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IS INERRANCY SUFFICIENT? A PLEA TO BIBLICAL SCHOLARS

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*Is Inerrancy Sufficient?
A Plea to Biblical Scholars concerning the
Authority and Sufficiency of Scripture*

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Introduction

I admit the title of this essay immediately begs the question, “Inerrancy is not sufficient for what?” At first blush, the paper smacks of someone who wants to push the confessional envelope with respect to what is allowable within the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS). Yet what I intend to argue is actually not all that controversial—or at least it shouldn’t be in a society whose foundational doctrinal precept consists in a confession of belief in the doctrine of inerrancy. After all, all of us in the ETS have put our names on the dotted line affirming the first item in the ETS’ doctrinal basis: “The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs.”¹ Not only that, but as a result of the Open Theism controversy,² our society has taken steps

¹Article 3 of the Constitution of the Evangelical Theological Society (Adopted 28 December, 1949, and amended in 1950, 1951, 1959, 1976, 1985, and 1990).

²Open Theism is the view that the future choices of free creatures are in no way augmented by God’s knowledge of the future because God has chosen to limit His knowledge of the future. Thus God does not know the future insofar as future events depend upon the choices of people who have an uncoerced, libertarian free-will. This view has become popular in certain sectors of evangelicalism, so much so that the Southern Baptist Convention voted to amend its doctrinal basis with an explicit affirmation of God’s exhaustive foreknowledge of future events: “God is all powerful and all knowing; and His perfect knowledge extends to all things, past, present, and future, including the future decisions of His free creatures.” *Baptist Faith & Message 2000*, Article II.

The Open Theism controversy in the ETS centered on the membership qualifications of two prominent proponents of Open Theism. These two members, Clark Pinnock and John Sanders, have argued in favor of the Open Theism position in their published works. Roger Nicole, therefore, challenged the membership credentials of Pinnock and Sanders by claiming that their Open Theism is incompatible with the doctrine of inerrancy, a doctrine that every member of the ETS must affirm. Pinnock and Sanders responded to these charges

to define clearly what we mean by inerrancy. In November 2004, the ETS Executive Committee unanimously recommended a resolution that was intended to clarify what our doctrinal basis means by the word “inerrant.”³ The resolution reads as follows:

For the purpose of advising members regarding the intent and meaning of the reference to biblical inerrancy in the ETS Doctrinal Basis, the Society refers members to the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978). The case for biblical inerrancy rests on the absolute trustworthiness of God and Scripture’s testimony to itself. A proper understanding of inerrancy takes into account the language, genres, and intent of Scripture. We reject approaches to Scripture that deny that biblical truth claims are grounded in reality.⁴

This resolution passed with 80% in favor and 20% opposed. Clearly we are a society of scholars committed to the doctrine of the inerrancy of scripture (or, at the very least 80% of us are). So what I want to argue should not be all that controversial because it is consistent with a confession of the inerrancy of scripture.

Nevertheless, the very controversy that I just referred to and this most recent clarification of our position reveal that a mere confession of inerrancy is not enough. That is, a mere confession of inerrancy is not sufficient to maintain a traditional evangelical orthodox consensus. Of course, the devil is in the details as to what precisely a “traditional evangelical orthodox consensus” is or even was.⁵ On this score, Roger Nicole’s membership challenge of Clark Pinnock and John Sanders is instructive. At least 63% of the Society regards John Sanders’s open theism as outside of the “consensus” insofar as his position has been shown to be irreconcilable with inerrancy.⁶ What this open theism controversy has demonstrated is that sizeable majorities of the ETS still think that a confession of inerrancy

by maintaining that they affirm inerrancy, even though they do not affirm the exhaustive foreknowledge of God. In the end, Roger Nicole’s membership challenge of Pinnock and Sanders did not pass, and both men remain members of the ETS today. “Reports Relating to the Fifty-fifth Annual Meeting of the Society,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* [JETS] 47 (2004): 170–71.

³“Reports Relating to the Fifty-sixth Annual Meeting of the Society,” *JETS* 48 (2005): 209–212.

⁴*Ibid.*, 210.

⁵David Wells notes “the interesting question of whether there ever was a theological structure that evangelicals commonly held and that held them together in a common world of belief.” See David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 133.

⁶“Reports Relating to the Fifty-fifth Annual Meeting of the Society,” 171.

involves some necessary theological entailments—that is, theological implications that may not be explicit but that nevertheless follow. Thus in this instance, 63% decided that Sanders’s mere confession of inerrancy is not enough.

