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Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy

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INTRODUCTION: ON DEBATING INERRANCY

J. MERRICK WITH STEPHEN M. GARRETT

The Bible is central to evangelical faith and witness, and, for many evangelicals, inerrancy is crucial to securing the centrality of the Bible. Inerrancy has been commonly viewed as *the* doctrine upon which evangelicalism stands or falls.¹ Perhaps the most obvious example is the doctrinal basis of the Evangelical Theological Society, which, until relatively recently, was just the doctrine of inerrancy (the doctrine of the Trinity was added in 1990). The assumption seemed to be that there was a direct correlation between believing in the accuracy of Scripture and reading Scripture accurately. When we approach Scripture in faith, we are motivated to harmonize apparent discrepancies and persist into historical or scientific data to see the vindication of the Bible. Challenges raised by critical scholarship are products not of the text but of suspicious scholars dissatisfied with or hostile to Scripture or Christianity.

Inerrancy, then, is not a mere statement about Scripture for evangelicals. Since Scripture is the source of evangelical faith, and since inerrancy is ultimately a matter of reading Scripture faithfully, inerrancy is often regarded as of the essence of genuine Christian faith. It should come as no surprise that inerrancy is resurfacing as evangelicalism is increasingly fragmented and contested, submerged between “emergence” and “resurgence.”² All indications are that evangelicalism is once more poised to “battle over the Bible” and focus afresh on the

1. Examples from decades ago abound, but more recent examples include John Woodbridge, “Evangelical Self-Identity and the Doctrine of Biblical Inerrancy,” in *Understanding the Times: New Testament Studies in the 21st Century*, ed. Andreas Köstenberger and Robert Yarbrough (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2011); Gregory Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2008); and Norman Geisler and William Roach, *Defending Inerrancy: Affirming the Accuracy of Scripture for a New Generation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2012).

2. Referring to the emerging/emergent church movement and the so-called restless Reformed or new Calvinist movement, respectively.

doctrine of inerrancy. This time, however, evangelicals are not battling mainline Protestants; they are debating *themselves*.³

Our project is concerned that this link between inerrancy and evangelical identity can obscure the meaning of inerrancy and frustrate the vitality of evangelical faith. Because inerrancy is seen as the guarantor of evangelical identity, many of the conversations about it are negative in thrust, focusing more on what could be lost if inerrancy, or at least a certain version of inerrancy, is not maintained. Moreover, inerrancy is not simply a stand-alone doctrine; it is interconnected with others. Unfortunately, the electricity of the debate obscures these other doctrines, limiting the conversation and diminishing evangelical faith. There is great risk, then, that inerrancy may become the only cipher for a certain account of what it means to be an evangelical.

Accordingly, for the sake of the health of evangelicalism and the vibrancy of its faith, this book aims to concentrate not only on the doctrine of inerrancy but also on the key doctrines that inform what it means to say that Scripture is inerrant. In other words, we want to encourage conversation on the doctrinal rationale of inerrancy and its Scriptural warrant rather than on why it may or may not be detrimental to evangelicalism. For in the final analysis, our beliefs should be motivated by theological and biblical reasons rather than by sociological ones. Said simply, we should hold to inerrancy not because it secures evangelicalism but because it teaches evangelicals about God and how to put faith in him.

On Inerrancy as a Doctrine

It might be helpful to begin by reflecting on what inerrancy means as a “doctrine.” In a scientific age such as ours, doctrines are often viewed as facts or as theories about biblical facts. As the scientist examines nature and formulates theories to explain its consistent behavior, so the

3. Three works by evangelical authors, one of whom is a contributor to this volume, are worth mentioning: Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005); A. T. B. McGowan, *The Divine Authenticity of Scripture: Recovering an Evangelical Heritage* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2008); Kenton Sparks, *God’s Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008). The latter two are taken to task by Robert W. Yarbrough in a review essay with a telling title: “The Embattled Bible: Four More Books,” *Themelios* 34, no. 1 (April 2009), http://thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the_embattled_bible_four_more_books/ (March 2, 2013).

theologian formulates doctrine that explains the data of Scripture. Yet, as we have already intimated, inerrancy is not merely a statement of fact but also a posture toward the Bible—a way of reading the Bible, a criterion for what counts as faithful interpretation. Critical interpretations are often ruled out by inerrancy not always because the evidence to the contrary is compelling but also because such interpretations seem to exhibit a lack of confidence in God and the Bible.

