

An Open Letter  
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C. S. Cowles  
Point Loma Nazarene University

## Scriptural Inerrancy?

### “Behold, I Show You A More Excellent Way”

Greetings in the majestic name of Jesus.

I am responding to your thoughtful letter in which you indicate how surprised and troubled you were to discover that the Church of the Nazarene limits inerrancy to “all things necessary to salvation” in its Article on Holy Scripture. You wonder why it does not affirm that the entire Bible is the inerrant and infallible word of God as do most evangelical churches. You ask: “if there are errors in any part of the Scriptures, how can we trust them to tell us the truth about salvation?”

Good questions. Scriptural inerrancy has been a hotly debated and deeply divisive issue in many churches for over a hundred years. Whole denominations such as Presbyterian and Missouri Synod Lutheran churches have split over it as have seminaries, colleges, and countless local congregations. Acrimonious controversy over it nearly destroyed Fuller Theological Seminary in the early years of its existence. Fuller has since rebounded to become not only the flagship of evangelical seminaries but the largest in the world. In their Statement of Belief Fuller declares that “Scripture is indeed God's trustworthy Word in all it affirms.” Yet it stops short of applying what they call “the catch phrase” of `scriptural inerrancy' to biblical contents that do not bear on Christian “faith and practice.”

It was in the vain hope of escaping these divisive disputes over the Bible that the Church of the Nazarene avoided, from its very beginning, using such hot-button words as `inerrancy' and `infallibility.' It was only under pressure from a vocal minority at the height of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Fundamentalist-Modernist controversies that the General Assembly compromised, and inserted the word “inerrancy” into the Manual in 1956. In doing so, however, the delegates—following the counsel of Dr. H. Orton Wiley, one of our church's most eminent theologians and my graduate school professor—limited it to “all things necessary for salvation.” This had been the intent of Article IV anyway since the Church's founding in 1908. They were rightly concerned, as has been the church since apostolic times, that focusing undue attention upon what Paul calls “the letter of the law” (Rom. 2:27, NASB) would detract from the living Word of God, Jesus of Nazareth, “in whom all fullness of deity dwells in bodily form” (Col. 2:9), and who alone is mighty to save. And this concern is more relevant today than ever.

Just to get it before us, Article IV on the “Holy Scriptures” in the Church of the Nazarene's Articles of Faith reads as follows:

We believe in the plenary (full, complete) inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, by which we understand the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments, given by divine inspiration, inerrantly revealing the will of God concerning us in all things necessary to our salvation, so that whatever is not contained therein is not to be enjoined as an article of faith. (*Manual*, Church of the Nazarene, 2005).

Let me address your second question first in that it is most urgent: namely, “if there are errors in any part of the Scriptures, how can we trust them to tell us the truth about salvation?” We can trust them according to the same standard we apply to virtually all other forms of human communication, verbal and written. We do not ask that they are free from incidental errors but that they tell the *essential* truth about that which is being said. If this were not the case, then I would have to stop conversing with family and friends, and cease reading all newspapers, magazines, books, and letters from my grandchildren.

My highway map, for instance, has a notation in the bottom right hand corner that a mile is 1/10<sup>th</sup> of an inch when it is actually 5,280 feet long—quite a striking discrepancy. I notice also that interstates are colored green and major state highways red. I’ve driven cross country many times and have yet to see even one mile of green interstate or red highway. Every map has a certain amount of distortion embedded in it because it is impossible for cartographers to accurately render a curved earth on a flat sheet of paper.

We do not ask that a map be free from such inaccuracies and a certain amount of distortion but that it will unerringly guide us to our destination. In like manner we do not ask that the Bible be free from human errors such as when Isaiah speaks of “the four corners of the earth” (Isa. 11:12) or when Joshua commands the “sun to stand still” (Josh. 10:13), reflective of a pre-Copernican cosmology. We do believe, however, that when read through the lens of God’s full and final revelation of himself in Christ and with the illuminating aid of the Holy Spirit, the Scriptures can be trusted to unerringly lead us into “all things necessary for our salvation,” and the living of a holy and productive life (2 Tim. 3:14-17). Millions of believers across many centuries can attest to the fact that “the gospel . . . is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16).

Most Wesleyan denominations, like the great family of churches from the first century until 1881,\* have avoided ascribing inerrancy to the Scriptures on those matters that *do not* pertain to the essential core of Scriptural truth for a number of good reasons. I will mention only a few.

## 1) The Bible is a vast, diverse, and richly textured book.

It resists being squeezed into one descriptive word no matter how succinct. This is especially true of a negative and non-biblical word like ‘inerrant.’ To say, for instance, that the Bible is the inerrant word of God tells us nothing about what the Bible *is*, but only

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\* Benjamin Warfield and A.A. Hodges, Calvinistic Princeton Theological Seminary theologians, introduced inerrancy as an "article of faith" into the Presbyterian Confession of Faith in 1881. *This was the first time in Church history in which such an article had been articulated and adopted by any denomination.* Later that same Presbyterian Church removed ‘inerrancy’ language from its Articles of Faith, precipitating a major split in the denomination.

what it *isn't*. The assumption is that if the Bible is error-free, that would prove its divine origins and authorship. And indeed this is precisely the argument that is often made.

It is conceivable however that a mathematics textbook could be written with no errors, contradictions or discrepancies in it, but that would hardly prove that it was divinely inspired Scripture. On the other hand, just because Paul got the timing of the Second Coming of Christ wrong believing that Jesus would return in his lifetime (1 Thess. 4:17) does not mean that we throw out his first letter to the Thessalonians, much less his other twelve letters. What he did get right, as the entire New Testament affirms and all the historic church creeds confess, is that Jesus *is* coming again (Acts 1:9-11).

