

INERRANCY AND CHURCH HISTORY: IS INERRANCY A MODERN INVENTION?

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The claim that the church has always believed in the inerrancy of Scripture has been challenged for over a century. In particular, it has been charged that the doctrine of inerrancy was invented by Princetonian theologians and proto-fundamentalists. This article will show from primary resources that this claim is without warrant.

In 1970, Ernest Sandeen (Macalester College) claimed that nineteenth-century Princeton theologians A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield created the doctrine of inerrancy to combat the burgeoning threat of liberalism.¹ In particular, Sandeen posited that the doctrine of inerrancy in the original autographs “did not exist in either Europe or America prior to its formulation in the last half of the nineteenth century.”² In 1979, Jack Rogers (Fuller Seminary) and Donald McKim (Dubuque Theological Seminary) wrote, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach*, which popularized this theory on a broad scale. Over the past forty years, the conclusions of Sandeen, Rogers and McKim have affected how many Christians think about the doctrine of inerrancy. Namely, if the doctrine of inerrancy was not promoted throughout church history, why should the church fight for it now?

¹ Ernest Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). Sandeen did not originate this charge. As early as 1893 Philip Schaff claimed, “the theory of a literal inspiration and inerrancy was not held by the Reformers” (quoted by B.B. Warfield in, *The Independent* magazine, July 1893). Also, in 1923 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A claimed that inerrancy was a new development of fundamentalism that was unknown by the drafters of the Westminster Confession of Faith. Karl Barth follows this error when he writes, “the historic view of the Bible with its cult of heroes and the doctrine of mechanical inspiration are both products of the same age and spirit. A common feature is that they both represent means whereby Renaissance man tried to control the Bible and also tried to set up obstacles to stop it controlling him, as indeed it ought to do” (*Church Dogmatics* I:1 [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010], 112–13).

² Ernest Sandeen, *The Origins of Fundamentalism: Toward A Historical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 14.

Despite the widespread influence of Sandeen, Rogers and McKim, their claim was historically inaccurate. In 1982 John Woodbridge (Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) wrote, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal*, to give abundant evidence that the doctrine of inerrancy was the dominant view of the church before Hodge and Warfield. As a result, Woodbridge offered a devastating critique of Sandeen, Rogers and McKim and all those who would follow in their footsteps of faulty scholarship.

Following the example of Woodbridge, it is the goal of this article to give evidence that the doctrine of inerrancy was not the creation of the Princetonians or American fundamentalists. Rather, the original resource material will show that the inerrantist view has been nearly unanimously accepted throughout church history by the Eastern and Western churches.³ A major thrust of this article will be to let theologians from the first to the nineteenth centuries speak for themselves, in their own words. There will also be a discussion concerning the origin of biblical criticism in the Modern Period.

The Early Church

Despite the fact that the early Christians did not have Bibles, and that doctrinal controversies of the time were much more focused on the Trinity and the nature of Christ, there are significant affirmations from the early church to support their conviction that the Scriptures were without error. Understandably, the early believers would have inherited this belief from their view of the Old Testament Scriptures. Bruce Vawter explains,

It would be pointless to call into question that Biblical inerrancy in a rather absolute form was a common persuasion from the beginning of Christian times, and from Jewish times before that. For both the Fathers and the rabbis generally, the ascription of any error to the Bible was unthinkable If the word was God's it must be true, regardless of whether it made known a mystery of divine revelation or commented on a datum of natural science, whether it derived from human observation or chronicled an event of history.⁴

Clement of Rome (d. ca. 99) gives us the earliest letter from one church to another outside of Scripture. Writing around 96 AD, Clement claims, “the holy Scrip-

³ Origen (154–251) is an interesting exception to the rule. While he believed that every jot and tittle of Scripture was precisely recorded according to God's will (thus inerrant), the content of what was recorded contained impossibilities or events that never occurred. This is instructive for us since Origen used this view of inspiration to make Christianity palatable to the high, cultured elite of Alexandria by use of what was reasonable to them (see especially *First Principles* IV.1). Peter Abelard (1079–1142) is another theologian who held to the limited inerrancy of Scripture.

⁴ *Biblical Inspiration* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 132–33.

tures, which are true, which were given through the Holy Spirit; you know that nothing unrighteous or counterfeit is written in them.”⁵ The greatest apologist of the second century, Justin Martyr (d. ca. 165), affirms the authority of Scripture over his reason when he writes, “since I am entirely convinced that no Scripture contradicts another, I shall admit rather that I do not understand what is recorded, and shall strive to persuade those who imagine that the Scriptures are contradictory, to be rather of the same opinion as myself.”⁶ Justin attempts to describe how the Holy Spirit moved men to write by saying,

