
REFORMULATING THE CHICAGO STATEMENT ON BIBLICAL INERRANCY IN LIGHT OF CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

On the weekend of October 26–28, 1978, approximately three hundred evangelical scholars, pastors, and laymen of diverse ecclesiastical backgrounds gathered to discuss and hear presentations on the issue of inerrancy.¹ Corresponding to these presentations was the formulation of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (CSBI).² The completed statement consisted of a summary statement, nineteen articles of affirmation and denial, and an accompanying exposition that places the doctrine of inerrancy “in the context of the broader teachings of Scripture concerning itself.”³

While the CSBI proved to be a useful document after its original publication, within the last two decades, a new resurgence—or, perhaps, a smoldering dissent come to full conflagration—has appeared, with several professing evangelicals formally registering either their dissatisfaction with the CSBI specifically or by arguing for a view of the Bible that undermines the definition of inerrancy provided in the CSBI.⁴

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¹ Norman L. Geisler, ed., *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1980), ix. The presentations—soon after compiled and bound into this volume—were designed specifically to counter Jack Rogers’s edited volume, *Biblical Authority* (Waco, TX: Word, 1977).

² This document, which was understood to “defin[e] the biblical and historic position on the inerrancy of Scripture” (Geisler, *Inerrancy*, ix), was signed by the conferees, among whom were Harold Ockenga, Harold Lindsell, and Gleason Archer. For a full list of signees, see The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, “List of Signers of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy,” Mosher and Turpin Libraries, http://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI_1_typed.pdf (accessed October 29, 2021). The full text of the CSBI document is printed at the end of the article by Wayne Grudem in this issue of *Presbyterian*, on pages 29–36.

³ Geisler, *Inerrancy*, 498. The exposition is approximately 2180 words.

⁴ Some confessing evangelicals find statements in the CSBI that reflect “untenable theological positions” while others wonder if a twelve-page definition of the word “inerrancy” (as found in the CSBI) does not “empt[y] the word of its content.” John J. Brogan, “Can I have Your Autograph? Uses and Abuses of Textual Criticism in Formulating an Evangelical Doctrine of Scripture,” in *Evangelicals and Scripture: Tradition, Authority, and Hermeneutic*,

Amidst these developments, some sectors of evangelicalism have sought formally to reclaim the CSBI as an evangelical benchmark for the doctrine of inerrancy. For example, in 2006, the presiding officers of the Evangelical Theological Society moved to adopt the CSBI into the Society's bylaws.⁵ More recently, in 2013, the late Norman Geisler—a founding member of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI)—labored to recover the CSBI as evangelicalism's standard definition of inerrancy in his co-authored volume *Defending Inerrancy*.⁶ In this book, Geisler argues for the adequacy of the CSBI by defending its various affirmations and denials in theological and philosophical detail, concluding that the document is in no need of revision or amendment.

One wonders, however, if Geisler's conclusion cannot be challenged given the

ed. Vincent Bacote, Laura C. Miguélez, and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 101–02; and A. T. B. McGowan, *The Divine Authenticity of Scripture: Retrieving an Evangelical Heritage* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 106, respectively. Craig Allert, in his work on issues of New Testament canon and biblical authority, suggests that portions of the CSBI tend to deny “that a critical examination of the phenomena of Scripture can inform a doctrine of Scripture,” while decrying the statement's narrow definition of inerrancy—a constriction that inevitably requires too many qualifications. See Craig D. Allert, *A High View of Scripture? The Authority of the Bible and the Formation of the New Testament Canon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 160–61. See also Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005); Enns, *The Evolution of Adam: What the Bible Does and Doesn't Say about Human Origins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2012); Kenton Sparks, *God's Words in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008); Sparks, *Sacred Word, Broken Word: Biblical Authority and the Dark Side of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012); Carlos Bovell, *Inerrancy and the Spiritual Formation of Younger Evangelicals* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007); and Bovell, *Rehabilitating Inerrancy in a Culture of Fear* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012).

⁵ James A. Borland, “Reports Relating to the 58th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society,” *JETS* 50, no. 1 (March 2007): 215. Article 12 of the bylaws reads, “For the purpose of advising members regarding the intent and meaning of the reference to biblical inerrancy in the ETS Doctrinal Basis, 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.” ETS has also recently highlighted the worth of the CSBI in other ways. For example, in his presidential address to the members of ETS in 2000, Wayne Grudem set the CSBI alongside the Nicene Creed (AD 325 and 381), the Chalcedonian Creed (AD 451), and Martin Luther's 95 Theses (AD 1517) as evidence of the Lord's continued doctrinal purification of his church. See Wayne Grudem, “Do We Act as If We Really Believe That ‘The Bible Alone, and the Bible in its Entirety, is the Word of God Written?’” *JETS* 43, no. 1 (March 2000): 13.

⁶ See Norman L. Geisler and William C. Roach, *Defending Inerrancy: Affirming the Accuracy of Scripture for a New Generation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011).

recent developments among evangelicals over inerrancy. Has there been no positive advance in the doctrine of Scripture since 1978 that may help strengthen the CSBI for future theological and ecclesial use?⁷ This article proceeds on the conviction that the CSBI, while a timely and well-crafted articulation of inerrancy at the time it was written, requires updating in order to maintain its usefulness for future generations. Present developments in the doctrine of Scripture require a revised CSBI to address the following matters: the nature of biblical authority; the nature of written revelation; the centrality of narrative as a biblical genre; the diversity of the biblical discourse; recent developments in the discipline of textual criticism; the relationship between providence and inspiration; the nature of biblical phenomena; the place of theological method in doctrinal formulation; the human authorship of Scripture; and the validity of doctrinal development. I will be able to address only a few of these issues in this article.

I am not suggesting, however, a wholesale cleansing of our theological palette. The CSBI requires revision, not a reset.⁸ Theologians and biblical scholars who are interested in reformulating the CSBI should proceed with the assumption that they are working with a document that has enjoyed more than four decades of usefulness precisely because it *does* provide a sound articulation of inerrancy as it is set within a broader context of an evangelical doctrine of Scripture.⁹ A year after CSBI was published, J. I. Packer stated that the CSBI would serve as a solid “reference point” for further discussions on inerrancy.¹⁰ Given the number of authors that have since

⁷ Even those who had a hand in writing the CSBI in 1978 recognized the limitations inherent in formulating a doctrinally weighty statement in such a short period of time and therefore did not desire to attribute creedal status to the document. The preface of the CSBI reads, “We acknowledge the limitations of a document prepared in a brief, intensive conference and do not propose that this Statement be given creedal weight.” Furthermore, the last paragraph of the preface invites a response from any who find reason to “amend its affirmations about Scripture in light of Scripture itself,” while expressing thankfulness for help that might be provided in strengthening the document. Indeed, this kind of reexamination appears to be what Carl Henry had in mind when he included the CSBI in the fourth volume of *God, Revelation and Authority* and noted in comments earlier in the book that the document was “subject to future revision.” Carl F. H. Henry, *God Who Speaks and Shows*, vol. 4 of *God, Revelation, and Authority* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999), 141.

⁸ As Kevin Vanhoozer notes in his response to John Franke in *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy*, “not everything that came out of the 1970s was mistaken.” Franke sees the CSBI’s dependence on a modern (read: foundationalist) epistemology as one of its primary deficiencies. But Vanhoozer is not willing to abandon the CSBI for that reason. See “Response to John Franke,” in *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy*, J. Merrick and Stephen M. Garrett, gen. eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 304.

⁹ The articles of affirmation and denial address the issue of inerrancy directly in Articles XI, XII, and XII. The other sixteen articles provide statements pertaining to other categories in evangelical doctrine of Scripture that have an irreducible connection to inerrancy.

