

The Problem of Inerrancy

By

Kristofer J Carlson

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The inspiration of Sacred Scripture is well-attested in Sacred Scripture. However, the idea that inspiration requires some assertion of inerrancy is not found in Sacred Scripture, and its derivation from Sacred Scripture is suspect at best. Robert Preus says the same passages used to support inspiration are also used to support inerrancy. (Piepkorn, What Does "Inerrancy" Mean? 2007) This suggests inspiration and inerrancy are intended to be synonymous, or at least referential, when in fact the two terms mean substantively different things. Even less well supported are the various formulae by which we attempt to expound, expand, and enhance a dogmatic assertion of the inerrancy of Sacred Scripture. As we shall see, introducing inerrancy into the subject of the inspiration of Sacred Scriptures actually detracts from our understanding of Sacred Scripture, introduces all manner of problems for scriptural interpretation, and creates serious problems for the doctrine of inspiration. In addition, adding verbal inerrancy into our understanding of inspiration tends to change our understanding of canonicity from that of the Word contained by the text (the *forma*) to the text (or *materia*) written by a particular author. When that happens, we think of Jeremiah (the author) as inspired to produce a text (the *materia*), instead of thinking of the extant text of Jeremiah as the inspired Word of God. (Sanders, Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism 1984, xvi-xvii) Inspiration of a specific author rather than subject matter has important implications for the canon of Sacred Scripture, leading scholars to excise passages they believe are corruptions of the earliest, best-attested texts. Moreover, if we are using a corrupted text, then in what way are our Sacred Scriptures any longer the authoritative Word of God? What is needed is a doctrine of inspiration that that preserves the mystery and the power of inspiration without diminution by scholasticism and sophistry, and allows us to understand the extant text as the inspired and authoritative Word of God.

On the Seeming Errancy of Sacred Scripture

The Sacred Scriptures are full of inconsistencies, seeming contradictions, seeming pre-scientific descriptions, anthropomorphisms, and even what may be called (by some) errors, the issue of inerrancy introduces all manner of problems—of which biblical scholars are well aware. Arthur Carl Piepkorn provides us with a long (and nevertheless partial) list of these issues.¹ (Piepkorn, What Does "Inerrancy" Mean? 2007, 34-39) Moreover, atheists and agnostics delight in producing long lists of inconsistencies and contradictions contained in Sacred Scripture, some of which are silly, while others are substantive and deserving of serious consideration. (Morgan n.d.) It is possible to explain away individual issues, but the accumulated weight of these inconsistencies, seeming contradictions, and other problems present great difficulty for the idea of inerrancy, particularly the fundamentalist formulae regarding verbal inspiration, by which is meant verbal inerrancy.²

Part of the problem is that inerrancy not only means something less than inspiration, but actually diminishes the concept of inspiration. A statement that I am an overweight Caucasian with brown hair and blue eyes is inerrant. The same statement—although inerrant—is not inspired. Inerrancy therefore means something other than inspiration, but proponents of the verbal inerrancy of Sacred Scripture seem to treat the two statements as though they are synonymous, or at least statements of equivalent importance. Piepkorn points out that the Sacred Scriptures are the Word of God, and that this is a maximum statement. (Piepkorn, What Does "Inerrancy" Mean? 2007, 41) Adding adjectives, clarifications, and modifying clauses serves to limit a maximum statement, to make it something less than maximal. For example, the word "unique" is a maximum statement, such that modifying it detracts from its power. Nothing can be *more* than unique, and if something is *less* than unique it ceases to *be* unique. Failing to deal properly with maximum statements is a sign of faulty thinking. There is a world of difference between saying the Bible is the Word of God, and saying the Bible is the "verbally inspired and infallible, authoritative Word of God" (Pensicola Christian College n.d.), or the "inerrant Word of

¹ I use Piepkorn to provide the following list of pre-scientific descriptions:

- 1) The Bible speaks of the sun's rising and setting. Is this metaphorical, or is this evidence of a pre-Copernican understanding of science? (Mal 1:11; Jos 10:13; Ps 19:4-6; Matt 5:45)
- 2) The Bible speaks of the four corners of the earth. Is this metaphorical, or evidence of a belief in a flat earth? (Isa 11:12; Rev 7:1)
- 3) The Bible describes the constellations of the zodiac. Is this a tacit acceptance of astrology, or is astrology a corruption of God's original plan of redemption written in the stars for all men to see? (Job 38:31-33)

² Multnomah University uses the following statement: "We believe in the verbal, plenary inspiration of Scripture. This means the Holy Spirit dynamically superintended the verbal expressions of the human authors of Scripture so that the very thoughts God intended were accurately penned in the wording of the original manuscripts. (2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:20-21; 1 Cor. 2:13)" (Multnomah University n.d.) Wheaton College uses a similar statement: "WE BELIEVE that God has revealed Himself and His truth in the created order, in the Scriptures, and supremely in Jesus Christ; and that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are verbally inspired by God and inerrant in the original writing, so that they are fully trustworthy and of supreme and final authority in all they say." (Wheaton College n.d.) A directory of similar statements may be found at <http://www.wholesomewords.org/direc.html>. Some imply the inspiration and therefore the inerrancy of the Masoretic Hebrew text and the Textus Receptus Greek text; some go so far as to imply inspiration and inerrancy apply to the translation of these texts known as the King James Version; others state these texts come closest to the inspired autographs.

