancy while inconsistently using it in their other theological formulations and commitments.¹³⁹

Inerrancy also accounts for the humanness and divine inspiration of the Bible. Precisely because the Bible is not only God-breathed but equally human, there is a need to say something about its authority since it has been touched by human hands. Inerrancy is a term that precisely does this, speaking of Scripture's accuracy and inability to be eclipsed by the potential corruptness that would have naturally occurred in Scripture's original writing. This, in turn, informs how evangelicals discuss canonical issues and why certain nuanced descriptions would be attributed to the autographic text. Other views of the Bible besides the evangelical inerrancy description (as embodied in CSBI) seem to loosen their views on one aspect of the Bible's origin when placing emphasis on the other (leaving either humanity to trump divine-inspiration or vice versa).

Inerrancy adequately expresses a significant point of an evangelical Scripture principle. Revisionists have attempted to adjust terms of the inerrancy debate,¹⁴⁰ but this seems like a sure way to breed more confusion. There is much more to be gained in working with the established terms (i.e., inerrancy and infallibility), which have a deep history and need to be understood in previous contexts before being applied in the contemporary context, none of which is conducive to lazy scholarship. Abandoning historic terms is unnecessary, especially when suggested by those having no desire to understand the terms' historical-theological pedigree and contemporary relevancy. In such cases, some other agenda might be taking precedence. These pertinent terms have been used for centuries, although some understanding of their cognate meanings, etymological developments, and definitional gradations will certainly aid in the understanding of the terms. Moreover, this is just the way people talk.¹⁴¹

Finally, "inerrancy" belongs as an ancillary under "authority." While one may be hard-pressed to find an evangelical inerrantist who does not locate inerrancy *under* Scripture's authority,¹⁴² this is

¹³⁷ It does not seem that one has to embrace Vanhoozer's characterization of "exchanging masters" (i.e., moving from postmodernism back to modernism) ("Lost in Interpretation," 113) in order to understand inerrancy's usefulness while working from it to develop a further Scripture principle today.

¹³⁸ E.g., at the outset they may subvert bibliology to theology proper or pneumatology, or generate new paradigms altogether in hopes of facilitating theology, and even a theology of Scripture.

¹³⁹ Cf. Allert, *A High View of Scripture?* 70, and also Sparks, who inconsistently utilizes both postmodernist and modernist forms of historical-criticism. This has also caused uneasiness among some evangelicals (Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation," 114; Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word*, 30–31; Witherington, *The Living Word of God*, 119, 193–94; and Myron B. Penner, *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn* [Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005], 30).

¹⁴⁰ Olson, "Why Inerrancy Doesn't Matter"; Witherington, "Ben Witherington on Scripture," available at <http://euan-gelizomai.blogspot.com/2007/09/ben-witherington-on-scripture.html>; McGowan, *Divine Authenticity*, 38–49.

¹⁴¹ Cf. Kevin Vanhoozer's comments in the question and answer session at the 2008 Wheaton Theology Conference, April 12, 2008 (cited at <http://thesuburbanchristian.blogspot.com/2008/04/wheaton-theology-conference-kevin.html> [accessed December 9, 2008]). Hsu recounts that Vanhoozer pointed out "that yes, 'inerrancy' was a term used that was particularly meaningful in the various debates of the 1940s and 50s, and that it is still valuable for affirming Scripture by what it negates (just as the word 'infinite' affirms a characteristic by what it negates, that it is 'not finite'). And Vanhoozer said something to the effect of how instead of automatically affirming (or denying) the use of the word 'inerrancy,' it's usually better to find out what people mean (or don't mean) by it first."

¹⁴² To list a few examples, Beale recently spoke of the Bible's "inerrant authority" (220), as did Craig Blaising during the Doctrinal Basis Discussion representing the ETS Executive Committee (60th Annual Meeting of ETS, November 19, 2008). Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), gives four characteristics of Scripture (authority, clarity, necessity, and sufficiency); while giving "inerrancy" its own chapter, he does not deem it as a characteristic, placing it under "authority."

not usually the practical outworking of inerrancy's articulation. Inerrancy often ends up becoming the fulcrum of any discussion on an evangelical Scripture principle, which is a reminder of the practical nature of theology: what is emphasized becomes what really matters, however inadvertent, and thus what gets published, discussed, and shapes theology for good or ill. Care must be taken then on the matter of inerrancy's subordinate, supportive, and complementary role to authority. While being the tension point in a contemporary doctrine of Scripture, inerrancy is a construction that was intended to serve the Bible's authority for the church and the world. This needs to be recovered explicitly. If inerrancy does not serve the Bible's authority, it runs the risk of becoming a useless doctrine in the life of the church with little relevancy. Yet if inerrancy is established, there seems to remain little quibbling with the Bible's authority.

