

IS NEW TESTAMENT INERRANCY A NEW TESTAMENT CONCEPT? A TRADITIONAL AND THEREFORE OPEN-MINDED ANSWER

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The reason I put the question this way is the simple observation that the word “inerrancy” does not play any significant role in the NT. I know of just one possible exception in the teaching of Jesus. In his discussion with the Sadducees about the resurrection of the dead, Jesus says: “You are in error (πλανᾶσθε), because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God” (Matt 22:29 par. Mark 12:24, 27). In other words, the Sadducees would not have erred had they known the Scriptures which do not err, at least not in the section from Exod 3:6 and 15 which Jesus quotes.

Furthermore, nowhere in the Gospels does Jesus ever say or imply that the Scriptures can contain errors. According to the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus distinguished in his Bible between more important and less important sections,¹ but he is not reported to have differentiated between biblical passages with and without divine authority.

On the other hand, we do not have a logion in which Jesus explicitly states that his whole Bible is without error. In order to identify Jesus’ position on biblical inerrancy it is obviously not enough to do a simple word study or to rely on an argument from silence; it is necessary to ask if Jesus’ explicit understanding of his holy Scriptures was compatible with the concept of inerrancy.

When it comes to the inerrancy of the NT, we are in a still more difficult position. On this topic we do not have even a single statement from Jesus, nor do we have a comment by any of his apostles about the truth of the NT canon. But we can at least ask if the theological notion of inerrancy is in line with what the bearers of the NT revelation have to say about their teaching and their books.

I. AN HISTORICAL REFLECTION: WHAT IS THE ESSENCE OF NT INERRANCY?

In order to understand what the post-biblical term “inerrancy” and the related concept means it is helpful to briefly recall what some of the most prominent of its proponents have had to say about the concept.

1. *Augustine’s 82nd Letter* (AD 405). My first example is the church father Augustine, who in one of his letters to his theological dialogue partner Jerome distin-

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¹ Matt 23:23: “You have neglected the weightier matters of the law.”

guished the inerrant books of the Bible from the errant theological treatises of his colleague:

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. As to all other writings, in reading them, however great the superiority of the authors to myself in sanctity and learning, I do not accept their teaching as true on the mere ground of the opinion being held by them; but only because they have succeeded in convincing my judgment of its truth either by means of these canonical writings themselves, or by arguments addressed to my reason. I believe, my brother, that this is your own opinion as well as mine. I do not need to say that I do not suppose you to wish your books to be read like those of prophets or of apostles, concerning which it would be wrong to doubt that they are free from error. Far be such arrogance from that humble piety and just estimate of yourself which I know you to have.²

2. *Martin Luther's Argument in Defense of all the Articles (1521)*. My second example is the German Reformer Martin Luther, who in 1521 in his *Argument in Defense of all the Articles* also distinguished between the errant teachers of the church and the inerrant teaching of the Bible. In support of his position, Luther quoted the section from Augustine's letter to Jerome, which I just cited and explained:

This is my answer to those also who accuse me of rejecting all the holy teachers of the church. I do not reject them. But everyone, indeed, knows that at times they have erred, as men will; therefore I am ready to trust them only when they give me evidence for their opinions from Scripture, which has never erred. This St. Paul bids me to do in 1 Thess. 5:21, where he says, 'Test everything; hold fast what is good.' St. Augustine writes to St. Jerome to the same effect.³

The statements by Augustine and Luther make it quite clear that traditionally the center of the notion of inerrancy concerned the conviction that humans err but God's word does not, not the question of how the many differences between the Synoptic parallel accounts can best be harmonized. This latter aspect was not regarded as irrelevant (see below) but was not the main emphasis of inerrancy.

3. *The Roman Catholic Constitution Dei Verbum (1965)*. The Roman Catholic dogmatic constitution on divine revelation *Dei Verbum* from 1965 referred (in a footnote) to the same statement by Augustine when it spoke about the Bible's inerrancy:

Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error

² Augustine *Epist.* 82.1.3 (CSEL 34/2, 354, 3–11, ed. A. Goldbacher; trans. *NPNF*¹ 1:350).

³ M. Luther, *Assertio omnium articulorum* (trans. C. M. Jacobs and G. W. Forell in *Luther's Works* [ed. J. Pelikan; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1958] 32.11).

(sine errore) that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation.⁴

In his autobiography, the liberal Roman Catholic theologian Hans Küng relates how, during the Second Vatican Council, he and others fought against the words “without (any) error” in *Dei verbum* but were not successful.⁵

4. *The evangelical Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978)*. Less than 15 years later, in 1978, the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* reinforced in article XII: “We affirm that Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from falsehood, fraud, or deceit.” As this sentence demonstrates, the Chicago Statement did not merely address the issue of unintentional falsehood (i.e. error), but also of intentional falsehood (i.e. deceit). The superordinate concepts are (intentional and unintentional) falsehood and (intentional and unintentional) truth. To say that the Bible is true includes two subordinate statements, namely that it is free from error and that it is free from deceit. This brings me to my second point.

II. THE POINT OF ORIGIN: WHAT IS THE THEOLOGICAL BACKBONE OF NT INERRANCY?

What evidence may be considered the most essential in support of the traditional doctrine of inerrancy? I believe the truth (i.e. the absence of error and deceit) of the NT Scriptures is primarily an implication of the truthfulness (1) of God, (2) of his Son Jesus Christ, and (3) of the apostles whom he appointed. The NT Gospels and letters are the written documentation of the divine message of Christ and the apostles (section III below). Therefore, the most elementary starting point for the assumption of the Bible’s truthfulness is the conviction that God always tells the truth. He never lies or deceives.