¹⁰ J. I. Packer, *Beyond the Battle for the Bible* (Westchester, IL: Cornerstone, 1980), 47.

utilized the CSBI to orient their discussion and defense of inerrancy (and other elements of their doctrine of Scripture), we must conclude that the document as it stands cannot be so easily set aside. There's a reason why it has endured these forty-three years.¹¹

¹¹For example, we find complete copies of the CSBI or references to relevant sections of the document in the bodies of various evangelical works. While impossible to mention every volume, a list of some significant works from both the scholarly and popular level will suffice to illustrate the above point. In his one-volume systematic theology, Wayne Grudem includes the preface, the summary statement, and the articles of affirmation and denial in an appendix entitled, "Historic Confessions of the Faith" (1203–05). See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000); cf. the second edition of this same work (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 1484–88. In their work in systematic theology, Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest reference the CSBI to supplement their definition of inerrancy. See Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 1:137–38. Greg Beale includes the entire statement in an appendix in his *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 267–79. Joseph Wooddell, commenting on "Article I: The Scriptures," notes the CSBI for further clarification on the definition of inerrancy in the *Baptist Faith and Message*. See *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, ed. Douglas K. Blount and Joseph D. Wooddell (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 10n10 and 10n11. Brian Edwards looks favorably on the CSBI and provides the document's preface, summary statement, and articles of affirmation and denial in a postscript to his study of the doctrine of Scripture entitled *Nothing but the Truth: The Inspiration, Authority and History of the Bible Explained* (New York: Evangelical, 2006), 485–92. In the preface to an important study on gender and sexuality, J. Ligon Duncan and Randy Stinson refer to the CSBI in noting the confusion that results when one no longer maintains the total truth of Scripture. See John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), xii. In their work on the history of inerrancy among Baptists, L. Russ Bush and Tom Nettles mention the CSBI in their discussion of Wayne Grudem, favorably placing the CSBI alongside the "historic Baptist view of the full authority and truthfulness of all the Bible." See L. Russ Bush and Tom J. Nettles, *Baptists and the Bible*, rev. and exp. (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1999), 384. David Dockery and David Nelson encourage their readers to consult the CSBI for further study in the doctrine of inerrancy in their chapter in David S. Dockery and David P. Nelson, "Special Revelation," in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Danny Aiken (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2007), 157. Norman Geisler included the CSBI's summary statement and the nineteen articles of affirmation and denial in his systematic theology. See Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 2002), 1: 419–22. Robert Plummer states that the CSBI "continues to serve as a touchstone for the definition of inerrancy." Robert L. Plummer, *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2010), 41. Jim Hamilton relies heavily upon the CSBI in his defense of an evangelical approach to Scripture. See Jim M. Hamilton, Jr., "Still *Sola Scriptura*: An Evangelical Perspective on Scripture," in *The Sacred Text: Excavating the Texts, Exploring the Interpretations, and Engaging the Theologies of the Christians Scriptures*, Gorgias Précis Portfolios 7, ed. Michael Bird and Michael Pahl (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2010), 215–40. The CSBI was a point of discussion for all the

But we should also proceed with the aim of addressing recent challenges that apply modifications to the CSBI both defensively and reflectively. This is what I mean. On the one hand, some of the proposals I've recommended in my research, writing, and academic presentations are in response to challenges that may exhibit logical incoherence, theological and/or biblical illiteracy, philosophical confusion, or a lack of familiarity with inerrancy in general or the CSBI in particular. Revisions to the CSBI that answer these new but otherwise mistaken challenges are what we might call *defensive modifications*. On the other hand, some of my proposals account for what I judge to be legitimate critiques of the CSBI and therefore contain recommendations to correct areas of genuine weakness, neglect, ambiguity, imbalance, disorder, and obsolescence. We might call these *reflective modifications*. In this way, while I have great respect for the CSBI and believe it rightly articulates the doctrine of inerrancy—I happily defend it and use it on a regular basis—I do not assign creedal status to the CSBI like the ecumenical creeds of the past.¹² While I am not ready to tinker with, say, the Chalcedonian Creed, I can countenance applying some effort to tighten up the CSBI.¹³

So, how should we approach the CSBI with the aim of updating it for future generations? We must begin by familiarizing ourselves with its structure and content. The CSBI contains a preface, short statements, articles of affirmation and denial, and an accompanying exposition.¹⁴ The preface, short-statements, and exposition, however, are built around the articles of affirmation and denial. The preface introduces

contributors to *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy*, ed., J. Merrick and Stephen M. Garrett (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013). Douglas Blount references the CSBI in his defense of inerrancy. See Douglas K. Blount, "What Does it Mean that the Bible is True," in *Defense of the Bible: A Comprehensive Apologetic for the Authority of Scripture* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2013), 55. Charles Quarles also affirms the usefulness of the CSBI in his contribution to the same volume. See Charles Quarles, "Higher Criticism: What has it Shown?" in Blount, *Defense of the Bible*, 78. The contributors to a compilation of articles edited by F. David Farnell use the CSBI and CSBH as their starting point for their subsequent discussions on the doctrine of Scripture. See F. David Farnell, ed., *Vital Issues in the Inerrancy Debate* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2015). Matthew Barrett uses the CSBI positively in *God's Word Alone: The Authority of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 25–26; 115; 126–29; 157–58; 270; 291; 316. John Feinberg uses the CSBI to shape his discussion on inerrancy in his volume on the doctrine of Scripture. See *Light in a Dark Place: The Doctrine of Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 238, 303, 331, 348, 348n14.

¹² See note 7 above.

¹³ I am not alone in my contention that the CSBI could use some updating. Greg Beale suggests that some minor changes in the exposition would be helpful. See Beale, *Erosion of Inerrancy*, 267n1. While noting their usefulness, Robert Yarbrough also admits that both Chicago Statements (Inerrancy and Hermeneutics) are "a generation old and bear revisiting and rephrasing today." Robert Yarbrough, "The Embattled Bible: Four More Books," *Themelios* 34, no. 1 (2009): 23.

¹⁴ Without the exposition, it is about eighteen-hundred words. Including the exposition, it is about four-thousand words.

the document, placing it within its historical setting. The short statements serve as brief summaries of what is conveyed in the articles of affirmation and denial, and the exposition explains in greater detail the meaning and implications of the articles.¹⁵ The nineteen articles of affirmation and denial, then, are the heart of the statement. If we are going to revise the CSBI, we should start with the articles of affirmation and denial the same way you would work first on the body of a paper then write the introduction and conclusion. In my own research the past few years, I've found this approach to be the most fruitful.¹⁶

Secondly, we must consider the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics (CSBH) in our reformulating of the CBSI. Although the CSBH was written four years after the CSBI, we should not view the CSBH as a self-contained document that focuses exclusively on the matter of hermeneutics; we should, in a significant sense, view it as an *update* of the CSBI. While I think it is legitimate to maintain two distinct statements, there are places where the CSBI would do well to learn from the CSBH, for while inerrancy and our principles of biblical interpretation can be distinguished, they cannot be ultimately separated.¹⁷

Due to space constraints, I will only engage here with a selection of the articles of affirmation and denial. I have addressed all nineteen articles and proposed seven new articles elsewhere.¹⁸ In this article, I will examine Articles VI, VIII, IX, and XIII, while offering a proposal for one additional article. In what follows, I will provide each article in its entirety, briefly discuss the article's original intent and meaning,

¹⁵ The exposition is not always included with the CSBI. While the original document held at Dallas Theological Seminary contains the exposition (see here: https://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI_1.pdf), it is occasionally left off when posted elsewhere. ETS, for example, does not include the exposition in their online documents (see here: https://www.etsjets.org/files/documents/Chicago_Statement.pdf). Yet, the preface to the CSBI states that the exposition is part of the original statement: "The statement consists of three parts: A Summary Statement [the Short Statements], the Articles of Affirmation and Denial, and Accompanying Exposition."

¹⁶ It is possible to begin with a different methodology. For example, one might develop an argument around major theological categories (e.g., Inerrancy and the Nature of God, Inerrancy and Truth), thus following Norman Geisler and William Roach's recent defense of the CSBI. One complaint I have with *Defending Inerrancy*, however, is how often Geisler and Roach repeat their arguments and critiques throughout the book. I find this mainly a problem of structure rather than style. That is, the very organization of the book seems to necessitate needless repetition. If the book would have been framed differently—around the original CSBI, for example—I wonder if some redundancy could have been avoided.

¹⁷ Paul Helm recognizes this very fact when he comments, "Debates about the significance of biblical inerrancy cannot (in my view) be separated from issues of hermeneutics." See Paul Helm, "The Idea of Inerrancy," in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 899.

¹⁸ See Derek J. Brown, "A Theological Reassessment and Reformulation of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy in Light of Contemporary Developments" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014).

engage contemporary challenges to the content and implications of the article, and provide appropriate modifications to the existing article. For the new CBSI article proposal, I will offer my rationale then provide an affirmation statement and a denial statement.