This can be illustrated by recourse to one of perhaps the most prominent debates about inerrancy *inside* evangelicalism, the resignation of Robert Gundry from ETS in 1983.⁴ Gundry's commentary on Matthew argued that certain portions of the infancy narratives were midrash. This did not contradict inerrancy, he said, because being midrash, these portions of Scripture were never intended to be factual reports. Norman Geisler headed the campaign calling for Gundry's resignation or dismissal. He never contested the details of Gundry's interpretation. Instead, on the basis of the meaning of inerrancy, he routinely returned to the point that biblical events must be factual.⁵ Yet Gundry's consistent claim was that the portions of Matthew in question were never intended to be factual reports. As he explained in his surrejoinder to Geisler: "I do not deny that events reported in the Bible actually happened, but only that the Biblical authors meant to report events, or historical details in connection with events, at points where Geisler and others think they did so mean. I deny in some texts what would be the literal, normal meaning for a reader who assumes a modern standard of history-writing, but not what I believe to be the literal, normal meaning for the original audience, or even for a modern audience that is homiletically oriented."⁶

4. For a discussion of Gundry's ouster, see Leslie R. Keylock, "Evangelical Scholars Remove Robert Gundry for His Views on Matthew," www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/novemberweb-only/11-17-42.0.html (March 2, 2013).

5. Geisler twice insists that "a 'report' of an 'event' must be factually true, especially an inspired report" (Norman Geisler, "Is There Madness in the Method? A Rejoinder to Robert H. Gundry," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 26, no. 1 [March 1983], 102). A telling instance of Geisler's refusal is when he declared, "This is precisely what Gundry does—namely, he claims that some events reported in Matthew did not actually occur but were invented by the gospel writer" ("Methodological Unorthodoxy," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 26, no. 1 [March 1983], 91).

6. Robert Gundry, "A Surrejoinder to Norman L. Geisler," *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 26, no. 1 (March 1983): 113–14.

Geisler's refusal to concede this point could be viewed as an act of stubbornness. However, it must be understood that Geisler thought the meaning of inerrancy itself disallowed the possibility of midrash in the Bible. In other words, Geisler believed midrash was incommensurate with the kind of truth inerrancy claims of Scripture. It is simply inappropriate for God to reveal himself in midrashic forms. Gundry, of course, felt that Geisler was insensitive to premodern forms of communication. For Geisler, inerrancy is an axiom—a necessary truth that follows upon belief in God's truthfulness. Here inerrancy is not a conclusion drawn from exhaustive investigation into the veracity of Scripture's claims but a *rule* for reading Scripture in ways consistent with the conviction that God is truthful. Inerrancy establishes both a set of expectations about the text and the condition of sound readings of the text. Geisler never disputed the details of Gundry's interpretation but instead spoke of how interpretations espouse a philosophy.⁷ Thus, in the following way, Geisler's theological intuition was correct: inerrancy bears more than just a statement about Scripture. It bears several theological convictions, convictions about who God is and how God relates to and communicates in and through the text of Scripture.

It is important therefore to recognize from the Gundry-Geisler example that, as a doctrine, inerrancy communicates far more than simply an attribute of Scripture. It communicates a way of understanding God and a way of understanding ourselves before Scripture. It is therefore bound up with the whole of Christian teaching and cannot be properly understood apart from some discussion of its doctrinal setting. Such being the case, this book hopes to generate conversations on the doctrinal commitments that determine inerrancy.

On the Doctrinal Location of Inerrancy

We will have more to say about the doctrinal commitments and the nature of this book below. Before doing so, it is important to recognize the way in which inerrancy functions as doctrine and thus speak to the issue of where inerrancy should occur in a doctrinal system. It is not at all uncommon to find the confession of inerrancy at the head of the doctrinal statements

7. See, for example, Geisler, "Methodological Unorthodoxy," 92; and Geisler, "Is There Madness in the Method?" 105.

of evangelical churches, ministries, and organizations. This of course has the benefit of declaring that what follows is reliable information, not merely the opinions of the people involved in the institution. Certainly, believers should be confident in their faith. But the question is, what kind of confidence, and what or who is the source of that confidence?