1. *God tells the truth (the inerrancy of God)*. In the Greco-Roman world, this conviction was not unanimously accepted as a matter of course. In classical Greek poetry, starting with Homer, the pagan gods could be presented as liars and deceivers.⁶ Homer’s influential poetic theology, however, was not approved by all ancient Greek philosophers and rhetors. Plato, for instance, claimed that “from every point of view the divine and the divinity are free from falsehood (ἀψευδὲς).”⁷ He therefore criticized the way in which Homer had portrayed the gods.⁸

⁴ H. Denzinger and P. Hünermann, eds., *Enchiridion Symbolorum: A Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations of the Catholic Church: Latin-English* (43rd ed.; San Francisco: Ignatius, 2012) 4216.

⁵ H. Küng, *My Struggle for Freedom: Memoirs* (trans. J. Bowden; London: Continuum, 2003) 366–68.

⁶ Homer put the following words into Agamemnon’s mouth: “Great Zeus, son of Cronos, has ensnared me in grievous blindness of heart, cruel god! seeing that of old he promised me, and bowed his head thereto, that not until I had sacked well-walled Ilios should I get me home; *but now has he planned cruel deceit*, and bids me return inglorious to Argos, when I have lost much people” (Homer *Il.* 2.111–115 [Murray, LCL]).

⁷ Plato *Resp.* 2.382e (Shorey, LCL).

⁸ Plato *Resp.* 2.383a: “‘You concur then,’ I said, ‘this as our second norm or canon for speech and poetry about the gods,—that they are neither wizards in shape-shifting nor do they mislead us by falsehoods (ψεῦδέσι) in words or deed?’ ‘I concur.’ ‘Then, though there are many other things that we praise

According to many ancient thinkers, the gods were not only free from deceit but also free from error. In one of his speeches, Demosthenes quoted an epitaph about the inerrancy of God:

God errs not, fails not; God alone is great;
But man lies helpless in the hands of fate.⁹

In the NT, it is the unanimous conviction of all its authors that God is absolutely truthful. The Pauline corpus, the Johannine corpus, and the Letter to the Hebrews fully agree on this point. What they confirm is not so much the conviction that God does not *err* but rather that he does not *lie*. According to Hebrews 6:18, “it is impossible for God to lie.” Paul says: “Although everyone is a liar, let God be proved true” (Rom 3:4; cf. Titus 1:2). According to the Johannine writings, God is not a liar (1 John 5:10) but truthful (John 3:33; cf. 8:26), and his word is truth (John 17:17).

It goes without saying that these statements are the legacy of the OT’s notion of God (Num 23:19). The truthfulness of God is an essential part of Jewish-Christian theology and is not called into question by Christian theologians, regardless of their heritage or denominational allegiance.

2. *Jesus claimed to tell the truth (the inerrancy of Jesus)*. Directly related to this is the conviction that Jesus always told the truth, although among modern Christian theologians this statement is not uncontested. That Jesus always told the truth is an immediate implication of the Christian confession that he was the Son of God and shared his Father’s unrestricted truthfulness. In the NT Gospels, Jesus claims several times that he is “telling the truth” (John 8:45–46; 16:7) and that there is “nothing false” in him (John 7:18). The same claim is expressed by his introductory phrases “Truly I say to you” (Luke 9:27; 12:44; 21:3) or “Amen, I tell you” (Matt 5:18 etc.). Some of his listeners explicitly recognize that Jesus teaches “the way of God in accordance with the truth” (Luke 20:21). Jesus’ assertion that he tells the truth includes the claim that he brings a singular revelation about God that he has received directly from God. He calls himself “a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God” (John 8:40). He affirms that he is “the truth” (John 14:6). The evangelist John confirms that the ultimate truth about God came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17). According to this self-portrayal, Jesus neither lies nor deceives, whether in mundane or divine matters.

There are, however, one or two places in the Gospels where Jesus appears to approve of deceit or even to act deceitfully himself. If this were the case, these sections would disprove Jesus’ claim to invariable truthfulness. In the Parable of the Unjust Steward, Jesus says that “his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly” (Luke 16:8). This statement might at first sight look like an endorsement of the manager’s financial cheating. But on closer inspec-

in Homer, this we will not applaud, the sending of the dream by Zeus to Agamemnon.” (Shorey, LCL; cf. A. Fürst, “Lüge (Täuschung),” *RAC* 23.620–45, esp. 625–27).

⁹Demosthenes *Orat.* 18.289 (Vince, LCL); cf. C. Osborne, K. Traede, A. Fürst, “Irrtum,” *RAC* 18.854–910, esp. 860–61.

tion the master does not commend his servant's dishonesty but solely his shrewdness.¹⁰

In the Emmaus pericope, when he and his two disciples approached the village Emmaus, Jesus "walked ahead as if he were going on" (Luke 24:28). The context makes it clear that Jesus did so although actually he was hoping for an invitation to stay overnight. But rather than being a lie, this behavior was more probably a conventional way of giving his disciples the opportunity to invite him because Jesus did not want to "force his presence on them."¹¹