What does all of this have to do with this essay? Having been a witness to what has transpired in the last several years in our society, I would agree with the 63% who indicated that a confession of inerrancy is not enough. Indeed, I would suggest that such a confession requires two concomitant obligations: (1) a definition of what inerrancy is, and (2) a clear delineation of the hermeneutical and theological implications of such a confession.⁷

I make this suggestion in large part because I want to see our society grow and deepen with respect to its adherence to biblical authority. But I also offer this reflection because the absence of these two elements opens up our position to criticism from those who perceive inerrancy to be an incoherent and unnecessary doctrine. In an essay for the *Baptist Standard*, Roger Olson makes a critique that has become standard fare among opponents of inerrancy. He argues that ever since Harold Lindsell’s popular 1976 book, *The Battle for the Bible*, there has been an “evangelical inquisition about a word [inerrancy].”⁸ Olson urges that proponents of inerrancy “kill the ordinary meaning of the word with the death of a thousand qualifications,”⁹ such that there isn’t really any substantive difference between conservative evangelicals who refuse the term and those conservatives who accept it. Olson brings out some old saws to make his case, claiming that even inerrantists admit that no existing Bible is inerrant. Moreover, appealing to the Chicago Statement, he says that, “if ‘inerrancy’ is compatible with flawed approximations, faulty chronologies, and use of incorrect sources by the biblical authors, it is a meaningless concept.”¹⁰ Thus, for Olson, “‘inerrancy’ has become a shibboleth—a gate-keeping word used to exclude people.”¹¹ To Olson, and many others, inerrancy is a mere slogan, not a concept with

⁷Craig Blaising’s remarks in his 2005 ETS presidential address are apt in this regard: “The question to ask, it seems to me, is what is the epistemological and methodological significance of the revealed and written word of God for the theological knowledge of the body of Christ?” Craig A. Blaising, “Faithfulness: A Prescription for Theology,” *JETS* 49 (2006): 12.

⁸Roger Olson, “Why ‘inerrancy’ doesn’t matter,” *Baptist Standard* (February 3, 2006), <http://www.baptiststandard.com/postnuke/index.php?module=htmlpages&func=display&cpid=4516> (Accessed 16 March 2006).

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

any real theological substance or import. It's just a political tool wielded by fundamentalists to demagogue opponents.¹²

Even though I think Olson is way off-base in his complaints against the inerrancy position,¹³ I still think there is a question that we self-professed inerrantists need to ask ourselves. Do we contribute in any way in our own theological and ecclesiastical endeavors to this kind of cynicism about inerrancy? My answer to that question is, "Yes, we often do." For many in our own society and in the institutions, churches, and denominations that we represent, we often treat inerrancy as a slogan to identify us with a particular religious movement called "evangelicalism" while not giving due attention to what inerrancy is and what its entailments are.

That brings me to the subject of this paper and to the theme of this conference. As I stated above, I argue that a confession of inerrancy requires two concomitant obligations: (1) a definition of what inerrancy is, and (2) a clear delineation of the hermeneutical and theological implications of such a confession. While this paper will deal briefly with the first item, the main thrust deals with item number two (inerrancy's necessary entailments). I will defend the thesis that a mere affirmation of the doctrine of inerrancy by itself is insufficient as a basis for Christian theological discourse and as a guide for the life of the church. Unless one embraces both the inerrancy and the sufficiency of scripture, then a commitment to inerrancy means nothing. It is as Roger Olson contends a mere "shibboleth—a gate-keeping word used to exclude people."

Defining Inerrancy

As I said, in terms of definition, my aim here is not to rehash old debates about what inerrancy is.¹⁴ In light of the society's recent actions, it

¹²This is in fact how a theologically moderate religious press describes inerrancy: "While the BGCT includes individuals and churches who use the term 'inerrant' to describe the Bible, most BGCT leaders and messengers in recent years have shunned that word as a politicized codeword more than a descriptive theological statement, while still affirming the complete authority and trustworthiness of the Bible." "What's the difference between the BGCT and the SBTC," *Baptist Standard* (February 11, 2002) http://www.baptiststandard.com/2002/2_11/pages/difference.pdf (Accessed 16 March 2006).

¹³Perhaps my chief objection would be that the Chicago Statement does not characterize apparent discrepancies with words like "flawed," "faulty," and "incorrect." Thus this is not really a fair characterization of the inerrancy position. Still these kinds of distortions need to be addressed anew by evangelical proponents of the inerrancy position. I think this is why Andreas Köstenberger highlights the need for a "commitment to inerrancy, properly defined," as evangelicals engage the challenges of post-modernity. Andreas Köstenberger, "Editorial," *JETS* 49 (2006): 2.