A slight but important aspect of the modifications is the addition of headings to each of the articles. You will note that the original CSBI contains no headings for any of the articles of affirmation and denial. This omission is unfortunate because it gives the impression that the articles were strewn together haphazardly without any concern for logical arrangement. Actually, a close examination of the CSBI reveals that the articles were not only arranged in logical order, but that each article touches upon an important theological category within a broader doctrine of Scripture as it relates to inerrancy. Though a minor modification, I believe that clear, concise headings would help demonstrate that the doctrine of inerrancy is located in a broader theology of Scripture and tethered to other evangelical convictions about the Bible.

I've presented my recommendations for Articles I, IV, X, and XVI before,¹⁹ so I will address other articles here. I begin with a proposal for a new article to be included in the CSBI.

AN ADDITIONAL ARTICLE: THE BIBLE AS STORY

In close relation to the subject of Scripture's nature as progressive revelation (see Article V) is the matter of the Bible's genre, intended in this sense: not the individual genre of Scripture—i.e., poetry, narrative, or parable—but the Bible as a whole. Although the Bible is composed of many different books—indeed, the Bible is a rich “library” of various types of literature—it is understood by evangelicals to constitute *one* book. The affirmation and denial statements of Article V (and Article XIV) reflect this conviction. Yet, inherent in the designation of the Bible as one book is the assumption that Scripture consists of a clear and developing plot line, various central and ancillary characters, traceable themes, and other important literary elements. In other words, the Bible is a *story*.

An emphasis upon the idea that the Bible is a single book that tells a consistent and compelling story has seen some significant attention in the past few decades.²⁰

¹⁹ Derek J. Brown, “A Theological Reassessment and Reformulation of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy in Light of Contemporary Developments with Special Attention Given to Articles I, IV, X, and XVI,” presented at The Evangelical Theological Society 65th Annual Meeting, November 19–21, 2013, in Baltimore, Maryland.

²⁰ Craig T. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Story of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004); James O. Chatham, *Creation to Revelation: A Brief Account of the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006); Preban Vang and Terry G. Carter, *Telling God's Story: The Biblical Narrative from Beginning to End* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2006); Morris A. Inch, *Scripture as Story* (New York: University Press of America, 2000); Walter C. Kaiser, *Recovering the Unity of the Bible: One*

Some of this renewed attention may be reflective of some of the ways postmodernism has helped dislodge modernism's attachment to reason and linear argument as the sole arbitrator of truth and beauty. Whatever the case, the rekindled reflection on the Bible as story is certainly a welcome development. That the Bible can consist of both story *and* historical truth, however, has not been so readily embraced. Hans Frei, for example, though not confessedly evangelical, affirms the narrative storyline of the Bible yet without simultaneously upholding the correspondence of the narrative to actual history.²¹ Carlos Bovell, a professing evangelical, is troubled by the doctrine of inerrancy and suggests that inerrantists have difficulty classifying biblical narratives as stories "since stories qua stories defy [the inerrantist's] pre-theoretical inclination toward construing (and establishing) truth by correspondence."²² According to Bovell, inerrantists cannot fully embrace the category of story because the classification by definition implies the inclusion of elements in the narrative that are fictional, legendary, or intentionally fabricated.²³

Continuous Story, Plan, and Purpose (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009). Christian Publishers have introduced Bibles that are configured around the narrative structure of Scripture: see *The Story: Read the Bible as One Seamless Story from Beginning to End* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008). Even the development of an evangelical approach to biblical theology can be viewed in significant measure to be an emphasis on the Bible as story. Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002); Goldsworthy, *Gospel Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles for Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006). N. T. Wright states that "most of [the Bible's] constituent parts, and all of it when put together (whether in the Jewish canonical form or the Christian one), can best be described as *story*" (emphasis original). N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Scripture and the Authority of God—Getting Beyond the Bible Wars* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2005), 26; Marion G. Bontrager, Michele Hershbecker, and John E. Sharp, *The Bible as Story: An Introduction to Biblical Literature*, 2nd ed. (WorkPlay Publishing, 2017).

²¹ See Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974); Frei, *The Identity of Jesus: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975). Frei does not state explicitly that the narratives do not correspond to actual history; he just never poses or answers that question. John Johnson argues that Frei's discussion of Christ's resurrection in *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, if coupled with the use of evidential proofs of the resurrection, could present a strong apologetic case for Christ's resurrection. The need for greater attention to historical evidence, however, appears to still beg the question of whether Frei was ready to link the biblical narrative with actual history. See Jack J. Johnson, "Hans Frei as Unlikely Apologist for the Historicity of the Resurrection," *Evangelical Quarterly* 76, no. 2 (2004): 135–51.

²² Bovell, *Rehabilitating Inerrancy in a Culture of Fear*, 59.

²³ Bovell, *Rehabilitating Inerrancy in a Culture of Fear* 63. Here, Bovell suggests that the Bible's narrative can include elements that are invented by the author. He also, in my judgment, draws a false antithesis between history and story. As V. Phillips Long affirms, however, history writing can be true and simultaneously a "creative enterprise." V. Phillips

Is such skepticism warranted? Although some wonder if, given the assertions of historical-critical scholarship and contemporary ANE studies, much of the biblical narrative represents actual history at all,²⁴ it does not appear that story and essential history as such must stand in opposition to one another. That is, it is not unreasonable to assert that the Bible is both story *and* history; or, more accurately: that the Bible is *true story*.²⁵ In the Bible God has given mankind a captivating account of his redemptive action in the world that is historically reliable, even inerrant. Therefore, considering the helpful emphasis these past several years on the nature of the Bible as story, and the apparent false dichotomy drawn by some between reliable history and story, I recommend the addition of an article to the CSBI that recognizes this vital component in the doctrine of Scripture and concurrently maintains the essential history of the biblical narrative.

WE AFFIRM that the Bible is a glorious and compelling story of God's redemptive action in the world. We further affirm that the biblical narrative faithfully portrays in the sum of its parts God's purpose in creation, fall, redemption, and judgment, and is paradigmatic for every element of what we call "story."

WE DENY that story and essential history are mutually exclusive, or that the designation of the Bible as story implies that the biblical narratives contain untrue, mythical, or fabricated elements, or cannot be said to correspond to actual states of affairs.

In providing this additional article, the CSBI gains some needed balance. Some of the articles of affirmations and denial tend to cast Scripture in a rather plain, lackluster mold. Although Article XVIII hints at some of the richness contained in Scripture (referring to the Bible's "literary forms and devices"), and the exposition implies that Scripture contains a plotline and some theme development, overall, the statement does not present the Bible as a captivating yet true story that compels imagination *and* repentance, appreciation *and* faith, delight *and* serious study. Furthermore, the affirmation designates biblical narrative as the archetype of all other

Long, "History and Fiction: What is History?" in *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation: Six Volumes in One* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 319–37.

²⁴ For example, Kenton Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008).

²⁵ See Tremper Longman III, "Storytellers and Poets in the Bible: Can Literary Artifice Be True?" in *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic: A Tradition, A Challenge, A Debate*, ed. Harvie M. Conn (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988), 137–49. Longman defends the notion that biblical narrative can be both compelling, entertaining story and historically accurate. "The question of historical truth of the text boils down to the question of who ultimately is guiding us in our interpretation of these events. If human beings alone, then artifice may be deceptive. If God, then no. To recognize this difference is to recognize that a literary analysis of a historical book is not incompatible with a high view of the historicity of the text, even one which affirms the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture in the area of history" (Longman, "Storytellers and Poets in the Bible," 147).

stories. Thus, Scripture is not subject to the evaluative principles of literary critics, but rather serves as the standard by which all other stories are judged.²⁶

ARTICLE VI: THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF INSPIRATION

WE AFFIRM that the whole of Scripture and all its parts, down to the very words of the original, were given by divine inspiration.

WE DENY that the inspiration of Scripture can rightly be affirmed of the whole without the parts, or of some parts but not the whole.

In this article, the CSBI affirms the doctrine of verbal plenary inspiration. As the designation itself implies, *all* Scripture is inspired, even the very *words*.²⁷ The denial portion counters the claim that one can speak of the inspiration of the entire Bible while also maintaining that some sections are not inspired.²⁸

The doctrine of verbal plenary inspiration, though, does not require a mechanical or dictation theory to account for God's comprehensive oversight of the text.²⁹ While the mode of inspiration is a mystery (see Article VII), the CSBI maintains that God utilized "the distinctive personalities and literary styles of the writers" (Article VIII) in his work of inspiring the biblical text. Thus, divine inspiration occurred concurrently with the work of the human author so in the final analysis we have the word of God in the word of men.