More serious is the problem related to Jesus' prediction that some of his contemporaries will not die before they have seen the kingdom of God come with power, a prophecy which he introduced with the words "truly I tell you" (Matt 16:28 par Mark 9:1). Some modern readers of this prediction believe it has not come true and conclude that, at least in this instance, Jesus was wrong and therefore cannot have been inerrant. The German deist Hermann Samuel Reimarus was one of the first to draw this conclusion and was convinced that with this discovery he had overthrown one of the supporting pillars of the Christian faith.¹² Jesus' inerrancy is not disproved, however, if the logion in Mark 9:1 is unauthentic¹³ or if the ancient interpretation is correct that it was fulfilled only a few days later in Jesus' transfiguration.¹⁴

Certainly by this point at the latest, the above-mentioned unanimity of the Christian interpreters of the Bible disappears. While some readers of the Bible continue to uphold the traditional Christian belief that Jesus was inerrant and that his teaching is free from error and deceit, others regard it as necessary to abandon this Christological position. In some cases, this negative judgment is the direct result of an exegesis of Mark 9:1, in other cases the conviction that Jesus was not free from error has other roots and is only confirmed by the interpretation of his contested prediction.

3. *The apostles claim to tell the truth (the inerrancy of the apostles).* In addition to Jesus, his apostles also claimed to tell the truth about God and his gospel. The most obvious example is the apostle Paul who in his letters repeatedly underscores the truth of what he is writing. He emphasized several times that he is not lying (Rom 9:1; 2 Cor 11:31; Gal 1:20; 1 Tim 2:7) and does not deceive his hearers and readers (1 Thess 2:3). In order to substantiate the truth of his apostolic message, Paul refers to the divine revelation he has received as an apostle of Jesus Christ (Gal 1:1). Paul claims "that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal 1:11–12). Since his gospel is not of human but of

¹⁰ Cf. D. J. Ireland, *Stewardship and the Kingdom of God: An Historical, Exegetical, and Contextual Study of the Parable of the Unjust Steward in Luke 16:1–13* (NovTSup 70; Leiden: Brill, 1992) 65–83.

¹¹ I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (NIGTC 3; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 897.

¹² Cf. M. Künzi, *Das Nabewartungslogion Markus 9,1 par* (BGBE 21; Tübingen: Mohr, 1977) 77–78.

¹³ Cf. the scholars mentioned by Künzi, *Nabewartungslogion* 143–56.

¹⁴ Cf. Künzi, *Nabewartungslogion* 8 and *passim*.

divine origin, Paul calls it “the word of God” and distinguishes it from “the word of men” (1 Thess 2:13; cf. 1 Cor 2:13).

In contrast to his Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, however, Paul does not claim that *all his words* are true, free from deceit and free from error. Rather, he restricted this claim to his apostolic utterances. Paul saw himself as a fallible man who could not claim that he always told the truth. But he was convinced that what he had to say and write as an apostle of Jesus Christ was true and more authoritative than his merely human words.

A challenge to Paul’s apostolic authority was leveled by the observation that, while on the one hand Paul strongly warned against *circumcising Christian believers*,¹⁵ on the other hand he circumcised Timothy (Acts 16:1–3). In the 4th century, Macarius Magnes quoted this pagan objection against Paul’s integrity in his *Answer-Book (Aporiticus)*.¹⁶ But Paul’s different approaches to circumcision easily mesh if in his Letter to the Galatians Paul dealt with “circumcision as a means of salvation” and in Acts 16 he used circumcision without any soteriological implications simply as “a legal act to remove a stigma from Timothy.”¹⁷

In the whole NT, the most serious challenge regarding the truthfulness of one of the apostles can be found in Paul’s report about the Antioch incident. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul writes: “When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because *he was clearly in the wrong*” (Gal 2:11). A little further on Paul explains that Peter and his fellow Jewish Christians “were *not acting in line with the truth of the gospel*” (Gal 2:14). Jerome reports that already in the second half of the third century the Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry had deduced from this passage that the apostle Peter cannot have been inerrant:

That impious man Porphyry from Batanea did not comprehend any of this. In the first book of his treatise against us (Christians), he alleged that Peter had been rebuked by Paul because he did not walk upright as he spread the Gospel. His intention was to charge Peter with error and Paul with impudence and to implicate the entire community (of Christians) in the lie of fabricated teaching on the grounds that the leaders of the churches disagreed among themselves.¹⁸

Similar objections were quoted by Macarius Magnes¹⁹ and raised by Julian Apostata.²⁰ The Church Fathers developed two different kinds of answers to this plea. Some tried to show that the apostle Peter was not guilty of any mistake. Oth-

¹⁵ Gal 5:2: “Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.”

¹⁶ Cf. J. G. Cook, *The Interpretation of the NT in Greco-Roman Paganism* (Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 3; Tübingen: Mohr, 2000) 213–15.

¹⁷ I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1980) 259–60.

¹⁸ Porphyrius *Adversus Christianos* (fragm. 21a Harnack) = Jerome *Comm. Gal.* 1.pref. (trans. A. Cain, *St. Jerome: Commentary on Galatians* [FC 121; Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010] 59–60); cf. Cook, *Interpretation*, 158–59; R. Hennings, *Der Briefwechsel zwischen Augustinus und Hieronymus und ihr Streit um den Kanon des Alten Testaments und die Auslegung von Gal. 2,11–14* (VCSup 21; Leiden: Brill, 1994) 225–28; cf. Osborne/Traede/Fürst, “Irrtum” 899–903.

¹⁹ Cf. Cook, *Interpretation* 210–12.

