



## **Inerrancy: Evangelical or Legalistic?**

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Is “inerrancy” church dividing? It all depends. If “inerrancy” is held or opposed evangelically, it need not be divisive; but if it is held or opposed legalistically, it will often be church-dividing.

Those who affirm or oppose “inerrancy” evangelically do so in the context of justification by grace through faith. They recognize that neither our salvation nor the unity of the Christian church depends upon agreement with theological propositions. Those who affirm or oppose “inerrancy” legalistically do so in the context of law rather than gospel and either require acceptance of a specific understanding of the Bible as a condition for true Christianity and Christian unity or reject fellowship with those who hold this view.

Because of numerous variants in extant manuscripts and inconsistencies in the present biblical text, of which all careful readers are aware, I believe that it is confusing to describe the Bible as “inerrant.” I do not find it helpful to acknowledge these discrepancies while at the same time affirming the textual inerrancy of the original autographs. Seeking to establish the absolute authority of Scripture by theorizing concerning documents that none of us has ever seen strikes me as an exercise combining fantasy and futility.

In this regard we do well to recall the struggles of Professor Michael Reu who was deeply involved in the inspiration controversy that preceded the formation of the old American Lutheran Church in 1930. Dr. Reu was too well informed and too honest to deny the presence of inconsistencies in the present biblical text. Like many others who have sought to maintain the concept of inerrancy in the face of these discrepancies, he retreated to the position that affirms only the inerrancy of the original manuscripts. At the same time, Dr. Reu also acknowledged that such a concept of inerrancy was a human opinion and not a biblical teaching and wisely taught that human opinions, including his own, that are not clearly expressed in Scripture have no place in the confessions of the church.

Nevertheless, since we are saved by grace through faith and not on account of our theological perspectives, I certainly believe that there are millions of Christians, past and present, who affirm some form of “inerrancy” and that it would be an act of legalistic snobbery and self-righteousness to assert, or even

imply, that they are not fully members of the body of Christ. On the other hand, I believe that it is equally arrogant and legalistic for those who affirm “inerrancy” to challenge the authenticity of Christians who affirm a different understanding of Scripture. One legalism in this regard is, in

my opinion, as divisive as the other.

By living in constant remembrance of our unity in Christ, Lutheran laity and clergy have usually been able to live together in harmony in spite of these differences, but there are occasions when it is necessary to focus specifically on this issue and to seek the greatest possible clarity concerning our understanding of Scripture. One such occasion involved development of the “confession of faith” statement prepared by the Commission for a New Lutheran Church and affirmed by the conventions of the merging churches. Another occurs in the process of certification of seminary graduates for ordination.

I believe that, with its emphasis on the Scriptures as “the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life,” the CNLC statement clearly and positively affirms exactly what the present ALC statement sought to affirm with the use of the negative term “inerrant.” There is no requirement that this term be removed from congregational constitutions, and those who like it will continue to be free to use it in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. While encouraging such persons to explain what they mean by “inerrant,” I will staunchly defend their right to hold this view and to use this term and believe that no one should be excluded from full fellowship in the ELCA for either using it or declining to do so.

In a similar way, I do not believe that any seminary graduate should be denied certification for ordination because of adherence to biblical “inerrancy” or rejected for failing to hold this view. At the same time, I must confess that I would oppose certification for ordination of any student who either believes that a person cannot be truly Christian without holding this view or that one cannot be a Christian while affirming it. Such legalists proclaim a conditional “gospel” that is not the gospel and by implication, if not intent, reject salvation by grace alone through faith alone.

In summary, I do not believe that the issue of “inerrancy” is inherently church dividing but that it can easily become so when it is either held or rejected by those who live by the law rather than the gospel and who are legalistic rather than evangelical.

## **Inerrancy: Questions from Its Advocates**

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The notion of inerrancy ought not divide the church, despite the efforts of some of its advocates. To be sure, the notion is open to numerous questions. Yet those who advocate its use—of whom I am not one—have questions to ask of those who reject it. This essay is neither a defense of inerrancy nor a summation of the arguments advanced for it. Instead, it will focus on some of the questions posed by its adherents.