3.2.2. *Inerrancy's Intellectual Sustainability*

Searching for precise wording is a constant pursuit in theology. Precision in articulation is the least that can be done when it comes to speaking about doctrinal truths, especially when seeking to lay them before God's people for their edification. It should be acceptable to have a theologically-driven, developed and developing, presupposed, driving view of Scripture.¹⁴³ For this is one of the quests of evangelical scholarship that is committed to academic study of the Bible within a confessionally Christian framework.¹⁴⁴

But how does one go about this? How might inerrancy stand up in the academy as part of a doctrine of Scripture? It is not without problems yet is seemingly the best view, both within the academy and without. Inerrancy is best posed to deal with conflicting views of Scripture. For example, if Barthian components are being employed,¹⁴⁵ then engaging these various points provides a base for healthy, coherent dialogue. Evangelicals also need to expand thinking and writing about how Scripture does not merely witness to God's self-disclosure, but *is* his own self-interpreted, economically oriented, *pro nobis*, verbal extension of his own mind and heart.

Inerrancy has stood the test of time. While one should not minimize difficulties that have arisen because it was misunderstood, misrepresented, or misapplied, it is a good doctrine that says much about a high view of Scripture. It upholds the gospel, affirming that God really worked *then* in Scripture and is working now in the contemporary context, which leads to a final consideration for the way forward.

3.3. Reestablishing Inerrancy's Extensibility

While noticeable divergences of opinion exist on the nature of inerrancy and how the doctrine is defined, the nuances are nothing new,¹⁴⁶ though they seem to be found in increasing variety.¹⁴⁷ What is hopeful, however, is that evangelicals from a broad spectrum are engaged at different levels in a renewed

143 Cf. Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation*, 136, and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Introduction" in *Dictionary of Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 19–25.

144 Marshall, *Beyond the Bible*, 12.

145 E.g., cf. dependence on Barth by evangelicals such as Oldfield, "The Word Became Text," 176–94, and McGowan, *Divine Authenticity*, 155–56, who distances himself from neo-orthodoxy elsewhere (29). Cf. comments by Beale, *Erosion of Inerrancy*, 20, 24, 281–83.

146 As evidenced in Clark Pinnock's early essay, "Limited Inerrancy: A Critical Appraisal and Constructive Alternative," in *God's Inerrant Word* (ed. John Warwick Montgomery; Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1973), 143–58.

147 Cf. Erickson's seven conceptions of inerrancy (*Christian Theology*, 248–50) and David S. Dockery's nine variations ("Variations on Inerrancy," *SBC Today* [May 1986]: 10–11).

discussion of inerrancy, which should alert one to the practical nature of this doctrine's helpfulness in cultivating dialogue about a Scripture principle. With CSBI as a referential starting point, something close to the robust Isaianic view of Scripture (Isa 66:2) seems to be indelibly in the warp and woof of an evangelical Scripture principle, where humility, contrition, and trembling mark those who come to God's Word. Consider the tone and the open invitation to dialogue, expansion, and furtherance of understanding the inerrancy principle as expressed by CSBI's preface:

We offer this Statement in a spirit, not of contention, but of humility and love, which we purpose by God's grace to maintain in any future dialogue arising out of what we have said. We gladly acknowledge that many who deny the inerrancy of Scripture do not display the consequences of this denial in the rest of their belief and behavior, and we are conscious that we who confess this doctrine often deny it in life by failing to bring our thoughts and deeds, our traditions and habits, into true subjection to the divine Word.

We invite response to this statement from any who see reason to amend its affirmations about Scripture by the light of Scripture itself, under whose infallible authority we stand as we speak. We claim no personal infallibility for the witness we bear, and for any help which enables us to strengthen this testimony to God's Word we shall be grateful.¹⁴⁸

It is rarely observed, unfortunately, that evangelicals who framed CSBI were epistemologically humble in that while they passionately upheld inerrancy, they recognized that their doctrine of inerrancy was not inerrant. Therefore, as an evangelical doctrine of Scripture is still in progress, so also is the structure and articulation of the doctrine of inerrancy, with a variety of features taking place on how to engage and express this doctrine in light of other fields of integrative thought.¹⁴⁹

3.3.1. *Debunking Fallacies*

At this point, some fallacies should be debunked.

1. The above statement shows that CSBI was not a creed or an indefinitely fixed reference point. So it may phase off the scene or be replaced by something better, which one could hope for.¹⁵⁰

2. The pressing issue at hand is still a high view of Scripture, which may be difficult to maintain alongside an increasing desire for academic dialogue partners about the nature of Scripture. But inerrancy should be upheld by those serious about the Bible.

¹⁴⁸ Cited in Beale, *Erosion of Inerrancy*, 269.

