

Biblical Authority and Campus Ministry: Questions and Responses

The Publications Committee of ASBCM invited Dr. Larry Lewis, Dr. L. D. Johnson, and Dr. William L. Hendricks to respond to some questions about biblical authority, inerrancy, and related topics. Dr. Lewis, pastor of Tower Grove Baptist Church, St. Louis is close to campus ministry. He served as director of student ministry in the Baptist Convention of Pennsylvania-South Jersey, 1971-74, and is now strongly involved in international student ministry in St. Louis. Dr. Johnson is Chaplain, Furman University, South Carolina, where he has been for 13 years. Dr. Hendricks is Professor of Theology and Christian Philosophy at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary.

The questions are listed with Dr. Lewis' responses, and at the beginning of Dr. Johnson's and Dr. Hendricks' responses.

Editor

1. Why is it important for campus ministers to be concerned with Biblical authority?

Our understanding of all matters relating to life, death, and eternity is dependent on Biblical revelation. It is imperative our understanding of these important matters be based on an absolute, immutable authority, not merely on a bunch of notions or "iffy" propositions. The Bible gives us an absolute statement of fact regarding morality, ethics, salvation, eternity and other pertinent matters.

2. Please define inerrancy as it relates to Biblical authority.

"Inerrancy" simply means the scriptures, in their original manuscripts, were without error of any kind. Since all scriptures are inspired all must be perfect, for God can not inspire error or mistakes. A perfect God wrote a perfect book!

"Inerrancy" does not mean "mechanical dictation". No respectable conservative scholar subscribes to the mechanical dictation theory. It does mean the Holy Spirit so supervised the writing of scripture that not even one word is contained within it that God did not intend, nor is there any error, mistakes or perverted doctrine in its whole or in any part!

I agree with John Wesley, "If there be any mistakes in the Bible there may as well be a thousand. If there be one falsehood in that book it did not come from the God of truth." ¹

3. Does the word inerrant improve on the word revelation?

"Inerrant" and "revelation" are both good, practical, usable words. We should not hesitate to use either in regard to the scriptures.

Revelation describes the purpose of scriptures, i.e. to reveal to man in written form great spiritual truths.

Inerrancy refers to the nature of scriptures as an absolutely credible document without error of any kind.

Dr. John R. Sampey, former esteemed president of Southern Seminary, made the case for inerrancy when he said, "Conservatives hold that the writers were preserved from all error by the inbreathed Spirit guiding them." ²

I find myself wondering why some are hesitant to use the word "inerrant"? They will freely and glibly speak of the Bible as "inspired", "trustworthy", "reliable", "adequate", etc., but recoil at

the word "inerrant". The reason is simple — those who refuse to use the word inerrant do not believe the Bible is inerrant. They acknowledge that it contains the word of God but also suspect it may contain errors — perhaps a bit of Babylonian mythology or Egyptian superstition; perhaps a scribal error or an interpolation — maybe at least a scientific error or a numerical miscalculation. Some have called this the "halitosis theory" — God inspired the Bible, but God had bad breath! Or the "Dalmatian theory" — the Bible is inspired in spots and we're inspired to "spot the spots". How absurd! If God inspired it at all, He inspired it all! And if God inspired it, it has to be true!

4. From your perspective of inspiration, would you change the statement in the Baptist Faith and Message concerning inspiration?

I would not change Article 1 of the Baptist Faith and Message except, perhaps, to make the interpretation given article one at the 1979 Houston convention the official interpretation. At the Houston convention Dr. Wayne Dehoney made a motion asking the convention to reaffirm article one and defined "truth without mixture of error" to mean "that in the original autographs, Gods' revelation was perfect and without error doctrinally, historically, scientifically and philosophically".

Dr. Hershel Hobbs was chairman of the committee that authored The Baptist Faith and Message statement in 1963. He also spoke to Dr. Dehoney's motion emphasizing the phrase "truth without any mixture of error" was meant to apply to "the whole Bible", not just the truth within the Bible.

Since the maker of a motion is the one who interprets its purpose and intent, this interpretation clearly understood by the messengers and overwhelmingly approved in a near unanimous vote, was tantamount to the convention endorsing inerrancy. However, I hope some future convention will adopt Dr. Dehoney's interpretation as the official interpretation of Article 1.

Ridiculous as it seems, some liberals have "wriggled out" of Article 1 by claiming "truth without any mixture of error" to mean the "truth" within the Bible has no error in it, but that doesn't mean the Bible has no error in it. How ridiculous and redundant can you be? The truth in anything has no error in it! Or they will say the Bible is "without error" in matters of salvation, and faith, but not in other areas such as science, history, etc. Of course, these are only "word games" they are playing with us. They know perfectly well "truth without any mixture of error" is meant to apply to the Bible

in its' whole and in every part.

5. To what extent should inerrancy be used as a test of fellowship or employment in a Baptist institution?

No one should be employed to teach in a Southern Baptist college or seminary who does not believe in the Bible as an inerrant and infallible document. This is not to suggest one has to believe in inerrancy to be a fine person or even a fine Christian, but we simply can not tolerate a neo-orthodox theological position in our institutions and remain conservative, evangelical denomination. If liberal theology prevails in our institutions, Southern Baptists will not survive as a conservative denomination beyond the 20th century.