While it is difficult to improve on this article given its straightforward assertion of the comprehensive scope of Scripture's divine inspiration, there are a few subtle modifications that would further strengthen this article and the remaining articles that touch upon the doctrine of inspiration. The first change I propose concerns

²⁶ I am indebted to Tom Nettles for articulating this last point to me as we discussed my research on this topic.

²⁷ This view of inspiration is defended in several places in Geisler, *Inerrancy*. See, for example, Paul Feinberg, "The Meaning of Inerrancy," in *Inerrancy*, 277–83; and J. I. Packer, "The Adequacy of Human Language," in *Inerrancy*, 210–11. The reason I cite these articles is because *Inerrancy* was published as an ICBI resource only two years after the inaugural writing of the CSBI. The connection between verbal-plenary inspiration and inerrancy is essential as these and other articles in Geisler's edited volume ably demonstrate.

²⁸ Article VI answers this position directly, denying any attempt to claim that inspiration can encompass the entire Bible without including every part and every word of Scripture. Peter Jenson provides a succinct yet helpful response to the claim that Scripture is only partly inspired. First, he notes that the NT itself treats the entire OT as inspired (e.g., Rom. 3:2), even those texts in which God is not speaking directly (Matt. 19:4–6; Heb. 4:7 cf. Ps. 95). Secondly, Jenson appeals to the necessity of context for one to properly convey communication to another. Peter Jenson, *The Revelation of God*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 160–61.

²⁹ Often the words *mechanical* and *dictation* are used interchangeably to refer to a theory of inspiration that views the human role in the composition of Scripture as little more than a secretary writing the words given to him by God.

specifically the word “inspiration.”

Historically, most contemporary English copies of the Bible have employed the word “inspiration” and its cognates to translate the Greek word *theopneustos* in 2 Timothy 3:16. These English versions are based on the KJV (1611): “All Scripture is given *by inspiration* of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, correction for instruction in righteousness” (emphasis added). Since the publication of the KJV, many English translations have followed suit in their rendition of this text.³⁰ As these copies became available for study, theologians imbibed the language of 2 Timothy 3:16 and formulated their doctrine of Scripture by employing the word “inspiration” as a technical term to denote the divine nature of the Bible. Over time, however, the word “inspiration” in the common parlance has come take on new connotations that differ from how it was used in 2 Timothy 3:16 or in theological texts. While still maintaining the sense of a divine work, “inspiration” can now refer to ordinary events like an “inspired performance” or a “feelings of inspiration” that motivates one to work hard or where one is supplied with moments of genius-like brilliance.³¹ Nevertheless, the shift in the word’s customary meaning and usage has signaled to some Bible translators and theologians that care must now be taken in communicating not only the truth of 2 Timothy 3:16, but also in how one describes the divine nature of Scripture. To maintain the passage’s emphasis on the origin of Scripture, some contemporary versions of the Bible have shelved the word “inspiration” and instead rendered *theopneustos* as “God-breathed.” The NIV, for example, reads, “All Scripture is *God-breathed* and profitable for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness” (emphasis added). The ESV follows the NIV by rendering 2 Timothy 3:16 as “All Scripture is breathed out by God.”

Some theologians have also recently expressed their complaint that the word “inspiration” no longer captures what the Bible teaches about its own origin. Wayne Grudem, for example, chose to leave out the word “inspiration” in his discussion of the doctrine of Scripture in favor of the NIV phrase “God-breathed.”³² A. T. B. McGowan has even proposed an overhaul of our theological vocabulary at this point, arguing that “piration” is a better way to speak of the Scripture’s divine origin rather than “inspiration.”³³ On the less extreme end of the spectrum, John Frame, while not electing to strike “inspiration” from his theological vocabulary, does recognize that “God-breathed” is a proper and useful translation of *theopneustos*.³⁴ Thus, it would be helpful to add a phrase to the affirmation statement that acknowledges the

³⁰ For example, the NKJV, ASV, NASB, RSV, NRSV, NLT, and NET.

³¹ Consider B. B. Warfield’s etymology of the English word “inspiration.” See B. B. Warfield, “Inspiration,” in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 3, ed. James Orr (Chicago: Howard-Severance, 1915), 1473–83.

³² Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 75n6 (1st ed.); 64n6 (2nd ed.).

³³ McGowan, *Divine Authenticity of Scripture*, 38–43.

³⁴ John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, vol. 4 of *A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2010), 124–25.

usefulness of the term “God-breathed” in relation to the doctrine of inspiration. The revised affirmation statement would read (with changes in italics):

WE AFFIRM that the whole of Scripture and all its parts, down to the very words of the original, were given by divine inspiration, *so that it is appropriate to say that all Scripture is breathed out by God.*

By making the claim to Scripture’s divine origin even more explicit and explaining the nature of that divine work, the additional clause counters, with greater force, arguments that are used to assert Scripture’s divine origin but also simultaneously reject inerrancy. Even for evangelicals who dislike the doctrine of inerrancy, it is difficult—if not impossible—to maintain, with any consistency, that God has *breathed out* that which is false or mistaken.³⁵ Furthermore, providing this additional clause also helps allay the complaints by CSBI inerrantists like Grudem who find the use of the word “inspiration” problematic. Attention to one issue in the denial section might also prove beneficial. For these reasons I also recommend that subsequent articles, where appropriate, refer to God’s work of breathing out Scripture rather than using the word “inspiration.”

According to R. C. Sproul’s commentary on the CSBI, the assertions made in Article VI do not imply that a dictation theory of inspiration is required to affirm the full inspiration of Scripture.³⁶ By stating in Article VII that the mode of inspiration is “largely a mystery to us,” the framers refused to endorse any theory of inspiration, much less a mechanical or dictation theory.³⁷ Given the problems inherent in defending inerrancy based on a dictation theory of inspiration, however, it is necessary to draw out an explicit reference to these theories and their relation to inspiration. Granted, evangelical defenses of inspiration from a dictation or mechanical framework are almost non-existent; nevertheless, given recent challenges to inerrancy, it is necessary for the CSBI to speak more directly to this matter.³⁸

³⁵For example, John Frame, in his critique of A. T. B. McGowan’s *The Divine Authenticity of Scripture* and McGowan’s suggestion that inspired texts could include error, remarks, “To breathe out is to speak. To say that God breathes out errors is to say that he speaks errors. That is biblically impossible. God does not lie, and he does not make mistakes (Heb. 4:12). So he speaks only truth” (Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 547). Also, Paul Helm: “If something has the character of God’s word, then it follows that it too must be necessarily inerrant.” Helm, “The Idea of Inerrancy,” 903.

³⁶ See R. C. Sproul, *Explaining Inerrancy: A Commentary* (Oakland, CA: The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, 1980) 17.

³⁷ Article VIII further distances the CSBI from any claim that inerrancy implies a dictation theory of inspiration by affirming that God, in his act of inspiration, “utilized the distinctive personalities and literary styles” of the human authors.

³⁸ McGowan, for example, believes that the doctrine of inerrancy—at least as it is articulated by some evangelicals—strongly implies a mechanical view of inspiration. He opts for the term infallibility because it is a “more dynamic (or organic) and less mechanical view of authority” (McGowan, *Divine Authenticity of Scripture*, 49). James Scott notes that

Along these lines, Gregg Allison, directing his comments specifically to Christian educators, notes that, “the mechanical dictation theory of inspiration is bankrupt and should be avoided strenuously.”³⁹ Because many of the contemporary challenges to inerrancy appear to betray an underlying influence from or commitment to a Barthian view of Scripture, it is crucial to include in the denial portion of Article VI an unambiguous statement that separates the doctrine of verbal-plenary inspiration from a dictation theory of inspiration.⁴⁰ The revised denial statement would read (with changes in italics):

WE DENY that the inspiration of Scripture can rightly be affirmed of the whole without the parts, or of some parts but not the whole. *We further deny that divine inspiration requires that God dictated his Word to the human authors of Scripture.*

ARTICLE VIII: THE HUMAN AUTHORSHIP OF SCRIPTURE

WE AFFIRM that God in His Work of inspiration utilized the distinctive personalities and literary styles of the writers whom He had chosen and prepared.

