Is It Just a Matter of Interpretation, not of Inerrancy? Examining the Relationship between Inerrancy and Hermeneutics

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Introduction

A current argument for broadening the traditional meaning of inerrancy is: "It's Just a Matter of Interpretation, not of Inerrancy." This is used to justify the acceptance of views that have been traditionally rejected by inerrantists. For example, Jack Rogers of Fuller Seminary held that the Bible is wholly true. He even went so far as to say that he was "in agreement with the view of inerrancy set forth in the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy [1978]." Yet he allowed for there to be factual mistakes in the Bible.[2] How so? Because when examining the biblical text according to his "the intention of the author," he insisted

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[2] Jack Rogers, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 431-432.

that the biblical authors did not intend to mislead the reader, even when they said that some things are factually incorrect.

Likewise, Robert Gundry justified his "dehistoricizing" of sections of Matthew (e.g., the visit of the Magi) by claiming he believed in the inerrancy of the whole Bible, including that text on the Magi in Matthew 2, however, he claimed the passage was not to be interpreted literally.[3] So, he claimed this was not denying the inerrancy of Scripture since his claim about Matthew was only a matter of interpretation, not one of inspiration.

Similarly, Michael Licona claims to believe in the inerrancy of the Bible (including Matthew), even though he affirms that it would not be contrary to inerrancy to view the resurrection of the saints in Matthew 27:51-54 as

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[3] See Robert Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), Appendix.

"poetic" or a "legend"[4] claiming that in that kind of Greco-Roman genre "it is often difficult to determine where history ends and legend begins" (*RJ*, 34). Indeed, he goes so far as to claim that even a literal contradiction in the Gospel record[5] could be consistent with a belief in inerrancy, since in the kind of genre used in the Gospels allow both of these texts as true, even though they contradict each other [6]

According to this view held by Rogers, Gundry, Licona, and others, challenging the meaning of a biblical narrative (as to whether it is historical) does not call inspiration into question; but is simply a matter of

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[4] Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approac*h (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academia, 2010), 548, 553.

[5] In the transcript of the debate with Bart Ehrman (Spring, 2009) Licona said, "I think that John probably altered the day [of Jesus's crucifixion] in order for a theological—to make a theological point there. But that does not mean that Jesus wasn't crucified."

[6] See "Mike Licona Admits Contradictions in the Gospels." http://normangeisler.net/articles/Bible/Inspiration-Inerrancy/Licona/LiconaAdmitsContradictionsInGospels.htm. Accessed January 26, 2015.

interpretation. However, by this kind of separation of
interpretation and inerrancy, one can hold that the entire
Bible is inspired, even though there may be errors in given
passages. Clearly, this leaves a lot more latitude for errors
rejected by the traditional view. There are serious problems
with the suppositions involved in such a procedure. We will
examine several of these faulty assumptions below.

Examining the Assumptions of the
Denial of Traditional Inerrancy

*Assumption 1: Inspiration and Interpretation are Totally
Separate Matters.*

This view of totally separating of inspiration and
interpretation is open to serious challenge. For if inspiration
and interpretation are totally separate, then the Bible could
be inerrant, even if it affirmed nothing. But this is absurd.
The fact is that interpretation cannot be totally separated
from Inerrancy. If it could, then logically no text of
Scripture would have any meaning. It would be totally

vacuous. Inerrancy would be affirming nothing in the

biblical text. But something has to be affirmed (or denied)

in order for there to be meaning and truth. For a statement

is meaningful only if it is either true or false. And it is true

or false only if it either affirms or denies something. But, as

Aristotle noted, truth is what corresponds to the facts. For

"to say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is

false."[7] Aquinas concurred, saying, "truth is defined by the

conformity of the intellect and the thing and hence to know

this conformity is to know truth"[8] Modern philosopher G.

E. Moore agreed, writing, "to say that this belief is true, is

to say that there is in the Universe a fact to which it

corresponds; and to say that it is false is to say that there is

not in the Universe any fact to which it corresponds" [9]

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[7] Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 7.6.25 in Richard McKeon, *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (NY: Random House, 1941).

[8] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.16.2 in Anton Pegis, *The Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (NY: Random House, 1944).

[9] G. E. Moore, *Some Main Problems in Philosophy* (NY: MacMillan, 1953), 279.

So, if the Bible has any meaning whatsoever, then it must be affirming or denying something. And, if it has any truths, then it must have affirmations or denials to which its statements correspond. So, its truthfulness (inerrancy) cannot be maintained totally apart from its affirmations (and denials). So, while interpretation and inerrancy are logically distinct, nonetheless, they are not actually separable.