Prominent evangelical scholar J. I. Packer defines 'inerrant' as "not misleading or being misled," or "not deceiving or being deceived." This was how it was used in the Church until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and how Nazarene theologians understand its use in Article IV today: that is, the Bible can be trusted not to mislead us relative to "all things necessary to our salvation." If this moral rather than technical understanding had prevailed, then the word would have incited little controversy.

Unfortunately, Protestant Fundamentalists loaded up an inherently benign word with claims about the Bible that it does not make about itself, and that do not accord with either its contents or purposes. Nearly three hundred evangelical theologians and biblical scholars—mostly from within the Calvinistic theological tradition—gathered in Chicago in 1978 to establish the Council on Biblical Inerrancy. Out of it came the famous Chicago Statement which built upon these fundamental propositions:

The Bible, being wholly and verbally God given, is without error or fault in all of its teaching in not only its witness to God's saving grace in individual lives, but in all matters of that which it speaks, not only in the whole but in *every part*. . . . The Holy Spirit [is] Scripture's divine author. . . . We affirm the unity and internal consistency of Scripture. . . . We affirm that what Scripture says, God says."

Inerrancy's logic is deceptively simple. God verbally dictated the Bible. God does not lie. Therefore every word in the Bible is true.

That "God verbally dictated the Bible," however, is not derived from the Scriptures but from John Calvin's (1509-1564) theology of Divine Determinism. Calvin built his theological edifice on the foundation of God's absolute sovereignty to the total exclusion of human agency or free will. "God," he wrote, who is "creator of all so regulates all things that nothing takes place without his deliberation." All events "are governed by God's secret plan in such a way that nothing happens except what is knowingly and willingly decreed by him." This applies not only to every human being whose every act was predetermined and eternal destiny was predestined long before they were born, but of course to everything in the Bible. Because God is righteous and perfect, then every word in the Bible must of necessity be righteous and perfect as well.

Inerrancy's seductive—and dangerous—appeal lies in that it offers believers something physical and tangible, a secure 'rock' upon which to build their faith in a turbulent and scary sea of religious pluralism and secular relativism. The Catholics have their infallible Pope, Muslims their infallible Qur'an, and inerrantists their infallible Bible.

That works well until we begin to read the Bible itself. When we do, we quickly discover that the contents of the Bible do not fit into that simplistic, reductionistic, and rationalistic box. The American Heritage Dictionary defines inerrancy as “free from error or untruth.” And yet as early as the third chapter of Genesis we encounter an “untruth”—actually, a bald-faced lie—“You will not surely die.” The lie, however, is not voiced by God but by the serpent. Thus the claim that “what Scripture says God says” is itself erroneous, unless one wants to believe that the serpent’s voice was really God’s voice in disguise.

The truth is that while the Scriptures do faithfully record the witness of “men [who] spoke from God” (2 Pet. 1:20), many voices other than that of God are heard in the Bible including those of Satan, demons, false prophets, pagans, idol worshippers, liars, thieves, murderers, adulterers, betrayers, deniers, and fools. It is hard to imagine that all these disparate voices are speaking inerrant and infallible words of God.

Furthermore, in the first three chapters of Genesis we have not one but two self-contained and widely divergent creation accounts (Gen. 1:1--2:3, and Gen. 2:4--3:24). While both bear witness to the fact that God created the heavens and earth, they tell that story quite differently. They employ different names for God (*Elohim* in the first, *Yahweh* in the second), embody conflicting chronologies of creation, and utilize vastly dissimilar literary styles. Both creation narratives stand side-by-side in sacred Scripture. Both claim to be “the account of the heavens and earth when they were created” (Gen. 2:4). And yet there are irreconcilable differences between the two.

This raises troubling questions for inerrantists: which one is historically factual? Which version is telling the truth? If the contents of the Bible are the product of a “single divine mind” (Chicago Statement), then why are there two such widely divergent versions of the same event? This problem of multiple voices, disparate accounts, varied literary styles, conflicting genealogies, differing ethical standards, and contradictory portraits of God’s character and activity are greatly multiplied as we move on into the rest of the Bible.

A “more excellent way” of thinking about the plethora of human and even anti-divine personalities that speak and act throughout the Bible is to recognize that—contrary to Calvin’s determinism—God not only created human beings with genuine freedom but allowed them to exercise their free will and express themselves accordingly. In doing so he was not the least bit threatened by what they might say or do. God did not prompt the serpent or Jacob or King David or anybody else to lie. Rather, he took these occasional twisted strands of falsehood and foolishness, and wove them with the truth about himself and life into a wondrous tapestry of “God-breathed” revelation that brings glory to his name, and contributes to the overarching purpose of Scripture which is the salvation of lost humankind.

Likewise the problem of two differing creation accounts along with many other passages that bear witness to God’s creative activity (i.e., Psalm 104, John 1:1-5; Col. 1:15-18; Heb. 1:1-3) melts away if we view them as distinctive portraits from the hands of differing literary artists, each painted from their unique and divinely inspired perspective. Each offers a testimony to the grandeur and glory of the creative event which was finally beyond all human powers of comprehension and expression. One creation account could no more say it all than one photograph can really convey what Yosemite National Park is like.

Truth is multidimensional and many faceted. It is not only the red hue that makes a rainbow but blue and green as well, each distinctively different from the others but working together to form a breathtaking celestial display. So it is with the Bible.

