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What Do We Mean by Biblical Inerrancy? Part 1

By Tal Davis

As evangelical Christians we usually take it for granted that the Bible is accurate and true. When we read it we believe it is God's inspired revelation and look to it for meaning and direction for our lives. If we hear someone teach a lesson or a pastor preach from it we assume they are basing their authority on a sound understanding and interpretation of the Scriptures, not just their own opinions. But what makes the Bible the unique source for that kind moral and spiritual authority?

Sometime you may hear Bible teachers and scholars refer to the concept of Biblical Inerrancy. The Online Merriam Webster Dictionary defines "inerrancy" as "exemption from error, or infallibility." That dictionary states that the first known use of inerrancy was circa 1834. The dictionary gives two modern examples of how the word is used.

- *By making a presumption of guilt and of the state's inerrancy, the attorney general is repudiating the rule of law, which is grounded in the state's obligation to prove its case.* Paul Rosenzweig, The Atlantic, 3 Jan. 2026
- *His defense of biblical inerrancy against the modernism of mainstream Bible scholars had laid the intellectual foundation for the future of evangelical Protestantism.* Austin Steelman, Made By History, TIME, 12 Mar. 2025

It is that second example that we are concerned about in this article. Most evangelicals, but not all, refer the Bible as the Inerrant Word of God. Indeed over the last two hundred years or so, there has been a debate among Protestant theologians as to the historical reliability and accuracy of the Bible. Unfortunately, scholars in most mainline theological seminaries have accepted the conclusions of 18th century Higher Critical Bible scholars. They regarded the Bible as collections of ancient myths

and legends and pretty much discounted the accounts of miracles and divine revelations. As result of that biblical skepticism, the mainline Christian denominations are in states of moral, spiritual, and numeral decline.

For that reason evangelical scholars in the 20th century banded together to defend the Bible's truthfulness and reliability. The word "Inerrant" was used by many to describe Bible's internal factual consistency and authority for faith and practice. But we may ask, "Just what does that mean?"

In October of 1978, 200 evangelical leaders and scholars met in Chicago, Illinois, at a conference convened by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI). There they formulated a written statement of belief they called *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* (CSBI). The statement's purpose was "to defend the position of Biblical Inerrancy against a trend toward liberal conceptions of Scripture." The finished statement was then signed by nearly 300 prominent evangelical scholars. Nonetheless, some evangelical leaders who affirm inerrancy did not choose to sign the CSBI for one reason or another.

The CSBI contains nineteen articles addressing various points. They are called Articles of Affirmation and Denial, meaning they each state what the authors believe positively about a certain principle of biblical inerrancy, but also state what they do not mean by that principle. In this two part column we will present and summarize each article and its denial. In this first installment we will analyze the first nine articles. To read the entire CSBI go here: <https://defendinginerrancy.com/chicago-statements/>. Hopefully we can get a clearer a picture of just what inerrancy of Scripture really is and what it is not, and why it is important.

We will begin with the first article.

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Article I

WE AFFIRM that the Holy Scriptures are to be received as the authoritative Word of God.

WE DENY that the Scriptures receive their authority from the Church, tradition, or any other human source.

This first article states that inerrancy takes the Bible as the Word of God given by God and in and of itself is infallible. Calling the Bible the “Word of God” is something most Christians would probably affirm, even those who may not affirm inerrancy. For that reason, as we will see, the term “Word of God” may need clarification. Some will say, “Yes the Bible contains the ‘Word of God’, but is not the infallible verbal ‘Word of God.’”

This article also denies that the Bible receives its authority from any human source or sources. Those would include any ecclesiastical organization (church) or any faith tradition. The authority comes only from God who has inspired it through the Holy Spirit, whether any human source endorses it or not.

Article II

WE AFFIRM that the Scriptures are the supreme written norm by which God binds the conscience, and that the authority of the Church is subordinate to that of Scripture.

WE DENY that church creeds, councils, or declarations have authority greater than or equal to the authority of the Bible.

Article two states that the highest written standard (norm) for human morality and behavior is the Bible. No human law, philosophy, or moral principle is equal to or superior to that of the Bible. Any such pronouncements should reflect biblical principles above all.

Furthermore, no statements of faith or creeds produced by any ecclesiastical body (e.g.s: Church councils, popes, conventions, boards, synods, ethics boards, etc.) are superior or equal in authority to Scripture. Such statements, when they are produced, should be squarely aligned with biblical theology based on sound principles of interpretation.

Article III

WE AFFIRM that the written Word in its entirety is revelation given by God.

WE DENY that the Bible is merely a witness to revelation, or only becomes revelation in encounter, or depends on the responses of men for its validity.

This article simply states that the whole Bible is to be regarded as a true revelation given to its authors directly by God through inspiration by the Holy Spirit. It means He inspired their thoughts and very words as they wrote them down. (More on this in Article VIII). In this sense the Bible is God’s Word in an objective way whether it is received that way or not.

The article emphatically denies that the Bible is only a “witness to revelation” or only becomes revelation when it interacts with the human reader to inspire some kind of spiritual effect. That is to say the Bible is not revelation only in a subjective manner depending on the response of the reader. This is counter to how many modern liberal, neo-orthodox, and existentialist theologians interpret the Bible. Those systems of biblical study relied on what was called “Higher Biblical Criticism” which is rejected by the ICBI. (This is in contrast to “Lower or Textual Biblical Criticism” which we will discuss in Article X.) “Higher Biblical Criticism” supposedly used what were considered accepted naturalistic scientific methods of analyzing texts for their historical accuracy and authorship. Generally it led to decreased confidence in the historical and scientific reliability of the biblical texts, regarding authorship, dates, events, and miracles. Over time those presuppositions became the normative concepts taught in most mainline Protestant theological seminaries.

