

Inerrancy, Harmonization and the Synoptic Gospels:
A Response to Darrell Bock
by Vern S. Poythress

[A paper presented as part of a panel discussion on "Inerrancy and the Synoptic Gospels," with a panel composed of Dr. Darrell Bock and Dr. Vern S. Poythress, moderated by Leslie Robert Keylock. 3:45pm to 5:10pm, Nov. 19, 2013, at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Baltimore, MD.]

[Dr. Bock read pieces from his article, "Precision and Accuracy: Making Distinctions in the Cultural Context That Give Us Pause in Pitting the Gospels against Each Other."¹ The following is the written response from Vern Poythress, which was followed by discussion not recorded here.]

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Dr. Bock makes a key distinction between precision and accuracy. I agree that this is a useful distinction. In this distinction Dr. Bock has good precedent. A similar distinction, without the same vocabulary, has been displayed in the past.

Past avoidance of artificial precision

Thus Augustine in his *Harmony of the Gospels* argues that the Evangelists were free to give the meaning or implications of what someone said, rather than the exact words:

Neither should we indulge such a supposition [of unreliability], although the order of the words may be varied; or although some words may be substituted in place of others, which nevertheless have the same meaning; or although something may be left unsaid, ...²

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- 1 Darrell Bock, "Precision and Accuracy: Making Distinctions in the Cultural Context That Give Us Pause in Pitting the Gospels against Each Other," in *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith? A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture*, ed. James K. Hoffmeier and Dennis R. Magary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012) 367-381.
 - 2 Augustine, *The Harmony of the Gospels*, in vol. 6 of A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Series 1, edited by Philip Schaff (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 2.12.28. My comments on this piece from Augustine may be found in Vern S. Poythress, *Inerrancy and the Gospels: A God-Centered Approach to the Challenges of Harmonization* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), chapter 26, 190.

Both Augustine and John Calvin allow that in the account of the healing of the centurion's servant Matthew has omitted the details about the centurion's use of the Jewish elders as intermediaries. Calvin says:

But there is no impropriety in Matthew saying, that the centurion did what was done in his name and at his request.³

We may see similar approaches in recent times. Ned Stonehouse, who was president of ETS in 1957, champions inerrancy but also warns against insistence on a kind of artificial precision:

In particular, there is the possibility of genuine progress if one does not maintain that the trustworthiness of the Gospels allows the evangelists no liberty of composition whatsoever, and does not insist that in reporting the words of Jesus, for example, they must have been characterized by a kind of notarial exactitude or what Professor John Murray has called "pedantic precision."⁴

Similarly, in my book *Inerrancy and the Gospels* I put forward the principle that one Gospel may omit details, and that language must not be pressed to force on it a precision that allows no possibility of a range of meaning.⁵ I include a chapter (chapter 9) entitled "Truthfulness versus Artificial Precision," in which I expound a contrast similar to Dr. Bock's contrast between accuracy and precision.⁶

What terminology?

Now may we reflect on what is the best terminology to use for the key distinction? Dr. Bock has helpfully codified the distinctions made in previous works by using the terms "precision" and "accuracy." The word "precision" corresponds to what I call "artificial precision" and what Stonehouse's quote from John Murray called "pedantic precision." On the other hand, Dr. Bock's term "accuracy" is compatible with lack of artificial precision. Stonehouse uses the same word *accuracy* in a similar way:

What is involved rather is that the Holy Spirit guided the human authors in such a way as to insure that their records give an accurate and trustworthy impression of the Lord's teachings.⁷

Nevertheless, the larger context has to clarify what Bock and Stonehouse mean. The word

3 John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 3 vols., trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 1:378. See Poythress, *Inerrancy and the Gospels*, 21.

4 Ned B. Stonehouse, *Origins of the Synoptic Gospels: Some Basic Questions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 109. See Poythress, *Inerrancy and the Gospels*, 63.

5 Ibid., 30, 54-55.

6 It should be noted that Dr. Bock's article and my book came out in the same year, 2012; we wrote independently of one another.

7 Stonehouse, *Origins*, 109-110; Poythress, *Inerrancy and the Gospels*, 63.

accuracy can have a range of uses. For the word *accuracy* we find in *Merriam-Webster* the following description:

1 : freedom from mistake or error : CORRECTNESS **2 a** : conformity to truth or to a standard or model: EXACTNESS **b** : degree of conformity of a measure to a standard or a true value -- compare PRECISION 2a⁸

Dr. Bock's use corresponds to the first sense, "freedom from ... error," "correctness." The senses 2a and 2b sound more like what he is trying not to import into his definition. When we look in *Merriam-Webster* under the word *precision*, some of the description looks uncomfortably similar to what we read under the term *accuracy*:

1 : the quality or state of being precise: EXACTNESS **2 a** : the degree of refinement with which an operation is performed or a measurement stated -- compare ACCURACY 2b

For myself, I have preferred to use the words *truth* and *truthfulness* rather than *accuracy*, in order to avoid possible ambiguity. But words that talk about truth can also be twisted around, if someone is determined to do so. No word by itself is going to do everything we want. So Dr. Bock is careful to provide examples.

Only the main point?