We wonder if there are some unintended consequences to misplacing the doctrine of inerrancy, that is, extracting it from its context of teaching about Holy Scripture and locating it at the beginning of a doctrinal statement. Placing inerrancy at the fount of doctrine can suggest things about the nature of doctrine itself. It can indicate that doctrines are merely facts or theories. Doctrine of course accords with reality, but it is not a mere fact.

The events which Christians proclaim are not events simply comparable to other historical events. They happen in history, but they are not merely historical. This is because the agent involved is not created but the Creator. Hence, the New Testament often describes events of our salvation as events of new creation (for example, John 1:1ff). The transformation effected in the events of Christian faith is rather different from a mere alteration of the general course of human history. What happens in Jesus Christ is nothing short of a reconstitution of the created order and the human being. Therefore, knowing the reality of Christ is not like knowing how the colonies won the Revolutionary War or the meaning of the Constitution of the United States. We can assimilate these truths into our repository of knowledge without much modification of ourselves or even our understanding of the world. Indeed, any aspect that may be challenging can be relativized: that was then; this is now.

But as Christians have recognized for two millennia, coming into contact with Christ involves repentance, a deep turning away from self and toward God. It involves abandoning some of our most commonsensical assumptions about what kind of place the world is, who we are, and what makes for a good life. The cross is a stumbling block (1 Cor. 1:23) and a cornerstone for a new form of humanity (Eph. 2:20) in which human enmity against one another and God is resolved (Gal. 3:28). To believe in Christ, in a certain sense, requires that we cease being “realistic,” for it requires us to see beyond the so-called necessities or realities of life in a fallen world and to let our faith in Christ ground a new way of life that takes seriously the presence of the kingdom of God.

While innerrancy helpfully insists upon the factuality of Christianity, extracting it from its context in the doctrine of revelation and placing it at the head of Christian doctrine can ironically lead to a diminishment of Christian truth. Placing innerrancy at the outset of doctrinal statements seems to teach that Christian beliefs are of the order of facts. As we have suggested, facts can usually be assimilated into the self without much modification of the self, without a deep existential and moral reordering. Consequently, the Christian is taught that becoming a Christian is about learning the right information rather than submitting to the regeneration of the Holy Spirit.

What is at stake here is the existential dimensions of Christian faith.⁸ Take the doctrine of justification as an example. Taken as a fact, the doctrine merely teaches that it is the work of Christ, not our own works, that makes us righteous before God. Notice how if the doctrine is seen as a mere fact rather than an existential reality, it could allow the Christian to continue in his or her life unaltered. In fact, acceptance of such a fact could be seen as something to be proud of (and some of the debates within evangelicalism about justification do tempt people to be prideful about their view of justification). Because justification is viewed as just a fact, people who believe in it are not forced to behold its true depth as a fundamentally self-shattering reality. Because justification is more than a fact, because it is a reality performed by the Creator of the world and so constitutes human identity, knowledge of justification must be more than mere acknowledgement and understanding of the mechanics of a person's relationship to Christ. Knowing justification means knowing ourselves as unrighteous, knowing ourselves as having no right to claim our justification, knowing that Christ is the only righteous one. In this way, the factuality of the doctrine is secondary to its existentiality.⁹

8. Use of the term *existential* should not be understood in a way that means the authors are committed to existentialist philosophy. Rather the term is being used in a less technical sense to capture the way in which Christian teaching penetrates to the deepest core of a person's identity and self-perception.

9. The great English Reformer Richard Hooker, in his "Learned Discourse on Justification" (www.ccel.org/ccel/hooker/just.toc.html [March 2, 2013]), recognized that the doctrine of justification itself demands that it is possible for some Catholics to have been justified by faith without believing in the doctrine of justification by faith, simply by their own self-understanding.