McGowan’s mistake here is based upon using the word “infallible” in a technical sense that departs from its original meaning, and upon the failure to recognize that an organic theory of inspiration can coexist coherently with the doctrine of inerrancy, as it does in, for example, B. B. Warfield. See James Scott, “Reconsidering Inerrancy: A Response to A. T. B. McGowan’s *The Divine Authenticity of Scripture*,” *WTJ* 71, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 189.

³⁹ Gregg Allison, “A Theologian Addresses Current Theological Issues Impinging on Christian Education,” *CEJ* 8, no. 1 (2011): 93.

⁴⁰ Consider the third appendix to G. K. Beale’s *Erosion of Inerrancy*, in which he provides a selection of sixteen quotes from Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* in response to contemporary evangelical developments in the doctrine of Scripture. “The point of this appendix is to show that Barth believed that Scripture contained errors but that, nevertheless, God could communicate his message even through such fallible parts of the Bible. Likewise, some of the quotations reveal that Barth did not identify God’s Word with the Bible but that the Bible is a witness to the Word.” Beale, *Erosion of Inerrancy*, 281. For example, consider the following selections from Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*. “The men whom we hear as witnesses speak as fallible, erring men like ourselves. What they say, and what we read as their word, can of itself lay claim to be the Word of God, but it can never sustain that claim” (Barth, *CD*, I/2, 507). “We have to face up to them and to be clear that in the Bible it may be a matter of simply believing the Word of God, even though it meets us, not in the form of what we call history, but in the form of what we think must be called saga or legend” (Barth, *CD*, I/2, 509). “But the vulnerability of the Bible, i.e., its capacity for error, also extends to its religious or theological context” (Barth, *CD*, I/2, 509). “We must dare to face the humanity of the biblical texts and therefore their fallibility without the postulate that they must be infallible, but also without the superstitious belief in any infallible truth alongside or behind the text and revealed by ourselves” (Barth, *CD*, I/2, 533). For more on Barth’s view of Scripture and the weaknesses therein, see Geoffrey W. Bromiley, “The Authority of Scripture in Karl Barth,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995), 275–94.

WE DENY that God, in causing these writers to use the very words that He chose, overrode their personalities.

A common complaint among those who find the doctrine of inerrancy unsatisfactory is that it does not account adequately for the humanity of Scripture.⁴¹ While not answering every concern in this vein of criticism, Article VIII does acknowledge the concurrence between God's act of inspiration and the work of the human authors in writing Scripture. The affirmation portion emphasizes that God's work of inspiration worked in such a way to respect the human agents' freedom of expression, personal style, and personality. Nevertheless, it also recognizes the sovereignty of God in superintending the authors of Scripture so that their style, personal motivations for writing, and other important factors would coincide with God's goal in providing a written revelation. The result is a text that is the very word of God, but one that has been conveyed through the free expression of the human authors.⁴²

⁴¹ Could it be that some of Warfield's descriptions of the doctrine of inspiration perpetuate the idea that divine inspiration (and, by implication, inerrancy) must, by necessity, diminish Scripture's "humanity?" For example, Warfield, commenting on the matter of revelation, states, "In the view of the Scriptures, the completely supernatural character of revelation is in no way lessened by the circumstance that it has been given through the instrumentality of men. They affirm, indeed, with the greatest possible emphasis that the Divine word delivered through men is the pure word of God, diluted with no human admixture whatever." Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, 86. By "human admixture," Warfield clearly means anything that is *merely* human, not human as such, for it was "through the instrumentality of men" that God gave his revelation. While I am not convinced Warfield was entirely wrong to use such language—the apostle Paul gave priority to the divine aspect of his message over the human vehicle through which it came (e.g., 1 Thess. 2:13)—one needs to consider whether there are *better* ways to communicate what we mean when we define the doctrine of inspiration. Nevertheless, we need to keep in mind that, as Jason Hunt notes, Warfield's view on the humanity of Scripture is likely more robust than is typically admitted. See Jason B. Hunt, "Bavinck and the Princetonians on Scripture: A Difference in Doctrine or Defense?," *JETS* 53, no. 2 (June 2010): 322.

⁴² By "free expression" I mean that the authors wrote what they most wanted to write according to what they judged to be true and fitting for a given situation; such a notion expresses a common view of self-determination and avoids both positions of indeterminism and hyper-determinism. However, while Article VIII is intended to counter the claim that an inerrant text implies a mechanical theory of inspiration where the authors were mere automatons through whom God wrote his word (see Sproul, *Explaining Inerrancy*, 19–20), "free expression" may not be the best way to describe *every* instance of divine inspiration. In some cases, God did dictate his word to the biblical authors; in such instances as God giving Moses the words of the law (Exod. 34:27), Jeremiah's dictation to Baruch the words of God (Jer. 36:4), or Christ's directions to the seven churches (Rev. 2–3), the authors were not used in such a way so as to respect their "freedom of expression." In these cases they were told what to say and how to say it. A thorough analysis of Scripture, however, reveals that inspiration *on the whole* was a process that worked concurrently with the human authors where the authors were free to express themselves in the manner they saw fit. The final product, by the work of

As I have already noted, one of the major complaints leveled against inerrancy is that it requires a kind of inspiration whereby God merely dictates the content of Scripture to the biblical author or controls the author in such a way that the author himself is unaware of what he is writing. The doctrine of inspiration rightly understood, however, implies no such thing.⁴³ Yet, a question: Can we reframe this article in such a way that the human component of Scripture's authorship might be emphasized in a clearer and more helpful way?⁴⁴

Overall, Article VIII emphasizes the divine initiative and superintending results of inspiration. The article affirms that it was *God's* work of inspiration through the authors *he* chose and prepared; it was *God* who *caused* these writers to write the words that *he* selected without overriding their personalities. Yet, because this article provides us with a clear, biblical emphasis on the divine source of Scripture and God's superintending work to secure a particular text, the assertion that inspiration does not supersede the personalities of the authors seems only to beg the question. Said another way: If we affirm that God worked in such a way to cause the writers "to use the very words he chose," one wonders how such a statement can comport in any meaningful way with the previous statement about God utilizing the "distinctive personalities and literary styles of the writers whom he had chosen and prepared."⁴⁵

This statement is a claim that a concurrence exists between the divine work of inspiration and the human work of writing the Scripture. We clearly see the human component at work throughout Scripture. For example, the author of Ecclesiastes drew upon basic observations of human life to form his argument (Eccl. 1:13–14), Luke utilized historical resources to write his accounts (Luke 1:1–14), and Paul offered his own counsel to instruct the Corinthians (1 Cor 7:12–17). What is needed in the CSBI is a description of the human work of authorship that lends credence specifically to the claim that human personalities and literary styles were not overruled by God's act of inspiration. With these things in mind, I suggest the following revision to the affirmation statement in Article VIII (with additions in italics):

inspiration, was the very word of God. See also Jenson, *The Revelation of God*, 158; Frame, *Doctrine of the Word of God*, 141–42; and Gordon R. Lewis, "The Human Authorship of Inspired Scripture," in Geisler, *Inerrancy*, 258–59; Sinclair Ferguson, "How Does the Bible Look at Itself?" in Conn, *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic*, 56.

⁴³ Article VIII underscores the statements made in earlier articles by highlighting the human component in the Bible's authorship.

⁴⁴ Interestingly, Merrick and Garrett state that "any doctrine of inspiration must show how the biblical authors retain their faculties," and that "much work needs to be done on how God secures an inerrant text without diminishing or displacing human agency." (See "Introduction: On Debating Inerrancy," in *Five Views on Inerrancy*, 19). But don't these assertions indicate that Merrick and Garrett are already assuming that human agency, for it to be truly human, *must* include a liability to error?

⁴⁵ Granted, the mode of inspiration is a mystery (Article VII), but this does not mean that we are unable to describe more fully the author's role in communicating the divine word so that we might avoid question-begging assertions about the nature of inspiration.