God".³ (LCMS n.d.) The modifiers are not only superfluous, but actually diminish the status of the Sacred Scriptures as the Word of God.

Regarding the problem of inerrancy, the summary statement of Dr. Marvin R. Vincent will serve as a wonderful introduction to the subject.

Nothing can be more puerile or more desperate than the effort to vindicate the divine inspiration of Scripture by the assertion of the verbal inerrancy of the autographs, and to erect that assertion into a test of orthodoxy. For:

- 1. There is no possible means of verifying the assertion, since the autographs have utterly disappeared.*
- 2. It assumes a mechanical dictation of the ipsissima verba [the very words] to the writers, which is contradicted by the whole character and structure of the Bible.*
- 3. It is of no practical value, since it furnishes no means of deciding between various readings or discrepant statements.*
- 4. It is founded upon a pure assumption as to the character of inspiration - namely, that inspiration involves verbal inerrancy, which is the very thing to be proved, and which could only be proved only by producing inerrant autographs. [In other words, the definition is a tautology.]*
- 6. If a written, inspired revelation is necessary for mankind, and if such a revelation, in order to be inspired, must be verbally inerrant, the necessity has not been met. There is no verbally inerrant, and therefore no inspired, revelation in writing. The autographs have vanished, and no divine guidance or interposition has prevented mistakes in transcription or in printing. The text of Scripture, in the best form in which critical scholarship can exhibit it, presents numerous errors and discrepancies. (Vincent 1899, 3)*

The argument can be recast into a number of syllogisms, which may serve to illustrate the point. Suppose inspiration required the production and supernatural maintenance of the text without error (as seems to be the contention of Quenstedt, and is the clear contention of August Pfeiffer). (Piepkorn, What Does "Inerrancy" Mean? 2007, 26-27) Our current text contains all manner of inconsistencies, paradoxes, discrepancies, disagreements, variations, and even what could be termed contradictions, errors, and mistakes. Therefore, since the extant text has not been preserved without error, verbal inspiration either cannot require the supernatural maintenance of the text without error, or the extant text is not inspired. Moreover, the idea of verbal inspiration is usually presented such that inspiration involves and even requires verbal inerrancy. Modern formulations of verbal inerrancy are based on the idea that the original manuscripts (or autographs) were without error. Since no autographs exist, the proposition cannot be proved; therefore we have no extant inspired text.⁴ An inspired and verbally inerrant revelatory text is necessary to the validity of the Christian faith. As we have no inspired, verbally inerrant revelatory text, we therefore have no inspired, verbally inerrant revelation.

³ It also matters what we mean by inerrant, as it could mean "fixed", in the sense of not wandering away from the truth, but in modern usage means containing no error, from which is derived a sense of trustworthiness.

⁴ Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. On the other hand, the burden of proof is on the person making the proposition.

This is precisely the position taken by the Muslim faith, which claims the verbal inerrancy of the Quran: which verbal inerrancy has been supernaturally maintained in its purity, and by which the Muslims are assured they have the revelation of Allah. But note the middle term depends upon there being no variant readings of the Quran. While textual criticism of the Quran is in its infancy, it is well known even among Muslim scholars that variant readings exist. Therefore, by their standard of inspiration, the Quran is not inspired, and is not a true and faithful revelation of Allah. (Reformed Internet Ministries n.d.) In this way the arguments of the Muslim scholars against the Christian Scriptures is turned against themselves.

But let us suppose the proposition of the Muslim faith is true, that the Quran is verbally inerrant and has been preserved free from error. Would this then serve as proof of its inspiration? Of course not, for as we have demonstrated, inerrancy is not the same thing as inspiration; the two are not synonymous, nor is one the proof of the other. Moreover, modern printing technology has the capability of producing multiple copies of a document without error and of preserving a document free from corruption. Does this mean that said documents are therefore inspired? Again, of course not, for inspiration is a matter of content, and it is the content that is inspired. The method by which that content is reproduced and transmitted may change, and the text may be more or less accurate, without affecting the content in any material way.