²⁰ Cf. Cook, *Interpretation* 315–16.

ers accepted his guilt but underscored that his mistake was not in conflict with the notion of apostolic inerrancy.

Clement of Alexandria opted for the first approach by distinguishing the Cephas mentioned in Galatians 2 from the apostle Peter.²¹ With a similar intention, Jerome stated that in Antioch Peter and Paul had just pretended a theological conflict but in reality did not disagree at all.²²

In contrast to this rather weak approach, Tertullian's defense of Peter's mistake was that "the fault surely was one of conversation, not of preaching."²³ This interpretation is confirmed by Paul's statement that "the other Jews joined him [i.e. Peter] in his hypocrisy" (Gal 2:13). As F. F. Bruce observed, "Paul calls their action ὑπόκρισις, 'play-acting,' because it did not spring from inner conviction.... He applied that term to Cephas's abstention because it sprang from expedience, not principle."²⁴ If this interpretation is correct, Peter did not proclaim a different gospel but, in at least one case, did not act in accordance with the true apostolic gospel by not unambiguously practicing what he preached. His mistake was not a doctrinal error but rather one of false conduct.

Among modern theologians, the inerrancy of the apostolic teaching is probably even more contested than the inerrancy of the teaching of Jesus. Some theologians who hesitate to call the truth of an authentic Jesus logion into question treat the teaching of Paul with considerably less restraint. By way of contrast, for adherents of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, not only the inerrancy of Jesus Christ but also the inerrancy of his apostles is the backbone of their view on Scripture. I turn now, in a third step, from the inerrancy of certain persons to the inerrancy of certain documents.

III. THE IMPLICATION:

IN WHAT SENSE ARE THE NT DOCUMENTS INERRANT?

The NT books claim to offer a correct account of the non-deceptive and inerrant teaching of Jesus and his apostles. If their truth claim is recognized, the NT Gospels and the NT epistles can also be regarded as theologically normative. At the same time, the traditional understanding of inerrancy (briefly mentioned above) has not been that the NT books are inerrant in every sense and every respect but rather in a sense that is adequate to their character and purpose.

1. *Historical reflection.* This aspect of biblical inerrancy was one of the topics of the papal encyclical letter *Divino Afflante Spiritu (Inspired by the Holy Spirit)* which Pope Pius XII issued in 1943:

No one, who has a correct idea of biblical inspiration, will be surprised to find, even in the Sacred Writers, as in other ancient authors, certain fixed ways of expounding and narrating, certain definite idioms, especially of a kind peculiar to the Semitic tongues, so-called approximations, and certain hyperbolic modes

²¹ Clement of Alexandria according to Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 1.12.

²² Cf. Hennings, *Der Briefwechsel zwischen Augustinus und Hieronymus* 274–91.

²³ Tertullian *Praescr.* 23.10–11 (*ANF* 3:254).

²⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (NIGTC 9; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 131.

of expression, nay, at times, even paradoxical, which even help to impress the ideas more deeply on the mind. For of the modes of expression which, among ancient peoples, and especially those of the East, human language used to express its thought, none is excluded from the Sacred Books, provided the way of speaking adopted in no wise contradicts the holiness and truth of God ... the words of God, expressed in human language, are made like to human speech in every respect, except error.

And further:

When then such modes of expression are met within the sacred text, which, being meant for men, is couched in human language, justice demands that they be no more taxed with error than when they occur in the ordinary intercourse of daily life.²⁵

The same conviction as in this Roman Catholic document found expression, albeit in much less detail, in article XIII of the evangelical *Chicago Statement*:

We deny that it is proper to evaluate Scripture according to standards of truth and error that are alien to its usage or purpose. We further deny that inerrancy is negated by Biblical phenomena such as a lack of modern technical precision, irregularities of grammar or spelling, observational descriptions of nature, the reporting of falsehoods, the use of hyperbole and round numbers, the topical arrangement of material, variant selections of material in parallel accounts, or the use of free citations.

These hermeneutical principles are designed to prevent us from demanding mathematical precision from NT texts but rather historical and theological reliability in terms of the ordinary communication of daily life. This approach leaves some room for discretion while at the same time not calling into question the conviction that the NT is true in all that it affirms.

2. *The Gospels tell the truth (they neither err nor deceive)*. It is worth noticing that the Gospel authors do not claim to *produce* the word of God as Jesus (and Paul) did. They rather claim to have collected and *reproduced* a representative selection of the most important things which Jesus said and did (John 20:30–31; Acts 1:1). The NT Gospels claim to be correct representations of the life of Jesus Christ (Luke 1:1–4; John 19:35; 21:24). According to their authors, the Gospels are true (i.e. free from deception and error) since they truly transmit the divine and flawless words and deeds of the Son of God.

For those who regard the teaching of the NT as altogether true, the teaching of the Gospels is normative. That means, for instance, that if the Gospels present Jesus as teaching the reality of eternal life and death this is not just an element of human and therefore fallible theology but carries with it the claim to be an instance of divine revelation. If a number of Christian theologians disagree with such a scriptural affirmation, it is those dissenting theologians who must be mistaken and not the Scriptures. Just as the Scriptures are more authoritative than the texts writ-

²⁵ *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, section 37 (Denzinger/Hünemann, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 3830).

ten by Augustine or Jerome, they are also more authoritative than any text written by modern theologians such as Friedrich Schleiermacher.²⁶

If the NT Scriptures maintain a historical and bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead, this assertion outweighs the alternative convictions that Jesus was raised only spiritually without his body or that his resurrection was not a historical event at all. The objection by David Hume, David Friedrich Strauss, and many others that such a miracle is impossible for philosophical reasons must be dealt with—but those who believe in the inerrancy of the NT regard this position with a certain amount of skepticism and will expect that after careful consideration of the counterarguments they will turn out to be overdrawn and unsustainable.