## 2) The Bible must be read inductively, and interpreted on its own terms.

The doctrine of scriptural inerrancy, unfortunately, did not originate from a careful study of the Bible but as a consequence of a pitched battle waged by Reformed (Calvinistic) theologians against Enlightenment scholars—so-called Higher Critics—who critiqued the Scriptures on supposedly scientific grounds. The first principle of scientific investigation according to the 17<sup>th</sup> century Father of Modern Philosophy, Rene Descartes, is ‘radical doubt:’ that is, everything must be doubted before it can be proved. While that works well when studying the physical universe, it is devastating when applied to the Bible in which the first principle is not doubt but faith. These radical skeptics questioned the historicity of biblical events, ruled out all supernatural phenomena, and denied the deity of Jesus. In their hands the Bible was reduced to just another sacred book among many in the history of religions.

Rather than respond to each point of the critics’ rationalistic attack, it was easier for ‘defenders of the faith’ such as Francis Turretin, Charles Hodge, and Benjamin Warfield to simply declare that the whole Bible is the “inerrant and infallible word of God.” The problem with these early fundamentalists was not their intention: like Christians everywhere they desired to boldly declare their faith in the essential trustworthiness of the Bible in the story it tells and all that it affirms. Rather, it was the questionable word they embraced and the fallacious argument they used to advance it.

While the word ‘inerrant’ works well with propositional statements that can, according to the normal rules of logic and empirical investigation, be verified or falsified, it is grossly inadequate to deal with the diverse texture of human experience and vast realm of spiritual reality that comprises most of the contents of the Bible. Inerrant, for instance, is appropriate when describing the computer print-out of my bank statement (hopefully!), but it becomes nonsensical when applied to George Fredrick Handel’s *Messiah*, or Michelangelo’s breath-taking panorama of *Creation* splayed across St. Peter’s Sistine Chapel ceiling.

The overwhelming weight of biblical contents has much more affinity with art than with science or mathematics. To tell its story the Bible utilizes a diverse, rich, and wondrous collage of literary art: narrative, poetry, parable, drama, personification, metaphor, simile, allegory, analogy, history, genealogies, letters, fables, prophecy, apocalyptic, typology, symbols, and every sort of figurative speech. When Isaiah says that “the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands” (55:12), it would be absurd to ask: is that a true or false statement? Likewise, how would one empirically verify Isaiah’s exalted vision of God in the temple? Or the truth embedded in Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son? Or prove the veracity of Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith? Or John’s audacious claim, unique among all the religions of the world, that God is love?

If the grand story of salvation told through the prism of a thousand infinitely diverse and often messy sub-plots could be reduced, flattened, and homogenized into

provable and demonstrable propositional statements as inferred by the doctrine of scriptural inerrancy, then faith would be unnecessary. I don't need faith to believe that two plus two equals four, but I do need it to believe that "As many as received [Christ], to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name" (John 1:12, KJV).

A larger problem has to do with the way inerrancy is argued. It uses, as does Calvin's deterministic theological system, what philosophers call deductive reasoning: that is, it begins by affirming 'general principles' (God verbally dictated the Bible), and then deducing from them 'particulars' (therefore the Bible is perfect in every regard). The problem, as we have already seen, is that the 'particulars' of the Bible are at frequent and often irreconcilable odds with the 'general principles' from which the claims of inerrancy are derived.

Biblical scholars committed to scriptural inerrancy are not only acutely aware of huge discrepancies throughout the Bible but have devoted a great deal of energy toward resolving them. Gleason A. Archer, an early Fuller Theological Seminary professor, devoted much of his adult life in the attempt to resolve these scriptural anomalies. His massive *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* is testimony to the 'difficulty' inerrantists have in harmonizing the particulars of the Bible with the general principles of inerrancy, principles derived not from the claims that the Bible makes about itself but from what their rationalistic philosophical premises dictate.

The textbook assigned for us to read in my first Bible Interpretation class at Pacific Bible College (now Azusa Pacific University) was John W. Haley's *Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible Explained*. In it he devotes 495 pages to explaining what he calls the 'apparent' contradictions in the Bible. I recall how distressed I was to learn that there were any discrepancies in the Bible at all, given my youthful magical view of the Scriptures. My anguish was compounded when I saw how unconvincing and far-fetched most of his resolutions were. Ironically, the very textbook that was suppose to prove the inerrancy of Scripture had the opposite effect for me.

Thankfully I also learned that there was "a more excellent way" of looking at the Bible. Rather than superimposing modern technical notions about inerrancy upon ancient Scriptural texts—concepts utterly alien to the pre-scientific world of the Bible—I was encouraged to read them inductively as devotees have done throughout history: that is, accept them as they are in all their vast, varied, and rich diversity.

In my quest to rightly read, understand, and communicate Scriptural truth, I was taught to begin not with philosophical 'general principles' but with the actual 'particulars' of why, how, to whom, and by whom the Scriptures came to be written. I sought to learn what its original witnesses were trying to say, what literary devices were used to communicate the truth, how its message was understood by its first readers, how it has been interpreted by the church across the centuries, and what biblical scholars have to say about it today.

Having been utterly captivated by the Christ to whom the Scriptures give faithful and true witness, I continued to immerse myself in them as deeply as possible, and learn all I could about the cultures, world-views, and faith communities from which they came. I discovered, for instance, that the Bible was actually written not by God but by men—lots of men—across nearly 1,500 years spanning eight major cultural eras. I also saw

that their diverse voices and sometimes differing accounts were not artificially homogenized with all the wrinkles ironed out, but were allowed to express themselves in their distinctive cultural setting and in all of their unique multifaceted color.

And yet from the first verse of Genesis to the last verse of Revelation I could clearly see God's fingerprints on every page, and powerfully feel the strong wind of his Holy Spirit breathing through every part. As I have read, studied, preached, and taught these sacred Scriptures across a long lifetime, my mind has been awakened, my soul transformed, my spirit set on fire, and my heart lifted to "heavenly realms in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:7).