Furthermore, when we consider the order of Christian teaching, inerrancy is a function of the larger doctrine of revelation. Yet when inerrancy is removed from this doctrinal context, it could prove distortive of the doctrine of revelation. Specifically, it could pit revelation found in Scripture against all other human knowledge and thereby foster retreat from intellectual engagement.¹⁰ Because we have access to indubitable truth and because secular fields of inquiry reject that source, or at least rely primarily on other data for the formulation of their views, secular fields are not as trustworthy as the simple teaching of Scripture. Hence, a misplaced doctrine of inerrancy leads to overinflated perceptions of our knowledge of truth when this doctrine is not bracketed by larger considerations of general and special revelation as well as of the relationship between revelation and reason, all of which are typically treated in the doctrine of revelation. It is best, then, to understand inerrancy within its proper doctrinal context, yet only in light of doctrinal convictions that are more fundamental. To these we now turn.

On the Doctrine of Inerrancy

Key definitions of inerrancy such as the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (CSBI) show that inerrancy is not an isolated idea that floats free from Christian conviction. Rather inerrancy is at the very least bound up with convictions about Scripture's inspiration, reliability, and authority as well as convictions about the character of God (especially the attribute of truthfulness). The CSBI claims that inerrancy is crucial for maintaining the evangelical conviction that when the Bible speaks, God speaks. Yet inerrancy on its own does not necessarily imply anything about God's speech. It could simply be that the humans who wrote the Bible were very careful or very lucky. Moreover, divine authorship of Scripture is surely more complicated than this evangelical conviction suggests, for the relationship between divine speech and the speech of the human authors would have to be explained, at the very least, which is why verbal plenary inspiration has gone hand in hand with inerrancy in evangelicalism. There is a

10. On this phenomenon, see Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995).

complex of issues that must be elucidated before inerrancy can function. What follows therefore will be a sketch of the doctrinal nexus in which inerrancy occurs.

Inerrancy is located within the doctrine of Holy Scripture. It takes place amidst a series of claims about the nature and function of Scripture, among which are the sufficiency, authority, and primacy of Scripture. These claims about Holy Scripture can be made only by first discussing the inspiration of Scripture, and thus inspiration qualifies inerrancy. Of course, the doctrine of Holy Scripture itself is a subset of the doctrine of revelation, and the doctrine of revelation is a subsidiary of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, Christology, and ultimately the triune God. Furthermore, we must also consider revelation's reception, which must be shaped by the prior doctrines of salvation, Christ, sin, humanity, and creation.

Let's begin with the doctrine of Scripture. As we said, inerrancy must be developed in dialogue with other claims about the Bible, such as its authority and sufficiency. We'll take the latter first. Sufficiency is an interesting qualifier because it speaks to the scope of Scripture's meaning. On the one hand, the sufficiency of Scripture means that Scripture is self-interpreting. In the Reformation context, this meant that Scripture was so coherent and plain that the commoner could read it in the local vernacular and gain the knowledge necessary for salvation. Does this mean that on things not pertaining to salvation, Scripture is insufficient? Thus we might be permitted to engage in science and historiography in order to understand other matters that do not immediately pertain to our faith in Christ. Or is what is meant that all things in Scripture pertain to salvation? On the other hand, what is the meaning of sufficient? Does it mean that what Scripture says is adequate for us to have true faith but that such knowledge could be expanded by engagement with other sources so long as such expansion does not compromise the knowledge gained in Scripture? Answers to these questions will help assess the scope of inerrancy.

As we observed above, in modern scientific culture the only ideas that have authority (or rationality) are those rooted in fact, and thus if the factuality of Scripture is demonstrated, Scripture is made an authority. This is where some theologians would want to argue that inerrancy should be developed within a larger conception of divine

authority rather than be determinative for authority. The Bible's authority must be understood according to the authority of God and thus should not be reduced to the authority of fact.¹¹ Far more than just a reliable repository of information, Scripture has intense meaning and purpose that must be engaged, and its authority is not fully regarded until the Bible is brought into conversation with contemporary realities, since God is the creator of all things. That is to say, we have not heeded the authority of Scripture as divine authority until we have heard Scripture address us utterly and obeyed.

