

Can the Bible have errors but still be infallible?

By Norman L. Geisler

Some Neo-evangelicals claim the Bible is infallible but not inerrant (e.g., [Roger Olsen, www.Patheos.com, Nov. 2015](http://www.Patheos.com)). In this they follow Jack Rogers, former Professor at Fuller Seminary whose book, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* was decisively critiqued by Dr. John Woodbridge of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Roger/McKim Proposal*. Rogers never responded. These critics deny verbal inspiration which the Scriptures claim for themselves (2 Tim. 3:16) and opt for a so-called “dynamic” view of inspired authors whose message they believe has never failed to transform its readers. **Roger Olsen claims, for example, that while the biblical record has errors, nevertheless, it is “perfect with respect to purpose” which is never failing in its transforming power.**

Roger Olson has taught at **Bethel University** and **George W. Truett Theological Seminary**. He asserts that the Bible is infallible but not inerrant.

Bible Only Infallible in Intent?

There are, however, some serious flaws in this thinking. First of all, it fails to recognize that an infallible book is also inerrant (without error), although an inerrant book might not be infallible (e.g., a phone book with no mistakes). Of course, the traditional evangelical view is that the Bible is both infallible and inerrant. And it makes no sense to speak of an infallibly true error!

Second, a book that is only infallible in purpose, but not in fact, is scarcely a reliable source for all truth, as the Bible claims to be (Jn. 17:17; Psa. 119:151). For false records, even if the author intended them to be true, are still false.

Third, this redemptive intent view is based on a false view of truth. Truth is not determined by intentions (as slips of the tongue indicate) but on affirmation or expression of what corresponds to

reality. This always has been the case and always will be. Aristotle defined truth as correspondence to reality, declaring, "To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is and what is not that it is not, is true" (*Metaphysics* 4.7. 1011b 25-30). Many great thinkers since have agreed. Indeed, the framers of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI) recognized the validity of this view of truth, declaring that something "is an error if it misrepresents the facts" ([*The Chicago Statement on Hermeneutics*, Article VI](#)). Indeed, the correspondence view of truth is undeniable. For any attempt to deny that truth is what corresponds to reality claims to correspond with reality.

Fourth, if the opposing intentionalist view of truth is correct, then almost anything could be true, even if it were factually incorrect. For example, if in fact Jesus did not rise from the dead (but is a myth), then one could be truly saved by believing what is not true! This, of course, is absurd, as the apostle Paul said, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (1 Cor. 15:17).

Fifth, the intentionalist view of truth is contrary to the Bible's claim for itself, namely, that "what the Bible says, God says." The great defender of biblical inerrancy, B. B. Warfield devotes a whole chapter in his classic book on the topic (*The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*) demonstrating this claim. For example he shows that the Old Testament affirms that "the LORD said to Abraham" (Gen. 12:1). But when the New Testament cites this text, it asserts that the "Scripture" said this to Abraham (Gal. 3:8). Likewise, in Genesis 2:24 it is the author of Genesis who informs us that God male female and called them one flesh. Yet when this text is cited by Jesus he insists that it was "He [God] who created them" who said this (Mt. 19:4). Numerous other New Testament citations of the Old Testament follow the same pattern of the "what the Bible said, God said." Unlike Karl Barth and his Neo-orthodox and Neo-evangelical followers claim, there is no separation between the words of God and the written Word of God.

Sixth, contrary to the claim of the critics, inerrancy does not die a death by numerous qualifications. Really, there are only two major qualifications: 1) Only the autographic text is inerrant, and 2) only a text as properly understood in its context is without error. As St. Augustine

noted, all alleged errors in the Bible are either because of a bad text, a bad translation, or because of a bad interpretation (Augustine, *Reply to Faustus* 11.5).

Seventh, with regard to reducing the objective truth of the Word of God *in* the text of Scripture, to subjective intent of the authors *behind* the text, this leaves us in no real way to discover what God's Word is. We have traded an objective hermeneutics for a subjective mysticism (see Thomas Howe, *Objectivity in Hermeneutics*). In fact, there is no authoritative way to get at an author's intention behind a text of Scripture except by what he affirms in the text. We have no private or extra-biblical access to the diaries of his mind. After all, exegetes are not mind readers but text readers.

Should We Throw Out Inerrancy Because It's Not A Biblical Term?

As for the word "inerrancy," admittedly it is not a biblical term. But neither is the word "Trinity." Nonetheless, this does not eliminate them from being biblical truths. Actually, it is not the term inerrancy itself but the truth it conveys that troubles most critics. It means "without error," and no one who believes the Bible is the written Word of God should object to this claim. And as for whether the Bible claims to be infallible or inerrant, the answer is *both*. In fact, The Bible claims to be inspired (2 Tim. 3:16), inerrant (Mt. 22:29; Heb. 6:18), unbreakable (Jn. 10:35), indestructible (Mt. 5:17-18), indefatigable (Heb. 4:13), indefeasible (Isa. 55:11), and many other things (e.g., sacred, holy, and immortal).

Are Evangelicals Really So Divided?

And on the issue of unity on the doctrine of inerrancy there is significant unanimity among believers. For the doctrinal statement of the largest body of evangelical Scholars in the world (the Evangelical Theological Society [ETS]) declares, "the Bible alone and the Bible in its entirety is the Word of God written, and therefore inerrant in the autographs." As for spelling out what this means, ETS refers its members to the [ICBI statements](#) formed by the largest body of evangelical scholars (some 300) ever to deliberate on and give a detailed definition and defense of inerrancy.

Life-Transforming Power the Criteria?

Of course, this absolutely true record called Holy Scripture is life-transforming. For “the word of God is powerful and sharper than a two-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12) and able “to make us wise unto salvation” (2 Tim. 3:15). But this is the *result* of truth, not the *definition* of truth.

Conclusion

In summation, because the Bible is the Word of God who cannot err, it follows that neither can the Scriptures err. In brief, if God cannot err (Heb. 6:18; Titus 1:2), and if the Bible is the Word of God (Jn. 1-34-35; 2 Tim. 3:16), then it is necessary to affirm that the Bible cannot err. And because it cannot err, it is sufficient “for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:17), that is, for faith and practice.