When I set out on this fascinating adventure, I was captivated by the often fallible, sometimes troubling, frequently surprising, but endlessly intriguing human-divine dance that leaps and soars and sings throughout the Bible. I came to realize early on that the Bible is not one book but many, and that they are not all the same. One does not have to be a specialist in biblical studies to notice the striking difference between the book of Leviticus and the Gospel of John, or between Ecclesiastes and Paul's mighty letter to the Romans. That all these disparate books are "the product of a single divine mind" strains credulity. On the other hand, that they convey not only divinely revealed truth essential to salvation and holy living but blend in the full coloration of the vast range of human experience in all its grossness and grandeur is beyond question.

Having been set free from the narrow parameters of a woodenly literal view of the Scriptures, I was now ready to spend my life happily reveling in the mystery, the wonder, the genius of the many ways God has chosen to reveal himself in and through the many diverse actors and unique events that comprise the biblical story, sometimes overtly but more often subtly. It set me on the path of discovering a much richer, deeper, and more satisfying way of understanding what we mean when we say that the Bible is the living, dynamic, breathing, convicting, converting, cleansing, comforting, teaching, nourishing, enriching, illuminating, and exhilarating word of God.

### 3) The Bible is not only divine but human—very human indeed.

In inerrantists' praiseworthy desire to take the "God-breathed" dimension of the Scriptures with absolute seriousness, what is sacrificed is the Bible's obvious and overwhelming humanness: that is, the *active role* that scores of diverse people played in its narratives, witness, writing, editing, and transmission. In this there are similarities between today's inerrantists and ancient Christian Gnostics who believed that because Jesus was 'truly God,' he could not have really "become flesh" (John 1:14). He only 'seemed' to be human. This heresy was soundly rejected not only by John (1 John 4:2-3) but by succeeding generations of orthodox Christians. The problem with the Gnostics was that they accented Jesus' divinity at the expense of his true humanity.

Likewise, if the Bible were, as inerrantists claim, "wholly and verbally God-given," then that can only mean that the human actors and mediators of that revelation were, like the Stepford wives or New Age Channelers, mere robotic automatons. They only 'seemed' to be fully human. And indeed this was what Calvin believed. Humans are nothing more than puppets dancing on the ends of divinely pulled strings.

Again, all one has to do is read the Scriptures to see how false that is. The human authors' unique personalities and distinctive theological voices, shaped by the dynamics of their spiritual communities as well as their constant interaction with the larger pagan world, are too obvious and way too numerous to be dismissed. While God could have made himself known through angels untouched by sin and undiminished by culturally limited and time-bound human experience, he did not.

The Bible itself is testimony to the fact that God has mediated his message of love, grace, and salvation through imperfect and flawed creatures formed "out of the dust of the ground"—fallen and cursed ground at that (Gen. 2:7; 3:17). Think of it: Abraham, hardly a praiseworthy exemplar of contemporary 'family values,' became the father of three great world religions as well as all who place their faith in Christ. Jacob the deceiver became progenitor of the twelve tribes of Israel. Into the hands of a killer was committed the Ten Commandments that included "You shall not kill." And what more shall we say of David the adulterer and murderer who wrote some of the world's most loved and treasured poetry? Or of Solomon with his 700 wives and 300 concubines who authored three biblical books? Or of Peter who thrice denied the Lord and yet played such a vital role in the earliest church? Or of Saul of Tarsus who laid waste the Church of God and yet penned nearly half of the New Testament books?

It is abundantly evident from the first verse of the Bible to the last that God was pleased to accommodate the "treasure" of his self-disclosure to the sin-darkened minds and oft-fickle hearts of human "jars of clay." Why would he do this? Paul's insightful answer is "to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 Cor. 4:7). If there were such a thing as divine revelation totally free of the human element with all the risks that it entails, the temptation to 'bibliolatry'—that is, worshipping the Bible—would be overpowering. We can paraphrase Paul's word to the Corinthians in this way, "My message and my preaching were not with wise and [inerrant] words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power" (1 Cor. 2:4-5).

It is a wonder beyond description that the great God of the universe should condescend to reveal himself to, in, and through frail, fallible and fallen human beings. And yet it is this very accommodation of the divine mind to the narrow parameters of the human mind—not to mention such slippery and changeable instruments of communication as human words—that makes the Bible endlessly fascinating. If one biblical author got it wrong as the author of 2 Samuel did when he wrote: "The anger of *the Lord* burned against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying 'Go and take a census of Israel and Judah,'" which brought a terrible plague upon Israel (24:1ff.), no problem. The writer of 1 Chronicles later corrected the record to say that it was not the Lord but "*Satan* [who] rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel" (21:1ff.). Otherwise both accounts are virtually identical.

This is just one of many examples demonstrating what biblical scholars call 'progressive revelation:' that is, there is an uneven but observable process of a clearer understanding of God's character, actions, and purposes in the Old Testament, a process that comes to its final, fullest, and most complete expression in Jesus of Nazareth "who is the exact representation of God's nature" (Heb. 1:3).

Inerrantists agree and "affirm" the obvious: namely, that "God's revelation in the Holy Scriptures was progressive." But then they make this incredulous and grossly



erroneous assertion: “We deny that later revelation, which may fulfill earlier revelation, ever corrects or contradicts it” (Chicago Statement, Explanation).