Dr. Harold Ockenga, President of Gordon-Conwell Seminary, said, "The evidence that those who surrender the doctrine of inerrancy inevitably move away from orthodoxy is indisputable."³

Dr. Harold Lindsell, former editor of Christianity Today said, "Once infallibility is abandoned — it always and ever opens the door to further departures from the faith. It is next to impossible to stop the process of theological deterioration once inerrancy is abandoned. It is a theological "watershed"."⁴

6. When did inerrancy become an issue?

Historically, inerrancy first became an issue in the Garden of Eden when the serpent said, "Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat every tree of the garden? — and the serpent said to the woman, 'Ye shall not surely die.'" (Gen. 3:1-4) Dedicated men of faith in every generation have had to fight for God's Word against those who would refute it, dilute it, dispute it, and destroy it. The first generation that refuses to affirm the Word of God will be the last generation to have the Word of God!

Historically Baptists have always affirmed the inerrancy and infallibility of the scriptures. This has always been and is now the "main stream" of Southern Baptist theology. B. H. Carroll, founder and first president of Southwestern Seminary said, "The inspired Word of God is irrefutably infallible and all the powers of the world can not break one 'Thus saith the Lord.'" James P. Boyce, founder and first president of Southern Seminary said, "No other book has ever been found more reliable"⁶." John Sampey, former president of Southern Seminary said, "The writers were preserved from all error by the inbreathed Spirit guiding them." Former Southern Baptist Convention President Herschel Hobbs said, "The Bible is

the divinely inspired Word of God. - - it has 'Truth, without any mixture of error for its matter.' Thus it is the inerrant Word of God."⁸

Inerrancy only becomes an issue within our Southern Baptist Convention when some within our midst depart from the historic position and begin to teach in our colleges and seminaries that the Bible does, or at least may, contain errors.

7. What good will come from the inerrancy debate, what bad will come from the inerrancy debate?

An open debate of these pertinent theological issues is always constructive, providing we center on issues and not personalities and that we do so with love and in the Spirit of Christ. Our love for a brother in Christ should and must be unconditional! A harsh condemnatory arrogant spirit does more harm than good and has no place in a community of Christians. However, a "peace at any price" philosophy is also unworthy. People of convictions should be willing to stand for if need be, die for those convictions.

8. Do you think that inerrancy of God's Word is really the issue in our convention?

Inerrancy is a serious issue in our convention and must not be dismissed as of little consequence. To quote Dr. Harold Kindsell, "If history has any lesson to teach Southern Baptists, it is the lesson that once a denomination departs from a belief in Biblical infallibility, it opens the floodgates to disbelief about other cardinal doctrines of faith."⁹

When we compare these forthright affirmations of the Bible as the inerrant Word of God, with the following quote from the May 21, 1979 issue of the Dallas Times Herald, it is not hard to see why many are concerned. "'Biblical inerrancy is not what we think is important', said Dr. Wayne E. Ward, a professor of Christian Theology at Louisville's Southern Seminary, who admitted that none of his colleagues would likely hold to the inerrancy of the Bible."¹⁰ I highly respect Dr. Ward and if his analysis is correct, inerrancy is, indeed, a critical issue in Southern Baptist life.

Once we accept the proposition that the Bible does or may contain errors, from that point on we sit in judgment over the Bible rather than the Bible in judgment over us. We become theological rationalists deciding by our own reason and intuition which portions of the scriptures we accept as true and which are false;

which are accurate and which are mistakes. Sooner or later, Southern Baptists must have a "showdown" over the issue of inerrancy if our doctrinal integrity is preserved.

Larry Lewis

Footnotes

1. John Wesley, *Journal*, VI, p. 117
2. John R. Sampey, *Syllabus for Old Testament Study*, Nashville=Broadman, 1903, p. 58
3. Harold Lindsell, *The Battle For The Bible*, Grand Rapids=Zondervan, 1976, p. 12
4. *Ibid*, p. 25
5. B. H. Carroll, *Inspiration Of The Bible*, New York=Revell, 1930, pp. 20-23
6. James P. Boyce, *Abstract of Theology*, Philadelphia=American Baptist Publication Society, 1899, p. 35
7. John R. Sampey, *Syllabus for Old Testament Study*, Nashville=Broadman, 1903, p. 58
8. Herschel Hobbs, *The Bible, God's Inerrant Word*, (Baptist Hour Message, 1972)
9. Harold Lindsell, *op. cit*, p. 104
10. Wayne E. Ward, *Dallas Times Herald*, May 21, 1979

1. Why is it important for campus ministers to be concerned with Biblical authority?
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7. What good will come from the inerrancy debate, what bad will come from the inerrancy debate?
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I shall make a few remarks, generally directed at answering the questions posed.

For me the real question is the authority of Scripture. I believe that the Bible is the divinely inspired record of God's word to us. As such, it has absolute authority as a rule and guide to faith and practice.