¹⁴For a fine collection of papers on contemporary questions concerning an evangelical doctrine of Scripture, see *Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority and Hermeneutics*, ed. Vincent Bacote, Laura C. Miguélez, and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove: InterVarsity,

is appropriate for us to take the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978) as a common point of departure for the definition of inerrancy. We must, however, take note of one item in the ETS's resolution on the Chicago Statement. The resolution affirms that "The case for biblical inerrancy rests on the absolute trustworthiness of God and Scripture's testimony to itself."¹⁵ This item is important not merely because it gives a theological grounding to the factual claims of the Bible (though this is true enough).¹⁶ The statement is important because it also implies a necessary connection between the Bible's accuracy and its authority¹⁷ as divine revelation. In other words, with respect to accuracy the very words of the Bible are true because God Himself is true and cannot lie. But with respect to authority, the statement also requires recognition that the Bible is authoritative because God Himself is authoritative.¹⁸ The Scripture's connection to the Deity makes it not just *a* sourcebook for accurate religious information, but also *the* guidebook whose very words command the obedience of all its readers. As the Chicago Statement itself affirms, "Holy Scripture . . . is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it affirms; obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God's pledge, in all that it promises."¹⁹

2004).

¹⁵"Reports Relating to the Fifty-sixth Annual Meeting of the Society," 210.

¹⁶Popular definitions often focus solely on the factual claims of the Bible. For example, Robert H. Stein writes, "The term 'inerrant' means that what the authors willed to convey with regard to matters of fact (history, geography, science, etc.) are also true and will never lead us astray." Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules* (Reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 62. This is a common and, I think, unfortunate reduction of what inerrancy is. Inerrancy refers not merely to so-called matters of fact, but also to matters of faith. This is true at least as far as the Chicago statement is concerned.

¹⁷Perhaps it would be helpful to define what I mean by authority. I am happy with Millard Erickson's definition: "By authority we mean the right to command belief and/or action." Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 268.

¹⁸N.T. Wright makes precisely this point in his recent book. N.T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 23, 25: "the central claim of this book: that the phrase 'authority of scripture' can make Christian sense only if it is a shorthand for 'the authority of the triune God, exercised somehow *through* scripture. . . . When we take phrase 'the authority of scripture' . . . , we recognize that it can have Christian meaning only if we are referring to scripture's authority *in a delegated or mediated sense* from that which God himself possesses and that which Jesus possesses as the risen Lord and Son of God, the Immanuel. It must mean, if it means anything Christian, 'the authority of God *exercised through* scripture.'"

¹⁹Number 2 in the "Short Statement," in the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978). Kevin J. Vanhoozer agrees: "Divine authority ultimately belongs to God alone . . . Scripture is not authoritative simply because the church needs a criterion but because it is part of the revelatory and redemptive economies of the triune God. The canon is the locus for God's communicative action—past, present, and future—the divinely approved means by which God exercises authority in, and over, the church. It is primarily in the church's

It is ironic that an evangelical moderate like Roger Olson would argue against inerrancy on the basis of the fact that the original manuscripts no longer exist. It is ironic because committed theological liberals have been making this argument for quite some time, but unlike Olson have used it as an argument against evangelical faith. One recent example of this line appears in Bart Ehrman's recent, popular²⁰ book *Misquoting Jesus: The Story behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*.²¹ Ehrman's book is mainly about the discipline of textual criticism, but the whole work is framed in his personal spiritual journey. For Ehrman, the absence of the original biblical manuscripts was a "compelling problem,"²² one that eventually led him to deny his previous commitment to the inerrancy of Scripture. In Ehrman's story, the undoing of inerrancy resulted in the undoing of his Christianity.²³ Ehrman concluded that if the Bible could not be relied upon as inerrant, it certainly could not be relied upon as an authoritative or sufficient basis for Christian faith. Once inerrancy fell, so did everything else.

The irony of Roger Olson's position is that the lack of inerrant manuscripts does not lead him away from affirming the authority of the Bible (like Ehrman), but to affirming it nevertheless. Unlike Ehrman, Olson does not see biblical authority as inexorably bound up with biblical inerrancy. Bart Ehrman on the other hand finds the lack of inerrant manuscripts grounds for rejecting the Bible and Christianity altogether. What Ehrman observes is merely what we have already seen above. Inerrancy is grounded

reading of Scripture that the risen Christ, through his Spirit, exercises his lordship over the church." Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 124.