The truth, as we have just seen in the two versions of David’s abortive census, is exactly the opposite. Later revelation not only corrects earlier revelation but frequently contradicts it. While Jesus accepted the Hebrew Scriptures as bearers of God’s revelation (and so should we), he did not endorse every word in them as God’s. He rejected some Torah-texts as representing the original intention and will of God such as Moses’ divorce laws (Mark 10:4-9). No fewer than six times in one chapter of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus not only “corrects” but “contradicts” the laws of Moses in his series of statements, “You have heard it said . . . but I say unto you . . .” (Mt. 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43). The pronouncement “I say unto you” appears thirty-two times in Matthew, and most often is set in contrast to what was said in the Old Testament.

We see this most clearly when Jesus takes issue with the Mosaic laws governing vengeance: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. . . . You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:38-45).

Jesus’ radical command to “love enemies” represents a total repudiation of Moses’ genocidal commands to annihilate enemies, and stands in judgment upon Joshua’s slaughter of the Canaanites as well as Samuel’s command that King Saul “totally destroy” the Amalekites including “men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys” (1 Sam. 15:3). In his word of absolution to the woman taken in adultery, Jesus contravened the clear injunctions of the Mosaic law calling for adulterers to be put to death (John 8:1-11; see Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22). It is clear that Jesus exercised an audacious prophetic authority over the Torah that when necessary not only corrects but displaces it with his word.

Another of many such examples in the New Testament is the contrast the apostle Paul draws between the Old and New Covenants. He points out that although “the ministry . . . which was engraved in letters on stone came with glory,” it turned out to be a “ministry that brought death,” a “ministry that condemns.” On the other hand, “the ministry of the Spirit” which is far more “glorious” is one “that brings righteousness! . . . For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor. 3:6—4:6).

Paul makes it clear not only in this passage but many others that while there is continuity between the Old Covenant and the New, there is radical discontinuity as well. Nowhere is this more evident than in his Doctrine of Salvation. Contrary to the clear and explicit teaching of many Old Testament passages that righteousness is obtained by obedience to the law (see Deut. 6:25), Paul declares that “a man is *not* justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.” In case they didn’t get it, he repeats it in different words: “So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and *not* by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified” (Gal. 2:16). No wonder the Jews sought to kill him!

In progressive revelation what we see is not God's gradual self-disclosure in bits and pieces according some grand dispensational scheme, but rather is reflective of the human mediators growing understanding of his character, will, and gracious saving purposes in Scripture. Isaiah, for instance, saw into the mind and heart of God more clearly than Moses when he virtually dismisses the whole sacrificial system that Moses believed to have been instituted by God, instructions that are given in great detail in Exodus and Leviticus. In contradistinction to Israel's entire temple-cult and priestly system, Isaiah asserts that God does not require "burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals," and that he took "no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats." What the prophet sees anticipates the dramatically clearer revelation of God fleshed out in Jesus: namely, that God is not impressed by outward ritual but rather inward holiness of heart and life (see Isa. 1:11-18). We are closer to the truth if we see progressive revelation as a progressive understanding of revelation, a process that is still going on today as Scripture is read and studied in the company of God's people.

It is this very uncertainty about absolute truth that delivers us from the insufferable 'arrogance of infallibility,' that helps us to be humble in the claims we make about the Bible, and that keeps us dependent upon the Holy Spirit to "lead and guide us into all truth" (John 15:26), always looking to Jesus who alone is "the author and finisher of our faith" (Heb. 12:2).

#### 4) The Bible is gloriously diverse, intriguingly complex, and wondrously multidimensional.

As such it is wishful thinking to expect that all of its infinitely varied parts and dissimilar aspects will be fully consistent with each other. Inerrantist biblical scholars who work deeply with the biblical text know this better than any one else. That is why that in their lengthy explanation of what they mean by 'scriptural inerrancy,' the authors of the Chicago Statement feel compelled to offer all sorts of caveats and exceptions of which the following is only one example:

We . . . deny that inerrancy is negated by biblical phenomena such as a lack of modern technical precision, irregularities of grammar or spelling, [erroneous] observational descriptions of nature, the reporting of falsehoods, the use of hyperbole and round numbers, the topical arrangements of material, variant selections of material in parallel accounts, or the use of free citations.

After they have explained what they do not mean by inerrancy, it has 'died the death of a thousand qualifications.' To engage in such blatant double-speak is at best misleading, and at worst dishonest.

Furthermore, inerrantists do not interpret the Scriptures as if every part of Scripture is "the product of a single divine mind," and thus authoritative. They feel under no obligation, for instance, to abide by copious and detailed Old Testament laws governing Sabbath worship, circumcision, animal sacrifices, temple rituals, feast days, adultery tests, prohibitions against eating pork and charging interest, and capital punishment for those who pick up sticks on the Sabbath, even though these were directly commanded by God.

To cite two examples dear to the heart of those in the Wesleyan theological tradition, Paul may have spoken of the possibility—and indeed the expectation—that those who are “united with Christ” would be set “free from sin” (Rom. 6:1-22), but not in this life according to Calvinists.

Likewise, inerrantists may believe that Joel’s prophetic words cited by Peter on the day of Pentecost were verbally dictated by God—“on my servants, both men *and women*, I will pour out my Spirit . . . and they will [preach]” (Acts 2:17-18)—but not in their churches or from their pulpits. Paul may have said that “There is neither . . . male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28), but that ‘oneness’ does not extend to ministerial offices in Southern Baptists churches where male dominance and female subordination has the force of church law. When evangelist Ann Graham Lutz, Billy Graham’s daughter, was introduced to speak to a large gathering of evangelical ministers, nearly a hundred walked out in noisy protest, and a score of others on the front row turned their chairs around and sat with their backs to her as she spoke.

It is disingenuous to make grandiose claims about the inerrancy—and thereby the authority—of all Scripture, and then blatantly disregard great blocks of those same Scriptures as being ‘truth for today’ through interpretive sleight of hand.