The doctrine of revelation in which the doctrine of Scripture occurs is relevant here. One of the major questions has to do with the relationship between revelation and reason. How does reason function in relation to revelation? Are there things knowable by bare human reason on which we do not require revelation? Once more, we run into the question of the scope of Scripture's claims. There has been a tradition of saying that reason is adequate to gaining certain metaphysical and scientific truths but incapable of the higher truths of salvation and God.¹² Thomas Aquinas, for example, claimed that human reason can attain some knowledge of the being of God naturally but could never recognize that the being of God is triune.¹³ What does this mean for Scripture? Does it mean that Scripture is concerned with imparting the knowledge beyond human reason, and so unconcerned with knowledge attainable by human reason? If so, does this mean that Christians can defer to science on physical or historical matters and heed Scripture only when it touches on higher truths?¹⁴ Here the scope of revelation and its relationship to natural knowledge is important for understanding the scope of inerrancy.

11. For an exemplar of this perspective, see N. T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

12. Thomas Aquinas, Richard Hooker, and John Calvin are just three examples.

13. Note Gilles Emery, the foremost scholar of Aquinas's Trinitarian theology: "St Thomas was vigorously opposed to this apologetic project in Trinitarian theology. Neither the goodness nor the happiness of God, nor his intelligence, are arguments capable of proving that the existence of a plurality of divine persons imposes itself by rational necessity. Only the 'truth of faith', to the exclusion of any other reason, leads us to acknowledge God's tripersonality" (Gilles Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of St Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Francesca Murphy [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007], 25).

14. An interesting example of this can be found in Augustine's discussion of the relationship between science and the book of Genesis in his "The Literal Meaning of Genesis," in Augustine, *On Genesis* (New York: New City Press, 2002), 185–86.

Indeed, the doctrine of revelation should be determined, in part, by the doctrine of salvation, for revelation is not an end in itself but serves the larger end of salvation. What constitutes saving knowledge of God? Is it perfectly accurate understanding of historical events, physical laws, biology, and so on, or is it a moral and spiritual relationship with God? And what is the goal of salvation and so of saving knowledge? Here we must consider how salvation is a history and indeed is often referred to as the “history of salvation” or “history of redemption.” Everyone recognizes that God works differently at different times in the course of his redemption of humankind. Dispensationalists recognize several dispensations (for example, Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus Christ, the church), while covenant theologians admit two covenants, the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. In the latter, it is usually suggested that God had to convince humanity of its sin, especially since the essence of sin is a kind of divinizing of humanity, and thus God had to first work through law in order to make way for grace, to demoralize humanity, as it were, so that humanity had no choice but to rest in the grace of God. But this seems to admit that God does not exhaustively reveal himself or his salvation in any one moment, but revelation develops over time. Some versions of inerrancy can suggest an almost exhaustive and complete account of events and divine intent. How does this square with progressive salvation/revelation? It seems inerrancy must be developed in conversation with the specificity of salvation and revelation in history. We look at the Bible as completed, but it was not always so. How, then, do we appropriately engage those earlier moments? Issues of the relationship between the two Testaments are thus important, which is why we have asked our contributors to comment on one possible discrepancy between Old and New Testaments, to be described below.

These questions of the nature and purpose of the text are further complicated by the doctrine of inspiration. As the Gundry-Geisler debate demonstrated, this doctrine was a source of divergence. Geisler disallowed Gundry’s hermeneutics which saw authorial intent as the locus of meaning or at least a clue to meaning. He wrote, “Gundry fails to recognize that the locus of meaning (and truth) for an evangelical is in the text, not in the mind of the author behind the text. It is the

graphai that are inspired, not the author's intentions behind them."¹⁵ Geisler believed that inerrancy implied verbal plenary inspiration. Verbal plenary inspiration means that the text we have is verbatim the text God inspired, down to the very terminology and syntax. It is not that God gave human authors a general impression or message that they then communicated in their own words and according to their own understanding. Rather God accommodated his message to each author's style and understanding, even as such did not interfere with the content.