¹⁴⁹ Buchan, "Inerrancy as Inheritance?" 54. Here might be where those in Britain and other places can helpfully contribute to the understanding of an evangelical Scripture principle, while also finding relevancy in an inerrancy concept that provides credence to Scripture's authority. For an upcoming two-volume collaborative attempt at something like this, see D. A. Carson, ed., *The Scripture Project: The Bible and Biblical Authority in the New Millennium* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming).

¹⁵⁰ Allert, *A High View of Scripture?* 160–63, stresses that CSBI is bent on imprecision. This has been neither the case nor the consensus within US evangelicalism. Some confusion may exist, however, either from seeming internal inconsistency or even from its layout in four components: Preface; A Short Statement; Affirmations and Denials; and Exposition. It should also be noted that the desire to have CSBI replaced by something better maintains it as a touchstone for now. But if inerrancy is focused on (as an apologetic facet) to the exclusion of authority, clarity, sufficiency, the doctrine of inerrancy may be doing a disservice—it was intended to support Scripture's "authority." One who affirms inerrancy should then be open to an extension of its articulation, as stated in CSBI (which CSBI also calls for—as stated explicitly in the CSBI "Preface"), that might be yet more biblical and continue to serve the church's understanding of the authority of Scripture in the present generation and coming ones. Consistent with Packer's reception of CSBI (*Beyond the Battle*, 48), the document has a shelf-life.

3. The inerrancy debate is not about a “term” but what is meant by a term.¹⁵¹

4. The “death of a thousand qualifications” that inerrancy is purported to have died is an erroneous characterization.¹⁵² Qualifications describe theology, which is always provisional, fragmentary, and tainted because it is human.¹⁵³ There is a better way forward for an evangelical Scripture principle. It simply needs a better description in the present context that will fervently summon the reading, preaching, hearing, and obeying of Scripture. Inerrancy is a helpful and integral part of this,¹⁵⁴ for it lends to a robust interpretation of Scripture as God’s Word, which was completely true when written and is true today. It additionally supports the Bible’s application in Christian communities and in people’s lives.

3.3.2. Other Factors for Extending a Scripture Principle

Other factors also come into play for a further extension of a Scripture principle.

1. Should there be parameters for structuring future views of inerrancy? How will these be determined?

2. How will unbelieving scholarship build up the believing church? Can those who cannot say “Jesus is Lord” tell those who can what the Bible says and define the nature of its content? Do these scholarly options set the tone for debate to be had in evangelicalism?

3. Is there still a place for the Bible’s self-authentication?¹⁵⁵

4. How can evangelicals learn from recent non-evangelical contributions? Could a comparative-style dialogue through history and with various disciplines aid the understanding of a distinctly evangelical doctrine of Scripture?¹⁵⁶ Could the very natural untheorized approach for understanding the Bible’s practical authority in individual lives bring suggestions for understanding practical dimensions of the Bible’s authority in evangelicals’ lives as well?¹⁵⁷

4. Conclusion

In attempting to answer the title question, this paper has examined how far evangelicals have gone from CSBI’s understanding of inerrancy and argued that the current discussion should relate to CSBI with more attentiveness than recent efforts have but should also search for ways to extend beyond it. A major point underlying this paper is that the doctrine of inerrancy seems to be here to stay for evangelicals. It recognizes the strong Scripture principle that has been a part of the particular life and history of evangelicalism, and it contributes effectively to the articulation of the Bible’s authority in the current context.

The Bible is God’s Word. As such, the church must look for ways to hold it and its message out as God’s

¹⁵¹ Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration*, 71.

¹⁵² Cf. “Ben Witherington on Scripture” (available at <http://euangelizomai.blogspot.com/2007/09/ben-witherington-on-scripture.html>) for the example of “in the autographs” for inerrancy.

¹⁵³ Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 82; Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 126.

¹⁵⁴ The day that the inerrancy doctrine will not be needed is the day when someone will not assert “errors in the Bible” as grounds for disbelief in the gospel explicated in the Bible.

¹⁵⁵ Young, *Thy Word is Truth*, 114; Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word*, 111, 141; Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 78.

¹⁵⁶ E.g., Holcomb, ed., *Christian Theologies of Scripture*.

¹⁵⁷ Cf. the authors in Brown, ed., *Engaging Biblical Authority* (none of whom holds to inerrancy).

steadfast truth in a time of great error. It is a rock because the God who attributes to it His very own authority is a solid rock in an age where every other ground is sinking sand. The proposal, then, offered in this paper for a constructive approach to an evangelical Scripture principle is submitted humbly yet urgently, looking to the future with great hope while not neglecting the rich heritage that exists in the evangelical view of the Bible's inerrant authority.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ I am very grateful for the helpful interaction of Steve Holmes, Rosalind Hine, Charles Anderson, and an anonymous reviewer, who read and commented on earlier drafts of this article.