Inerrancy can be applied to the Bible in the sense of its being an authentic, dependable record of God's self-disclosure. It is "Word of God in words of men." I subscribe to the "Baptist Ideals" statement of the SBC meeting in 1963 in which it is stated that all Scripture is judged by Jesus Christ. This is crucially important to me.

Inerrancy in my view does not have anything to do with the notion of God dictating the words of the text. People who hold to that assumption--and that is what it is-- fall back upon the "original manuscript" argument to make such a theory possible. Inasmuch as we have no autographs, we are arguing about something that can be neither proved nor disproved. What the "autograph theory" does presume is, I believe, much more destructive to the fundamentalist argument than they have imagined. If the Bible must be "word-by-word" dictated by God in order to be authoritative, and since we obviously do not have such a word-by-word letter-perfect text, are we to assume that the fundamentalists don't believe that the Bible they do have to work with is authoritative? No, the authority of Scripture does not hang upon the presumption that God turned the authors of the text into dictating machines.

I graduated from SBTS in 1942. My teachers were such Baptist notables as Sampey, Carver, Hershey Davis, Tribble. Were these men dangerous heretics? How come these Johnny-come-latelies into the SBC are now the self-appointed defenders of the faith? Who made them keepers of our orthodoxy? One gets the impression that the issue is not authority of the Scripture -- which Southern Baptists have always stood by -- but an attempt to wrest control of the vast power and influence of the SBC from those who have made the SBC what it is so that these late-comers can use it to their own ends.

We are involved in a power struggle. When Southern Baptists wake up to that reality we may be able to clarify the issues.

L. D. Johnson

Campus Ministers should be concerned about biblical authority because authority is a major problem for college students and the Bible is the major form of authority which we deal with in Southern Baptist life. Since we are talking about our authority and an area of interest to the students, it seems patent to me that biblical authority is a prime concern for those who minister with students.

The word inerrancy means without error. It entered the biblical vocabulary of Apologetics in the 17th century in Protestant circles as a resistance to Roman Catholic viewpoints. Please see Dewey Beegle's *The Inspiration of the Scriptures*. The term has been used sparingly in Protestant circles until the present time. It does not occur in Baptist Confessions of Faith which have been instrumental in formulating Southern Baptist opinion or insights.

The Bible has no errors in it. Biblical inerrancy means that the Bible is adequate to do what it claims in itself that it is intended to do. This would mean that biblical inerrancy applies to matters of faith and conduct as our Baptist Statements of Faith have so well said and as one finds in II Timothy 3:16.

I do not feel that inerrant improves on the word inspiration. (Revelation is a larger concept which involves manifestation, inspiration, and illumination.) It seems to me preferable to use the biblical materials' own terms for defining what it says about itself. Therefore, it seems to me that inspiration is preferable to inerrancy. There are persons who want to use the term inerrant to indicate that the Bible is to be used as a source book for all norms and manner of insights including modern science and psychology, etc. Obviously, this was not the historical intention of the term. When it is so used this way it tends to say things about the Bible that the Bible does not say about itself. I repeat it is preferable to use the term inspiration and to define it in such terms that the scripture becomes the norm and authority for our faith.

I would not change the Baptist Faith and Message Statement. It expresses very well what the Bible says about itself and what the majority of Baptists have said about it.

Since the term inerrancy, as I have indicated above, is variously used by different groups, I feel that it would be a mistake for it to be used as a test of fellowship in any Baptist institution. Obviously, fellowship and employment are two parts of a larger dimension.

Inerrancy became an issue in the 17th century when Protestantism strove to set up an authority against the Bishop of Rome. It surfaced again in the early parts of this century when the dilemma of science and religion and their battles over inspiration became a renewed issue. It has recently resurfaced as an issue in Baptist life, coming to a major point of concern in the 1979 Southern Baptist Convention.

I do not feel that debating errancy and inerrancy is a matter that will contribute either to the fellowship or the well-being of our denomination. It seems to me that the term inerrancy is used by some not only to speak of the authority of scripture but also to guarantee a certain type of hermeneutic or interpretation of the scripture. The authority of scripture and biblical interpretation are two separate issues and should definitely be kept so. There are some who do not divorce these issues and try to lump interpretation together with authority and inspiration. This is an egregious error. There can come much ill feeling and polarization by a debate of this issue that is held at emotional levels. Those who seek to uphold inclusive inerrancy, by which I mean an inerrancy which includes all kinds of insights and areas of concerns, find themselves in great difficulty when it comes to suggesting that the original manuscripts alone are inerrantly inspired. Simple logic would indicate that if we do not have the original manuscripts then we do not have any inerrant Bible. This seems to be a weakening both of their case and of the way in which I would like to speak about Scripture. I prefer to speak about the Bible which we have in hand and not about original manuscripts which we do not have. This kind of discussion calls into question the sovereignty of God and his wisdom in preserving what would be necessary to prove inerrancy, but his not choosing to do so.

I do not believe that inerrancy of God's word is the significant issue in Southern Baptist life. It seems to me that leadership, desire for funding for institutions, and the desire for expression of a more conservative view in the light of our political realities are the deeper issues which underlie this discussion.

William L. Hendricks