Assumption 2: The Bible Could Be Inerrant, Even If its Interpretations were Completely Allegorical.

It is agreed by all sides of the debate that there is poetry (psalms), parable (Matt. 13), and allegory (Gal. 4:24) in the Bible. If so, then some critics argue that it is possible that any given passage (and by logical extension, all passages) could be taken allegorically. After all, if interpretation nd inerrancy are totally separate issues, then all passages could be taken allegorically (i.e., non-literally). Hence, it is possible that nothing in the Bible is literally

true, including the story of the Magi (Matt. 2) and the resurrection of the saints (Matt. 27).

Indeed, both Robert Gundry and Michael Licona have admitted this possibility. When Gundry was asked whether he would vote "yes" on Christian Science founder Mary Baker Eddy (who totally allegorized the Bible) to be a member of The Evangelical Theological Society (ETS), if she sincerely accepted its doctrinal statement on inerrancy, Gundry said, "I would vote yes…"![10] Likewise, when Licona was examined y the Southern Evangelical Seminary (SES) faculty about his views, he said "that if someone interpreted the resurrection accounts as metaphor and therefore denied the historicity of the Gospel accounts that would not contradict inerrancy." As a result, one faculty examiner exclaimed, "That was unbelievable."[11] Shocking

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[10] See *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society,* vol. 26, 1 (Lynchburg, VA: The Evangelical Theological Society, 1983), 86-94.

[11] Professor Thomas Howe, Ph.D, Letter to Norman Geisler, Sep 22, 2014.

as this may seem, it is a logical extension of the view that interpretation and interpretation are totally separate issues. That is to say, the Bible could be entirely inerrant without anything in it being actually true.

Even Paul Tillich admits that God-talk could not be totally symbolic. For there could be no negation of a literal truth, if there were no preceding affirmation to be negated. Something has to be literally true. Tillich believed the statement that God is "Being" or "the Ground of Being" or, better, "Being Itself" was literally true.[12] Indeed, logic demands that not every statement about God (or reality) can be non-literal. Something has to be literally true before one can know that something else is not-literal. Every negation of knowledge presupposes some positive knowledge. Even the Neoplatonic mystic, Plotinus (3rd cent. A.D.), contended that "It is impossible to say, 'Not

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[12] Paul Tilllich, *Ultimate Concern: Tillich in Dialogue* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1965), 46.

that' if one is utterly without experience or conception of the 'That.'"[13]

Likewise, inerrancy and interpretation cannot be totally separated. To assume they can be is logically incoherent. Yet both Gundry and Licona, and other Neo-evangelicals following them, argue that they can be totally separated. Thus, the basic premise behind this view is incoherent. Something has to be known to be literally true in order for us to know that something else is not literally true. Everything cannot be purely symbolic. The Bible must be actually making some literal truth claim before we can say it is inerrant.

Assumption 3: Since Interpretations are Entirely Separate Issue from Inerrancy, The Real Issue is One of Interpretation, Not One of Inerrancy.

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[13] Plotinus, *The Enneads*, translated By Stephen MacKenna (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1966), 6.7.29.

It is argued that if interpretation is an entirely separate issue from inerrancy, then all debates about inerrancy boil down to matters of interpretation. But since there are many different and legitimate ways to interpret a biblical text, then the inerrancy issue becomes one of *how* one interprets the Bible.

In response, inerrancy and interpretation are not totally separate matters. Inerrancy implies a certain way to interpret the Bible. For even the statement that "the Bible is inerrant (without error)" involves an interpretation of some facts. Otherwise how could one know it was without error, unless he knew what was true (that is, what corresponds to the facts). As already noted, one cannot know what is not-true, unless he first knows what is true. But this is only possible if one has a proper understanding of that facts. Thus, inerrancy and interpretation are inseparably connected. Otherwise, the very statement that "The Bible is

without error" would mean no more than, "If anything is true in the Bible, then the Bible is true on this matter."

However, this is a hypothetical and vacuous statement, and it is clearly not what confessors of inerrancy mean when they claim "the Bible is completely without Error." What they mean is that "All of the many things the Bible does affirm as true, are true." In other words, inerrancy confessions are confessions of truth in the Bible—all the truth of the Bible.

Even in its landmark "Statement on Biblical Inerrancy" (1978), the ICBI framers recognized the connection between inspiration and interpretation by its Article XIII: "We affirm that the text of Scripture is to be interpreted by grammatico-historical exegesis…." Thus, "all the claims of the Bible must correspond with reality, whether that reality is historical, factual, or spiritual."[14]

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[14]Article XII of International Council of Biblical Inerrancy Commentary on Biblical Inerrancy (1982) edited by R. C. Sproul. Book I. *Explaining Biblical Inerrancy* (Charlotte, NC: Bastion Books, 2013).