For neither by nature nor by human conception is it possible for men to know things so great and divine, but by the gift which then descended from above upon the holy men, who had no need of rhetorical art, nor of uttering anything in a contentious or quarrelsome manner, but to present themselves pure to the energy of the Divine Spirit, in order that the divine plectrum itself, descending from heaven, and using righteous men as an instrument like a harp or lyre, might reveal to us the knowledge of things divine and heavenly.⁷

He goes on to say, “When you hear the utterances of the prophets spoken as it were personally, you must not suppose that they were spoken by the inspired themselves, but by the Divine Word who moves them.”⁸ Connecting the veracity of Scripture with the character of God, Irenaeus (115–202) writes,

If, however, we cannot discover explanations of all those things in Scripture which are made the subject of investigation, yet let us not on that account seek after any other God besides Him who really exists. For this is the very greatest impiety. We should leave things of that nature to God who created us, being most properly assured that the Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God and His Spirit⁹

The early apologist Athenagoras (133–190) also describes the role of the Holy Spirit in the giving of Scripture by saying, “It would be irrational for us to cease to believe in the Spirit from God, who moved the mouths of the prophets like musical instruments, and to give heed to mere human opinions.”¹⁰ He goes on to write that the prophets were “lifted in ecstasy above the natural operations of their minds by the impulses of the Divine Spirit, utter[ing] the things with which they were inspired,

⁵ *Letter of the Romans to the Corinthians*, 45:2–3 in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd edition, edited and translated by Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic), 105.

⁶ *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*, LXV in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, edited by Philip Schaff (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 1:230.

⁷ *Horatory Address to the Greeks*, VIII in *ibid.*, 276.

⁸ *The First Apology*, XXXVI in *ibid.*, 175.

⁹ *Against Heresies*, II.XXVIII.2 in *ibid.*, 399. See also III.V.1, 417.

¹⁰ *A Plea for Christians*, VII in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2:132.

the Spirit making use of them as a flute player.”¹¹ Furthermore, the Eastern father Clement of Alexandria (150–215) writes, “I could adduce ten thousand Scriptures of which not ‘one tittle shall pass away’ without being fulfilled; for the mouth of the Lord the Holy Spirit hath spoken these things.”¹² For Clement, the biblical writings were an “infallible criterion of faith.”¹³

Tertullian (160–220), the great theologian from Carthage writes, “we point to the majesty of our Scriptures, if not to their antiquity. If you doubt that they are as ancient as we say, we offer proof that they are divine.”¹⁴ Noting the extent of inspiration, Tertullian says, “The Divine Scripture has made us united in one body; the very letters are our glue.”¹⁵ Also answering critics of the Bible, Caius (180–217) notes, “For either they do not believe that the divine Scriptures were dictated by the Holy Spirit, and are thus infidels; or they think themselves wiser than the Holy Spirit, and what are they then but demoniacs?”¹⁶ Summing up the view of the apologists from the early church, Geoffrey W. Bromily concludes, “there can be no mistaking that they held to divine, inerrant inspiration.”¹⁷

The defender of Nicene orthodoxy against the Arians, Athanasius of Alexandria (293–373), also affirms the inerrancy of Scripture in accordance with church tradition. He writes, “divine Scripture is sufficient above all things.”¹⁸ Recognizing heresy of the day, he writes, “Now it is the opinion of some, that the Scriptures do not agree together, or that God, Who gave the commandment, is false. But there is no disagreement whatever, far from it, neither can the Father, Who is truth, lie.”¹⁹

The great Eastern expository preacher, John Chrysostom (349–407), also upheld the inerrancy of the canonical writings. In his sermons he was careful to explain to his audience how differing Gospel accounts were complimentary, and not contradictory. The reason for this, he affirms, lies in the character of the sacred Scriptures. He says, “Let us act so as to interpret everything precisely and instruct you not to pass by even a brief phrase or single syllable contained in the Holy Scriptures. After all they are not simply words, but words of the Holy Spirit, and hence the treasure to be found in even a single syllable is great.”²⁰ In his famous sermons “Concerning the Statues,” Chrysostom preaches, “For the Scripture by no means speaks falsely.”²¹ Furthermore, in his sermon on John 12:39–41, Chrysostom discusses John’s quotation of Isaiah with the caveat, “He desires hence to establish by many proofs the

¹¹ Ibid., IX, 133.

¹² *Exhortation to the Heathen*, IX in *ibid.*, 195.

¹³ *Stromata*, II.IV in *ibid.*, 349–50.

¹⁴ *Apology*, XX in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:33.

¹⁵ *On Modesty*, V in *ibid.*, 78.

¹⁶ *Fragments*, III in *Ibid.*, 5:602.

¹⁷ *Historical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1978), 27.

¹⁸ *De Synodis*, I.6 in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 4:453.

¹⁹ Letter XIX.3 in *ibid.*, 546.

²⁰ Homily 15.3 in *Homilies on Genesis 1–17*, translated by Robert C. Hill (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 195.