A statement that the Sacred Scriptures are inspired and verbally inerrant in the autographs is a problem. As we have seen, we do not have the autographs, meaning no one can verify this statement. Moreover, nonexistent autographs cannot be used to clear up any seeming problems in the text. Therefore, the statement regarding verbal inerrancy in the autographs is both useless and pointless, and should not be used. Second, we know the extant text contains various inconsistencies, paradoxes, discrepancies, disagreements, and variations—all of which can mean nearly the same thing as contradictions, errors, and mistakes. (Piepkorn, What Does "Inerrancy" Mean? 2007, 39) This means the received text contains what could be called errors. Since verbal inerrancy is used to demonstrate the infallibility of the text, then if the text is errant, its infallibility is in question. Therefore, if verbal inerrancy and infallibility are necessary components of inspiration, then the received text cannot be inspired and is therefore not profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, or for instruction in righteousness. (2 Tim 3:16) Thus, if inspiration and infallibility requires verbal inerrancy, the need has not been met and we cannot call the scriptures inspired.

Inerrancy and the Loss of Faith

Obviously the problem is grave, and has the potential to cause a person to doubt the authenticity and reliability of the scriptures. The biblical scholar Dr. Bart Ehrman is one such person. Ehrman was raised an Episcopalian and in his teen years became a "born again" Christian through Campus Life Youth for Christ, an evangelical and ecumenical parachurch ministry. Ehrman attended Moody Bible Institute, majoring in Bible theology, where he was exposed to and trained in a strict fundamentalist

understanding of inspiration.⁵ He completed his bachelor's degree at Wheaton College, where he began to have doubts about verbal inerrancy. The problem of translations bothered him greatly, for what good did it do to speak of the inspiration and verbal inerrancy of the autographs when Christians relied upon different versions and translations into different languages? Gradually he became aware of the issues raised by textual criticism, and began to question how a document that is inspired and verbally inerrant only in the autographs could possibly be relevant today after two millennia of corruption by scribal errors. His search ultimately drove him to accept the position that the Sacred Scriptures actually contained errors.⁶ Since his view of inspiration precluded the possibility of errors in the text, this led to his loss of faith and the development of his belief that what we call Sacred Scriptures are not inspired at all, but merely products of human authorship. (Ehrman 2005, 1-14)

⁵ The Inspiration and Inerrancy of the Bible

We believe that the Bible is God's word. The doctrinal statement of Moody Bible Institute affirms, "The Bible, including both the Old and New Testaments, is a divine revelation, the original autographs of which were verbally inspired by the Holy Spirit."¹

Revelation is God's self-disclosure. It is God making Himself known to men.² God has revealed himself in a limited way in creation.³ But the Bible is a form of special revelation. The Bible is "special" revelation in the sense that it goes beyond what may be known about God through nature.⁴ It is divine in origin, since in the Bible God makes known things which otherwise could never be known.

The Bible is unique because it is God's revelation recorded in human language.⁵ According to II Timothy 3:16-17 the words of Scripture are "God breathed" or inspired. This implies that God is the source or origin of what is recorded in Scripture. God, through the Holy Spirit, used human authors to write what He revealed in the Bible. They were not mere copyists or transcribers. The Holy Spirit guided and controlled the writers of Scripture, who used their own vocabularies and styles but wrote only what the Holy Spirit intended.⁶ This is true only of the original manuscripts, not the copies or translations. Although the original manuscripts have been lost to us, God has preserved the biblical text to a remarkable degree.

The Bible is verbally inspired. This means that the words of the Bible, not just the ideas, were inspired. What is more, this is true of not just some, but all the words of the Bible. As a result, the Bible is free from error in what it says. Moody Bible Institute believes strongly in the factual, verbal, historical inerrancy of the Bible. That is, the Bible, in its original documents, is free from error in what it says about geography, history and science as well as in what it says about God. Its authority extends to all matters about which the Bible speaks.⁷ It is the supreme source of our knowledge of God and of the salvation provided through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.⁸ It is our indispensable resource for daily living.⁹

Even though the Bible is God's revelation, it must still be interpreted. Interpretation has to do with our reception and understanding of that which God revealed and recorded.¹⁰ Revelation is a divine act. Interpretation is a human responsibility. Divine inspiration guarantees the truthfulness of God's word but not the accuracy of our interpretation. The Bible is infallible in all it affirms to be true and therefore absolutely reliable. We, however, may be fallible in our interpretation of the Bible.

1- II Tim. 3:16; II Peter 1:21

2- I Cor. 2:11-16

3- Ps. 19:1

4- Rom. 1:19, 20

5- II Tim. 3:16,17

6- II Peter 1:21, I Cor. 2:12-13

7- Matt. 5:18; John 10:35

8- John 5:39-47

9- II Tim. 3:16,17; I Peter 2:2

10- John 16:13

(Moody Bible Institute n.d.)