Yet to what degree are the historical reports of the Gospels accurate and flawless? Early on the Church Fathers discussed this question. Augustine wrote a large book on this topic, his *Harmony of the Gospels*. Other Fathers considered the reliability of the Gospels in their homilies and commentaries. It is interesting to see that again they offered at least two slightly different approaches which complemented one another. Theodore of Mopsuestia, in commenting on the difference between John 20:1 (“when it was yet dark”) and Mark 16:2 (“at the rising of the sun”), explained:

In my opinion nothing else is needed to confirm the truth of their words than the fact that in the necessary details they demonstrate overwhelming harmony. In the small details, and in those things which they considered not to be important for their human point of view, it can be found that their words are not unanimous with regard to moments and hours... since they wanted to relate the facts, and each of them wrote on his own, it is inevitable that there would be some difference in minor details.²⁷

Theodore mentioned several possible reasons for these minor and irrelevant discrepancies: Mark and Luke were not among the disciples who always accompanied the Lord. None of the Gospel authors had been present at the related Easter events. Moreover:

Concerning the discrepancies of the hours, who could ignore the fact that this happens frequently, with one person calling it the third hour, another the fourth hour, and another even something more different, but all referring to the same hour? Indeed it is hard enough to discern accurately the hours of the night when the hours of the day are not even recognized that easily if the sun is hidden by thick clouds.²⁸

According to Theodore, “everyone has different opinions about times and hours, and the doubt about the hours does not affect in any way the reported

²⁶ On Schleiermacher’s universalism, see G. Cross, *The Theology of Schleiermacher: A Condensed Presentation of His Chief Work “The Christian Faith”* (Chicago: University Press, 1911) 282–83.

²⁷ Theodore of Mopsuestia *Comm. Jo.* on John 20:1 (trans. M Conti, *Theodore of Mopsuestia: Commentary on the Gospel of John* [Ancient Christian Texts; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010] 158).

²⁸ Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Comm. Jo.* on John 20:1 (p. 159).

facts.”²⁹ John Chrysostom agreed with this approach when he wrote in his *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*:

But if there be anything touching times or places, which they have related differently, this nothing injures the truth of what they have said....in the chief heads, those which constitute our life and furnish out our doctrine, nowhere is any of them found to have disagreed, no not ever so little.³⁰

The chief points John Chrysostom had in mind are Jesus’ incarnation, his miracles, his crucifixion, his resurrection, his ascension, his coming judgment, his commandments, his divine identity, and many similar topics on which the Gospels are in complete agreement.

Thus on the one hand, while Theodore (and others) maintained that minor discrepancies do not call the overall reliability of the Gospel accounts into question, on the other hand he tried to harmonize even minor discrepancies and to demonstrate “that the words of Mark contain no contradiction and are consistent with the words (of the other Evangelists).”³¹ This approach can be applied to the NT letters as well.

3. *The apostolic letters tell the truth (they neither err nor deceive)*. The apostolic letters are the apostolic teaching as written down by the apostles themselves and their secretaries. As apostolic writings they claim to have the same qualities and authority as the oral apostolic teaching. Therefore Paul opened many of his apostolic letters with the words: “Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 1:1; etc.). This claim means that the letters do not contain human words but consist of the inerrant apostolic words of God. The same applies to the letters which were not written by the apostles Paul, John, or Peter but were composed by non-apostolic members of the apostolic church whose names are in at least one case unknown to us. Since they reproduce the teaching of the apostles, they participate in its authority.

Christians who believe in the truthfulness of the whole NT will also regard the teaching of the letters as normative. To give just one or two examples: If in the first chapter of his letter to the Romans Paul does, in fact, make use of a teleological argument for God’s existence (Rom 1:18–20), this cannot be regarded as a debatable theological strategy which might be right or wrong; instead, it has to be recognized as part of God’s revelation. The fact that Immanuel Kant, and subsequently many Protestant theologians, have regarded this argument of the apostle as inconclusive³² will not be accepted uncritically but investigated thoroughly in order to find the weak elements in Kant’s counterargument. Adherents of inerrancy agree with Luther (see above) that, whereas the Scriptures have never erred, everyone knows that even the most gifted philosophers have erred at times, including Kant.

If it can be shown that, further on in the first chapter of Romans, Paul views homosexual behavior as sinful because it violates God’s beneficial order of creation (Rom 1:24–27), adherents of an inerrant NT will not be inclined to regard this

²⁹ Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Comm. Jo.* on John 19:14 (p. 154).

³⁰ Chrysostomus, *Hom. Matt.* 1.6 (NPNF¹ 10:3).

³¹ Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Comm. Jo.* on John 20:1 (p. 159).

³² Cf. *Kant’s Critique of Judgement* (trans. J. H. Bernhard; 2nd rev. ed.; London: Macmillan, 1914) §91.

opinion as culturally conditioned and therefore inapplicable to our modern society. Since Paul is regarded as an inspired apostle of Jesus Christ, his moral teaching is believed to be ethically normative. (The view that it is defective and outdated can only be regarded as a last resort in case all efforts to demonstrate its ethical superiority [also in light of the best results of modern scholarly research on the effects of homosexual behavior] fail. In that case, the inerrancy and reliability of Scripture would have to be given up.)