²¹ “Concerning the Statues,” II.22 in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, edited by Philip Schaff (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 9:352.

unerring truth of Scripture, and that what Isaiah foretold fell not out otherwise, but as he said.”²²

The great eastern Cappadocian Fathers (Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil of Caesarea) are unanimous concerning the full trustworthiness of the sacred writings. Gregory of Nazianzus (329–390), also one of the great four Eastern doctors of the church, writes, “We, however, who extend the accuracy of the Spirit to the merest stroke and tittle, will never admit to the impious assertion that even the smallest matters were dealt with haphazard by those who have recorded them, and have thus been borne in mind down to the present day.”²³ Gregory’s brother, and father of Eastern monasticism, Basil the Great (330–379), concurs, “all Scripture is God inspired and profitable, and there is nothing in it unclean.”²⁴ Gregory of Nyssa (331/40-395) agrees and connects the character of the writings with the nature of God, “Thus it is by the power of the Spirit that the holy men who are under Divine influence are inspired, and every Scripture is for this reason said to be ‘given by inspiration of God,’ because it is the teaching of the Divine afflatus.”²⁵ He goes on to say, “the Scripture does not lie.”²⁶

Other theologians such as Hilary of Poitiers (300–368) upheld the “sacred narrative,” proclaiming “The Scripture is accurate and consistent”²⁷ The Eastern theologian John Cassian (360–435) compares the New Testament writings with the “testimony of the old prophets, intermingling at times new things with old, that everybody may see that the holy Scriptures proclaim as it were with one mouth” Citing the Old Testament prophets, Cassian concludes, “How wonderfully consistent the Holy Scriptures always are!”²⁸ Jerome (347–420), the famous translator of the Latin Vulgate, agrees with his contemporary Cassian when he writes, “I am not, I repeat, so ignorant as to suppose that any of the Lord’s words is either in need of correction or is not divinely inspired.”²⁹

The Medieval Church

Augustine (354–430) is arguably the greatest theologian in church history and is generally thought to usher in the Medieval Period because of his theological contributions. His influence upon all subsequent theology cannot be overemphasized. Therefore, it is significant that Augustine held to a strong view of biblical inerrancy. Augustine writes,

For it seems to me that the most disastrous consequences must follow upon our believing that anything false is found in the sacred books: that is to say, that the

²² Homily LXVIII, in *Ibid.*, 14:252.

²³ “Orations,” II.105, in *Ibid.*, 7:225.

²⁴ Letter XLII.3, in *Ibid.*, 8:145.

²⁵ “Against Eunomius,” VII.1, in *Ibid.*, 5:193.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, VII.2.

²⁷ *On the Trinity*, IV.28, in *Ibid.*, 9:80.

²⁸ *Against Nestorius*, IV.IX, in *Ibid.*, 11:579.

²⁹ *Epistles*, XXVII.1, in *Ibid.*, 6:44.

men by whom the Scripture has been given to us, and committed to writing, did put down in these books anything false. . . . For if you once admit into such a high sanctuary of authority one false statement . . . , there will not be left a single sentence of those books which, if appearing to any one difficult in practice or hard to believe, may not by the same fatal rule be explained away, as a statement in which, intentionally, . . . the author declared what was not true.³⁰

Furthermore,

For I confess to your Charity that I have learned to yield this respect and honor only to the canonical books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error. And if in these writings I am perplexed by anything which appears to me opposed to truth, I do not hesitate to suppose that either the manuscript is faulty, or the translator has not caught the meaning of what was said, or I myself have failed to understand it.³¹

Finally, “the authority of the Divine Scriptures becomes unsettled (so that every one may believe what he wishes, and reject what he does not wish) if this be once admitted, that the men by whom these things have been delivered unto us, could in their writings state some things which were not true”³² In an age where various religions and philosophies held to sundry cosmologies, Augustine’s high view of Scripture resulted in a literal interpretation of biblical events that was unpalatable to some of his cultured contemporaries. Gregg Allison summarizes,

This all-encompassing notion of the truthfulness of Scripture resulted in Augustine affirming the divine creation of the universe out of nothing; the origin of humanity no more than six thousand years before his time; the great age of people who lived before the flood; and the scientific possibility of the worldwide flood and of Noah’s ark to save eight people and the animals on board. Clearly, he believed that biblical inerrancy extended to matters of cosmology, human origins, genealogy, and the like. Scripture’s infallibility also meant that no contradictions exist in the Bible. Accordingly, Augustine underscored that ‘we are bound to believe’ everything in Scripture.³³

To confirm this interpretation of Augustine, Hans Küng describes Augustine’s view: “the Spirit alone decided the content and form of the biblical writings, with the result that the whole Bible was free of contradictions, mistakes, and errors, or had to be kept free by harmonizing, allegorizing, or mysticizing. St. Augustine’s influence in regard to inspiration and inerrancy prevailed throughout the Middle Ages and right

³⁰ Letter XXVIII.3 in *Ibid.*, 1:251–52.

