

# **DOCUMENT #5**

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## **AN ESSAY ON THE NATURE OF INERRANCY**

**BY**

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## AN ESSAY ON THE NATURE OF INERRANCY

*“The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs.”*

This was the doctrinal basis of ETS prepared by the doctrinal committee of the first meeting in December 1949, submitted to and discussed at a plenary session, accepted by a vote without dissent, and remaining without change ever since that time, although a statement on the Trinity was added in 1990 as an Amendment by a four-fifth vote at an annual meeting according to Article VII, sections 1 and 2.

The Committee was well aware of possible alternates for the word “inerrancy” in this statement: infallibility, complete trustworthiness, entire truthfulness, and others. I know that because I was a member and so was Professor John Murray. Although the word “infallible”, etymologically meaning “that could not err”, was in that sense stricter than “inerrant” meaning “that does not err”, the actual use of it had so greatly weakened its impact that we decided that the doctrinal boundary of the Society would be more properly defined by the word “inerrant”. We were fully aware that James Orr had expressed in print misgivings about that word as vigorously advocated by B. B. Warfield. James Orr held it unwise to make the divine origin and authority of the Bible hostage to the discovery of one single truly documented error within the whole canon and yet he wrote:

*The Bible, impartially interpreted and judged, is free from demonstrable error in its statements, and harmonious in its teachings, to a degree that of itself creates an irresistible impression of a supernatural factor in its origin.<sup>1</sup>*

It was by deliberate choice that the word used was “inerrant”. Its meaning was clearly articulated by Warfield, in line as he and we judged, with Anselm, Augustine, Calvin, Wesley, Turretine, and supremely the Scripture itself. This meaning was further elucidated by Robert Preus<sup>2</sup>, Roger Nicole<sup>3</sup>, John Feinberg<sup>4</sup>, and the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy<sup>5</sup>. The use of that term prevented some scholars present at the first meeting and otherwise qualified for membership ever to sign on doctrinal basis (e.g. Drs. Harry Boer and George Stob) and others who had actually joined the membership and signed on the dotted line to withdraw on their own initiative when their views of the inspiration of Scripture changed so as to allow certain mistakes in the autographs (e.g. Drs. Edward Dalglish, Warren Young, Daniel Fuller and Bernard Ramn).

The use of that term has prevented some very conservative scholars such as Drs. Bruce Metzger, Donald Bloesch, John Stott from joining us. It is in opposition to that concept that Jack Rogers and Donald McKim have directed their large volume The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979) in which, strangely enough, they have not adduced statements by great leaders in the Church alleging actual errors in the Scripture but have ransacked the field of church history to list declarations that were not detailed enough to specify “inerrancy”, or, in the case of Augustine, a

declaration that did specify it, but in which they arbitrarily interpreted the word “error” as “moral aberration!”<sup>6</sup>

In view of all this, it is clear what inerrant in our doctrinal base means, and following the language of James Orr, we can surely say “A person who alleges or claims to have discovered in Scripture even one unmistakable false statement by God has fallen short of the doctrine of the inerrancy of God and of Scripture, God’s Word.” By that fact alone that person has forfeited the legitimacy of his/her membership in ETS.

Some discussion has properly arisen concerning the precise scope of the word “error” in this context. In Dr. Preus’ discussion and in my article the following have been listed as not constituting error in the autographs:

1. Variant readings in the transmission of the text and/or its early translations, note being taken of the exceptional reliability of a text built on existing ancient witnesses, without the help of conjectural emendations.
2. Variations in orthography.
3. Irregularities in grammar (morphology or syntax).
4. Use of round numbers and approximations.
5. Use of phenomenological language (like “the sun rises”).
6. Fragmentary information when completeness was not specified.
7. Lack of uniformity in the use of certain standards (like length of a cubit, method of counting the length of a reign, etc.).
8. Non-chronological order in the accounts where chronology is not indicated.
9. Relating names of people and place in their resemblance in sound rather than as a claim to scientific etymology.
10. Presentation of some truths which appear in opposition to the finite mind, but whose ultimate unity is perceived by God’s infinite mind.

To these I might add the following:

11. Freedom in quotations in accordance to ancient custom and not in keeping with modern scholarly requirements.
12. Omission of names in genealogies (but not fanciful additions).
13. Reference to one person under different names (Abram, Abraham).

Of course, all of these would be related to the text in the original language rather than in any translated form.

By contrast with these that do not represent an actual denial of objective truth, we may then define inerrancy by saying:

“At no point in what was originally given were the Bible writers allowed to make statements or endorse viewpoints which are not in conformity with objective truth. This applies at any level or in any area in which they make pronouncements.”

Inerrancy does not confer a divine endorsement on all statements made by all the individuals who appear in the drama of the Bible, Satan, Cain, Esau, Pharaoh, Sanballat, the Pharisees, the friends of Job, and other enemies of God’s truth. But the statements of God, of Christ, of the prophets and the apostles, of Stephen and others moved by God’s Spirit would be inspired even as the writers of Scripture itself.

The confession of inerrancy does not demand the resolution of all difficulties or apparent errors encountered in Scripture, because it is not an induction derived from the external demonstration of the perfection of the text. Rather it is based on the oft-repeated affirmation of Scripture and of Christ himself that this is the Word of God. Naturally, in the presence of difficulties, the evangelical scholar will be looking for solutions—and in the case of many difficulties very plausible solutions have been in fact advanced—but the authority and inerrancy of Scripture is not dependent on the ability of any person or group of persons to provide full solutions. What would be needed to overturn inerrancy is the presence of at least one difficulty for which no solution could be conceived to be available. In the same way, the perfect holiness of Jesus Christ could not be overturned by pointing to a situation in which his attitude might be thought by some to be sinful, but would be jeopardized by reference to one unquestionable sin.

One spot destroys immaculateness.

One sin destroys perfection.

One error destroys inerrancy.

But the spot, the sin and the error have to be proved beyond the shadow of a doubt when we speak of God.

Any statement that something that God said turned out to be false violates inerrancy.

Any opinion that God did not know the future but merely surmised what would happen violates inerrancy.

Any suggestion that God literally changed his mind violates inerrancy, because it implies that his earlier thought or words were cancelled.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> James Orr, Revelation and Inspiration (London: Duckworth, 1910), p. 216.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Preus, “*Notes on the Inerrancy of Scripture*”. Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society. (Autumn 1965), pp. 127-38.

“*The Truthfulness of Scripture*”. Theology of the Post-Reformation Lutheranism. St. Louis: Concordia, 1970, pp. 339-62, 394-400.

<sup>3</sup> Roger Nicole, “*The Nature of Inerrancy*” in Roger Nicole and J. Ramsey Michaels, ed. Inerrancy and Common Sense. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980). Pp.71-95. Or with fuller footnotes. Standing Forth, Fearn, Rosshire: Christian Focus, 2002, pp. 27-49.

“*Why I am comfortable with Inerrancy*” in Kent Martin, ed. Not Omitting the Weightier Matters. (Belfast, N. Ireland: Ambassador, 2002), pp. 52-64.

<sup>4</sup> John Feinberg, “*The Meaning of Inspiration*” in N. Geisler, editor, Inerrancy. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), pp. 269-304.

<sup>5</sup> The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. 1980.

<sup>6</sup> Jack Rogers and Donald McKim, The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), p.31.