Without the historical-grammatical (literal) interpretation of the Bible, one could not even embrace the doctrine of inerrancy.

This leads to another problem with the total separation of inspiration and interpretation. So, the ICBI statement on inerrancy includes a statement on the historical-grammatical method by which even that statement on inerrancy should be understood. And it looks forward to a fuller statement on the relation between interpretation and inerrancy which followed (in 1982).

Assumption 4: Truth is Not That Which Corresponds with the Facts

The reason many contemporary Bible critics can hold that the Bible is true, even if it is not literally true, is that they have rejected the correspondence view of truth in part or in whole, at least when it comes to some biblical texts. That is, they believe the Bible is true, even if it is sometimes mistaken. For "truth" in this sense does not have

to correspond with the facts. Truth is found in intentions so that something can be mistaken but if stated with good intentions, then it is still true. So, if one holds to the redemptive intent of a text, even if there are mistakes in it, then it is still true.

However, according to this faulty view of truth, virtually every sincerely uttered statement (no matter how many errors are in it), would be true. Further, the denial of the correspondence view of truth assumes the correspondence view of truth. For the statement that "The correspondence view is not true" assumes that this statement corresponds with reality. In fact, the correspondence view of truth is the bedrock of all communication. Without it, communication is impossible. Finally, totally symbolic language, with no anchors in the real world, is not possible. We cannot know what is not-literal (i.e., is symbolic) unless we know what is literal. Thus, inerrancy (the total truthfulness of Scripture) makes

no sense apart from a correspondence view of truth. For, unless something corresponds to the facts it cannot be true. So, for anything—let alone everything—in the Bible to be true, it must be literally true, even if it utilizes symbols and figures of speech to express this literal truth. For instance, the devil is a literal (real) person, even if he is symbolized as a dragon (Rev. 12:3), a serpent (Rev. 12:9), and a lion (1 Pet. 5:8).

Even statements that are symbolic presuppose a literal truth behind them by which we know the symbolic statement is not literal. So the literal truth is at the basis of all truth. Thus, without knowing the literal truth of the Bible we could not say it is inerrant. Ultimately, truth is anchored in some factual reality. Hence to confess the Bible is inerrant (completely true) is to confess that there is actual truth in it that corresponds to reality for this is what truth means. And a denial of the correspondence view of

truth lies at the basis of the denial of the literal truth of the Bible.

ICBI made it very clear that its view of inerrancy entailed a correspondence view of truth. The original framer of the ICBI articles, R. C. Sproul, in his official ICBI commentary on the famous "Chicago Statement on Inerrancy" (1978) wrote: "By biblical standards of truth and error is meant the view used both in the Bible and in everyday life, viz., a correspondence view of truth."[15] It adds, "This part of the article is directed toward those who would redefine truth to relate merely to redemptive intent, the purely personal, or the like, rather than to mean that which corresponds with reality." Likewise, the ICBI commentary on Hermeneutics (1982) adds: "We further affirm that a statement is true if it represents matters as they

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[15] Ibid, Article XIII, Book I.

actually are, but is an error if it misrepresents the facts"
(Article VI).[16]

So inerrancy, as defined by ICBI, is based on a
correspondence view of truth. But on this view of truth
everything cannot be symbolic. For nothing can be taken
symbolically unless one knows the literal truth of which it
is symbolic (non-literal). Correspondence with the literal
facts demands a literal interpretation of the facts. Thus, the
correspondence view of truth is at the basis of the belief
that a biblical narrative should be taken literally.

*Assumption 5: Biblical Narratives are not Necessarily
Historical*

Another assumption of the critics contrary to the
correspondence view of truth and the historical-
grammatical interpretation is that the biblical narratives do

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[16]*ICBI Commentary on Hermeneutics* (1982) adds: "We
further affirm that a statement is true if it represents matters as they
actually are, but is an error if it misrepresents the facts" (Article VI,
Book II). *Explaining Biblical Inerrancy* (Bastion Books: 2013).

not have the presumption of historicity. When it comes to historical matters, some contemporary critics (like Licona) argue that the biblical record makes no presumption of historicity, even in the narrative sections. That is, a biblical narrative is neutral with regard to its historicity. One must prove its historicity or non-historicity.

