

Pedagogical Best Practices for the Doctrine of Inerrancy:  
A Contribution  
by Vern S. Poythress

[A presentation as part of a panel on "Pedagogical Best Practices for the Doctrine of Inerrancy," 1:00pm to 4:10pm, Nov. 21, 2013, at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Baltimore, MD. Moderated by Jason Oakes.]

[*Copyright (c) 2013 by Vern Sheridan Poythress.*

Permission is granted to copy, distribute and/or modify this document under the terms of the GNU Free Documentation License, Version 1.3 or any later version published by the Free Software Foundation; with no Invariant Sections, no Front-Cover Texts, and no Back-Cover Texts. A copy of the license can be found at the [Free Software Foundation](http://www.gnu.org/licenses/fdl.html) website.]

I consider it a particular privilege to be on the panel because, unlike most of the other participants, I have not taught regularly on the subject of inerrancy. I teach in the New Testament department at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. I can build on the foundation already laid in a required course on Prolegomena to Theology, taught by the department of systematic theology. In my course on biblical hermeneutics I focus on what the doctrine of inerrancy looks like in practice. What should we be thinking and doing when we are actually interpreting biblical texts that have divine authority?

### Reckoning with worldviews

I think that teaching inerrancy works better if we take into account the influence of modern worldviews, including influences from postmodernism. Inerrancy seems implausible to people who are influenced by these worldviews. Certainly we need to teach the positive biblical basis for inerrancy. But we also need to discuss and undermine contemporary atmospheric assumptions that get in the way.

Consider an example. Tim Keller's book *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008) takes up near the beginning two main objections: "There Can't Be Just *One* True Religion" (chapter 1) and "Christianity is a [moral] Straitjacket" (chapter 3). These two objections are interesting precisely because they would not have been on top of the list fifty years ago.

Something has happened. Western culture has moved in the direction of religious relativism and moral relativism. And that affects people's perception of the doctrine of inerrancy. Clearly, if they think there cannot be *one* true religion, they will also think that the Bible cannot be completely right, because it contains absolute religious claims. And it contains absolute moral claims as well. These moral claims cannot be completely right if they constitute a straitjacket that inhibits and suppresses true human living. Inerrancy is implausible to people unless these perceptions about religion and morality receive cogent responses.

Keller's book aims to address outright skeptics. But I suspect that many people

who consider themselves interested in spiritual things or even consider themselves Christians harbor similar doubts. They would say that they respect Jesus and his teachings. But an absolute claim for one true religion makes them uncomfortable. It is impolite, they think. And if they analyze more deeply, they might say that it is arrogant and presumptuous and intolerant. Similarly observations hold with respect to moral standards. In the minds of many people, the Ten Commandments are acceptable only if they have become the ten suggestions or the ten maxims.

### Underlying assumptions

Inroads from relativism have certainly contributed to the implausibility of inerrancy. At the same time, some of the scholars who criticize inerrancy or attempt to redefine it have expressed considerable confidence in historical-critical reconstructions of the history and the meaning of biblical texts. Part of their message is that evangelicalism has yet to "come to terms with" materials from the Ancient Near East and with the results of biblical criticism. Biblical criticism increasingly confronts us with the alternative: interact responsibly with criticism, and give up classical inerrancy; or ghettoize yourself and become irrelevant to future generations. The same may be said for the claims coming from the scientific world.

So what is at the root of the contemporary form of challenge to inerrancy? Is it the uncertainty and pluralism of postmodern tolerance, or is it the (comparative) certainty claimed for pronouncements from biblical criticism and science?

### Influence of materialism

Paradoxically, I think it is both. The two are not incompatible. Rather, they are both re-inforced by the influence from materialism and Kantianism. Materialism says that the real world is at bottom matter and energy in motion. People cannot live with pure materialism. They build extra layers of personal meaning on top. But materialism still has a great influence. It is maintained through the illusion that it is a natural consequence of science, rather than being an ungrounded philosophy that hijacks the prestige of science.