⁶ Some of the explanations of various problems become quite convoluted, and it is simpler simply to say that the author erred. Occam's Razor suggests that the simplest solution to the problem is more likely to be right. Yet simply saying the author erred raises a whole host of other issues, and suggests our understanding may be lacking in some fundamental way. The answer that the author erred is not as simple as it might appear.

On the Recent Invention of Verbal Inerrancy

The current enthusiasm for the idea of verbal inerrancy—as indeed the word itself—is relatively recent. Piepkorn points out that while the word bears superficial resemblance to the ancient Latin word *inerrantia*, it is in fact "a kind of do-it-yourself [or manufactured] term, ...with *in-* meaning 'not' and *errantia* meaning 'the act of wandering about.'" Piepkorn cites the Oxford English Dictionary as pointing out that the first use of the English word *inerrant* was in 1834, and its first use in a religious context was in 1865 when describing the manner in which the Pope was preserved from error. (Piepkorn, *What Does "Inerrancy" Mean?* 2007, 29) It may well be that the work entitled *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth* (1910-15) is the first major work to formally equate inspiration with verbal inerrancy, although this assertion is made in only two of the seven essays on the Sacred Scriptures.⁷ If so, then the idea of verbal inerrancy is an American invention, made by those who came to be known as Fundamentalists. (Portier 1994, 130) This, despite the feeble attempt by L. W. Munhall to find support for this position from the writings of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Augustine. (Munhall 2005)

Lutheran theologians of the twentieth century quickly adopted the Fundamentalist definition of inerrancy. In his book *Luther and the Scriptures*, J. Michael Reu developed his thesis that Luther supports for the recently developed Fundamentalist definitions of inerrancy. Despite his valiant effort, he is unable to provide a single instance of Luther's use of the word *inerrant* (or its Latin or German equivalent) in the manner with which the word is used by the Fundamentalists. Despite this failure, no less a luminary than John Warwick Montgomery approvingly cites Reu as concluding that Luther "did indeed hold to the inerrancy of the Bible." (Montgomery n.d.) Reu and Montgomery's arguments are cast in 20th century terms, not in terms used by Luther and the Lutheran Confessors. The claim that Luther supports a dogma that was developed over 400 years after his death is at best an appeal to authority. At worst, the appeal to Luther for support of the modern understanding of inerrancy puts words in his mouth, besmirching his reputation.

Inspiration Defined: Separating Forma from Materia

It is possible to describe Sacred Scripture as inspired and infallible, yet not include any reference to verbal inerrancy. Infallibility has to do with doctrine, with the intrinsic *forma* of Scripture. Inerrancy has to do with the text itself, with the *materia*, with the letters, syllables, words, sentences, paragraphs, and the entire grammatical structure. On the other hand, inspiration regards the intrinsic *forma* of Scripture, the essential Word of God contained and expressed in feeble human language. Pieper writes: "God has deigned, as Luther again and again reminds us, to "become incarnate" in Scripture (*Scriptura Sacra est Deus incarnates*). (Pieper 1950, 198) While the *materia* serve to signify and reveal the *forma*, but do not constitute the *forma*; in fact, the *forma* is indescribably greater than the tongue can express. This is why a 2000 year old text containing what could constitute corruptions and possibly errors is still inspired, because we can discern the *forma* of scripture from corrupted *materia*. This was the position of Lutheran Orthodoxy, as described by Hannu Lehtonen.

⁷ See "The Inspiration of the Bible — Definition, Extent and Proof" by Rev. James M. Gray (Gray 2005), and "Inspiration" by Evangelist L. W. Munhall. (Munhall 2005)

*Regarding the doctrine of Scripture as taught by the Lutheran orthodoxy it is important to pay attention to the distinction they made between the *materia* and the *forma* of Scripture. By the *materia* of Scripture they mean the letters, syllables, words, phrases etc. in Scripture. In this sense Scripture doesn't differ from any other book. By the *intrinsic forma* of Scripture they mean the inspiration of Scripture or the inspired meaning of Scripture. This *forma* makes Scripture to be what it is, Scripture, and it also distinguishes it from all other books in the world. When the dogmatists speak about Scripture as the Word of God they speak about the inspired content of Scripture when they speak exactly. On the other hand the letters and words in Scripture don't only signify the inspired content of Scripture but they actually reveal this divine meaning and therefore it is impossible to separate them from it. (Lehtonen 1999)*