As followers of the one who not only spoke the truth but said, “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6), whatever else it is that we do as those committed to holiness of heart and life, we should tell the truth, especially the truth about the Bible. When we fail to do so, no matter how laudable our intentions or pious our motives, we discredit the very gospel we are seeking to uphold and defend.

Paul testified that “we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God” (2 Cor. 4:2). To make claims about the Bible that it never makes of itself, that neither Jesus nor any of the apostles or Church Fathers ever made, that churches across most of the past centuries have not made, that the overwhelming majority of believers in the great family of churches in the world today do not make—claims that even inerrantist scholars candidly admit are not literally true—is not only deceptive but distorts the very word of God we so deeply cherish. Claiming too much for the Bible is as false as claiming too little.

## 5) Every part of the Bible must be read and interpreted in light of its overall purpose and message.

The Chicago Statement claims that the Bible is inerrant “not only in the whole but in every part.” Thus it is not only permissible but praiseworthy to lift a single verse or even a part of a verse out of context and run with it, or string verses together in any combination to say or prove whatever one wants. This ‘mix and match’ practice is the way most believers read, use, preach, and teach the Bible.

Fortunately, such fragmenting and topical reconstitution of Scripture is not only harmless but has been used by the Holy Spirit to convict, convert, instruct, nourish, edify, admonish, and encourage. Countless people have come to faith in Christ after reading just one verse of Scripture, John 3:16. My mother kept a Promise Box on our kitchen table. Before dinner each of us would draw a promise out of the box, usually just

one or two verses of Scripture, and read it. This was the heart of our family devotions. I have committed hundreds of such `stand alone' verses to memory. They have not only been a great source of personal edification and blessing but immensely useful in preaching, teaching, writing, personal witnessing, pastoral work, and counseling.

Such `proof-texting,' however, is fraught with innumerable hazards, and invites all sorts of scriptural abuse. Biblical texts taken out of context and loosed from their anchor in Christ have been used to promote strange doctrines, validate cultic claims, and authorize all kinds of bizarre practices from plural marriages to prosperity theology to snake handling to child abuse to genocide. We blush to admit it: the Scriptures are not only the divine source of light, life, and salvation but also have toxic power to distort, damage, and even destroy human beings. I offer just two of many such examples.

Spurred by a Mosaic injunction, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" (Exod. 22:18, KJV), a witch-craze swept sixteenth and seventeenth Europe, spilling over into Colonial America in the infamous Salem Witch Trials. Conservative estimates are that in excess of one hundred thousand women—mostly single, poor, ugly, elderly, physically or mentally handicapped and thus especially vulnerable—were unjustly arrested, cruelly tortured, and savagely executed. Christian persecution of witches constituted, according to historians, the greatest mass killing of European people by people not caused by war. And all of that heinous destruction of human life was authorized by one verse of Scripture!

A second example comes closer to home for me. I learned a few years ago that my ancestors on my mother's side were Virginia slave owners. Discovering that I had slave-owner blood flowing in my veins was very distressing. Not only did I immerse myself in books about slavery but have visited numerous sites throughout the south where slaves lived, worked, suffered, and died. The experience of reliving this aspect of my heritage has been a wrenching one.

Tragically, slavery—what John Wesley decried as "that most vile of all human institutions"—was not only accepted by long generations of Christians but stoutly defended as instituted by God and authorized in Scripture. One of the many passages slave owners loved to cite is the following:

"If a man beats his male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies as a direct result, he must be punished, but he is not to be punished if the slave gets up after a day or two, since the slave is his property" (Exod. 21:20-21).

And savagely beat their slaves they did. In his searing autobiography, Frederick Douglass, an ex-slave who became a fervent and eloquent abolitionist, tells how one of his masters, a Kentucky Methodist class leader reputed to be the most effective soul-winner in his county, repeatedly beat a teenage household slave girl who infuriated him. Because her hands had been crippled by falling into a fire at four years of age, she kept dropping and breaking things. When she did, he flew into a rage. He stripped her half naked, tied her hands to a rope thrown over a beam in the ceiling, and hoisted her up until her toes barely touched the floor. He then whipped her until the flesh on her back and legs was laid bare, and her blood ran freely to the floor. He did it early in the morning so that her screams would be heard by the other slaves, thus striking fear into their hearts. Sometimes he left her hanging all day and repeated the whipping in the evening reopening the caked wounds on her back.

There is no way to overstate the inhumanity, the atrocities, the horrors visited upon generation after generation of slaves by our Bible-believing slave-holding ancestors. When abolitionists became serious about ending slavery in this country, they were vigorously slapped down by biblical literalists on `scriptural grounds.' George Whitfield, the great English evangelist who was instrumental in sparking our country's first Great Spiritual Awakening, purchased a Georgia Plantation along with its slaves. Although slavery had been outlawed in Georgia in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, thanks to Whitfield's vigorous campaign defending slavery on `biblical grounds,' it was re-legalized in Georgia in 1751. And he was not alone in this by any means.

Recalling his own violent pre-Christian past, Paul writes of the very Hebrew Scriptures to which he was deeply committed and so often cited, that "The letter kills" (2 Cor. 3:6). And kill it often does. When a particular way of reading and interpreting the Bible lends itself to such inhumane and patently unChristlike beliefs and practices, clearly it must be questioned if not abandoned. It is precisely because of my heart-break over the continuing inhumane and abusive use of Scripture that I am addressing this topic of inerrancy at all.