²⁰Bart Ehrman's book is "popular" in the sense that it is intended for lay-readers, not specialists. But it is also "popular" in the public's reception of the work. Ever since its publication late last year, it has become increasingly apparent that Ehrman has reached his target audience, and then some. He has been interviewed twice on National Public Radio to talk about his book—once by Diane Rehm (8 December 2005) and once by Terry Gross (14 December 2005). In 2006, the book landed him a spot on the popular cable program "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart" (15 March 2006). This attention is not surprising given the success of his popular lectures for The Teaching Company and the fact that his many writings have distinguished him as a leading expert in the field of Text Criticism. His important scholarly contribution to the subject appears in his book, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). Also, he has revised a new edition of what is the standard introduction to the field: Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²¹Bart D. Ehrman. *Misquoting Jesus: The Story behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005). Cf. Daniel B. Wallace, "The Gospel According to Bart: A Review Article of *Misquoting Jesus* by Bart Ehrman," *JETS* 49 (2006): 327–49.

²²*Ibid.*, 5.

²³Ehrman says that it was one "picayune mistake in Mark 2" that opened the "floodgates" of skepticism and unbelief. *Ibid.*, 9.

in a theological conviction concerning the person of God. To let go of inerrancy (properly conceived) is to let go of something about God Himself. If there are errors in the Bible, then there are errors in God. When one comes to this conclusion, then the entire edifice of the Christian faith falls. This is why the admission of one “picayune mistake in Mark 2” had such a devastating effect on Bart Ehrman. When inerrancy fell, Christianity fell.

I can imagine that many readers will have already thought of a significant objection to my argument to this point. One might object, “There are plenty of Christians who do not affirm inerrancy but who nevertheless are Christians with a pious regard for and submission to the Bible’s authority. Therefore, you are wrong to claim that there is a necessary connection between the inerrancy of Scripture and the authority of Scripture.” In one sense, this is certainly a valid observation. For example, anyone who has ever heard or read a scholar of the likes of N.T. Wright knows that it is possible to have a high view of the authority of Scripture while refusing to acknowledge the inerrancy of Scripture.²⁴ I will certainly concede this point. But that does not overthrow my argument that biblically and theologically speaking there is a necessary connection between the inerrancy and the authority of Scripture such that to compromise the one is to compromise the other. What then do I make of those who disagree, like N.T. Wright? This is one of those cases in which I am thrilled that the opponents of inerrancy are inconsistent. Yes, there are some who deny inerrancy, but thankfully they are inconsistent and do not allow their error to dampen their commitment to the authority of the Bible.

What this means is that the Chicago statement is correct, in spite of anecdotal indications to the contrary. It says, “The authority of Scripture is inescapably impaired if this total divine inerrancy is in any way limited or disregarded, or made relative to a view of truth contrary to the Bible’s own; and such lapses bring serious loss to both the individual and the Church.”²⁵ Regardless of individual exceptions to the rule, those who are biblically and theologically consistent cannot diminish inerrancy without also diminishing the authority of Scripture.²⁶

²⁴The question of inerrancy is in fact a lacuna in his recent work on the authority of the Bible, *The Last Word*, in which he does not even address the issue.

²⁵Number 5 in the “Short Statement,” in the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978).

²⁶That is why the response to Peter Enns’ recent proposal has been so vehement. Enns’ appears to be diminishing Scripture’s inerrancy by suggesting that parts of the OT should be read as “myth”—that is, as “made up” stories. Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 41. The implications of such a position are problematic to say the least and pose no little challenge to the doctrines of inerrancy and authority. See G.K. Beale, “Myth, History, and Inspiration: A Review Article of *Inspiration and Incarnation* by Peter Enns,” *JETS* 49

Defining Sufficiency

If the Bible is indeed authoritative in what it says, then there are implications for how we understand what the Bible seems to be saying about itself. As Article 15 of the Chicago statement affirms, the doctrine of inerrancy is grounded in what the Bible teaches about itself.²⁷ The classic biblical text on the nature of Scripture not only addresses the Scripture's own inspiration, but also its own sufficiency.²⁸ This text indicates that the written Word of God, Scripture (γραφή), is totally sufficient for everything that the Christian²⁹ (and thus the church) needs. Of course I am

(2006): 287–312; Peter Enns, “Response to G.K. Beale’s Review Article of *Inspiration and Incarnation*,” *JETS* 49 (2006): 313–26.

²⁷Article 15 of “The Articles of Affirmation and Denial,” in the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978).