Verbal Inerrancy and the Re-opening of the Canon

From the prominent modern connection between inspiration and inerrancy, it may seem that the concept of inerrancy is necessary to properly define inspiration. But that is incorrect. First, it depends what exactly is inerrant: the Sacred Scriptures that make us wise unto salvation (the *forma*), or the text—the peculiar combination of marks on a page (the *materia*), which change from language to language, and from translation to translation. Second, if one postulates the verbal (and plenary) inerrancy of the autographs (being the original peculiar combination of marks on a page), this postulate then drives the task of textual criticism. No longer do textual critics seek determine the *authoritative* text (a theological enterprise), but instead seek the recovery of the *original* text (a critical enterprise), which they deem authoritative by virtue of its being original. Verbal inerrancy in the autographs necessitates the understanding that only the original author was inspired by the Holy Spirit, and that subsequent corrections, additions, and deletions by later copyists and/or churchmen are corruptions.⁸ The clear implication is that the word of a man (the author) was inspired; indeed, that the author was himself inspired. This means that passages deemed by scholars to have not been part of the original text are deemed non-canonical, even though the extant texts are part of the canon of Sacred Scripture. The natural result is the re-opening of the canon of scripture and the excision of suspect texts from Sacred Scripture. In this manner the obsession with verbal inerrancy logically leads to the error of Marcion.

Inerrancy vs. Infallibility

"Faith confesses the Bible to be the inerrant Word of God." (Committee on Theology and Church Relations (LCMS) 1995, 8) This statement is false, because inerrancy has to do with the *materia*, and the inspiration of the *forma* is what makes the *materia* the Word of God. Inerrancy of the *materia* is not a necessary component of inspiration, nor with what the Sacred Scriptures plainly declare to be the nature of inspiration. Peter tells us that prophecy, which is an inspired discourse declaring the purposes

⁸ Interesting examples include the following: 1) The epilogue of John 21 was clearly added later. The original Gospel ends at Jn 20:31. 2) The pericope on the woman taken in adultery (Jn 7:53 – 8:11) is not in the oldest and best-attested manuscripts. 3) The oldest manuscripts for the Gospel of Mark do not include Mk 16:9-20; instead, it ends rather abruptly with the resurrection appearance to Mary Magdalene. This all results in the following question: if the Sacred Scriptures were inerrant in the original manuscripts, and these texts were not part of the original text, are they then Scripture? Do we excise them from our bibles? And if so, how is this different from what Marcion tried to do?

of God, comes when holy men of God speak as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. (2 Pet 1:20-21). And all prophecy, by which we mean the Sacred Scriptures, speaks of Christ (Luke 24:27). As Christ was slain from the foundation of the world (Rev 13:8), the Sacred Scriptures are inspired because they declare to us the things concerning the Christ, and are thus the salvific Word of God. Faith does not confess the Sacred Scriptures to be inerrant; no, faith confesses the Word of God concerning our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, through whom we are saved, and whose divine expression makes us wise unto salvation. The Sacred Scriptures are the record of the divine expression contained within the limitations of human language; it is divine expression that is inerrant, not the tools by which the expression was preserved for us, and for our salvation.

"God does not lie". Thus the Sacred Scriptures make us wise unto salvation, and are profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and instruction in righteousness. This is most certainly true. But in no way does this mean that the Sacred Scriptures must be inerrant in every detail. When the authors of Sacred Scriptures speak of the four corners of the earth (Isa 11:12, Rev 7:1), or the pillars of the earth (1 Sam 2:8), they were not using what they understood to be metaphor, but what they understood to be scientific fact. When we try to reconcile these statements with today's scientific understanding, we declare them to be metaphor, which is almost certainly not the understanding of the author. We are trapped: If the Sacred Scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit and inerrant in every detail, and if the author included information he believed to be true but was actually false, did the Holy Spirit inspire a falsehood? Or did the Holy Spirit allow the author to make the occasional erroneous scientific statement and still use that statement to make us wise unto salvation? Or perhaps did the author intend one thing and the Holy Spirit another, which itself suggests problems with depending only upon the literal interpretation of scripture

God works through and in spite of human weakness. We accept this principle in our lives, but reject its implications in the text of scripture. Isaiah was wrong about the earth resting on pillars. He was not speaking metaphorically; he was proclaiming that which he believed to be true. That Sacred Scripture contains problems of this type does not affect its status as the inspired Word of God. We can even speak of inerrancy and infallibility regarding the purpose for which it was written. But we are wrong to define inspiration (a maximum statement) using terms that delimit inspiration, that force it to mean something other than what scripture says of itself. This is scholasticism run amok.

Inerrancy is not Lutheran Dogma

Lutherans do not include the idea of verbal inerrancy in their understandings of inspiration. In this we stand with orthodox Christianity against those who assert a crass verbal inerrancy. Simply because we Lutherans do not assert verbal inerrancy does not mean we promote the opposite argument that the scriptures are errant. In fact, we have historically not participated in the entire errant/inerrant argument; the Lutheran Confessions never assert verbal inerrancy, nor is it asserted by the Lutheran Scholastics. (Remember, inerrancy is a modern term). Instead, the confessions state that Sacred Scriptures are the sole "rule and norm" by which all teachers and teachings are alike judged. (Ep 1; SD Rule and Norm, Summary, 1)

Jacob Andrae (et al.) wrote the following in the first theological exchange between the Lutherans and the Eastern Orthodox:

There is, indeed, no more sure, nor truer, nor better standard rule for judging all dogmas, all institutes, and usages of faith and human traditions and works, than the Word of the Almighty God of all; the Word, which has been revealed to the human race by the Prophets and Christ and the Apostles and written in the Old and New Testaments for the benefit and the salvation of the entire Church. ...When in matters of religion a controversy arises, it is to be answered by both the Old and the New Testaments, as heavenly documents and schools, both of which have been guaranteed and made sure by admirable signs and wonders—with seals, as it were. ...