³¹ Letter LXXXII.3 in *Ibid.*, 350.

³² Letter XXVIII.3 in *Ibid.*, 1:252.

³³ *Historical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2011), 103.

into the modern age.”³⁴ Herman Sasse agrees with Küng’s assessment of the influence of Augustine’s view of inerrancy on subsequent church history,

During all these [fifteen] centuries no one doubted that the Bible in its entirety was God’s Word, that God was the principal author of the Scriptures, as their human authors had written under the inspiration of God the Holy Spirit, and that, therefore, these books were free from errors and contradictions, even when this did not seem to be the case. The Middle Ages had inherited this view from the Fathers who had established it in numerous exegetical and apologetical writings.³⁵

Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) is famous for his work *Why God Became Man* and for his formulation of the ontological proof for God’s existence. In words similar to those of Justin Martyr, Anselm writes, “For I am sure that, if I say anything which is undoubtedly contradictory to Holy Scripture, it is wrong; and, if I become aware of such a contradiction, I do not wish to hold to that opinion.”³⁶ Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), the most significant Western theologian of the Middle Ages, agrees with his predecessors when he asserts, “It is plain that nothing false can ever underlie the literal sense of Holy Writ.”³⁷ Although Aquinas’ theology was affected by Aristotelian philosophy, he recognized the unique place of Scripture. He writes, “other disciplines derive their certitude from the natural light of human reason, which can err, whereas theology derives its certitude from the light of the divine knowledge, which cannot be misled.”³⁸ While he exalted the ability of natural human reason, Aquinas was clear that the salvation of man not only depended upon the Bible, but an inerrant Bible. He states, “it was necessary that man should be taught by a divine revelation; because the truth about God, such as reason could discover, would only be known by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors. Whereas man’s whole salvation, which is in God, depends upon the knowledge of this truth.”³⁹

³⁴ Hans Küng, *Infallible? An Enquiry* (London: Collins, 1972), 174.

³⁵ “The Rise of the Dogma of Holy Scripture in the Middle Ages,” *Reformed Theological Review* 18:2 (June 1959): 45.

³⁶ *Why God Became Man*, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 298.

³⁷ *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, part. 1, question 1, article 10 (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1948), 7.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p1.q1.a5, 3.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p1.q1.a1, 1. Even in the time of the Reformation, the Catholic Church held to this doctrine. The famous opponent of Luther in the Leipzig Debate of 1519, John Eck (1486–1543), wrote to Erasmus: “Listen, dear Erasmus: do you suppose any Christian will patiently endure to be told that the evangelists in their Gospels made mistakes? If the authority of Holy Scripture at this point is shaky, can any other passage be free from the suspicion of error?” (*Collected Works of Erasmus*, translated by R. A. B. Mynors and D. F. S. Thomson, vol. 5, *The Correspondence of Erasmus* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976], 289–90).

The Reformation Church

As theological heirs of the Reformation, it is critical that the Reformers' position on inerrancy is understood by contemporary evangelicals. It is no surprise that the Reformation, which was known for *sola scriptura*, would emphasize the power, authority and inerrancy of the Bible. The great German Reformer, Martin Luther (1483–1546), wrote that Scripture “never erred” and “cannot err.”⁴⁰ Furthermore,

But everyone, indeed, knows that at times they [the Fathers] have erred as men will; therefore I am ready to trust them only when they prove their opinions from Scripture, which has never erred.⁴¹

It is impossible that Scripture should contradict itself, only that it so appears to the senseless and obstinate hypocrites.⁴²

Whoever is so bold that he ventures to accuse God of fraud and deception in a single word and does so willfully again and again after he has been warned and instructed once or twice will likewise certainly venture to accuse God of fraud and deception in all of His words. Therefore it is true, absolutely and without exception, that everything is believed or nothing is believed. The Holy Spirit does not suffer Himself to be separated or divided so that He should teach and cause to be believed one doctrine rightly and another falsely.⁴³

One little point of doctrine means more than heaven and earth, and therefore we cannot suffer to have the least jot thereof violated.⁴⁴

For it is established by God's Word that God does not lie, nor does His word lie.⁴⁵

This does not mean that Luther ignored difficulties in the Bible, however. In the case of biblical chronologies, Luther writes that he refuses to agree with “those rash men who in the case of a Bible difficulty are not afraid to say that Scripture is evidently wrong; I conclude the matter with a humble confession of my ignorance, for it is only the Holy Ghost who knows and understands everything.”⁴⁶ Therefore, we can conclude with J. Theodore Mueller, who, in his article “Luther and the Bible,” writes,

⁴⁰ *Works of Martin Luther* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), XV:1481; XIX:1073.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, XXXII:11.