²⁸Wayne Grudem defines the sufficiency of Scripture as follows: “The sufficiency of Scripture means that Scripture contained all the words of God he intended his people to have at each stage of redemptive history, and that it now contains all the words of God we need for salvation, for trusting him perfectly, and for obeying him perfectly.” Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 127. Cf. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, new combined ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 168: “Over against the position that Scripture needs some complement, the Reformers asserted the *perfectio* or *sufficientia* of Scripture. . . . The Reformers merely intended to deny that there is alongside of Scripture an unwritten Word of God with equal authority and therefore equally binding on the conscience. And in taking that position they took their stand on Scriptural ground”; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (reprint; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 183: “All that Protestants insist upon is, that the Bible contains all the extant revelations of God, which He designed to be the rule of faith and practice for his Church; so that nothing can rightfully be imposed on the consciences of men as truth or duty which is not taught directly or by necessary implication in the Holy Scriptures. . . . The people of God are bound by nothing but the Word of God. . . . If we would stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, we must adhere to the principle that in matters of religion and morals the Scriptures alone have authority to bind the conscience.”

²⁹The “man of God” may perhaps refer narrowly to Timothy, the Christian leader, 1 Tim 6:11; so Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, NIBC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson), 280. It may also refer to Christians in general. I. Howard Marshall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, International Critical Commentary (New York: T&T Clark, 1999), 656–57; 796. Perhaps the difference between the two interpretations is mitigated by the fact that Christian leaders were to teach the Scriptures to the Christians in their congregations, as Paul so clearly exhorted Timothy to do (1 Tim 4:13–16). Thus, we would presume that the effect of the Scriptures on the leader would be that which was also intended for the congregation. After all, Timothy was charged to be “an example of the ones who believe” (1 Tim 2:12). As William D. Mounce writes, “Scripture . . . provides the content and direction necessary for Timothy, Christian leaders, and by implication all Christians to be fully equipped, enabled to do every good work, among which are teaching, reproving, correcting, and training in righteousness.” William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 570–71.

talking about II Timothy 3:16–17: “All³⁰ scripture is God-breathed³¹ and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness in order that the man of God might be adequate, having been equipped for every good work.”

The crucial implication of this text is that the written Word of God is put forth as all that the Christian person needs to live a life faithfully *coram deo* (“in the face of God”). The written Word makes a person “adequate” to construct Christian doctrine (διδασκαλίαν) and to embody Christian ethics (παιδείαν τὴν ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ). Indeed the “Scripture” itself is sufficient for “every good work.” As Wayne Grudem has commented on this text,

If there is any “good work” that God wants a Christian to do, this passage indicates that God has made provision in his Word for training the Christian in it. Thus, there is no “good work” that God wants us to do other than those that are taught somewhere in Scripture: it can equip us for *every* good work . . . what must we do in addition to what God commands us in Scripture? Nothing! Nothing at all! If we simply keep the words of Scripture we will be “blameless” and we will be doing “every good work” that God expects of us.³²

If the sufficiency of Scripture is a valid implication of what the Bible teaches about itself, there are massive repercussions for how we inerrantists conceive of our vocations as scholars and as churchmen. It is not enough to sign the ETS doctrinal statement or merely to be in favor of inerrancy in principle. Unless we also take upon ourselves the concomitant obligation of bowing to the authority and sufficiency of Scriptures (two necessary entailments of the inerrancy position), then inerrancy becomes nothing more than a slogan and shibboleth. So I would like to suggest some ways

³⁰I agree with I. Howard Marshall that to make a decision between “every” and “all” to translate πᾶς is really not that important: “To say ‘All of the Scripture’ is in effect to say ‘every passage of Scripture’, and at the end of the day a decision is not important.” I. Howard Marshall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, International Critical Commentary (New York: T&T Clark, 1999), 792.

³¹Commentators have been divided on whether θεόπνευστος should be understood attributively or predicatively. Daniel Wallace has done extensive research on this question and has argued decisively that it is predicate. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 313–14; cf. J. William Johnston, *The Use of Πᾶς in the New Testament*, Studies in Biblical Greek 11, ed. D.A. Carson (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 178–83.

³²Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 127–28.

that we can enact our commitment to the Scripture's sufficiency in our own theological and ecclesiastical contexts.

Enacting Sufficiency

To begin with, I have a word that applies to us biblical scholars in particular. We have for too long tolerated the virtual divorce³³ between biblical theology and dogmatic/systematic theology.³⁴ In other words, we have caved in too much to the temptation to see our task as a purely descriptive, historical exercise. This caving in has caused at times a preoccupation with minutiae and an unwillingness to write and publish on topics that are theological in nature. We can account for this reticence in part by understanding the history of our discipline and how it has come to conceive of its tasks and methods.