It is altogether evident, that none of the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures have been intermixed with error; no deceit has come out of them for anyone. Since they have been written under the inspiration of and brought to mind by the Holy Spirit (who is the Spirit of Truth) [cf. Jn 15:26], as the same Apostle Peter bears witness. He says: "no prophecy of the scripture ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" [2 Pet 1:20-21]. (Mastrantonis 2005, 110-111)

According to Andrae the Sacred Scriptures have not been intermixed with error; from the context, it is clear Andrae is referring to the Scripture's ability to stand as a rule of dogma, of institutes, and of usages of faith, human traditions, and good works. This is not a crass assertion of verbal inerrancy, but rather an assertion regarding the nature of divine revelation—that *the Sacred Scriptures are the Word of God and therefore without error in matters with which the divine revelation concerns itself: doctrine, reproof, correction, instruction in righteousness, and salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.* (2 Tim 3:15-16). (Mastrantonis 2005, 111)

Gerhard greatly expanded upon this idea:

*From the efficient cause and goal of Holy Scripture results its perfection and clarity. Because God, the Creator of mind and language, wanted to inform people in and through Scripture about his essence and will and in its instruction about faith and mores to make them wise to eternal salvation, therefore he also wanted Scripture to be perfect and clear. Were it not perfect and clear, it could not have instructed us fully about the essence and will of God nor could it have made us wise to eternal life. **Our churches affirm that Scripture is perfect; and with that word perfect, they mean the fact that Scripture instructs us fully and perfectly about all things necessary for attaining salvation.** (Gerhard 2006, 333) [Emphasis added]*

Hollazius writes: "In the definition of the Holy Scriptures, **The Word of God signifies formally the purpose of God, or the conception of the divine mind, revealed for the salvation of men** immediately to the prophets and apostles, and mediately, through their ministrations, to the whole race of man." (Schmid 1875, 40) [Emphasis added] Gerhard again says "the absolutely wise and perfect God ...wanted the Scriptures to appear and exist for this purpose: that they might instruct us fully about his essence and will for our salvation. ...Scripture, then, as the effect of a perfect cause of this sort, is perfect." (Gerhard 2006, 335-336) The careful reader will note that Gerhard, in ascribing perfection to the Sacred Scriptures, is not asserting a crass verbal inerrancy. Instead, he is saying that "the absolutely wise and

perfect God" is the "perfect cause" of Sacred Scripture, and that the Word of God informs us regarding God's essence and will, containing such instructions about faith and mores as will make us wise unto salvation.

Gerhard points out that although we are concerned for the text itself, this is only the external form of the divine revelation, and the divine revelation is the most important thing.

*By the term Scripture, we are not to understand so much the external form, or sign, i. e., the particular letters employed, the art of writing and the expressions by which the divine revelation is described, as the matter itself or the thing signified, just **that which is marked and represented by the writing, viz., the Word of God itself, which instructs us concerning the nature and will of God.** For, as in all writing, performed by an intelligent agent, so also in these prophetic and apostolic writings, two things are to be considered, viz., in the first place, the letters, syllables, and sentences which are written, and which are external symbols signifying and expressing conceptions of the mind; and, secondly, those conceptions themselves, which are the thing signified, expressed by these external symbols of letters, syllables, and sentences; wherefore in the term Scriptures we embrace both of these, and the latter especially. (Schmid 1875, 41) [Emphasis added]*

Pieper's *Christian Dogmatics* speaks not of inerrancy, but of the "perfection, or sufficiency, of Holy Scripture" over and against those who deny their "normative or judicial authority". Scripture does not tell us everything we can know about "earthly or civil life", nor does Scripture "reveal all divine matters". Yet the Scriptures do teach us "perfectly whatever we need to know to obtain eternal life." This is the normative function of Holy Scripture.⁹ (Pieper 1950, 317-318)