Materialism contributes to the idea that science gives us real truth, but that personal meanings built on top of the material layer of the universe are subjective inventions, either individual creations or cultural creations. Thus, religious ideas and moral ideas are subjective, rather than being based on objective revelation from God or the objective existence of absolute moral standards. According to these assumptions, the Bible is out of tune, because it originated in an era when people believed that religion and morality rested on accessible absolute truth.

Kantianism moves in the same direction. According to Kantianism, science gives us the realm of the rational, because it investigates phenomena belonging to the world of sense experience. Religion, morality, and human freedom belong to the noumenal realm, where pure reason cannot reach. Kant himself thought that people could operate for practical purposes using assumptions about God and morality and human freedom. But the multicultural influence in our own time has broken apart the unity of human views

about God, morality, and freedom. And that leaves us with irreducible pluralism in religion and morality. Every society and indeed every individual must find his own subjective way.

#### Alleged impossibility of revelation

Beneath the older Kantianism and the newer materialism lies the assumption that God is fundamentally absent. He is not accessible within the phenomenal order. No transcendent revelation can break through and actually communicate to mankind. For Kant, any supposed revelation must be filtered through the standards of judgment given by would-be autonomous reason. Otherwise, it would destroy human freedom and responsibility.

In the newer thinking, influenced by materialism, there is no revelation, but only what we as human beings project as our own personal meanings. The universe is a closed box of physical causation, which God himself--if there is a God--cannot break through. When it comes to understanding the Bible, the Bible itself is closed in with respect to four different dimensions. It is enclosed within history, which is a series of immanent causes (a closed linear development from cause to effect). It is enclosed within language, which is wholly human. It is enclosed within culture, which is wholly human. It is enclosed within the finite capabilities of the human psyche. God cannot break into history, or language, or culture, or the psyche.

Even supposing hypothetically that God did "break in," we could understand the effect of his breaking-in only in purely human terms. So a break in history, in the form of a miracle, would be irrational and unintelligible, because it would not fit into our rational guidelines for historical meaning. A break into language would result either in unintelligible gobbledygook or a message in human language. And the latter would be wholly human, and so could not communicate anything divine. Similarly, a break into culture would be either unintelligible or wholly human, and so would a break into the human psyche.

#### Response

Responding to this array of opposition is not easy, because the attacks against inerrancy comes from many points, and because the assumptions on which the attacks are based are often not critically analyzed, but are simply part of our intellectual atmosphere. They are, as it were, part of the intellectual and cultural air that we breathe. The typical university has systematically made God irrelevant. In its learned halls analysis proceeds with the assumption that science, history, language, culture, and the human psyche are whole and merely human--closed to the presence of God. And where rational analysis fails--because of pluralism--we get individual and corporate expressionism. Each does his own thing.

We need to lay out a coherent alternative. And if it is really an alternative, it is not an attempt to make a truce with the mainstream of contemporary thinking, by accepting most of it but also adding an extra "religious" layer or additional subjective personal

meanings. Root and branch need revision; we need a radical alternative. The lordship of Christ leads to re-interpreting every field of human action and reflection.

So we must talk about religious antithesis, distasteful though it may be to the present mood of soupy tolerance. The human race is divided in two, between those who serve God and those who do not, between those who follow Christ and those who do not, between those who are regenerate and those who are not.

(Postmodernist tolerance has an obvious weakness here, because it wants to affirm multiple cultures and multiple views. But it cannot affirm a view that holds to antithesis. So one may ask the obvious question, "Why not?" Postmodernists pride themselves on having critically "seen through" modernist overconfidence. But can they be critical of their own foundations? They cannot. They have an ultimate stake in tolerance, and that kind of commitment to an ultimate is fundamentally religious. The claim to have "seen through" the relativity of religious claims is itself a supremely arrogant claim to have religious insight superior to them all.)