It was the publication of J.P. Gabler's epoch-making address in 1787 that sounded a clarion call for biblical scholars to make a methodological distinction between history and theology in the pursuit of biblical theology.³⁵ For Gabler, this distinction did not entail a denial of a legitimate relationship between the task of history and the task of theology. On the contrary, he said that dogmatic theology is "made more certain and more firm" after the distinction has been observed and carried through one's interpretation of the biblical text.³⁶

But his suggestion did lead subsequent generations of biblical scholars to make a false disjunction between history and theology. Whereas Gabler meant to make a distinction, and thereby establish proper grounds

³³Max Turner and Joel B. Green, "New Testament Commentary and Systematic Theology: Strangers or Friends?" in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies & Systematic Theology*, ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 3–4: "The church, of course, has always maintained that Bible and theology belong together. But driven by developments within the academy, following Gabler's programmatic distinction between the tasks of biblical theology and those of dogmatics, the two became separated, if not divorced."

³⁴Evangelical theology today rarely shares this degree of intense biblical thought and evangelical biblical scholarship rarely displays this concern for a common theology inhering the canon." Blaising, "Faithfulness," 15.

³⁵J.P. Gabler's address was originally published in 1787 under its Latin title *De justo discrimine theologiae biblicae et dogmaticae regundisque recte utriusque finibus*. An English translation appears in the *Scottish Journal of Theology* in 1980. John Sandys-Wunsch and Laurence Eldredge, "J. P. Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of His Originality," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 33 (1980): 133–58. Gabler actually called for the distinction between "biblical theology" and "dogmatic theology." *Ibid.*, 137. He argues that biblical theology is of "historical origin" while dogmatic theology derives not only from the Scripture but also from what "each theologian philosophises rationally about divine things." *Ibid.*, 136–137.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 138.

for dogmatic theology,³⁷ others have sought to separate the two enterprises altogether. In 1897, an important essay by William Wrede argued this very point. Wrede wrote, “New Testament theology must be considered and done as a purely historical discipline.”³⁸ According to Wrede, when the historical task of biblical theology concerns itself with dogmatic implications, “Biblical theology will be pressed for an answer to dogmatic questions which the biblical documents do not really give, and will endeavour to eliminate results which are troublesome for dogmatics.”³⁹ Therefore, Wrede calls for a complete separation of biblical theology from dogmatic theology, of the historical task from the theological task. Herein is the fissure that has crackled its way down even into our own day.⁴⁰

Lest one think I am overstating the case, listen how the spirit of Wrede broods over a recent essay by Michael V. Fox in a recent edition of “The SBL Forum.” Fox writes:

Faith-based study has no place in academic scholarship, whether the object of study is the Bible, the Book of Mormon, or Homer. Faith-based study is a different realm of intellectual activity that can dip into Bible scholarship for its own purposes, but cannot contribute to it. . . . Faith-based study of the Bible certainly has its place—in synagogues, churches, and religious schools, where the Bible (and whatever other religious material one gives allegiance to) serves as a normative basis of moral inspiration or spiritual guidance. This kind of study is certainly important, but it is not scholarship. . . . The best thing for Bible appreciation is secular, academic, religiously-neutral hermeneutic.⁴¹

³⁷Gabler said that the proper distinction between the historical and dogmatic tasks would ultimately strengthen the results of dogmatic theology, “Exactly thus will our theology be made more certain and more firm.” *Ibid.*, 138.

³⁸William Wrede, “The Tasks and Methods of ‘New Testament Theology,’” in *The Nature of New Testament Theology: The Contribution of William Wrede and Adolf Schlatter*, ed. Robert Morgan, Studies in Biblical Theology, Second Series 25 (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1973), 69.

³⁹*Ibid.*

⁴⁰Gerd Luedemann reflects this disjunction in his remarks after having lost his full teaching status at the University of Göttingen, “All I have claimed is that the pursuit of theology as an academic discipline should not be tied to the confession [of faith], and that if it is, it is not a true academic discipline.” Rob Simbeck, “Belief vs. Academic Freedom,” *The Washington Post*, 6 April 2002, B09.

⁴¹Michael V. Fox, “Bible Scholarship and Faith-Based Study: My View,” *The SBL Forum* (February/March 2006): <http://www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=490> (Accessed 16 March 2006).