However, many have argued that verbal plenary inspiration is destructive of human agency and reduces inspiration to dictation. The doctrine of inspiration should be determined by the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, which specifies the Spirit as the mediator of communion, the divine agent who unites distinct agents. In the immanent life of the Trinity, the Spirit is the bond of love, the one in whom Father and Son commune. In the economy, the Spirit is the one in and by whom believers are united to Christ. It is the Spirit's peculiar ministry to unite that which is different, and it is essential that the Spirit preserves the integrity of the different parties he unites. In this regard, any doctrine of inspiration must show how the biblical authors retain their faculties. Some have argued that if humanity is preserved from the limitations of culture and perspective, then the integrity of the human nature is compromised.¹⁶ And what if hermeneutics shows us that authorial intent is the locus of meaning? Does a doctrine of inspiration which locates meaning in the text rather than the author destroy the normal human conventions of communication? Does it mean that the reader of Scripture does not need to engage God in order to understand the text, to gain the meaning of the text? Inerrancy should not control the mode of inspiration but should be understood as a consequence of it. But here much work needs to be done on how God secures an inerrant text without diminishing or displacing human agency.

Like all doctrines, inerrancy has its deepest mooring in the doctrine of God. For Geisler and many other inerrantists, including the authors of the CSBI, inerrancy is a consequence of the truthfulness

15. Geisler, "Is There Madness in the Method?" 105.

16. For example, Enns, *Incarnation and Inspiration*; Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words*.

of God, not immediately of the text itself. But as we have seen, such a quick move from divine truthfulness to inerrancy breezes over or, at the very least, abbreviates some major doctrinal issues. In the final analysis, such a quick transition ignores God's relationship to time. Classically, God's eternity meant that human language, being temporally structured or constrained, was incapable of simple reference to God's reality. Scriptural language tended to be read contemplatively and allegorically; divine illumination was necessary for finite language to be effective.¹⁷ Later, in the Middle Ages, language was conceived of as analogical, sufficient for communicating knowledge but not technically precise.¹⁸ The difference between God and creatures meant that human language and predication were adequate but not exhaustive of divine truth.

While there are good theological reasons for divine truthfulness, there seem to be equally good reasons for recognizing a difference between created and uncreated being as well.¹⁹ And if there is distance, as it were (analogical language!), between our reality and God's, then perhaps it is not so simple to call God's truthfulness into question if there is a supposed error in Scripture. For example, if God's eternity means that his historical presence exceeds any temporal event, and indeed that the human relationship to God always strains human language, then the reporting of an event by a biblical author seems to involve more than mere historical accuracy. And there is possibly a sense in which factual accuracy may need to be subordinated to a more poetic rendering of an event so that its significance is grasped. How does the historical circumscription of human language fit within inerrancy? Thus God's relationship to time is important for any discussion of God's truthfulness in history.

17. On the issues of language, knowledge, and biblical interpretation, see Marcia Colish, *The Mirror of Language: A Study of the Medieval Theory of Knowledge* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1968); G. R. Evans, *The Language and Logic of the Bible: The Earlier Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991); R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen's Interpretation of Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003); Michael Cameron, *Christ Meets Me Everywhere: Augustine's Early Figurative Exegesis* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012).

18. See, for example, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, bk. 1, chap. 34, www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/gentiles.iv.xxxi.html.

19. See, for example, John Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (New York: Catholic Univ. Press of America, 2000).

The above is but a sketch of the doctrinal nexus by which inerrancy must be explicated and understood. But there is also what may be called a meta-issue that inerrancy raises, namely, the nature of truth. One of the interesting issues here is the relationship between the truth of inerrancy and the truth inerrancy claims of the Bible. As intimated above, inerrancy is often viewed as an axiom, a necessary truth that follows upon divine truthfulness. Again, the Gundry-Geisler debate is illustrative. Geisler claimed that inerrancy meant factual accuracy.²⁰ Yet his argumentation for inerrancy turned not on the facts—again, he never disputed the details of Gundry’s interpretation—but on the philosophical warrants for inerrancy. Geisler accordingly disallowed the facts of Gundry’s interpretation. But here is a curious issue in the nature of truth: if inerrancy claims that the Bible is factually accurate and yet inerrancy itself is not a fact but an axiom, what ultimately do facts have to do with inerrancy? There seem to be two different standards of truth here: truth as metaphysical necessity and truth as historical factuality. How does a theory of the factual accuracy of Scripture relate to the facts of Scripture? The larger issue of truth, therefore, needs to be discussed in any account of inerrancy.