⁴² *Ibid.*, IX:650

⁴³ *D. Martin Luthers Werke: kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1928), 54:158.

⁴⁴ *Works of Martin Luther*, IX:650

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, XX:798

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, I:721.

“Luther unfailingly asserts the inerrancy of Scripture over against the errancy of human historians and scientists.”⁴⁷

John Calvin (1509–1564) is largely recognized as producing the most significant theological representation of the Reformation in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. In his sermons and commentaries Calvin is clear that the authors of Scripture “put forward nothing of their own,”⁴⁸ and “dared not announce anything of their own, and obediently followed the Spirit as their guide, who ruled in their mouth as in his own sanctuary.”⁴⁹

Commenting on Calvin’s view of Scripture, J.I. Packer notes, “Calvin could never have consciously entertained the possibility that any mistakes, whether of reporting or of interpreting facts of any sort whatever, could have entered into the text of Scripture as the human writers gave it.”⁵⁰ Edward Dowey concurs, “To Calvin the theologian an error in Scripture is unthinkable.”⁵¹

Following Calvin, Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575) inherited a high view of the Scriptures from his predecessor, Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531) in Zürich. He writes, “all the words of God are true, steadfast, and undoubted. For heaven and earth shall pass away, but the eternal word of God shall never perish, nor shall one jot or title fall from it.”⁵²

In addition to its most famous theologians, the creeds of the Reformation also testify to the importance of inerrancy. Below are a sampling:

The French Confession of Faith (1559): “And inasmuch as it [the Bible] is the rule of all truth, containing all that is necessary for the service of God and for our salvation, it is not lawful for men, nor even angels, to add to it, to take away from, or to change it.” (Article V)

The Belgic Confession of Faith (1561): “We receive all these books, and these only, as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith; believing, without any doubt all things contained in them, not so much because the Church receives and approves them as such, but more especially because the Holy Ghost witnesseth in our hearts that they are from God, whereof they carry the evidence in themselves.” (Article V)

⁴⁷ In *Inspiration & Interpretation*, edited by John Walvoord (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1957), 99.

⁴⁸ “Twenty-fourth sermon on 2 Timothy,” in *The Deity of Christ and Other Sermons*, trans. Leroy Nixon (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1950), 244.

⁴⁹ *Calvin's Commentaries*, volume XXII, 2 Peter 1:20 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1981) 391.

⁵⁰ “John Calvin and the Inerrancy of Holy Scripture,” ed. John Hannah in *Inerrancy and the Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 178.

⁵¹ *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), 104.

⁵² “Letter CCCLIII” from 24 August 1554 in *Original Letters Relative to the English Reformation*, volume 2, edited and translated by Hastings Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1847), 750.

The Irish Articles of Religion (1615): “All [Scripture] we acknowledge to be given by the inspiration of God, and in that regard to be of most certain credit and highest authority.”⁵³

The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) follows the terminology used throughout history to support inerrancy. The authors of the confession explain that the Bible is “infallible truth” and that “a Christian believes to be true whatever is revealed in the Word because the authority of God himself speaks therein.”⁵⁴ This is confirmed by future confessions such as the New Hampshire Baptist Confession (1833), which states that the Bible “has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth without any mixture of error for its matter.”⁵⁵

The Puritans were also completely committed to the inerrancy of Scripture. As one of the most popular theology books of the time, William Ames’ (1576–1633) *The Marrow of Sacred Theology* clearly states the case: “Only those could set down the rule of faith and conduct in writing who in that matter were free from all error because of the direct and infallible direction they had from God.”⁵⁶ As one of the members of the Westminster Assembly, William Whitaker writes, “We cannot but wholly disapprove the opinion of those, who think that the sacred writers have in some places, fallen into mistakes.”⁵⁷

John Owen (1616–1683), perhaps the greatest Puritan theologian, followed the church’s tradition on the inerrancy of Scripture. He writes,

It is, then, the wisdom of every Christian to inquire upon what account he receives this rule; – why he believes it and submits to it; – whether he be persuaded that it is of God by God himself, or only by man. For if he can find indeed that he receives it upon the authority of God, he may be secure of the truth and sufficiency of it; but if only on that of men, they being liable to mistakes, may lead them into error; and so he can never be sure that what he owns as his rule is indeed the right one, and of God’s own prescribing.⁵⁸

Explaining the nature of inspiration, Owen continues, “The word that came unto them was a book which they took *in* and gave *out* without any alteration of one tittle or syllable The word is come forth unto us from God, without the least mixture or intervenience of any medium obnoxious to fallibility.”⁵⁹

⁵³ *The Creeds of Christendom*, edited by Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Baker Books), 3:362, 386–87, 527.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 602, 630.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 742.

⁵⁶ *The Marrow of Sacred Theology* (Boston: Pilgrim, 1968), 185.

⁵⁷ *Disputation on Holy Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1849), 36–37.