Article IV

WE AFFIRM that God who made mankind in His image has used language as a means of revelation.

WE DENY that human language is so limited by our creatureliness that it is rendered inadequate as a vehicle for divine revelation. We further deny that the corruption of human culture and language through sin has thwarted God’s work of inspiration.

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One of the unique qualities of humans, as opposed to other living creatures, is the ability to communicate using complex language. (Yes, some higher order animals do communicate using what might be regarded as simple language. E.g.s. dolphins and whales.) This ability is a reflection of the fact that we are made in the image of God Himself who also can communicate in language to us when he so deems necessary to reveal important truths.

It does not mean, the article states, that because human language is limited that it is not capable of transmitting God's revelation adequately. Furthermore, just because sin has left a mark on humanity, it has not hindered God's use of spoken and written language to transmit His inspired revelation.

Article V

WE AFFIRM that God's revelation within the Holy Scriptures was progressive.

WE DENY that later revelation, which may fulfill earlier revelation, ever corrects or contradicts it. We further deny that any normative revelation has been given since the completion of the New Testament writings.

This article describes a principle that many people unfortunately do not understand when studying the Bible. The point being that the Bible was not written all at once but over many centuries by many inspired authors. When the statement says "God's revelation within the Holy Scriptures was progressive," it means that over the course of time God revealed more information about Himself and His will to the writers of later Scriptures. The ultimate revelation was revealed bodily in Jesus Christ, but also finally in the New Testament letters and books. This principle is important for proper biblical interpretation since the later revelations may shed greater light on certain theological and ethical principles not so clear earlier.

The article denies, however, that any newer revelation that was received later in time would contradict any revelation given earlier. It may clarify or fulfill earlier prophecies and truths, but

will not negate them. The statement also affirms that no new special inspired revelation has been given since the completion and canonization of the New Testament. Thus the 66 books of the Bible (39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament) are the totality of inspired Scripture. Any other books or sources, whether ancient or recent, that may claim special divine inspiration equal to the Bible should be rejected. Thus we cannot accept the infallible pronouncements of Roman Catholic popes or the extra-biblical revelations of cults like *The Book of Mormon* or *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*.

Article VI

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.

This article affirms what is sometimes called "verbal-plenary inspiration." That is to say that each and every word of the whole Bible as written down by the authors was inspired by the Holy Spirit and therefore is exactly what God wanted to say. However, it is important to recognize that this applies only to the original autographs written down by the original authors as they wrote. It does not mean God unconsciously dictated every word to them (see Article VIII). It also applies to the original autographs in the original language that the writers utilized. There is no such thing as an inerrant translation. The problem with this principle is that no original autographs of any biblical texts still exist. Nonetheless, the copies we possess are considered the most reliable of any ancient documents in the world.

This article also denies that the whole Bible is inspired but some parts of it are not, or that some parts of it are inspired but the whole Bible is not.

Article VII

WE AFFIRM that inspiration was the work in which God by His Spirit,

through human writers, gave us His Word. The origin of Scripture is divine. The mode of divine inspiration remains largely a mystery to us.

WE DENY that inspiration can be reduced to human insight, or to heightened states of consciousness of any kind.

This article states that the inspiration of Scripture is a miraculous process done by the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. It is a divine process not fully understood by us. He directed the human authors of the Bible to write exactly what God intended them to put down on the scrolls and parchments. Thus, what they wrote in the original autographs was the uniquely, divinely inspired Word of God.

The article denies that the inspiration is just “human insight, or due to heightened states of consciousness of any kind.” That is to say, inspiration is not some kind of higher level of human reasoning formulated by greater levels of logic, wisdom, or intelligence. Nor is it a higher thought process or mystical experience brought on by extreme periods of fasting, meditation, or drugs. The events in the Scriptures describe actual events, not hallucinations or allegories, except when they are clearly meant to be understood that way by the authors.

Article VIII

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.

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

This principle is also very important for interpreting Scripture. It means that though the Holy Spirit inspired every word the authors wrote in the original autographs, He did so within the context of their own “distinctive personalities and literary styles.” Thus the various books of the Bible, though each one is fully inspired of God, may have totally different usage of language diction, vocabulary, and syntax. For instance, each of the four Gospels tell the story of Jesus life but have very different styles of writing. Also, Paul’s letters have different styles than do the letters of Peter and John.

So, despite the fact that the Spirit inspired each word the writers used, He did not override their personalities in the process. Thus, there is both a divine and human aspect to the scriptural texts, but without mistake.

Article IX

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.

In light of Article VIII, this article affirms the divine-human nature of Scripture, but nonetheless affirms that it is totally trustworthy and true about everything the writers wrote about. That is to say that though the inspired writers did not have total understanding of everything (omniscience), what they wrote about was true within the context of their limited knowledge.

Furthermore, the article denies that just because the authors, like all humans, were finite in their knowledge, or were fallen sinners, that what they wrote may have therefore contained falsehood or distorted what God intend for them to say. The point being that God protected them from error.

This concludes Part One in this two installment article discussing the concept of biblical inerrancy. We are doing so by analyzing *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* (CSBI) of 1978. In the next part we look at the Articles X - XIX and discuss some of the implications this has for evangelical Christians.

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