Some modern theologians regard it as necessary to make a distinction and accept only sections of the Pauline corpus or the Letter to the Romans as the authoritative word of God. According to C. H. Dodd, right from the start the modern reader of Paul's Letter to the Romans has two questions to ask: "not only, What did Paul say, and what did he mean? but also, Is it true?... Sometimes I think Paul is wrong and I have ventured to say so."³³

A different approach has more recently been taken by Ulrich Wilckens who in his commentary on Romans agreed with many of his more liberal colleagues that modern insights into the reasons for homosexuality make it impossible to accept Paul's view that homosexuality is a morally reprehensible offense.³⁴ Later Wilckens changed his mind and accepted Paul's position on Romans 1 as normative.³⁵

Still, as is evident at a number of places in his letters, Paul's apostolic truth claim does not imply that he had a perfect memory for all the technical details of his ministry. In 1 Corinthians 1:14–16, Paul first says that he did not baptize any of the Corinthian Christians except Crispus and Gaius, and then corrects this statement by adding the words: "Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else." Obviously, Paul did not regard it as necessary to eliminate his first and incomplete statement in order to conceal a (temporary) lapse of memory.

Similarly, his letters reveal that Paul at times had to change earlier travel plans which, as it appears, had not been inerrant. "When Paul sent off 1 Corinthians, he fully intended to...cross the Aegean to Macedonia...and travel south to Corinth...(16:5–8)...After sending the letter, Paul changed his plans a little: he now proposed to visit Corinth twice, once on the way to Macedonia and once on the way back...(2 Cor 1:15–16)."³⁶ It is evident that Paul did not feel such a change of mind would call into question his apostolic authority as an inerrant communicator of the revelation of God.

IV. A QUALIFICATION: WHAT ARE THE LIMITS OF NT INERRANCY?

As I have tried to show, the notion of NT inerrancy contains a number of clearly identifiable claims. At the same time it is important to keep in mind that

³³ C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Collins, 1963) 27.

³⁴ U. Wilckens, *Der Brief an die Römer* (2nd ed.; EKK 6/1; Köln: Benziger, 1987) 110–11.

³⁵ Cf. U. Wilckens, *Kritik der Bibelkritik: Wie die Bibel wieder zur Heiligen Schrift werden kann* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2012).

³⁶ D. A. Carson and D. J. Moo, *Introduction to the NT* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 422.

many relevant questions regarding the NT and its interpretation cannot be decided with reference to biblical inerrancy. I will briefly mention four of those questions.

1. *No inerrant answers to text-critical questions.* Most theologians would agree that the hundreds and thousands of minor text-critical decisions that underlie the different critical editions of the Greek NT are fallible. When it comes to the two or three larger sections of the NT that are text-critically controversial (Mark 16:9–20; John 7:53–8:11), Roman Catholic exegetes believe that in these cases the decision of the (Latin) church to include them into the NT has to be regarded as inspired and inerrant. Most Protestants do not agree and hold that the decisions about the canonicity of the longer ending of Mark or the Pericope Adulterae are just as human and fallible as any other text-critical decision.³⁷

2. *No inerrant delimitation of the NT canon.* The same is true regarding the delimitation of the biblical canon. It is well known that Martin Luther's personal canon of the NT was smaller than Augustine's. In the prefaces of his German translation of the Bible the Reformer called into question the orthodoxy and historicity—and thereby also the canonical status—of Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation.³⁸ Luther believed in the inerrancy of the NT but did not believe that the traditional delimitation of the NT could be regarded as inerrant. As far as he was concerned, the conviction that biblical books are inspired and inerrant did not imply that the identification of biblical books was inspired as well.

In contrast, not only Roman Catholic but also some Protestant theologians regard their particular list of canonical books as inspired, even though they do not always agree among themselves on the extent of the canon. As is well known, the Roman Catholic canon of the OT which includes books such as Judith, Tobias, and First and Second Maccabees, is more extensive than the Hebrew canon. I regard it as problematic to apply the concept of inerrancy to the church's selection of the inerrant books.

3. *No inerrant historical results about the origins of the NT.* Even adherents of biblical inerrancy do not possess inerrant knowledge about the origins of the NT. The Synoptic Problem has been solved in many different ways. I share the view that the Two-Source Hypothesis is not the best answer to this historical question with its highly complex literary evidence.³⁹ But in my lectures, I always take care not to convey the impression that for evangelical Christians the modified Oral Tradition Hypothesis, which I prefer, is the biblical or the only possible explanation of the Synoptic Problem. I am aware that every solution to the Synoptic Question can be modified in a way that brings it in conflict with a high view of Scripture. But I do not believe that any of the available solutions is as such incompatible with inerrancy. Therefore I regard some of the statements made in the book *The Jesus Crisis* as un-

³⁷ Cf. A. D. Baum, "Does the Pericope Adulterae Have Canonical Authority? An Interdenominational Approach," *BBR* (forthcoming).

³⁸ *Martin Luther: Selections from his Writings* (ed. J. Dillenberger; Garden City: Doubleday, 1961) 35–36 (on James and Jude) and *passim*.