⁵⁸ *The Works of John Owen* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1968), 8:497. See also 8:506 and 20:38.

⁵⁹ *Works*, 3:144–45.

Owen's rival to the claim of greatest Puritan theologian, Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), was a confirmed follower of the church's traditional belief in inerrancy. In his sermon on 2 Timothy 3:16, Edwards says,

... no man could make such a Book as the Bible It must be made by wicked men or good men Wicked men would not make it. Good men could not . . .

Hence we may learn that all the Scripture says to us is certainly true Consider how much it is worth the while to go often to your Bible to hear the great God Himself speak to you. There you may hear Christ speak. How much better must we think this is than the word of men Here all is true; nothing false.⁶⁰

John Smith, former professor of philosophy at Yale University, affirms Edwards' position with lament: "The central problem is this: Edwards . . . accepted totally the tradition established by the Reformers with respect to the absolute primacy and authority of the Bible, and he could approach the biblical writings with that conviction of their inerrancy and literal truth which one usually associates with Protestant fundamentalism."⁶¹

The Modern Church

It was during the Modern Period that critical views of the Bible began to emerge in a significant way. Following the rise of René Descartes' (1596–1650) philosophical rationalism, reason became the chief guide in all matters. Characteristic of this modern project was a rejection of authority (church, Bible), a trust in autonomous reason to determine truth, a quest for certainty, individualism, and optimism about human ability.

It is at this time that Isaac La Peyrere (1592–1676) claimed that the apostle Paul revealed to him that there was a pre-Adamic race that existed more than 50,000 years ago. This had such an impact that Richard Popkin comments, "The whole enterprise of reconciling Scripture and the new science was blown apart by a mad genius, Isaac La Peyrere . . . [who] really set off the warfare between theology and science."⁶² Following Peyrere, Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) questions the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and claimed that most of the Old Testament was post-Exilic (*Leviathan* [1651]). Baruch de Spinoza (1632–1677) then posits that the Bible is not a divine book, but a part of nature and subject to its laws (*Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* [1670]).

⁶⁰ "2 Tim. iii.16—'All scripture is given by inspiration of God'" in *Selections from the Unpublished Writings of Jonathan Edwards of America*, edited by Rev. Alexander Grosart (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1992), 194–95.

⁶¹ "Jonathan Edwards as Philosophical Theologian" in *Review of Metaphysics* 30 (December 1976), 306.

⁶² "Skepticism, Theology, and the Scientific Revolution in the Seventeenth Century," *Problems in the Philosophy of Science*, ed. I. Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing, 1968), 3:18.

The empirical philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) gives a classic statement regarding the elevation of reason over the Scriptures, “Reason must be our last judge and guide in everything. I do not mean, that we must consult reason, and examine whether a proposition revealed from God can be made out by natural principles; and if it cannot, that then we may reject it; but consult it we must, and by it examine if it be a revelation from God or no; and if reason finds it to be revealed from God, reason then declares for it, as much as for any other truth, and makes it one of her dictates.”⁶³ This would quickly affect Christianity as seen by the Christian apologist Joseph Butler (1692–1752) who wrote, “Let reason be kept to: and if any part of the Scripture account of the redemption of the world by Christ can be shown to be really contrary to it, let the Scripture, in the name of God, be given up.”⁶⁴

It was this rationalistic philosophy that led to a major movement called Deism. In Deism, God is portrayed as a watchmaker who winds the clock (the world) and then leaves the clock to run by itself. Consequently, if everything is under natural law, there is nothing supernatural in our world: including divine revelation, God becoming man, miracles, prophecy, and the Trinity. They also rejected original sin because they believed in the innate goodness of man to improve himself. For Deists, the purpose behind Christianity was not to believe in Jesus per se, but to maintain a life of true virtue and piety for the improvement of society. So the Bible was for them simply an ethical guidebook. Popular deists were the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–76) who strongly attacked biblical miracles. In France were Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) and Voltaire (1694–1778), and in America Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826), Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790), and Thomas Paine (1737–1809). Thomas Jefferson is famous for the Jeffersonian Bible in which he removed all of the miracles in the Bible. He describes his method of editing the text: “Abstracting what is really [Jesus’] from the rubbish in which it is buried . . . [is like separating] the diamond from the dung hill”⁶⁵ Again, autonomous reason decides what God is allowed to say.

Jean LeClerc (1657–1736) continued the work of Spinoza in rejecting the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch but claimed that a distinction should be made between inspired portions of Scripture with uninspired. To characterize the Modern Period, it is appropriate to cite the words of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804): “Enlightenment is man's exodus from his self-incurred tutelage . . . use the mind without the guidance of another. ‘Dare to know’ (*sapere aude*)! Have the courage to use your own understanding; this is the motto of the Enlightenment.”⁶⁶

Such is the background for the birth of liberalism. The father modern liberalism is known as Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768–1834). He is perhaps the most influential theologian of the 19th century. In 1799 Schleiermacher released one of his most important works, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*. As

⁶³ *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London: William Baynes and Son, 1824), 640.