WE AFFIRM that God in His work of *breathing out* Scripture he *employed* the *unique* personalities, literary styles, *and research* of the writers whom He chose and prepared. *We further affirm that in most cases, the biblical writers composed Scripture according to their own free expression, writing what they most wanted to write.*

By acknowledging the biblical authors' ability to write what they most desired to write, Article VIII now significantly relieves the tension produced by the seemingly incongruent statements about God's sovereign control over the text and the full humanity of the writers. From a divine standpoint, God sovereignly caused every word of Scripture; from the human standpoint, men wrote what they most wanted to write, according to their own research, background, personality, and literary skill. The phrase "in most cases" in the revised statement acknowledges that Scripture indicates that a kind of dictation was sometimes, though rarely, used to write the text.

With the addition of the above statement, the denial can now reassert a key truth concerning inerrancy and the human authorship of the Bible. Again, one of the primary complaints among evangelical non-inerrantists is that inerrancy inherently limits the humanity of the human authors. As we will see in the discussion of the following article (IX), much of this critique is grounded in a faulty epistemological principle regarding human nature. In the article currently under discussion (VIII), I suggest the addition of a statement to the denial section that plainly asserts that no inherent conflict exists between affirmations of inerrancy and the claim that God's work of inspiration respected the full humanity of the authors. The revised denial portion would read (with changes in italics):

WE DENY that God, in *breathing out his very words*, overrode the personalities, *mental faculties, personal agency, or free expression of the biblical authors.* *We further deny that the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture necessarily entails a limitation on the humanity of the biblical authors.*

Although the following article (IX) indicates that the "finitude and fallenness" of the biblical authors does not necessarily entail the introduction of error into their writings, the above addition to Article VIII offers a slightly different nuance by asserting that inerrancy does not conflict with the claim that the Bible was written through the free agency of the human authors. By touching upon a related matter, however, this additional statement leads Article VIII naturally into the affirmations and denials of Article IX.

ARTICLE IX: THE DEFINITION OF INERRANCY

WE AFFIRM that inspiration, though not conferring omniscience, guaranteed true and trustworthy utterance on all matters of which the Biblical authors were moved to speak and write.

WE DENY that the finitude or fallenness of these writers, by necessity or otherwise, introduced distortion or falsehood into God's Word.

Having upheld in the previous article the concurrence between God's work of

inspiration and the human act of writing (Articles VII, VIII), Article IX now addresses the matter of human authorship in more depth, but with critical epistemological and anthropological concerns in view. Article IX makes two important clarifications. The first concerns a distinction that must exist between the scope of the authors' knowledge and the reliability of their communication.⁴⁶ The second clarification is related to the first. A criticism leveled by Karl Barth against the doctrine of inerrancy was that it truncated the human component of Scripture by removing the possibility of human error from the process of inspiration.⁴⁷ Inherent in Barth's criticism, however, was a faulty epistemological principle: Barth believed that "fundamental to our humanity [is] that we are liable to error."⁴⁸ The denial portion, with careful nuance, counters this misguided assumption by rejecting any logical necessity between the property of existing as a human and the property of mistake-making.

Furthermore, it is incorrect to say that a tendency to err is an essential property of human personhood. Consider a prelapsarian Adam and Eve, for example, or saints in their future glorified states; these are both instances of genuine human personhood where there is no commission of error (Adam and Eve) or a tendency to err (glorified saints).⁴⁹ Therefore, because the tendency to err is not an essential property of human personhood—it is an accidental property—and because it is not necessary that persons err every time they speak or write, the CSBI can maintain the doctrine of inerrancy while simultaneously holding to the full humanity of the biblical authors: nothing truly human is lost in a process by which God guarantees the writing of an error-free text.

Even with these clear affirmations and denials, however, the epistemological and anthropological issues raised here reside at the center of the current inerrancy debate. For example, Kenton Sparks has blurred the distinction between exhaustive knowledge and truthful utterance. To Sparks, the doctrine of inerrancy implies that the biblical authors required omniscience—a "god-like grasp on the truth"⁵⁰—to speak

⁴⁶ One of the criticisms aimed at the doctrine of inerrancy at the time the CSBI was written was that it implied that authors must possess omniscience in order accurately to convey divine truth. The affirmation statement counters this criticism and differentiates between exhaustive knowledge and reliable statements, implying that the possession of former is not required for delivery of the latter. In his work of divine inspiration, God did not bestow omniscience upon the human authors because he did not have to, but he did ensure that whatever the authors wrote was "true and trustworthy."

⁴⁷ Sproul, *Explaining Inerrancy*, 22.

⁴⁸ Sproul, *Explaining Inerrancy*, 22.

⁴⁹ Paul Feinberg, "The Meaning of Inerrancy," in Geisler, *Inerrancy*, 282.

⁵⁰ Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words*, 54. On the next page, Sparks concedes that reasoning from the character of God to an inerrant Scripture is legitimate, yet, he believes that such a formulation "overlook[s] that God has chosen to speak to human audiences through human authors in everyday human language." Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words*, 55. Sparks then asks, "Is it therefore possible that God has selected to speak to human beings

truthfully in all the areas on which they wrote. Peter Enns and A. T. B. McGowan, as well as Sparks, all ground their argument for an errant text at least partially on the assumption that genuine human personhood entails the property of mistake-making: to assert an inerrant text implies—demands—the conclusion that inerrantists have minimized much of the Bible’s human component.

In view of these challenges, then, I recommend the following changes to Article IX. First, explicit rebuttal of the idea that exhaustive human knowledge is necessary for the accurate conveyance of truth should be added to the affirmation statement. The statement already rejects the idea that inspiration involved the bestowal of omniscience to the biblical authors, but an additional affirmation that touches upon the epistemological principles inherent in this issue would further strengthen the article.

WE AFFIRM that *God’s action of breathing out Scripture*, though not *bestowing exhaustive knowledge* upon the biblical authors, guaranteed true and trustworthy utterance on all matters of which the authors were moved to speak and write. *We further affirm that exhaustive human knowledge is not necessary to accurately convey historical events or theological truth.*

Second and related, I recommend that the denial portion of Article IX receive an additional statement directly addressing the misguided assumption that the property of existing as a human entails the property of mistake-making. Again, the denial statement takes up this issue at some level by noting that neither human fallenness nor finitude entail, by necessity, the reporting of error in the biblical text. Even so, the statement could be supplemented with more logical force.⁵¹ That is, a principle could be provided in the statement that precludes the claim that inerrancy requires the loss of Scripture’s human component. Note the following modification (with changes in italics):

through *adequate* rather than *inerrant* words, and is it further possible that he did so because human beings are *adequate* rather than *inerrant* readers” (55)? Because these statements represent the foundation of Sparks’s argument, a few words of critique are necessary. First, Sparks appears to misunderstand the doctrine of inerrancy, at least as it is articulated in the CSBI. One of the primary contentions of the CSBI is that inerrancy must be judged according to the biblical text—a text that has been given in *everyday human language* (see especially Article XIII and the exposition). The CSBI certainly cannot be charged with “overlooking” the reality that God has spoken to mankind by way of normal human discourse. Secondly, the CSBI does not posit any inherent conflict between adequate language and inerrant language. Indeed, the distinction made by Sparks at this point is false: a person is quite able to speak both truthfully yet not exhaustively about a particular subject.

⁵¹ In his discussion of the humanity of Scripture and the tendency of some to commit the logical misstep described above, Paul Wells aptly concludes, “At this point a doctrine of Scripture in which humanity and fallibility are not synonymous is vital.” Paul Wells, “The Doctrine of Scripture,” in *Reforming or Conforming: Post-Conservative Evangelicals and the Emerging Church*, ed. Gary L. W. Johnson and Ronald N. Gleason (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 32.

We deny that the finitude or fallenness of the *biblical authors*, by necessity or otherwise, introduced distortion or falsehood into God's Word. *We further deny that the commission of or tendency to err is a property essential to genuine human personhood, or that the inerrancy of Scripture and the full humanity of Scripture are logically incompatible.*

With that, we now turn to consider the extent of inerrancy.

ARTICLE XIII: TRUTHFULNESS AND THE PHENOMENA OF SCRIPTURE

WE AFFIRM the propriety of using inerrancy as a theological term with reference to the complete truthfulness of Scripture.

WE DENY that it is proper to evaluate Scripture according to standards of truth and error that are alien to its usage or purpose. We further deny that inerrancy is negated by biblical phenomena such as a lack of modern technical precision, irregularities of grammar or spelling, observational descriptions of nature, the reporting of falsehoods, the use of hyperbole and round numbers, the topical arrangement of material, variant selections of material in parallel accounts, or the use of free citations.