³⁹ A. D. Baum, *Der mündliche Faktor und die synoptische Frage: Analogien aus der antiken Literatur, der Experimentalpsychologie, der Oral Poetry-Forschung und dem rabbinischen Traditionswesen* (Texte und Arbeiten zum neutestamentlichen Zeitalter 49; Tübingen: Francke, 2008).

founded. I do not agree, for instance, that the Two-Source Hypothesis undermines the historical trustworthiness of the Synoptic Gospels.⁴⁰

Theologians with a high view of Scripture cannot accept deception in the NT. But since the question as to whether the authorial attribution in pseudepigraphical apostolic letters was deceptive or not can be answered in two different ways, the belief in the inerrancy of the Bible does not necessarily preclude the presence of pseudepigraphical letters in the NT. Personally, I am convinced that ancient pseudepigraphy was deceptive and that therefore pseudepigraphy and canonicity are mutually exclusive categories.⁴¹ But I am aware that some colleagues disagree with my (fallible) historical results about the meaning of authorship attributions in ancient letters and regard ancient pseudepigraphy as non-deceptive and morally innocent.⁴² And I have to admit that from their perspective pseudepigraphy and the conviction that the Bible is the inerrant and non-deceptive word of God are reconcilable. The question as to whether a pseudonymous letter can have a place in an inerrant Bible cannot be decided merely on the basis of doctrinal statements but has to be answered historically.

4. *No inerrant interpretation of the NT.* That brings me to my final point. Acceptance of biblical inerrancy is no guarantee of doctrinal unity. Defenders of inerrancy have always differed on many questions of biblical interpretation and theological application. Until the 18th century, most of the theological debates were carried out by theologians who shared the high view of Scripture which Augustine and Luther put into words in the statements quoted above. Their belief in the inspiration, truth, and inerrancy of the Bible, however, did not prevent them from developing different and sometimes contradictory answers to important theological questions such as: Do wives have to cover their heads? Does double predestination have a biblical foundation? Should infants be baptized?

V. THE NECESSARY BALANCE: HOW DO INERRANCY AND IMPARTIALITY GO TOGETHER?

One of the objections against the notion of inerrancy is that it leads to an invulnerable position. According to Howard Marshall, a defender of inerrancy holds “that in principle there can be no ‘real’ errors in the Bible, and he is prepared to argue that any hypothetical solution to an alleged difficulty, no matter how improbable it may seem to ordinary historical judgment, is always more probable than the

⁴⁰ See R. L. Thomas and F. D. Farnell, *The Jesus Crisis: The Inroads of Historical Criticism into Evangelical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998) 133–34.

⁴¹ A. D. Baum, *Pseudepigraphie und literarische Fälschung im frühen Christentum: Mit ausgewählten Quellentexten samt deutscher Übersetzung* (WUNT 2/138; Tübingen: Mohr, 2001); idem, “Authorship and Pseudepigraphy in Ancient Christian Literature: A Translation of the Most Important Source Texts and an Annotated Bibliography,” in *Paul and Pseudepigraphy* (ed. S. E. Porter and G. P. Fewster; Pauline Studies 8; Leiden: Brill, 2013) 11–63.

⁴² For instance, D. G. Meade, *Pseudonymity and Canon: An Investigation into the Relationship of Authorship and Authority in Jewish and Earliest Christian Tradition* (WUNT 39; Tübingen: Mohr, 1986), and H. J. Riedl, *Anamnese und Apostolizität: Der Zweite Petrusbrief und das theologische Problem neutestamentlicher Pseudepigraphie* (RST 64; Frankfurt: Lang, 2005).

hypothesis that the Bible may be in error."⁴³ But as far as I am concerned, the belief in inerrancy of the Bible is just as vulnerable as any other confessional statement.

1. *No invulnerable position.* The way in which I have tried to describe the implications a high view of Scripture has for one's theology will have made it clear that I regard the belief in the complete truthfulness of the NT as a strong and decisive factor in the theological process—but not as principally irrefutable. As I see it, in the exegesis of the NT two factors come together and have to be kept in balance: the authoritative claim of the NT and the evidence that supports this claim or calls it into question.

On the one hand, we should accept the Bible's evident truth claim. Augustine said that whenever he came across a problem in the text of his Bible he did not hesitate to suppose that "I myself have failed to understand it" (see above). I believe that this is a good and necessary approach but that it cannot be upheld in the face of the results of our exegetical work. While the recognition of the Bible's truth claim is indispensable, it remains only one side of the coin.

The other side of the coin is that as exegetes we have to be open-minded about the biblical text and should be ready to go where the biblical evidence leads us. The commitment to the Bible's claim to be the truthful word of God should not be used as exoneration from the relevant evidence. If a statement of faith does not prove its worth, it has to be given up.

Therefore, on the one hand I do not think that the statement that the Bible is true (i.e. free from deception and free from error) should be easily abandoned. If people are fallible, it is quite possible that they misunderstand and misjudge the biblical evidence. At the same time if during the exegetical process the number of problems was to expand dramatically and if for many of these problems no satisfying solutions could be found, the statement that the Bible is inerrant would have to be modified. I will again mention a few examples, both concerning the teaching of Jesus and the apostles and regarding the documentation of their words and deeds.

2. *The teaching of Jesus and the apostles.* According to Reimarus, Jesus was not only wrong when he predicted the imminent coming of the kingdom of God with power (see above); beyond that, the apostles invented the message of his (bodily) resurrection and succeeded in making many believe that it was a historical fact on which they could build their Christian faith. If the belief in the truth of the apostolic teaching about the resurrection of Jesus was invulnerable, it would not have been necessary to examine the historical and philosophical arguments presented by Reimarus and others. At least it would not have been necessary to review them thoroughly and honestly. But many, among them many evangelicals, have regarded it as indispensable to do just this. And the Christian conviction that the apostolic message of the resurrection of Jesus is true (i.e. free from error and deceit) would have been considerably weaker if an unbiased analysis of the historical and philo-

⁴³ I. H. Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration* (Vancouver: Regent College, 2004) 64.

sophical counterarguments had not been able to offer a clear refutation of these arguments.