Inerrantists assert that it is through the Bible that they know of the God who has declared salvation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. They, therefore, speak of Scripture with terms that communicate deep thankfulness and passion. “Inerrant” is one word which has emerged in the history of the church to express that gratitude to God for the gift of the Scriptures. Non-inerrantists might well spend less energy on attacking the use of the term and instead search for vocabulary that helps people express the deep passion they have for the Scriptures in which

they meet their only Savior.

Inerrantists maintain that the alien character of Scripture has been diluted. They wish to underscore in the strongest possible terms that Scripture stands over against our sinful, rebellious hearts. The language of inerrancy is, for them, a defense against those modern theologies which *accommodate* more than *address* the modern world. The notion of “inerrancy” is used because it is abrasive to contemporary theology in away that “inspiration” is not, for the latter has been reduced to “inspiring” and “stimulating.” “Inerrancy,” it is argued, makes Scripture function as *the* norm for faith and practice, not merely *a* norm. To what extent have the “hard” words of Scripture been evaded by reducing them to culturally-conditioned opinions?

Inerrantists assert that biblical scholarship has become more magisterial than ministerial, for it is not directed toward the proclamation of the Word of God. It describes the views of biblical writers, but it skirts normative questions. Does this assertion have merit? It may. Non-inerrantists might consider how long it has been since a critical journal article helped them both to see within a text a word from God and to preach that word as the Word of God.

Inerrantists contend that the diversity of the biblical writers has been exaggerated. Slogans such as “a canon within a canon” have been more frequently

used against sections of the Bible than as a means to focus on central matters within Scripture. Luke is pitted against John and prophet against priest and king in a manner suggesting that one’s preference is based solely on contemporary tastes. In their view, the differences (which many do not deny) are more complementary than contradictory. Are contemporary theologians more eager to find a partisan Christ than to articulate the *unity* in Scripture’s diversity so that the voice of the *one* God might be more clearly heard?

Inerrantists argue that a reduced sense of the authority of Scripture has diminished the study of the Bible. The Bible is mined for its position on economics, sexuality, and politics, but is read and studied much less than it once was. It is both the promise of God and the experience of the historic community of faith that the Spirit of God is present in the Bible. Why is so little time spent there?

Inerrantists contend that Scripture’s role in the articulation of Christian truth has been greatly reduced. Not all inerrantists view truth simplistically. Many self-designated inerrantists discuss the complexity of determining “truth” in commands and questions versus declarative statements, in parables and symbolic language, and the like. They know that Jesus undoubtedly spoke Aramaic and, therefore, we have no *actual* words of Jesus. All that said, they ask for caution when it is thought that “truth” will be achieved by including more disparate contemporary perspectives in the discussion. Their inclusivity will not be at the expense of the normative quality of Scripture, which relativizes all contemporary voices. Has “truth,” as complex as it may be, given way to truces between contending perspectives and interests?

Non-inerrantists often assert that inerrantists betray a basic insecurity about a faith based solely on the Christ’s word of promise. But if some inerrantists fearfully yearn for a greater certainty, the only adequate and faithful response is the proclamation of the Gospel’s “fear not” spoken in the name of Jesus. The “fear not” cannot be addressed in the name of assured scholarship and surely it is inappropriate to respond with a barrage of “difficult” passages. Secondly, if some inerrantists stifle the freedom of the Gospel, the response must be the

continued proclamation—in word and deed—of the freedom of the Gospel. If that does not “work,” then perhaps non-inerrantists should argue with God, not the inerrantists. Being a non-inerrantist does not protect the freedom of the Gospel—that is the gift of the Holy Spirit and only the Spirit can maintain it.

Inerrantists ought not be dismissed as simply uninformed or sectarian. Many of their arguments present an occasion for non-inerrantists to ask hard questions of themselves. To adapt Karl Barth’s comment on D. F. Strauss, inerrantists may simply be the bad conscience of modern theology.