## 6) God has chosen to reveal himself fully and finally in Christ.

Few theologians have operated from the presupposition of the inerrancy of "all Scripture" as rigorously as Dutch Reformed theologian A. van de Beek. In *WHY? On Suffering, Guilt, and God*, he takes the received text of both Old and New Testaments as representing the literal words of God. Thus all distinctions between the testaments are erased, and the differing historical locations, perspectives, and personalities of the human mediators of God's self-disclosure mean little. In that all parts of the Bible have equal weight of revelatory value, he must of necessity portray God as not only good and faithful but changeable, unpredictable, irrational, and even evil. "[The] way of God does not answer to our norms of good and evil. . . . God is a rough God, grim, and in our eyes even cruel. . . . God is not one you can figure out. Majestically he goes his own way. . . . Good and evil both come forth from his will."

This is what belief in scriptural inerrancy finally comes to: *we have a perfect Bible but a grotesquely imperfect God*—a God who is "rough," "grim," even "cruel," and from whom comes forth both "good and evil."

And van de Beek is right. No matter how hard one tries, it is impossible to reconcile the many commands to kill enemies in the Old Testament with the commands to love our enemies in the New. Even more difficult is the portrait painted of God as a violent and genocidal child killer in the Old Testament (Noah's flood, the fiery destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the slaughter of the Canaanites and Amalekites), and in Christ the lover of children in the New. Van de Beek admits as much. He confesses that "The more one wants to let all of Scripture speak for itself . . . the more unclear the Bible becomes. The more we believe that the whole Word is revelation, the less we know who God is."

This is a remarkably candid and deeply troubling confession on the part of an avowed inerrantist: namely, imposing inerrancy on the Scriptures so distorts the revelation of God that we do not know what to believe. Sensing that the reader may well

be frustrated by what appears to be a `hermeneutic of theological nihilism,' van de Beek suggests that "we could perhaps restrict revelation to certain events in the world. We could restrict it to certain texts in Scripture. But then what is the criterion for our selection?"

**The New Testament answers with a shout: JESUS!** He is the living Word of God made flesh. John exults, "We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. . . . The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known" (John 1:14, 17-18). Paul adds that Jesus is the one in whom "all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (Col. 2:9).

## **7) Jesus is Lord not only of the cosmos but of the Scriptures as well.**

J. P. Morgan, Talbot Theological Seminary professor, sent a shock wave through a recent Evangelical Theological Society meeting in San Diego when he asserted: "In the Evangelical community in North America, there is an over-commitment to Scripture in a way that is false, irrational, and harmful to the cause of Christ." How so?

To absolutize the Bible is to relativize Jesus. That is, when all the words of Scripture are elevated to the rank of being the very words of God, the unique word of God embodied in Jesus is reduced to just one source of divine revelation among many. What Jesus had to say is, in principle, no more revelatory or authoritative than the words of Moses or spiritually bankrupt Solomon or Balaam's ass (KJV) for that matter. One never hears, for instance, of anyone campaigning to get Jesus' two love commandments displayed in a public school classroom or engraved on stone and placed in a courthouse vestibule. When it comes to the commandments, Moses' robust ten are preferred over Jesus' squishy two.

Or take Creation Science, a passionate cause embraced by a militant sub-group of inerrantist evangelicals. At last count there were 115 para-church organizations committed to advancing Creationism's agenda. Creationists can carry on their enterprise quite well and argue their case without any reference to Jesus Christ whatsoever. The same can be said of other political and social causes championed by evangelicals.

Not so the New Testament. From the very first verse of Matthew to the last paragraph of Revelation it is all about Jesus. He alone was present and active with God the Father from before creation, and is the one whom God will "exalt to the highest place." He alone is the one before whom "every knee . . . in heaven and on earth and under the earth" will bow, and "every tongue [will] confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:5-11). Jesus is greater than Moses, greater than Joshua, greater than Solomon, and even greater than the angels. He alone is "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Heb. 1:3).

All the New Testament witnesses declare with Paul that Jesus alone "is the image of the invisible God" for whom "all things were created." "He [alone] is before all things, and in him all things hold together." Jesus alone is "the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have

all his fullness dwell in him [alone], and through him to reconcile to himself all things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (Col. 1:15-20). There is between Jesus and all others an infinite qualitative distance.

In his exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, John Wesley exults, "With what authority does [Jesus] teach! *Not* as Moses, the servant of God; *not* as Abraham, his friend; *not* as any of the Prophets; nor as any of the sons of men. It is something more than human; more than can agree to any created being. It speaks the Creator of All! A God, a God appears! Yea, 'I AM,' the Being of beings, the self-existent, the Supreme, the God who is over all, blessed for ever!"

The whole purpose of the Scriptures, according to Paul, is to "make you wise unto salvation" (2 Tim. 3:15), a salvation to be found only in Christ. The Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament) were valued by early Christians and the Church Fathers as an indispensable prologue to and preparation for the coming of Jesus, without which we would be unable to fully understand the significance of his ministry, atoning death, and resurrection. As Augustine famously put it, "Jesus is in the OT concealed, and in the NT revealed."

As the full and final revelation of God, Jesus is the criterion for evaluating Scripture. He is the lens through which the entire Bible must be read, believed, interpreted, and obeyed. This becomes clear in Jesus' use of the Hebrew Scriptures which he interpreted in light of his own self-understanding. To the Pharisees—the scriptural literalists of his day—he said, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me (John 5:39). Eternal life is not to be found in a book no matter how inerrant and infallible, but in Jesus to whom the Scriptures give faithful and trustworthy witness.

Likewise, the 'authority of Scripture' is not inherent in its words or texts, but in the one whose last words to his disciples were, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given *to me*" (Matt. 28:20).