A different example has to do with the teaching on justification in the Letter of James. Martin Luther was firmly convinced that James taught salvation by works and that therefore his teaching contradicted Paul's message of salvation by faith alone. Luther's position on the inerrancy of the NT did not prevent him from identifying contradictions in the Bible. And since Luther could not accept errors in his NT, he drew the necessary consequence and challenged the canonicity of the Letter of James.⁴⁴

Paul's statements on homosexuality can serve as a further illustration. As part of Paul's apostolic teaching these statements have to be regarded as the inerrant word of God. But if anyone were convinced that the modern scientific evidence about homosexuality has clearly and finally disproved Paul's position I regard it as understandable that such a person calls the complete truthfulness of Paul's apostolic teaching into question and takes leave of biblical inerrancy.

3. *The documentation of their words and deeds.* The same rules apply when it comes to the narration or documentation of the words and deeds of Jesus and his apostles in the NT texts. In his helpful book *Biblical Inspiration*, Howard Marshall pointed to the dating of Theudas in Acts 5:33–39 as a clear historical error that is irreconcilable with biblical inerrancy.⁴⁵ This case belongs to the small group of comparatively strong objections against the historical reliability of the NT historical books. I believe that such a case also has to be dealt with on two levels.

First, it has to be decided whether, if Luke really is guilty of a chronological mistake here, it is an error in terms of classical notions of biblical inerrancy. It is clear that if Theudas lived later than Luke assumed in his narrative this is an error according to the absolute standards of truth and error (which according to the *Chicago Statement* do not apply). It is less clear if such a slip of memory would also militate against Augustine's, Theodore's, or Luther's understanding of biblical inerrancy. Would they have deemed such an anachronism in Acts (if that could be proven to be the case) more severe than Paul's mistaken preliminary travel plans that later had to be corrected? Or would the Church Fathers quoted above have classified such an anachronism as an element that diminishes the NT's overall inerrancy?

Second, it is possible that Luke's chronology regarding Theudas is wrong. But of course, it is also possible that Josephus, whose presentation of Theudas contradicts Luke's chronology, is mistaken. Everyone who looks at the evidence without prejudging Luke's or Josephus's reliability will find it difficult to arrive at a definite historical judgment on this point.

The attribution of Second Peter is a different example. I believe that the authenticity of the NT letters also has to be investigated without historical prejudices. Second Peter cannot be regarded as authentic simply because it belongs to the NT canon. Moreover, if Second Peter can be shown to be inauthentic, its authorial

⁴⁴ W. G. Kümmel, "Luther und das Neue Testament," in *Reformation und Gegenwart* (ed. H. Graß and W. G. Kümmel; Marburger theologische Studien 6; Marburg: Elwert, 1968) 1–11.

⁴⁵ Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration* 63–65.

attribution is deceptive and incompatible with the Bible's truth claim. I therefore believe that, just as Luther did not recognize the canonical status of the Letter of James, we cannot award a literary forgery more than a deuterocanonical status.⁴⁶

VI. CONCLUSION

The main intention of the doctrine of inerrancy since the times of the ancient church and as it was rearticulated during the Reformation was to distinguish between the theological judgments of people who are fallible and the theological statements of the NT Scriptures which are regarded as inerrant and non-deceptive.

NT inerrancy is rooted in the inerrancy of God, who always tells the truth; of his Son Jesus Christ, who always told the truth; and of Christ's apostles, who told the truth whenever they preached and wrote in apostolic authority. While in Christian theology the inerrancy of God is generally uncontested, the inerrancy of Jesus Christ has been called into question by theologians since the Enlightenment and the inerrancy of the apostolic teaching even more so.

The inerrancy of the NT documents is an implication of the inerrancy of God, Jesus Christ, and his apostles. The doctrine of biblical inerrancy expresses the conviction that the NT Gospels are free from error and deceit, since they correctly transmit the divine and flawless words and deeds of the Son of God, and that the NT letters are free from error and deceit, since they contain the divinely inspired message which the apostles proclaimed. It must be recognized, however, that the Church Fathers did not define the inerrancy of the NT documents according to absolute standards of truth and error but were convinced that minor imprecisions and slips of memory did not call into question the truth of the NT.

While the doctrine of biblical inerrancy has its merits, it does not supply inerrant answers to text-critical questions, an inerrant delimitation of the NT canon, inerrant historical results about the origins of the NT, or an inerrant interpretation of the NT.

Although the inerrancy of God, Jesus Christ, the apostles, and the NT documents should not be abandoned without widespread and convincing evidence of its indefensibility (which, in my opinion, has not yet been offered), it must be acknowledged that belief in the inerrancy of the NT is a confessional stance, and as such is just as assailable and improvable as any other creedal statement.

I believe if inerrancy is interpreted along these lines, it is fully justified to call the inerrancy of the NT a NT concept.

⁴⁶ Cf. E. E. Ellis, *The Making of the NT Documents* (Biblical Interpretation Series 39; Leiden: Brill, 1999) 294 n. 306; Baum, *Pseudepigraphie und literarische Fälschung* 179–81.