However, this is based on a faulty premise. For just as the undeniable correspondence view of truth presumes a literal truth at the basis of all truth claims, even so, the correspondence view of truth also assumes that a narrative is telling the literal truth the Gospel writers are reporting, not creating the events. But according to *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary*, *Unabridged*, to "report" is "a statement of facts." Thus, those who deny the historicity of sections of the Gospels have denied the fact stated in the report. It is futile to say that Matthew does not report these events, for he reports them in the same sense that he reports other events (sometimes in the same chapter) that are taken

to be literally true about what happened, unless it is proven
to the contrary. Even when speaking of persons and events
in the present we assume a literal interpretation, likewise,
when the Bible speaks of persons and events in the past, we
presume it is to be understood literally, unless there are
clear indications to the contrary. For truth is what
corresponds to the facts. And literal truth implies some
literal facts. So, truth about the past (i.e., history) should be
understood to be literal, unless proven otherwise.

This is why the ICBI statement on inerrancy speaks
of the fallacious procedure of "dehistoricising" a record in
the Gospel narrative (Article XVIII). This implies that it
should have been taken historically and that it is
presumptively wrong not to do so.

However, this view is clearly contrary to the facts of the
matter for several reasons. First, ICBI adopted the
"grammatical-historical" method of interpreting the Bible
(Article XVIII). The grammatical-**historical** method, by its

very name assumes the historicity of the biblical text. It is also called the "literal" method of interpretation from the Latin *Sensus Literalis* (literal sense). Also, it applies the correspondence view of truth to the Genesis narrative which "affirms that Genesis 1-11 is factual, as is the rest of the book."[17] Finally, the ICBI official commentary defends the historicity of some of the most disputed Old Testament events. It says, "Some, for instance, take Adam to be a myth, **whereas he is presented as a historical person**. Others take Jonah to be an allegory when **he is presented as a historical person** and [is] so referred to by Christ.[18]"

The emphasized words in the above citations give the key to what should be presumed to be literal or historical, namely, whatever is presented as literal or historical! This presumption can be overcome only if there

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[17] See Article XXII in Book II of *Explaining Biblical Inerrancy* (Charlotte, NC: Bastion Books, 2013).
[18]Ibid., Article XIII, emphasis added.

are clear indications in the text or in other related texts to

the contrary—or if some moral or logical law (like the law

of non-contradiction) is being violated if it is taken literally.

For example, the command to "cut off your hand" (Mk.

9:43) to avoid sin—is a violation of a moral law against

mutilation. Or, "swallowing a camel" (Matt. 23:24)—

which is physically impossible.

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events (sometimes in the same chapter) that are taken to be

literally true.

A popular way to state the literal hermeneutic

illustrates this point, namely, "If the literal sense makes

good sense, then seek no other sense lest it result in non-

sense." Likewise, "if the literal sense does not make good

sense (because it violates some moral, rational, or physical

law), then some other sense must be sought lest it result in non-sense." To apply this principle to narrative texts, we could say that: "If the literal historical sense of a narrative makes good sense, then seek no other sense lest it result in non-sense." Likewise, "if the literal sense of a narrative does not make good historical sense (because it violates some moral, rational, or physical law), then seek some other sense lest it result in non-sense." In brief, unless there are clear indications to the contrary in a narrative text (which by its very nature as a narrative has the presumption of historicity), then it should be taken as literal history.

Assumption 6: A Proper Hermeneutical Method is Neutral on the Issue of Inerrancy

Another faulty premise in claiming separation between hermeneutics and inerrancy is the claim that there are no unorthodox methods of interpretation. Methods are hermeneutically and doctrinally neutral. By doctrine we mean what one believes, and by hermeneutical method we

mean how one arrives at this belief. The question, then, is this: Can one's method be contrary to his doctrine? Can one deny *de facto* (in fact) what he affirms *de jure* (officially)? If so, then would not the methodology he utilizes undermine or negate the theology he confesses? Those who separate the two domains seem to think there is no connection when in actuality there is.

Take some examples from church history. The Averronian double-truth method.[19] Thirteenth-century followers of Averroes were condemned for holding a double-truth methodology whereby they could confess the truth of revelation at the same time they held truths of reason that contradicted it. Should an Averronian belong to an inerrancy society like the ETS? That is, should one

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[19] Although Averroes himself probably never held the "double-truth" method, nonetheless, in 1277 Siger of Brabant and followers were condemned by the Church for teaching that "things are true according to philosophy but not according to the Catholic faith, as though there were two contradictory truths." See "Averroism," *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (ed. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingston; Oxford: University Press, 1974) 116.

belong to ETS if he holds that the Bible is wholly true from the standpoint of faith, yet from the standpoint of reason, he also holds many things to be true that contradict truths of Scripture? Indeed, by using this methodology the individual contradicts the theology (i.e., bibliology) he confesses. Despite the fact that they could confess revelation to be inerrant, Averronians held things to be true (by reason) that were contradictory to this revelation. Thus the alleged confession to inerrancy is actually negated by other beliefs, and the denial of inerrancy flows logically from their method.