I am arguing that Wrede and his successors have misconstrued the task of biblical theology. What the biblical texts have joined together, Wrede and his successors have put asunder. Proceeding from the dogma of Enlightenment theories of knowledge, Wrede urges a disinterested, objective, historical inquiry into the writings of the New Testament in order to understand the history to which those writings give testimony.⁴² For many modern practitioners, therefore, understanding this history is the end game of biblical theology. All that matters is the descriptive task of laying out what the Bible meant without any concern for what the Bible means.

This conception of the task, however, fails because there is in fact no such thing as a “disinterested” inquiry into the New Testament. Adolf Schlatter’s insight on this score is instructive,

The word with which the New Testament confronts us intends to be believed, and so rules out once and for all any sort of neutral treatment. As soon as the historian sets aside or brackets the question of faith, he is making his concern with the New Testament and his presentation of it into a radical and total polemic against it.⁴³

Schlatter continues, therefore, “The Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in the spirit in which it was written,”⁴⁴ or else a proper understanding of the New Testament is impossible.

The whole tenor of the New Testament witness is that God has acted decisively in history in the person of Jesus Christ. The New Testament presents the event of the incarnation as the ultimate revelatory act of God (John 1:17 and Heb 1:3 are typical). Indeed Jesus is portrayed as the very *logos* of God (John 1:1–18). It is impossible to imagine anything but that the authors of the New Testament intended to communicate words about God (theology) through their witness to the incarnation (history). Therefore, to posit a disjunction between the theological task and the historical one is to kick against the goads of the authors’ clear intention in chronicling the incarnation—that God might make Himself known in history. Consequently, to separate the task of history from the enterprise of theology is to introduce a disjunction where the biblical writers never meant

⁴²The first few pages of Wrede’s essay are rife with the language of defunct Enlightenment epistemological premises, “self-evident” (4 times), “logical,” “objectively,” “science,” “facts,” and “disinterested concern for knowledge.” William Wrede, “The Tasks and Methods of ‘New Testament Theology,’” 68–70.

⁴³Adolf Schlatter, “The Theology of the New Testament and Dogmatics,” in *The Nature of New Testament Theology*, ed. Morgan, 122.

⁴⁴This principle is attributed to the early church father, Jerome. Peter Stuhlmacher, *How To Do Biblical Theology* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1995), 66, 70n24.

for one to exist. This separation also introduces a disjunction which would have been strange indeed to Christian theologians who have been studying the Bible through the long history of the church. As Wright has recently noted,

Though we often think of . . . writers like Origen, Chrysostom, Jerome and Augustine—and, much later, Aquinas, Luther and Calvin—as great “theologians,” they would almost certainly have seen themselves first and foremost as Bible teachers. Indeed, the modern distinction between “theology” and ‘biblical studies’ would never have occurred to any of them.⁴⁵

Any valid biblical theology must have an eye to the integration of the tasks of history *and* theology, of exegesis *and* synthesis, and of biblical theology *and* dogmatic theology. This is precisely why Al Mohler has recently commented,

A resistance to systematic theology reflects a lack of discipline or a lack of confidence in the consistency of God’s Word. We are to set out the great doctrines of the faith as revealed in the Bible—and do so in a way that helps to bring all of God’s truth into a comprehensive focus. The preacher must be ready to answer the great questions of his age from the authoritative treasury of God’s truth.⁴⁶

In other words, there is an implicit questioning of the Bible’s authority and sufficiency when biblical scholars conceive of their task as purely descriptive. Yes, a part of our task is descriptive, but it is also theological. There are indications that more evangelicals are coming around to this position,⁴⁷ but more work needs to be done.

⁴⁵Wright, *The Last Word*, 4. Consider also Blaising, “Faithfulness,” 14: “What our situation actually calls for here, the mission impossible assignment, if we choose to accept, is to go back to a common affirmation of the inerrant written Word of God alone and on that basis do what the earliest church and the Reformers set as their task, and that is speaking the truth in love, to strive for the unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God.”

⁴⁶R. Albert Mohler, “Let Him Who Boasts Boast In This’—Knowing God, Studying God’s Word, Knowing God’s Truth, and Serving God’s People,” January 22, 2006. http://www.albertmohler.com/commentary_read.php?cdate=2006-01-22 (Accessed 23 January 2006).

⁴⁷For example, see the essays in Joel B. Green and Max Turner, eds., *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies & Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). Likewise, Grant R. Osborne has recently noted, “It is now widely recognized that theology is a partner and a path to history . . . The attempt to bifurcate history and theology and to see a dichotomy between the facts and the story line is unfortunate and wrong.”