⁶⁴ In *The Works of Bishop Butler* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 260.

⁶⁵ Thomas Jefferson, letter to William Short from Monticello (October 31, 1819). Quoted in Merrill D. Peterson, ed., *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1994), 1430–33.

⁶⁶ “An Answer to the Question: What is the Enlightenment,” 58–64 in *What is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 58.

the title of his book indicates, Schleiermacher's goal was to save Christianity by making it palatable to the rational man. He posits that Christianity is misunderstood—it is not about knowledge and doctrine of the Bible, but about human experience, feeling, and intuition. In his next book, *Christian Faith* (1821), he defined religion as “the feeling of absolute dependence” or “God-consciousness.” This is of course radically individualistic, and anti-authoritarian. Consequently, he denied cardinal doctrines such as original sin, the virgin birth, authority of the Bible, the Trinity, the atonement and others. This then would lead to the severe criticism of the Bible by men such as Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792-1860), David Friedrich Strauss (1808-1874), Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), and Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930).

Despite this burgeoning criticism of the Bible, conservative Christians maintained and defended the inerrancy of Scripture. Writing in the time of Descartes, Francis Turretin (1623–1687) states, “The sacred writers were so acted upon and inspired by the Holy Spirit (as to the things themselves and as to the words) as to be kept free from all error and . . . their writings are truly authentic and divine . . . The prophets did not fall into mistakes in those things which they wrote as inspired men (*theopneustos*) and as prophets, not even in the smallest particulars; otherwise faith in the whole of Scripture would be rendered doubtful.”⁶⁷ Writing with similar conviction, John Andrew Quenstedt (1617–1688) notes, “[the prophets and apostles] could in no manner make mistakes in their writing, and no falsification, no error, no danger of error, no untruth obtained or could abstain in their preaching or writing. This was because the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of truth and the Fountain of all wisdom, and who had as His hand and pen holy writers, cannot deceive or be deceived, neither can He err or have a lapse of memory.”⁶⁸

Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), popularly believed to be America's greatest theologian, and a key figure in the First Great Awakening, directly addressed the growing dependence upon reason to attack the Bible. He believed in the “perfection of the Scripture”⁶⁹ and as a result preaches, “we learn [that] that rule of interpreting Scripture so much insisted upon by many of late, namely, first to determine by our own reason what is agreeable to the moral perfections of God and then to interpret the Scriptures by them, is an unjust and fallacious one.” For Edwards, to do so is “absurd, namely, to make the dictates of our own reason the highest rule in judging of the things of God and to make it a rule to revelation itself.” He rejected the theistic rationalism of his day by preaching, “Divine revelation . . . does not go a begging for credit and validity by approbation and applause of our understandings.”⁷⁰

Living coterminously with Edwards, John Wesley (1703–1791) was also a great revivalist and an important figure in the establishment of Methodism. He writes, “Nay, if there be any mistakes in the Bible, there may as well be a thousand. If there

⁶⁷ *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., translated by George Musgrave Giger, 3 volumes in 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Press, 1997), 2nd topic, 4th questions, section 5, section 23, 1:62, 69.

⁶⁸ *Theologia Didactico Polemica* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), I:112.

⁶⁹ *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 13:203.

⁷⁰ Richard A. Bailey and Gregory A. Wills, editors, *The Salvation of Souls: Nine Previously Unpublished Sermons on the Call of Ministry and the Gospel by Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2002), 127.

be one falsehood in that book, it did not come from the God of truth.”⁷¹ Affirming the trustworthiness of the Scripture, Wesley continues, “The Scripture, therefore, of the Old and New Testament is a most solid and precious system of divine truth. Every part thereof is worthy of God; and all together are one entire body, wherein is no defect, no excess.”⁷²

Moving into the nineteenth century, Princetonians such as Charles Hodge (1797–1878) and Benjamin Warfield (1851–1921) popularized the inerrantist view against liberalism. Concluding that century, perhaps no one has given a more eloquent response to the challenges to inerrancy than the great Baptist preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834–1892):

I believe that there is no mistake whatever in the original Holy Scriptures from beginning to end. There may be, and there are, mistakes of translation; for translators are not inspired; but even the historical facts are correct. Doubt has been cast upon them here and there, and at times with great show of reason—doubt which it has been impossible to meet for a season; but only give space enough, and search enough, and the stones buried in the earth cry out to confirm each letter of Scripture. Old manuscripts, coins, and inscriptions, are on the side of the Book, and against it there are nothing but theories, and the fact that many an event in history has no other record but that which the Book affords us. The Book has been of late in the furnace of criticism; but much of that furnace has grown cold from the fact that the criticism is beneath contempt. “The words of the Lord are pure words”: there is not an error of any sort in the whole compass of them. These words come from him who can make no mistake, and who can have no wish to deceive his creatures. If I did not believe in the infallibility of the Book, I would rather be without it. If I am to judge the Book, it is no judge of me. If I am to sift it, like the heap on the threshing-floor, and lay this aside and only accept that, according to my own judgment, then I have no guidance whatever, unless I have conceit enough to trust to my own heart. The new theory denies infallibility to the words of God, but practically imputes it to the judgments of men; at least, this is all the infallibility which they can get at. I protest that I will rather risk my soul with a guide inspired from heaven, than with the differing leaders who arise from the earth at the call of “modern thought.”⁷³