How about the allegorical method of Origen? He professed the inspiration of the Bible, saying: "That this testimony may produce a sure and unhesitating belief, either with regard to what we have still to advance, or to what has been already stated, it seems necessary to show, in

the first place, that the Scriptures themselves are divine, i.e., were inspired by the Spirit of God."[20]

On the other hand, Origen claimed that to take the story of Adam and Eve as literal is absurd. He believed this because he adopted an allegorical methodology. Thus, while he confesses a belief in total inerrancy his actual beliefs (resulting from his allegorical method) do not conform to an adequate understanding of total inerrancy, for he denies the truth of some parts of Scripture. In short, his methodology undermines his bibliology. He claims to believe what the Bible presents as true, but as a matter of fact he does not believe everything the Bible says happened, actually happened.

The same logic could be applied to a modern allegorist—for example, the Christian Scientist religion. There is no reason that Christian Scientists (followers of

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[20] Origen, *De Principiis*, 4.1.1 in A. Cleveland Coxe*, Fathers of the Third Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976 reprint.

Mary Baker Eddy) could not sincerely confess to believe the ETS or ICBI statements of inerrancy. Yet by their allegorical method they deny the deity of Christ, the historicity of the resurrection, and many other Biblical teachings. So, in effect, they take away with their left hand (hermeneutically) what they confesses with their right hand (bibliologically).

Three contemporary examples, Jack Rogers, Paul Jewett, and Robert Gundry, will make the point. Let's ask whether their methodology is consistent with their theology (particularly their bibliology). All three of these men profess to believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. At least two of them deny that there are any errors in the Bible (Rogers and Gundry), and one of them (Gundry) once belonged to the ETS.

Jack Rogers denied inerrancy by allowing for the possibility of factual mistakes in the Bible. He has a theological procedure that allows him to believe that the

Bible is true, even though not all statements in Scripture need to represent things as they really are—that is, some statements in Scripture may be mistaken. But this disavows the classic statement of inspiration: "What the Bible says, God says." This means that the Bible could affirm what God denies. So if there is significant content in the ETS statement, then someone like Jack Rogers would not be consistent with the ETS confession on inerrancy.

Paul Jewett of Fuller Seminary was another case in point. Jewett claimed to believe in the inspiration of the Bible. He also acknowledged that the apostle Paul affirmed that the husband is the head of the wife (1 Cor. 11:3). However, he insisted that Paul was wrong here—that is, God does not affirm what the apostle Paul affirms here. Indeed, God denies it, for according to Jewett, the truth of

God is that the husband is not the head of the wife as Paul affirmed him to be.[21]

What implications does Jewett's view have for inerrancy? Simply this: He has denied in principle the classic statement of inerrancy: "What the Bible affirms, God affirms." For he believes this is a case where Scripture affirms as true that which is not true. If Jewett is right, then in principle when the interpreter discovers what the Bible is saying he must still ask one more very significant question: "Hath God said?" But that could only be determined by something that is outside the Bible. Thus, the Bible would not be the final authority for faith and practice.

In view of this denial that "what the Bible says, God says," Paul Jewett's view is inconsistent with that of ETS. So, despite Jewett's claim to orthodoxy he has a method

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[21] Paul Jewett, *Man* as *Male and Female* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975).

that is inconsistent with his confession. What he gives with the right hand Jewett confessionally takes away with the left hand hermeneutically. His unorthodox methodology belies his confession to orthodoxy (on the doctrine of Scripture). Indeed, Jewett is methodologically unorthodox.

The case of Robert Gundry is interesting and more crucial because he not only confesses to believe in inerrancy, but he also belonged to ETS which affirmed inerrancy. Yet like the other examples, he held a methodology that is inconsistent with the ETS doctrine of inerrancy. Thus, he was asked to resign from ETS by a vote of nearly three-quarters of its members in 1983. In spite of this, a significant section of ETS now desires that Gundry be restored to ETS.