And so, having determined what inspiration is not, we must finally describe the content and the meaning of inspiration. Sacred Scripture is inspired because it is the very Word of God that makes us wise unto salvation (2 Tim 3:15). Gerhard remarks: "Scripture is nothing other than the divine revelation reduced to sacred writing, for the revealed Word of God and Holy Scripture really are not different because holy men of God reduced into the Scriptures those actual divine revelations". (Gerhard 2006, 49) Pieper writes: "The Scriptures not only tell us that they are the Word of God, but they also teach very clearly why they are the Word of God, namely, because they were inspired, or breathed into the writers, by God. ...This divine act of inspiration establishes the fact that the Holy Scriptures, though written by men, are the Word of God." (Pieper 1950, 217) Because the Sacred Scriptures are the inspired revelation, the very Word of God, they make us wise unto salvation and are profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness (2 Tim 3:15-16). The plain words of Scripture regarding the nature and content of inspiration constitutes that which Nichols calls the formal perspective of inerrancy, "that of relevance to human salvation". (Nichols 1991, 137)

⁹ Pieper does seem to provide some slight support for inerrancy: "But remember: When Scripture incidentally treats a scientific subject, it is always right, let "science" say what it pleases." (Pieper 1950, 317) I say no more than that as well. I do not argue for science or history over and against the Bible. "In the beginning" means the universe is not eternal, but time, space, energy, and matter had a beginning. "God created the heavens and the earth" means exactly what it says. But I will not base my Christian apologetics on the Biblical account of creation, as do the Fundamentalists, but on the cross of Christ.

I note that this is not Gospel-Reductionism, the reduction of Biblical authority to matters that are either part of the Gospel, or derived from it.¹⁰ We know this cannot be the case, for the resurrected Christ, on the road to Emmaus, began with Moses and the prophets and showed how the entire Scriptures were about Him (Luke 24:27). From this we know that the entirety of Sacred Scripture is a testimony to the Christ, "who is our life" (Col 3:4): Christ (and therefore Christology) is the center of Sacred Scripture. Christ is the *Logos*, the Word made flesh, and the *Logos* is the essence of the Gospel message. Therefore Christ is the Gospel (in the broadest sense), the material element of Sacred Scripture, for all Scripture testifies of Christ and is therefore profitable for salvation. How then may we say that this or that portion of Sacred Scripture is not Gospel, and therefore not authoritative? And by what authority could we say it? For down that path lies the diminution of the most perfect and holy Word of God, and the destruction of "the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 1:3).

The inspiration of Sacred Scriptures, which are the Word of God, requires that word to speak with consistency and unanimity regarding the divine revelation. Writing on the subject of inspiration, the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod makes the point that the unity of Sacred Scripture is both Christological and doctrinal. This, then, is the content, the subject matter, and the purpose of inspiration:

The unity of the Scriptures is Christological. Jesus said that the Old Testament testifies of Him (John 5:39) and that Moses wrote of Him (John 5:46). In the parable of the householder (Matt. 21:33-46) He cited Ps. 118:22-23 as applying to Himself. In Mark 14:27 He refers to Himself as the subject of Zech. 13:7. He went up to Jerusalem that everything written of the Son of Man in the prophets might be fulfilled in Him (Luke 18:31-33). Beginning at Moses and all the prophets He expounded to the disciples on the Emmaus road the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures (Luke 24:27). (Committee on Theology and Church Relations (LCMS) 1995, 12)

The unity of the Scriptures is doctrinal. Throughout the Scriptures, wherever such topics are treated whether as the specific subject of discussion or only incidentally mentioned, the same doctrine is taught concerning creation, anthropology, justification, sacraments, church, the end of the world, resurrection of the dead, judgment, eternal life, eternal death, or any other article of the Christian faith. (Committee on Theology and Church Relations (LCMS) 1995, 13)

¹⁰ Schlink writes regarding the treatment of Scripture in the Lutheran Confessions: "This intense concern with the Gospel suggests that the Gospel is the norm in Scripture and Scripture is the norm for the sake of the Gospel." (Schlink 1961, 6) The statement is made within a Law/Gospel context, and suggests support for the use of Law/Gospel Reductionism as the ruling hermeneutical principle; however, Schlink seems to be using "norm" in its philosophical sense, as described by Piepkorn: "The norm is in a sense the form which the tangible, palpable matter seeks to express, by which the matter is informed, and to which it is conformed. Thus in the Sacred Scriptures, in the Symbols, and in the concrete expressions of the Church's continuing ministry, we have a material element which changes from language to language, from situation to situation and from generation to generation, and we have a formal element[,] the unalterable Word of God". (Piepkorn, *The Significance of the Lutheran Symbols for Today* 2007, 86) Fagerberg notes the Confessions speak of the "Holy Scriptures" as "God's Word", which is sometimes used as a synonym for the Gospel. (Fagerberg 1972, 16-17) Thus Schlink's statement is true because he appears to use the term Gospel in its broad sense: as being the *Logos* which is the material element of Sacred Scripture. By contrast, Law/Gospel Reductionism (normally referred to as Gospel Reductionism) expresses the Law/Gospel as the "ruling or only hermeneutical presupposition in Lutheran theology". (Murray, *Law and Gospel and the Doctrine of God: Missouri in the 1960s and 1970s* 2001, 128) Gospel Reductionism replaces Christology with the Law-Gospel principle as the ruling hermeneutical principle.