On This Book

Mindful of the complexity of inerrancy, this book hopes to generate conversation from a variety of diverse quarters on the doctrinal framework that surrounds inerrancy. As mentioned above, discussions of inerrancy too often produce more heat than light, being polemical rather than constructive. One of the aims of this book is to restore focus on these doctrinal issues so that debates about inerrancy enrich evangelical theology and faith, facilitating deeper understanding. Yet in a volume like ours, in which different perspectives are being expressed and responses are given, it would be impossible to have contributors develop and defend a full doctrinal framework while also treating some of the issues that accompany discussions of inerrancy. We have

20. See, for example, Geisler, “Methodological Unorthodoxy,” 91–92, and Geisler, “Is There Madness in the Method?” 101–3. Also, note his comment in his resignation announcement: “What is more, I love the organization and that for which it once firmly stood—the total factual inerrancy of the written Word of God” (Geisler, “Why I Resigned,” <http://www.normgeisler.com/articles/Bible/Inspiration-Inerrancy/ETS/2003-WhyIResigned-FromTheETS.htm>).

accordingly narrowed our focus to what seem to be the most significant issues, asking our contributors to treat four topics: (1) God and his relationship to his creatures, (2) the doctrine of inspiration, (3) the nature of Scripture, and (4) the nature of truth. Contributors have been asked to develop their position on these in reference to the CSBI, given its historical prominence as the standard definition of inerrancy, and in relation to three case studies that might pose challenges to inerrancy.

One of the first requests the editors made of the contributors was that they submit three texts they believed constituted a potential challenge to inerrancy and by which they would have to test their view of inerrancy. We instructed contributors to supply suggestions for texts for three categories: (1) the factuality of Scripture, (2) canonical coherence, and (3) theological coherence. From the submissions, the editors chose two passages which were common to the submissions and one which we felt was the best of the possibilities.

For the first, we chose Joshua 6, since current archaeological and historiographical evidence calls into question the details of the text's account. Obviously, those who maintain a strictly factual account of inerrancy must defend the Bible's factuality. But for those who have a broader or different understanding of truth, or for those whose understanding of inspiration does not extend to factual accuracy, we wanted to see how Joshua 6 could still function as Scripture without being factually correct. For the second, we chose the discrepancy between Acts 9:7 and Acts 22:9. Both texts describe Saul's conversion. The former says that his travel companions "heard the voice but saw no one," while the latter says that they "saw the light but did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking" (NRSV).²¹ For questions of theological coherence, we asked authors to consider Deuteronomy 20 in relation to Matthew 5. Deuteronomy is of course a portion of the Law of Israel, while many scholars believe that the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 is Jesus acting as a new Moses bringing the new Law of God. Jesus himself claims that his instructions constitute the fulfillment of the Law (Matt. 5:17–20). But this is where the question of theological coherence is pressing. How is it that Deuteronomy 20

21. It is true that both the ESV and the NIV translate the word for "hear" as "understand" in the latter passage in order to get around this discrepancy. But both translations admit that this is a debatable decision.

instructs Israel that the complete extermination of Yahweh's enemies is a matter of Israel's purity before and obedience to Yahweh, while Jesus subsequently says that faithfulness to God requires nonretaliation and sacrificial love of enemies (Matt. 5:38–48)? If, as in some views of inerrancy, new revelation cannot be seen to correct or alter previous revelation, then how can these passages be understood? While all of our choices raise the issue of truth and inspiration, this one particularly raises the extent of inspiration. How could our knowledge of God be said to be accurate if the human relationship to God varies over time?

As you might imagine, with a doctrine as controversial as inerrancy, where what is at stake is not just the legitimacy of the view but also the very integrity and identity of evangelicalism, it was not easy to establish who should be involved, what views should be represented, and what issues should see discussion in the essays. Most basically, we wanted major voices within the evangelical community who represented both the diversity of theological disciplines and the current spectrum of evangelical opinion. We landed on two systematic theologians (John Franke and Kevin Vanhoozer), two biblical scholars (Michael Bird and Peter Enns), and one historical theologian (Albert Mohler).

After identifying authors, the most difficult issue the editors faced was trying to shape the conversation along the lines sketched above while allowing authors to develop their essays in accordance with their own personal concerns and disciplinary interests. Yet, as the contributors will likely verify, we were eager to force the conversation to take place upon the theological and biblical grounds discussed above. And this leads us to the peculiar organization of this volume. We had originally intended to follow the usual practice of volumes in the Counterpoints series and label each view in a way that captured something of the essence of its perspective. However, as the contributions came in, we realized that the conversations were happening at different levels and that there was no meaningful or fair way of categorizing them.