In his rebuke of his disciples who wanted to call fire down from heaven upon the recalcitrant Samaritans (they must have been thinking about the fiery destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah), Jesus said, "You do not know what kind of spirit you are of, for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them" (Luke 9:51-56). Though there was Old Testament precedent for believing that God incinerated people, Jesus made it clear that this was *not* reflective of the "spirit" of the God of Israel he came to reveal and glorify. Unlike the Warrior God often portrayed in the Old Testament, the God revealed in Jesus is a "God of peace" (1 Thess. 5:23)—a gracious and loving God would rather be wounded than wound, would rather be destroyed than destroy, would rather die than damn, and did!

Where do we see the glory of God? Certainly not in the book of Joshua where we read over and over again *ad nauseum*, "Everyone in it they put to the sword. They totally destroyed them, not sparing anything that breathed" (11:1ff.). We see the glory of God in all its majestic beauty and wonder "in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). "To see what God is like," Philip Yancey writes, "simply look at Jesus."

Our final authority not only in matters of faith and salvation but in determining the true nature and character of God is Jesus. John Calvin said that "It is Christ alone on

whom faith ought to look. This is the proper look of faith, to be fixed on Christ.” John Stott reminds us that “Our Christian conviction is that the Bible has both authority and relevance . . . and that the secret of both is Jesus Christ.”

The Reformed Churches of America beautifully capture the essence of the New Testament’s exaltation of Jesus as Lord in the very first line of their Statement of Belief: “Above all, our faith is centered in Christ. Every need of ours finds its answer in Jesus Christ.” The proper role of Scripture is not to become an end unto itself but to faithfully point us to Jesus who said, “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned: he has crossed over from death to life” (John 5:24).

Martin Luther exulted, “The Holy Scriptures are a spiritual light far brighter even than the sun, especially in what relates to salvation and all essential matters.” John Wesley testified, “I am a man of one Book. I open it and read it in the presence of God and it leads me to salvation. It tells me how to get to heaven. Salvation does not lie in our feeling, but it is our faith that when the Scriptures are opened the Spirit does give witness.”

John Wesley never spoke of inerrancy but rather of the “sufficiency” of Scripture to accomplish its divine purpose: that is to announce to the world the incredibly good news that “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself” (2 Cor. 5:19), and that “whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). That is truth which millions of people across many centuries have experienced in a life-transforming way. As Paul so succinctly put it: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation: the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Cor. 5:17).

H. Orton Wiley, the preeminent Nazarene theologian of the Church of the Nazarene during its first half-century of existence, wrote in his landmark *Christian Theology*, “Spiritual men and women – those filled with the Holy Spirit – are not unduly concerned with either higher or lower criticism. They do not rest merely in the [inerrant] letter which must be defended by argument. They have a broader and more substantial basis for the faith. It rests in their risen Lord, the glorified Christ. They know that the Bible is true, not primarily through the efforts of apologists, but because they are acquainted with its Author. The Spirit which inspired the Word dwells in them and witnesses to its truth.” To which we add a strong Amen!

“What is the infallibility we claim for the Bible?” asks A. M. Hills, another early Nazarene theologian. “It is infallible as regards the purpose for which it was written. It is infallible as a revelation of God’s saving love in Christ to a wicked world. It infallibly guides all honest, willing, and seeking souls, to Christ, to holiness, and to heaven.”

“To attach our faith to the letter of Scripture,” warns William Greathouse, “may result in substituting the written word for Christ the living Word. The infallible Word of God in whom I put my trust for salvation is Christ, and Christ alone—the Christ revealed in Holy Scripture as the Word become flesh and made sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. . . . The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”

In Fuller Theological Seminary’s lengthy explanation of why it avoids using the “catch-phrase” of Scriptural Inerrancy, they say:



We would urge that the emphasis be placed where the Bible itself places it: on its message of salvation and its instruction for living, not on its details of geography or science, though we acknowledge the wonderful reliability of the Bible as a historical source book. We would strive to develop our doctrine of Scripture by hearing all that the Bible says, rather than by imposing on the Bible a philosophical judgment of our own as to how God ought to have inspired the Word.

This is exactly what the Church of the Nazarene's current language in Article IV on the Holy Scriptures conveys. And we ought to stick to it.

C. H. Spurgeon, the great London preacher of the mid-1800's, said it well: "The Bible, like a lion, needs no defense. It needs only to be set free." Amen!

And now for my personal testimony:

**I love the Bible because . . .**

- 1) It alone tells me the story of a creative, loving, seeking, and saving God fully and finally revealed in Jesus.
- 2) It alone tells me that Christ died for my sins and the incredibly "good news" of his mighty resurrection from the dead!
- 3) It alone tells me how I can be reconciled to God by grace through faith.
- 4) It alone gives me the assurance of sins forgiven and life eternal.
- 5) In and through its pages God discloses himself to me through the indwelling Holy Spirit, empowering me to live a holy life.
- 6) It is great, inexhaustible, and ever fascinating literature.
- 7) By reading and studying it my mind is informed, my imagination ignited, my heart made tender, my soul enlarged, my motives purified, my emotions stirred, my character perfected, my life focused, and my spirit communes with God as a friend with a friend.

Peace and joy,

C. S. Cowles

### **Notes**

Footnotes were eliminated to facilitate ease of reading. For source information on works cited, contact me at [cscowles@pointloma.edu](mailto:cscowles@pointloma.edu). For further examples of how I read Scripture through a Christological lens:

C. S. Cowles, *Who Is God? His Character Revealed in the Christ* (Beacon Hill Press, 2005).

C. S. Cowles, et. al., *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide* (Zondervan, 2003).

C. S. Cowles, *A Woman's Place? Leadership in the Church* (Beacon Hill Press, 1993).