In encouraging the exercise of care and respect and (yes) reverence in the interpretation of the Gospels, we need in the long run to pay attention to some other dimensions of the challenge. One such dimension lies in the temptation to go to the far opposite side of the spectrum from the expectation of pedantic precision. The opposite side that I am thinking of is not raw unbelief or raw skepticism. Rather, it is the approach, or rather spectrum of approaches, that says to itself that only the "main point" matters. According to this way of thinking, the Gospels truthfully report concerning the main point of each event or each speech of Jesus. But everything beyond the main point is mere adornment. I call this a spectrum of approaches, because a lot depends on how extensive an interpreter judges the main point to be.

For example, on a very narrow view, someone might claim that we learn from the episode of the centurion's servant only that Jesus can heal from a distance. Or we learn only that Jesus is favorable to Gentile faith. The details need not be reliable. That is, we supposedly cannot rely on the man in question being a centurion, or that he used an illustration involving men under his command carrying out his orders, or the fact that it was his servant rather than wife who was sick. Among evangelicals, this treatment would be extreme. But it is possible. Or someone might argue that only what is common to the various accounts in different Gospels is guaranteed as from God.

Over against such minimizing, I maintain that the Gospels are a genre in which the details as well as the main point describe things that happened. Every detail is part of

⁸ *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (2007).

the word of God, and every detail makes a contribution. But in some cases the contribution may be small and subtle. But then we must have in place a sense of the whole as well as the details. The details do function to support the whole, rather than independently. And if we press the details and draw extended inferences from them, we may find ourselves on less solid ground. After all, when a Gospel provides a detail, it does not provide the fullest possible information about that detail--it is not, as we have said, precisionistic.

Thus, there is danger that we may overread details as well as the opposite danger that we underread them. Some people may presume on the basis of details to produce a more thorough and elaborate reconstruction of the events than is actually justified by the sparseness of the information given. The danger is obvious with respect to the account of the centurion in Matt. 8:5-13. The description in verse 5, "a centurion came forward to him," might easily be pressed to mean not merely that he came, but he came *in person*, for a direct face-to-face encounter.

But, as we have observed, there is a complementary danger of underreading or ignoring details.

Where are the boundaries?

So where are the boundaries for how we treat details? Many interpreters may have good instincts here. But not everyone's instincts are equally good. In my book I have endeavored to address the question and clarify the process somewhat by talking about the functions of words and larger units in communication in terms of the three intersecting linguistic characteristics, namely contrast, variation, and distribution. Truth contrasts with error. So the category of contrast encourages us not to minimize the truth claims produced by an utterance. The category of variation reminds us not to press language that is sparse and not precisionistic. Communication produces meaning that is not like a point but like a centered whole that may have fuzziness at the edges. The third category, the category of distribution, reminds us that the meaning is colored by the literary and situational contexts in which it sits and with which it interacts. The principle of contrast is meant to help us not to fall off the cliff in the direction of minimized meaning, in which we discount everything except the "main point." The principle of variation is meant to help us not to fall off the cliff in the direction of forcing artificial precision onto the text.

Avoiding the mental-picture theory of truth

I also believe that it helps if we studiously avoid a mental-picture theory of truth. The mental-picture theory of truth expects verbal communication to be produce in the mind of the reader a mental picture of the scene that directly matches the facts of history. For various reasons, this kind of expectation is unrealistic. It leads to disappointment and frustration, and does not respect the functions of verbal communication in its *sparseness* (leaving a lot unsaid). A person who holds the mental-picture theory of truth may realize that any particular word is not infinitely precise, and still fall into a pattern in which he makes unwarranted inferences with respect to the whole narrative episode. His

interpretation produces a kind of precisionism in practice with respect to the resulting mental picture.

Nonartificiality of inerrancy

Inerrantists have also from time to time had to fend off accusations from critics that they "qualify" the meaning of inerrancy until it is without substantive meaning. In response, it is valuable to do what Dr. Bock has done, by distinguishing accuracy from precision. Truthfulness, or lack of error, does not imply precision, especially in the contexts of ordinary communication as opposed to specialized scientific and technical explanations. We can be seduced by an ideal of technical precision that does not respect the powers and functions of multidimensional personal communication.

I think it is useful in this connection to have the backing of a view of language drawn from Scripture, which shows that the sparseness of ordinary language is not a defect, but fully compatible with the nature of God and the nature of his communication to human beings in Scripture.

History and narrative

Finally, I believe it is useful to have the backing of a biblically based view of history. History is not bare facts, but is providentially governed by God. It has theological and artistic meaning from the beginning.⁹ The presence of theological meaning and literary artistry in the Gospels does not signify that these aspects are unhistorical, but rather that the aspects belong by the design of God to the meaning of history from the beginning. Moreover, history designed by God is incredibly rich in meaning, so that the same episode in the life of Jesus can be expounded from more than one perspective or with more than one emphasis on more than one aspect of its theological significance. The two or more perspectives from different Gospels do not contradict one another, but complement one another. They contribute to a rich understanding of the meaning of the life of Jesus. This kind of the pluriformity of the Gospels thus ceases to be an embarrassment to the doctrine of inspiration.

⁹ Poythress, *Inerrancy and the Gospels*, chapter 4.