Conclusion

This article has shown that the majority of theologians throughout church history have held to the inerrancy of Scripture. R. Laird Harris confirms this when he writes, “It is safe to say that there is no doctrine, except those of the Trinity and the

⁷¹ *The Journal of John Wesley*, 8 volumes, edited by Nehemiah Curnock (London: The Epworth Press, 1938), 6:117.

⁷² “Preface,” *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, point 10 accessed at “The Wesley Center Online” on 1 March 2014 (<http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/john-wesleys-notes-on-the-bible/preface-to-the-new-testament-notes>).

⁷³ “The Bible Tried and Proved,” preached on 5 May 1889. *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1975), 35:253–64.

deity of Christ, which has been so widely held through the ages of Church history as that of verbal inspiration.”⁷⁴ Consequently, it must be emphasized that those who posit an errant Bible not only contradict the Scriptures, but also place themselves outside of church tradition. As Gregg Allison writes,

The church has historically acknowledged that Scripture in its original manuscripts and properly interpreted is completely true and without any error in everything that it affirms, whether that has to do with doctrine, moral conduct, or matters of history, cosmology, geography, and the like. Over time, the church has expressed this conviction by applying a number of terms to the Bible, such as truthful, inerrant, and infallible. No matter what term it used, the church from its outset was united in its belief that the Word of God is true and contains no error. The first significant challenge to this belief did not arise until the seventeenth century.⁷⁵

Acknowledging that the evidence overwhelmingly supports this claim, one may wonder why it is challenged. After his detailed analysis of this topic, John Woodbridge concludes that Rogers' and McKim's scholarship “does little to enhance an open-minded reader's confidence in the reliability of their documentation, or in their manner of doing history.”⁷⁶ It is evident that historians such as Rogers and McKim have revised history in order to make their theology palatable to mainstream evangelicalism.⁷⁷ As a result of these observations, and realizing that the writing of history is an ethical responsibility, Christians should hear the clarion call for careful and honest scholarship.

The battle over the Bible is a struggle worth fighting. Harold Lindsell, once Vice-President of Fuller, and champion of inerrancy, warns us, “Down the road, whether it takes five or fifty years, any institution that departs from belief in an inerrant Scripture will likewise depart from other fundamentals of the faith and at last cease to be evangelical in the historical meaning of that term.”⁷⁸ Former President of Fuller Seminary, Harold Ockenga, concurs, “The evidence that those who surrender the doctrine of inerrancy inevitably move away from orthodoxy is indisputable.”⁷⁹ If God has exalted His Word to the extent of His name (Ps 137:2), then defending the truthfulness of Scripture is an extension of defending the honor of God. May the

⁷⁴ *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1969), 72. J.N.D. Kelly concurs, “it goes without saying that the fathers envisaged the whole Bible as inspired. It was not a collection of desperate segments, some of divine origin and others of merely human fabrication . . . their general view was that Scripture was not only exempt from error but contained nothing that was superfluous” (*Early Christian Doctrines* [New York: HarperCollins, 1978], 61).

⁷⁵ *Historical Theology*, 99.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁷⁷ Elsewhere Woodbridge writes, “They wanted to baptize as evangelical the hypothesis that the Bible is infallible for matters of faith and practice but errant in matters of science, history, and the like.” “Toward an Evaluation of the Rogers and McKim Proposal,” in *Biblical Authority and Conservative Perspectives* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1997), 62.

⁷⁸ *Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1978), 120–21.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, “Preface,” 12.

church universal continue to defend this doctrine of inerrancy as it has been passed down to her by a long line of godly men and women throughout history.

Last eve I passed beside a blacksmith's door
And heard the anvil ring the vesper chime;
When looking in, I saw upon the floor,
Old hammers worn with beating years of time.
"How many anvils have you had," said I,
"To wear and batter these hammers so?"
"Just one," said he; then with a twinkling eye,
"The anvil wears the hammers out, you know."
And so, I thought, the anvil of God's Word,
For ages, skeptics blows have beat upon;
Yet, though the noise of falling blows was heard,
The anvil is unharmed—the hammers gone.
-John Clifford⁸⁰

⁸⁰ New Zealand Herald, volume XXII, issue 7461, 17 October 1885, 3.