What we observed, and what we regard as one of this book's main contributions to the conversation, is that discussions of inerrancy are very much determined by a person's theological sensibilities and particular location within evangelicalism. Specifically, a person's understanding of inerrancy is dependent upon their sense of its function

in evangelicalism and upon their diagnosis of what is needed at the present hour. We take this as further proof of the aforementioned deep connection between inerrancy and the identity of evangelicalism, which is one of the main concerns of all the authors. Our project thus must be regarded as a first step toward disentangling inerrancy as the primary link to evangelical identity.

As we reflected on the contributions, we observed that two essays seemed to be driven by a sense of evangelicalism's past. They were sensitive to the way inerrancy has functioned in previous decades. Here we slotted Mohler and Enns. Not only did their essays have noticeable and interesting lines of divergence, but also both were concerned with how inerrancy has functioned in evangelical history. Mohler is very pleased with the achievements of evangelical forebears like Warfield and Henry and is content with the CSBI. He sees little need to update previous evangelical positions on inerrancy. Enns, however, believes that evangelicalism has been hindered and deformed by older views of inerrancy. Because inerrancy carries with it some destructive baggage, he is not optimistic about the project of refreshing inerrancy for today. Moreover, both seem to hold to a more factual view of truth, with Mohler thinking the Bible must be factually accurate in every detail and Enns thinking the Bible is empirically false at times and so cannot be regarded as inerrant. Thus we place Mohler's and Enns's essays in a section titled "Perspectives on Inerrancy and the Past."

It made sense to have Bird's essay follow in part 2, "Inerrancy from an International Perspective," since much of Bird's essay represents those evangelicals outside the U.S. who feel that inerrancy is possibly too constrictive or too determined by American developments. While he finds much value in inerrancy and its articulation in the CSBI, he believes that evangelicals should not break fellowship over it and should be open to revising it so that it does not force unhelpful constraints upon Scripture. Bird's essay also brings other important textual considerations to the fore and provides a logical bridge to part 3.

In our third section, "Perspectives on Renewing and Recasting Inerrancy Today," Vanhoozer and Franke are both concerned with how inerrancy has been received and perceived within contemporary evangelicalism. Yet both address the situation differently, with Vanhoozer seeking to renew inerrancy by recovering Christian tradition

and Franke desiring to recast inerrancy in light of our plural context. Unlike Mohler and Enns, Vanhoozer and Franke also think inerrancy needs to be reexpressed or rethought so that evangelicalism can meet the challenges of today and speak into current academic debates—linguistics for Vanhoozer, and concerns of colonialism and missiology for Franke.

The obvious disadvantage to this approach is that it might suggest that conversation across different sensibilities is impossible. We do not think conversations are impossible; we think they are just more complicated than what we and likely many of our readers expected. Moreover, grouping the contributions in this manner *does not* mean that the conversations are only between two authors. Rather this arrangement should be viewed as an open conversation with crisscrossing lines between all the essays. Hence, we believe this is an advantage that calls attention to where the debate lies at present; and, as mentioned above, we think this is one of the key contributions of this volume and one of the ways it can move the conversation forward to include more diverse voices from both within and without North America.

At the same time, readers are encouraged to examine the conclusion, where we will continue the conversation started here about the doctrinal dimensions of inerrancy by making plain the lines of continuity and discontinuity between the authors, which will particularly emerge in the response sections. Consequently, readers should be able to see the kinds of theological and hermeneutical decisions necessary to constructing a doctrine of inerrancy. We believe this will generate new conversations about inerrancy that consider previous questions as well as new ones, enriching the lives and faith of evangelicals. Furthermore, we will call attention to those matters that are insufficiently developed and thus require more attention in future conversations.

This book is not an end in itself but a means to an end, that end being a charitable, fruitful conversation designed to enrich the life and faith of evangelicals. Our hope is that its readers will gain a sense for the theological and hermeneutical decisions on which fresh conversations need to take place, for the health and vitality of evangelical faith.