Given that some have taken the term inerrant to imply that Scripture must provide a kind of scientific precision in all that it affirms, Article XIII helpfully tethers inerrancy to the concept of *truthfulness* to guard Scripture from this type of misunderstanding. That is, Article XIII insists that one judge the inerrancy of Scripture according to standards of precision in communication that are native to the text itself. Biblical phenomena like “lack of modern technical precision, irregularities of grammar or spelling, observational descriptions of nature,” and the like do not destabilize the concept of inerrancy because none of these phenomena impinge upon or contradict the truthfulness of statements in which they occur.⁵² The main point of Article XIII is to call the reader to judge biblical statements and affirmations according to their own genre, purpose, and audience.⁵³

⁵² For example, if David killed 18,432 Edomites in the Valley of Salt, yet Scripture records 18,000 (2 Sam. 8:13), the text does not err; it provides an accounting that is appropriate for the given context. If Paul or John's grammar is unusual in some instances, these irregularities cannot be said to affect the truth of their statements any more than my statement “I ain't seen him” truthfully communicates, despite its colloquial grammar, that I did not see the person to whom the reference is made. When biblical authors record that the sun rose, they do not, by making statements from an earth-dweller's perspective, err any more than the newspaper errs when it reports the time of the sunrise and sunset for any given day.

⁵³ James Scott rightly describes the importance of appraising Scripture according to its own presentation: “The doctrine of inerrancy requires a sympathetic and reasonable understanding of what biblical statements actually affirm and do not affirm. Nothing is gained by setting up artificial standards of ‘accuracy’ that ignore the realities of language. Inerrancy requires that the exact truth be within the range of possibility allowed by the words used, and

Accordingly, the CSBI does not attempt to qualify inerrancy in a way that allows for actual errors in the text. Just the opposite: the denials in Article XIII contend that the biblical phenomena *do not constitute an actual error* with regard to a correspondence to actual states of affairs. By articulating the denials in this way, the CSBI does not equivocate on or redefine the words “truth” and “error;” rather, it respects the way Scripture defines these terms and seeks to apply the concept of inerrancy accordingly.⁵⁴

Despite the clarity of the original affirmation and denials statements, I do believe attention to two specific details will strengthen this article. First, I recommend changing the sentence “according to standards of *truth and error* that are alien to its usage or purpose” (emphasis added) to read “according to standards of *precision* that are alien to its usage or purpose” (emphasis added). In my judgment, placing the phrase “standards of truth and error” prior to the list of biblical phenomena implies that the CSBI equivocates on these terms, especially if “truthfulness” in the affirmation refers, primarily, to that which corresponds with actual states of affairs. A grammatical irregularity, for example, does not constitute an error in this sense. If one insists that a grammatical irregularity *is* an error in the text of Scripture, one would not be guilty of judging Scripture according to standards of truth and error that are foreign to the text as much as he would be requiring a *precision of language* that is foreign to the text: namely, a standard of modern grammatical convention. Truth is not in question here, but precision in communication: the “error” is not a lack of correspondence to actual states of affairs; it is a lack of conformity to a contemporary rule of language, and compliance with these rules of language is not required in order to communicate faithfully an event as it really happened.

Moreover, in his commentary on the CSBI, Sproul states that the phrase “standards of truth and error” is “directed toward those who would redefine truth to relate merely to redemptive intent, the purely personal or the like, rather than to mean that which corresponds to reality.”⁵⁵ If this is the case, the inclusion of this phrase in Article XIII is somewhat redundant, for the previous article (Article XII) already indicates that inerrancy should be applied to the whole of Scripture, not merely its spiritual, redemptive, or religious sections. In the above case, Article XII addresses the attempt by non-inerrantists to place an emphasis on the salvific purpose of Scripture to allow for errors in portions of the Bible that do not readily deal with matters of redemption and Christian practice.

These efforts to separate the Bible’s redemptive content from its historical, scientific, and geographic content appear to apply standards of truth that are foreign to

nothing more.” James Scott, “Reconsidering Inerrancy,” 194.

⁵⁴ Sproul, *Explaining Inerrancy*, 29. “When we speak of inerrancy,” Sproul comments, “we are speaking of the fact that the Bible does not violate its own principles of truth. This does not mean that the Bible is free from grammatical irregularities or the like, but that it does not contain assertions which are in conflict with objective reality.”

⁵⁵ Sproul, *Explaining Inerrancy*, 31.

the text.⁵⁶ Article XIII, however, addresses a slightly different issue. The phrase “standards of truth and error” here in Article XIII, then, is unnecessary not only because it causes confusion as to what the CSBI claims regarding truth and the phenomena of Scripture, but also due to its repetitiveness in relation to Article XII. Also, if the phrase “according to standards of precision” should be included in the revised statement, then I also recommend the removal of the phrase, “the lack of modern technical precision” due to repetitiveness and to the fact that the phenomena listed *are*—with the exception of the phrase “the reporting of falsehoods”—examples of biblical expressions that do not conform to modern standards of precision.

The issues noted here highlight a problem that has afflicted the doctrine of inerrancy ever since it was formalized in evangelical doctrines of Scripture. The problem relates specifically to the word itself. “Inerrancy” for some connotes a kind of pedantic precision rather than simply communicating the idea of comprehensive truthfulness. Yes, precision is sometimes required, given the context, to communicate truthfully. Take, for example, communication between scientists discussing a highly technical piece of research or mathematical equations where a high level of precision is of the utmost importance. Overall, however, as John Frame notes, “outside of science and mathematics, truth and precision are often much more distinct.”⁵⁷ Indeed, in most cases of normal, day-to-day speech, a high amount of precision may impede effective communication.

In his book *A High View of Scripture?*, Craig Allert’s equivocation on the words *truth* and *precision* brought him to conclude that there is a “tension” that resides between the claim that Scripture is wholly true and the acknowledgement of biblical phenomena like round numbers, colloquial statements, and unscientific language.⁵⁸ In light of what Frame has observed about the important difference between these two words, we may not be able to lay the fault entirely at Allert’s feet: Article XIII appears to promote confusion rather than alleviate it.

Furthermore, because contemporary critiques of inerrancy have revealed a broad misunderstanding of what the word intends to communicate vis-à-vis the nature of Scripture, I believe it would be helpful in the denial portion to replace “inerrancy” with the word “truthfulness” to reemphasize the inextricable parallel between these

⁵⁶ See Frame, *Doctrine of the Word of God*, 177–78. Frame gives five reasons for why it is invalid to argue against inerrancy by appealing to Scripture’s purpose and claiming that the Bible “is written to tell us of salvation, not about matters of history, geography, science and so on” (177). The first two reasons will suffice to demonstrate that such arguments are guilty of applying standards of truth that are alien to the text of Scripture. “(1) Scripture does not distinguish in any general way between the sacred and the secular, between matters of salvation and mere worldly matters. (2) Scripture speaks not only of salvation, but also of the nature of God, creation, and providence as the presuppositions of salvation. But these deal with everything in the world and with all areas of human life. So Scripture makes assertions not only about salvation narrowly considered, but about the nature of the universe” (177).

⁵⁷ Frame, *Doctrine of the Word of God*, 171.

⁵⁸ Allert, *A High View of Scripture?*, 168.

two concepts. I also recommend replacing the word “negated” with the word “compromised” in the second sentence of the denial portion. I suggest this latter modification for the following reason: if we desire to guard the doctrine of inerrancy from the complaint that the word “inerrancy” implies categories of scientific precision or places too strong an emphasis on the propositional aspects of Scripture, then we should be careful not to use words that strengthen this perception as we define the doctrine. The word “negate” implies precision and does not seem to fit squarely with a list of biblical phenomena that demonstrate the imprecision of some biblical language. “Compromise,” on the other hand, while suggesting that the existence of the biblical phenomena does not force inerrantists to hedge on their definition of truth or concede that there really are exceptions to inerrancy in the Bible, better fits with the list of phenomena in Article XIII. Although this is a fine point and one that relates more to aesthetics than to doctrine, I do believe a change here will improve the CSBI’s general presentation of the doctrine of inerrancy.⁵⁹ The revised denial section would read (with changes in italics):

WE DENY that it is legitimate to evaluate Scripture according to standards of *precision* that are foreign to its original intention or purpose. We further deny that phenomena such as irregularities of grammar or spelling, observational descriptions of nature, the reporting of falsehoods, the use of hyperbole and round numbers, the topical arrangement of material, variant selections of material in parallel accounts, or the use of free citations, *compromise the truthfulness of the biblical statements in which they occur.*

Next, the affirmation would be improved by adjusting the definition of biblical phenomena to include direct statements of Scripture that speak to the matter of truth, God’s written word, inspiration, and God’s character as it relates to these issues. Among the many evangelical challenges to inerrancy is a collective plea to pay attention to the various phenomena of Scripture as we formulate our understanding of biblical authority and inerrancy.⁶⁰ Evangelicals concerned with rightly understanding and articulating the doctrine of inerrancy would do well to heed this call to understand Scripture on its own terms.