Because the Sacred Scriptures are the inspired Word of God, and because the many authors all testified concerning Christ and are unified in doctrine, the *forma* of the Sacred Scriptures is reliable. However, the reliability of the Sacred Scriptures is not demonstrated by the inerrancy of the *material*, nor would an inerrant *material* be evidence of inspiration. It is not the Sacred Scriptures that are inerrant; rather, the divine revelation is inerrant. The Sacred Scriptures are a reliable source of knowledge concerning the divine revelation, which is understood by means of faith in Christ. Samuel Nafziger writes:

[We] believe that confidence in the reliability of the Bible is not possible apart from faith in Jesus Christ. Christians believe what the Scriptures teach because they first believe in Jesus Christ. Christ is the object of faith, not the Bible. We believe that the inversion of this order compromises "scripture alone" and results in rationalistic fundamentalism, as if an accepted demonstration of the Bible's truthfulness and reliability -- perhaps a piece of Noah's ark, for example -- could provide a foundation for faith in the Gospel. The Bible remains a dark book apart from faith in Christ, for He is its true content. But when sinners are brought to faith in Him, Christ points them back to the writings of the prophets and apostles as the sole authoritative source for all the church believes, teaches and confesses. (Nafziger 1994, 6)

The Lutheran Doctrine of Inspiration

We err when we assume inspiration requires inerrancy, as though the *forma* of Sacred Scriptures would be unreliable if the *materia* were not inerrant. When we ascribe inerrancy (in its modern theological understanding) to Sacred Scripture, we are subscribing to a view of inspiration that goes beyond what Sacred Scripture says about itself. Moreover, the concept of inerrancy is not derived from Sacred Scripture, but is a theological presupposition imposed upon the Word of God. As such, it is a divinization of the *materia* and a desacrilization of the *forma*. Practically speaking, the divinization of the text forces us to spend time and energy focusing on side issues (like proving that the Bible is scientifically accurate) instead of focusing on Jesus Christ. And what did Jesus say about himself? "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me". (John 14:6) The Sacred Scriptures are not the way, but the means through which the way is revealed to us. Christ alone is the divine self-expression of the Father; the text is the guidepost pointing us to Christ. Therefore, the Sacred Scriptures are the inspired revelation, the very Word of God, they make us wise unto salvation and are profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness. This is most certainly true.

Quotations from various Lutheran doctrinal formulae:

The Synod, and every member of the Synod, accepts without reservation ...The Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament as the written Word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and of practice. (Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod 2007, 11)

The synod accepts the canonical books of the Old and New Testament as the divinely inspired and inerrant Word of God and submits to this Word of God as the only infallible authority in all matters of doctrine, faith, and life. (The WELS Committee on Constitutional Matters 2008, 6)

The only source and rule of the Synod's faith and doctrine is the Word of God, revealed in the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments. (Evangelical Lutheran Synod 2008)

We confess that God reveals Himself to mankind, not only through creation and the human conscience, but also and especially through the Holy Scriptures, His written Word. The true way of salvation is revealed only through God's Word, and any claims for revelation of the way of salvation through other means must be rejected. The main purpose of Holy Scripture is to reveal to us that Jesus Christ is our only Savior. See Rom. 15:4 and 16:25-26, 2 Tim. 3:15, Luke 24:25-27, John 20:31, Rom. 10:14-17, Jer. 23:25-29, John 14:6, Acts 4:12.

We confess that the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments, in their original form as written by the prophets, apostles, and evangelists, were given by inspiration of God. The Holy Scriptures are without error in everything they teach, including matters of geography, science, and history, and they are the only infallible rule and norm of Christian doctrine and practice. The Scriptures not only contain the Word of God (as if to say, some of their teachings are the authoritative Word of God and others are not), but they are the very Word of God in their entirety. We reject the so-called "historical-critical" or "higher-critical" method of Biblical interpretation as an unwarranted and arbitrary manner of dealing with Holy Scripture. The Scriptures are true and reliable in all that they report, including their accounts of Old Testament and New Testament miracles. We therefore regard the denial of these miracles as blasphemous and as setting up man's reason as a judge over God's Word. Since the term "inspired" is often used in a loose sense, we frequently use the expressions "verbally inspired" and "inerrant" in describing the authority and reliability of these sacred documents which God caused His servants to write. See John 10:35, 1 Cor. 2:13, 2 Tim. 3:16, 2 Pet 1:20-21, 2 Pet. 3:15-17, 1 Thes. 1:5, 2:13. (Evangelical Lutheran Synod 2005)

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