In many respects, Gundry holds a limited form of the allegorical method. Like Origen, he confesses that the Bible is inspired. And, like Origen, when there are parts of the Bible that, if taken literally, seem to him to contradict

other parts of Scripture, then Gundry rejects their literal truth and takes a kind of allegorical (i.e., midrashic) interpretation of them. For example, Matthew reports that wise men followed a star, conversed with Herod and the scribes, went to Bethlehem, and presented gifts to Christ. Gundry, however, denies that these were literal events. He denies that Jesus literally went up on a mountain to give the Sermon on the Mount as Matthew reports it, and so on. So, while Gundry confesses to believe that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, he denies that these events reported by Matthew are literally and historically true. And more recently Gundry claims that there can be contradictions in the Gospels. In a presentation at Westmont College Oct 8, 2014 titled, "Peter: A False Disciple and Apostate as Portrayed by Matthew,"[22] Gundry cites Aristotle, saying, it

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[22] In this presentation from Oct 8, 2014 (http://youtu.be/QloN9EuOGXE) he cites Aristotle, saying, "In his worked called, *Poetics,* Aristotle defended the right of poets to engage in factual inconsistencies if they were necessary to make the desired point." However, this begs the question by assuming the Gospels are poetry, not history.

is OK "…to engage in factual inconsistencies if they were necessary to make the desired point." However, this appeal to Aristotle's *Poetics* begs the question by assuming the Gospels are poetry, not history. Clearly they are written in narrative form, not poetical form.

But to deny that what the Bible reports in these passages actually occurred is in effect to deny that the Bible is wholly true. As the 1982 "Chicago Statement on Hermeneutics" declares, "We deny that any event, discourse or saying reported in Scripture was invented by the biblical writers or by the traditions they incorporated" (Article XIV). This is precisely what Gundry did—namely, he claimed that some events reported in Matthew did not actually occur but were invented by the gospel writer.

Neither will it suffice to point out that Rogers and Jewett officially deny the classic formula of inerrancy— "What the Bible says, God says"—but that Gundry does not officially deny it, for Origen and Christian Scientists

could hold this formula too. Denial of the formula renders one unorthodox, but affirmation of the mere formula does not necessarily make one's view orthodox. Nor is it sufficient to point out that while others deny inerrancy *de jure,* Gundry does not. Gundry's is a *de facto* denial of inerrancy, for he denies that some events reported in Scripture did in fact occur. But our ETS statement insists that we believe the entire Bible is true.

Still, some may insist that the implied evangelical content as to what the Bible is affirming should not exclude those whose method does not entail the denial of any major doctrine of Scripture. But Gundry affirms all major evangelical doctrines, such as the deity of Christ, his atoning death, his bodily resurrection, etc. Surely, then, Gundry's unorthodox methodology is not tantamount to unorthodoxy. Or is it? In response let us note several things.

First, the doctrine of the inspiration-inerrancy of Scripture is a major doctrine, and Gundry's method is a *de facto* denial of the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture. Inerrancy cannot be separated from interpretation For a divinely inspired error is a contradiction in terms. Even if his method never leads him actually to a denial of any other doctrine, it does deny one important doctrine, the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture. In fact, as far as ETS is concerned this is the only explicitly stated doctrine by which one is tested for membership. So Gundry's denial of the occurrence of some events reported in the gospel of Matthew is a denial of the ETS doctrine that all Scripture is true.

It is acknowledged that Jewett's methodology has yet to lead him actually to deny any major doctrine. However, the method itself leads logically to a denial of a major doctrine—i.e., the doctrine of Scripture. For Jewett's method denies the principle of inerrancy that

"what the Bible says, God says." And even though Jewett did not apply his own implied principle ("What the Bible says, God does not necessarily say"), yet this does not mean it is not applicable elsewhere. The fact remains that the principle is applicable, and if it is applied it will lead logically to a denial of another major doctrine. For example, if Paul can be wrong (because of his rabbinical training) in affirming the headship of the husband over the wife, then logically what hinders one from concluding that Paul is (or could be) wrong in the same verse when he affirms the headship of Christ over the husband? Or if rabbinical background can influence an apostle to affirm error in Scripture, then how can we trust his affirmations about the resurrection in the same book (1 Cor. 15)? After all, Paul was a Pharisee, and Pharisees believed in the resurrection. If he had been a Sadducee perhaps his view on the resurrection would have been different. How then can we be sure that Paul is not also mistaken here on the

major doctrine of the resurrection? In fact, once one separates what the author of Scripture says from what God says, then the Bible no longer has any divine authority in any passage.