However, contemporary appeals to biblical phenomena usually restrict these phenomena to aspects of Scripture that appear to represent the “human” component of Scripture’s authorship; other facets of the Bible, like explicit statements about God’s character and its relation to the written word, are given secondary status. Yet, there seems to be no biblical warrant to divide such phenomena this way. If we are

⁵⁹ With the matter of aesthetics in mind, we should consider whether some of the language in the CSBI might be what has contributed to the distaste some evangelicals have toward the doctrine of inerrancy. If God has chosen to reveal himself in a book that consists of a broad range of genre and colorful literary expression, we should pay attention to how winsomely we frame our description and discussion of this book.

⁶⁰ For example, Peter Enns, “Inerrancy, However Defined, Does Not Describe What the Bible Does,” in *Five Views on Inerrancy*, 84.

going to judge Scripture on its own terms and build our doctrine of inerrancy on the whole Bible, we must consider not only phenomena such as irregular grammar or a lack of scientific precision, but statements that speak directly about God, his character, and the inspiration of Scripture as well.⁶¹

Mark Thompson argues that we must avoid setting explicit statements about the Bible's divine origin against these other so-called phenomena. Commenting on deductive versus inductive approaches to Scripture, Thompson observes: "Some accounts [of the nature of Scripture] tend to privilege observations about the phenomena of Scripture as basic to an inductive approach and fail to recognize that the explicit statements of Scripture are themselves indispensable 'phenomena.'"⁶² He senses an inherent flaw in forcing a dichotomy between the aspects of Scripture that are typically labeled "phenomena" and those aspects of Scripture that attest to its divine origin. In my judgment, if inerrantists and errantists are going to hold to a basic lexical definition of the word "phenomena," then neither party can posit one set of texts at the expense of another in defense of their position.⁶³ Classifying certain elements of Scripture like round numbers or grammatical irregularities as "phenomena" while grouping the self-attesting portions of Scripture in a separate category seems only to perpetuate confusion at this point.⁶⁴

⁶¹ The exposition states that we should not set the so-called phenomena of Scripture against what the Scripture claims about itself.

⁶² Mark Thompson, "The Divine Investment in Truth: Toward a Theological Account of Biblical Inerrancy," in *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith? A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture*, ed. James K. Hoffmeier and Dennis R. Magary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 76n19.

⁶³ "Phenomena" is simply the plural form of "phenomenon." The primary definition of the latter is: "A thing that appears, or is perceived or observed; an individual fact, occurrence, or change, as perceived by any of the senses, or by the mind: applied chiefly to a fact or occurrence, the cause or explanation of which is in question." *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 11:674. A secondary definition acknowledges the use of the words "phenomena" and "phenomenon" in theological discourse. To "save the phenomena" is to "reconcile the observed or admitted facts with some theory or doctrine with which they appear to disagree" (674). This latter use, however, highlights a common misunderstanding concerning how inerrantists approach their doctrine of Scripture. Inerrancy, it is often claimed, is a position grounded in a deductionist approach to the Bible where basic presuppositions about God and the nature of divine revelation are first assumed and then applied to our doctrinal formulations about Scripture. This kind of *a priori* approach to the Bible, the argument goes, keeps inerrantists from dealing fully with any aspects of Scripture that appear to throw inerrancy into question. Actually, the doctrine of inerrancy is drawn from *explicit texts* that speak of God's character, the nature of Scripture, and so on. These texts from which the doctrine of inerrancy is drawn are just as much a part of the biblical landscape as grammatical anomalies, variant accounts, and other kinds of so-called "phenomena." Thus, using a word that has the lexical capacity to apply to all of Scripture to only refer to certain portions of it seems only to confuse the issue.

⁶⁴ Thompson also notes a defect in Kenton Sparks's critique of Carl Henry's deductionist approach to the doctrine of Scripture. Although Sparks admirably desires to form a doctrine

Most importantly, these questions of biblical phenomena and their relation to inerrancy highlight the importance of theological method. In my judgment, John Feinberg is exactly right when he notes that one's process of weighing and ascribing primacy to biblical texts in their doctrinal formulations will determine in large measure where they land on the matter of biblical inerrancy.⁶⁵ When theologians set out to frame their theological positions, they should ascribe greater weight and priority to biblical texts that speak directly to the doctrine in question. Regarding inerrancy, if theologians desire to arrive at a doctrinal formulation that is truly biblical, they must begin with and prioritize biblical texts that directly address the nature of Scripture and *then* move to texts that only indirectly address these matters. It is methodological common sense when handling the doctrine of inerrancy to assign priority to 2 Timothy 3:16 *over* Jesus's statements about, say, the mustard seed (see Matt. 13:31–32).

Indeed, to appeal to passages that specifically address the nature of Scripture is no less an appeal to biblical phenomena than turning to Jesus's teaching about the mustard seed to build a case for the errancy position. The question is not so much who is and who isn't accounting for the phenomena of Scripture, but what phenomena are granted priority in our theological formulations.

The burden of proof, then, is upon those who suggest that alleged discrepancies and other textual problems should be given methodological preeminence over texts that speak directly to the nature of God's written Word. The argument that passages which deal incidentally with the nature of Scripture should be quarried prior to the texts that expressly address the topic cannot be logically sustained.

With these considerations in mind, therefore, I propose that the revised affirmation statement would read as follows (additions in italics):

WE AFFIRM the propriety of using inerrancy as a theological term to refer to the complete truthfulness of Scripture. *We further affirm that biblical statements about God, his character, his relation to Scripture, and the truth and reliability of Scripture are rightly classified as biblical phenomena.*

The additional sentence directly confronts the tendency among evangelical errantists and inerrantists alike to categorize biblical phenomena exclusively as those aspects of Scripture that appear more "human" or tend to pose problems for inerrancy. Indeed,

of Scripture that reckons with the Bible *as it really is*, Thompson rightly wonders how one can reject Henry's "deductionist" approach when Henry is simply accounting for biblical texts that attest to Scripture's divine nature. Each class of texts—the so-called "phenomena" and the self-attesting portions—come from the Bible *as it really is*. See Thompson, "The Divine Investment in Truth," 76n19; cf. Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words*, 139.

⁶⁵ Feinberg, *Light in a Dark Place*, 287–302. See also John Frame, "Inerrancy: A Place to Live," *JETS* 57, no. 1 (March 2014): 29–39. Frame discusses broadly the importance of methodology as it pertains to the doctrine of inerrancy; he does not address directly the deductive vs. inductive approach to doctrinal formulation.

to appeal to texts that speak directly to the nature of the Bible *is* to deal with biblical phenomena—i.e., to Scripture as it is. Inasmuch as it posits a difference between what statements in Scripture seem more or less “human,” the language of “phenomena” creates confusion and seems to lend some legitimacy to a theological method that reverses the order of how we prioritize texts in doctrinal formulation.⁶⁶

CONCLUSION

The CBSI has enjoyed wide usefulness for the past forty years. Even our study above has revealed its resilience in the face of contemporary challenges. Nevertheless, these fresh challenges to inerrancy also necessitate an update to this document. These proposals are offered in the hope that they spur greater discussion over how to reformulate the CSBI for another forty years of effectiveness.

⁶⁶ This paragraph was adapted from Derek J. Brown, “The ‘Phenomena’ of Scripture: Theological Method, Inerrancy, and the Chicago Statement,” at *CredoMag.com*, November 27, 2018. <https://credomag.com/2018/11/the-phenomena-of-scripture-theological-method-inerrancy-and-the-chicago-statement/>