Andreas Köstenberger recently opined, “Too many of us write our books essentially for our academic peers or the larger academic community rather than for students or people in the churches.”⁴⁸ I agree with Köstenberger’s assessment and would add that if biblical scholars in particular were to come to grips with the implications of sufficiency, we might find time to write and publish works that address the church, and not just other scholars in our disciplines. D.A. Carson is exemplary in this respect. Here is an outstanding biblical scholar who not only makes significant contributions to his field, but who also who writes and publishes on pressing theological issues facing the church. His books on postmodernism⁴⁹ and the emerging church⁵⁰ are cases in point. The Emerging Movement is an entirely new departure in evangelicalism that is addressing questions of great theological import: the atonement, community and ecclesiology, post-modernism and missional cultural engagement, and the new perspective on Paul, just to name a few. In addition to making solid contributions to his field, Carson labors to bring a biblical theology to bear on these important topics.

I think this is the kind of model that we need to pursue as biblical scholars. To be sure, time is short, and we must prioritize our work. But if those we teach and the churches we serve never see us giving our time and talent to addressing the pressing issues of the day, issues that are unambiguously theological, what will they conclude about the Bible? If they see us merely describing its contents and never see us applying its message in a theologically coherent way, they will likely do the same. They will see us as people who give lip-service to inerrancy without appropriating the doctrine’s necessary entailments. It should be no surprise to us that preaching has become so biblically and theologically vacuous when the preachers’ teachers in the seminaries set such poor examples in the way that they treat the biblical text. If we are not passionate about the inerrancy and sufficiency of the Scripture in our work, then why should they be?

The connection that I am making between inerrancy and sufficiency is precisely what Wayne Grudem argued in his 1999 presidential address to ETS.⁵¹ The reason he asked the question of integrity is because he believed

Grant Osborne, “Historical Narrative and Truth in the Bible,” *JETS* 48 (2005): 676, 688).

⁴⁸Andreas J. Köstenberger, “Setting the Agenda for Evangelical Scholarship to 2050: New Testament,” *Biblical Foundations*, <http://www.biblicalfoundations.org>. (Accessed 16 March 2006).

⁴⁹D.A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

⁵⁰D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

⁵¹Wayne Grudem, “Do We Act As If We Really Believe That ‘The Bible Alone, and the Bible in Its Entirety, Is The Word of God Written?’” *JETS* 43 (2000): 5–26.

that there are necessary, practical implications for how we do scholarship if this inerrant Word is in fact from God. He summarizes the implications in six suggestions:

Suggestion #1: Consider the possibility that God may want evangelical scholars to write more books and articles that tell the church what the whole Bible teaches us about some current problem.

Suggestion #2: Consider the possibility that God wants the church to discover answers and reach consensus on more problems, and wants us to play a significant role in that process.

Suggestion #3: Consider the possibility that God wants evangelical scholars to speak with a unified voice on certain issues before the whole church and the world.

Suggestion #4: Consider the possibility that God may want many of us to pay less attention to the writings of non-evangelical scholars.

Suggestion #5: Consider the possibility that God may want us to quote his Word explicitly in private discussions and in public debates with non-Christians.

Suggestion #6: Consider the possibility that the world as we know it may change very quickly.⁵²

To be sure, some of Grudem's suggestions would not go over well in the secular guild of biblical studies—at least insofar as the secularists think that there is no place for the construction of theology in what should be a purely descriptive discipline. But sometimes faithfulness to God requires us to challenge the assumptions of the secular guild—even when those assumptions might cost us advancement and prestige among scholarly elites. So, for instance, it is not just our task to describe what Paul thought about pederasty or Gentile homosexuality. We must bring that message to bear upon current debates about gender and sexuality. Likewise, we cannot pretend that there aren't profound ecclesiological ramifications for us in the Bible's teaching on the role of men and women in ministry. We must bring the apostolic testimony to the contemporary debates. We have an

⁵²Ibid., 26.

obligation to show our churches and indeed the world that God's written Word is sufficient to address these issues.

Conclusion

Is inerrancy enough? It is not enough if inerrancy produces merely a slogan on our lips without a calling on our lives. If we all affirm inerrancy, then we must also affirm the absolute authority of scripture. As Craig Blaising has exhorted, "Our call is ultimately, for all the work we do, a simple one. May we be faithful in the work of the Word."⁵³ This authoritative Word declares itself to be wholly and completely sufficient for our lives, our scholarship, and our churches. Let us embark upon journey of scholarship that is guided by a recognition of a holy understanding of our vocation. God forbid that inerrancy should ever become a shibboleth among us. But may we ever be learning, writing, publishing *coram deo*—in the face of God.

⁵³Blaising, "Faithfulness," 16.