Although Gundry does not apply his allegorical (midrashic) interpretation to any major doctrine, the midrash methodology is applicable nonetheless. For example, why should one consider the report of the bodily resurrection of the saints after Jesus' resurrection (Matthew 27) allegorical and yet insist that Jesus' resurrection, which was the basis for it (cf. 1 Cor. 15:23), was literal? By what logic can we insist that the same author in the same book reporting the same kind of event in the same language can mean spiritual resurrection in one case and literal bodily resurrection in another case? Does not Gundry's method lead (by logical extension) to a denial of major doctrines of Scripture? And if it does, then there seems to be no more reason for including Gundry in

ETS than to include Origen, Rogers, or Jewett. They all do (or could) affirm the inerrancy of Scripture, and yet all have a method that actually negates or undermines inerrancy in some significant way.

Even if one could builds safeguards into the midrash method whereby all major doctrines are preserved from allegorization, there is another lethal problem with Gundry's view. The ETS statement on inerrancy entails the belief that everything reported in the Gospels is true ("the Bible in its entirety"). But Gundry believes that some things reported in Matthew did not occur (e.g., the story of the Magi [chap. 2], the report of the resurrection of the saints [chap. 27], etc.). It follows therefore that Gundry does not really believe everything reported in the Gospels is true, despite his claim to the contrary. And this is a *de facto* denial of inerrancy.

It will not suffice to say that Matthew does not really report these events, for he reports them in the same sense

that he reports other events that Gundry believes actually

occurred. In fact, on his view, some stories that seem to be

more likely candidates for midrash (for example, the

appearance of angels to the Jewish shepherds in Luke 2)

Gundry takes as literal, whereas the earthly pilgrimage of

astrologers following a sign in the sky he takes as

imaginary (i.e., midrash). Regardless, the fact of the matter

is that Gundry denies that certain events reported in

Scripture (Matthew) actually occurred. This means in effect

that he is denying the truth of these parts of Scripture. And

if he denies in effect that the Bible is true "in its entirety,"

then Gundry has disqualified himself from ETS.

An Objection Considered

Does not the above argument prove too much? Granted the

finitude and fallibility of man, is it not a reasonable

presumption that we are all inconsistent in our beliefs in

some way or another? Therefore should we not all be

excluded from ETS, ICBI, or other inerrancy affirming group?

In response, there are several crucial differences between common inconsistency of belief and a conscious commitment to a methodology that undermines our important beliefs. First, the common inconsistencies with which we are all plagued are usually unconscious inconsistencies. When they are brought to our attention we work to eliminate them. On the other hand a theological method such as Gundry's midrash or Licona's Greco-Roman genre method is a conscious commitment. Further, and more importantly, common inconsistencies are not recommended as a formal method by which we are to interpret Scripture. Hence they have no official didactic force. They do not purport to teach us how to discover the truth of Scripture. Gundry's method, however, entails a crucial truth claim. It claims that by using this method we will discover the truth that God is really affirming in

Scripture. After all, Gundry's method proposes to tell us what it is that the Bible is actually saying and thus what God is actually saying. This makes a conscious commitment to a theological method a very serious matter, for a hermeneutical method purports to be the means by which we discover the very truth of God.

Further, there is another possible difference between common inconsistencies and the serious inconsistency in which these NT critics engage. The former do not necessarily lead logically to a denial of a major doctrine, but the latter can. As was noted earlier, unorthodoxy in methodology leads logically to unorthodoxy in theology. This is true regardless of whether the proponent of the method makes this logical extension himself. For example, a "double-truth" theory or an allegorical method leads logically to a denial of the literal truth of Scripture.

Now let us consider the question: Is conscientious confession of the doctrine of inerrancy solely in terms of what the confessor takes it to mean a sufficient ground for determining orthodoxy on this doctrine? We suggest that the answer to this is negative for several reasons.

First, making conscientious confession of inerrancy the only test of orthodoxy is tantamount to saying that sincerity is a test for truth. But as is well known even the road to destruction is paved with good intentions (Prov. 14:12).

Second, a statement does not mean what the *reader* takes it to mean to him. It means what the *author* meant by it. If this is not so, then a statement can mean anything the reader wants it to mean, including the opposite of what the author meant by it. If this were the case then neo-orthodox theologians and liberals could also belong to ETS, since many of them believe that the Bible is inerrant in some sense (usually in its purpose).

Third, no theological organization has integrity without some objective, measurable standard by which its identity can be determined. In the case of ETS, the standard was the stated doctrine of inerrancy: "The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs." But if anyone can take this statement to mean that the Bible is true in any sense he wishes—as long as he believes it sincerely—then an inerrancy affirming organization has no doctrinal integrity.

Benedict Spinoza, a Jewish pantheist and anti-supernaturalist, denied virtually every major doctrine in the Bible. Nonetheless, he sincerely believed that he was orthodox and acting in accordance with Scripture. He wrote: "I am certified of thus much: I have said nothing unworthy of Scripture or God's Word, and I have made no assertions which I could not prove by most plain argument

to be true. I can therefore, rest assured that I have advanced nothing which is impious or even savours of impiety." [23]

So we must conclude that sincerity is an insufficient test for orthodoxy. In addition to sincerity there must also be conformity to some objective standard or norm for orthodoxy, for truth is conformity with reality. And without such conformity one is not truly orthodox, regardless of his confession to the contrary. Our Lord made it clear that mere confession of him was not enough, for he denied those who confessed "Lord, Lord" but did not "do the will of the Father" (Matt 7:21). Likewise, saying "I believe, I believe" (in total inerrancy) is not sufficient. One's beliefs must truly conform to the fact that all of Scripture is true before he is considered orthodox on this point. So it is not mere subjective confession but objective conformity that is the sufficient test for orthodoxy.

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[23] Benedict Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, trans. R. H. N. Eles (NY: Dover Publication, 1962), 166 [Chapter XII].

Conclusion

We have shown that there are some hermeneutical methods (like the "double-truth" method and total allegorical method) that are inconsistent with a belief in the ETS statement on inerrancy. Given this, there are two questions: Where should we draw the line? And, why should we draw it there? In the above discussion, I have offered a criterion for drawing such a line—that is, for determining methodological unorthodoxy. Briefly it is this: Any hermeneutical or theological method that logically or by necessary consequence, undermines a major doctrine of all of Scripture is an unorthodox method. The method can do this either *de jure* or *de facto*.

It seems to me that if we do not accept some such criterion we are admitting the emptiness of our confession of inerrancy. For if the ETS or ICBI inerrancy statements of faith do not exclude any particular belief about Scripture,

then it includes all beliefs about Scripture. And whatever says everything, really says nothing.

So, in order to preserve our identity and integrity as an evangelical group that confesses an inerrant Word from God, we must define the limits of a legitimate methodology. One thing seems safe to predict: Granted the popularity of evangelicalism and the degree to which the borders of legitimate evangelical methodology are now being pushed, a group will not long be "evangelical" nor long believe in inerrancy in the sense meant by the framers of that statement unless it acts consistently on this matter.

In short we would argue that, since methodology determines one's theology, unless we place some limits on evangelical methodology there will follow a continued broadening of the borders of "evangelical" theology so that the original word will have lost its meaning. After all, even Barth called his neo-orthodox view "evangelical." Is this what the word "evangelical" meant to the founders of ETS

or ICBI? Or have they already conceded so much to the
"new hermeneutic" that it does not really matter what the
words "evangelical" or "*inerrant*" meant to the authors of
the statements, but only what they mean *to us*? On the other
hand, if one rejects this kind of subjective hermeneutic (and
we most certainly should), then it behooves us to draw a
line that will preserve its identity and integrity as an
"evangelical" society. Such a line, we suggest, need not
entail a change in (or addition to) our doctrinal statement
but simply the explicit acknowledgment (perhaps in the by-
laws) that the denial of the total truth (inerrancy) of
Scripture, officially or factually, *de jure* or *de facto, is*
grounds for exclusion from ETS.

It is assumed, however, that a conscientious
confession is a necessary condition for membership in an
organization that confess inerrancy, even though it is not a

sufficient condition. That truth involves conformity to reality we have argued elsewhere.[24]

The 1982 "Chicago Statement on Hermeneutics" has a clear and succinct statement on this point: "WE AFFIRM that the Bible expresses God's truth in propositional statements, and we declare that biblical truth is both objective and absolute. We further affirm that a statement is true if it represents matters as they actually are, but is an error if it misrepresents the facts. WE DENY that, while Scripture is able to make us wise unto salvation, biblical truth should be defined in terms of this function. We further deny that error should be defined as that which willfully deceives" (Article VI).

In brief, belief in biblical inerrancy is not just a matter of personal interpretation. It has an objective

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[24] See N. L. Geisler, "The Concept of Truth in the Inerrancy Debate," *BibSac* (October-December 1980) 327–339, reprinted in *The Living and Active Word of God* (ed. M. Inch and R. Youngblood; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983) 225-236.

meaning given to it by virtue of its adoption of the

historical-grammatical interpretation. That is to say, it

implies at its basis a literal interpretation of the history and

events without which it would be meaningless.