On the basis of antithesis, we cannot accept the pervasive assumption that God is absent, and that history, language, culture, and the human psyche have merely immanent, merely human meanings in isolation from God. We must think through globally the implications of really believing that God is God, revealed once for all in the work of Christ and continually present as providential ruler not only over nature, but over language and history and culture.

### Using perspectives

I also think that the antithetical character of Christian faith becomes clearer when we work through the meaning of inerrancy from several perspectives.<sup>1</sup> From a normative perspective, we work through the biblical teaching about the word of God and about its own status. But in addition, we need to describe with some thoroughness what inerrancy looks like from what I would call a *situational* perspective, where we concentrate on how our view of history, language, culture, and psychology impinge on biblical interpretation.

### Transforming the idea of history

For example, we do not believe in a mechanically closed system of causation in history. The historical critic offers an antisupernaturalistic reconstruction of, let us say, the Gospel stories of Jesus walking on the water. Perhaps, he says, the whole story is a "mythological" expression of the religious feeling that in Jesus we are meeting something somehow divine. Or perhaps it is the result of a gradual, multi-stage expansion of an initial core where the disciples saw Jesus on a spit of land jutting out into the sea, and where in their fright and in the darkness they thought he was walking on the water. This kind of explanation strikes the modern mind as *rational*. It is, according to the modern mind, an attempt at a genuinely "historical" explanation--though such explanations can

---

1 On the three perspectives for ethics, see John M. Frame, *Perspectives on the Word of God: An Introduction to Christian Ethics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1990; reprint, Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999).

never be more than probable. By contrast, to say that the event was miracle is no explanation at all. That strikes the modern mind as antirational and antihistorical. It does not work for us to look for ways to get through the confrontation without an antithesis. The whole conception of what is rational and what is historical must be challenged.

The contemporary atmosphere about history, based on a closed series of causes, also involves the assumption that, at the most fundamental level, history consists in bare facts. Theological meanings and artistic coloring in a historical account are human additions after the fact. By contrast, I maintain that history, as a working out of the plan of God, has innate meaning from the beginning, according to God's design. So theological interpretation and literary rendering through plots, which we find in the Gospels, are not human inventions, but explications of divine significance that really belongs to the events.

### Transforming the view of language

We may make similar observations about the philosophy of language. The contemporary Western world thinks that, since language is wholly human, it cannot possibly be a reasonable vehicle for talking about God. If we do employ human language to talk about God, it is only by virtue of stretching and twisting it for new, strange purposes, and we can hardly know what it is that we are saying. But this kind of inference rests on anti-Christian assumptions about language.

A second kind of challenge comes from people who accuse inerrantists of making inerrancy an idea that dies the death of a thousand qualifications. But the "qualifications" they have in view arise in responding to a precisionistic ideal of virtually infinite and exhaustive detail, which is itself alien to the real character of language and truth, within a thoroughly Christian framework. A view of language based on a biblically grounded view of the world leads in radically different directions.

We can also work through the meaning of inerrancy from an existential perspective, also called the personal perspective. What does inerrancy look like for the person who is following Christ and who is committed to submitting to Scripture rather than critically sifting its meanings? It means humility. It means not always having an answer, but believing that God is true even when you do not. It means living intellectually as well as morally "by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4). It means looking like a fool and a simpleton to the rest of the intellectual world, for whom unfettered human judgment holds sway, free from the ultimacy of any religious claim.

### Multiple approaches to biblical exposition of inerrancy

We can apply these three perspectives not only to the person of the interpreter, but to ways in which we learn the Bible's teaching about itself. The classical exposition of the Bible's teaching about Scripture uses primarily the normative perspective, where we examine many verses that teach about the word of God. Such we find, for example, in

Warfield, Archibald A. Hodge, and John Murray.<sup>2</sup> I believe this approach is valid. But it can be supplemented by a situational approach, akin to the way in which Geerhardus Vos studies the historical unfolding of progressive revelation. What historical unfolding do we see in the process of God giving his word to man? We can see the centrality of verbal instruction from God in the case of Adam, Noah, and Mount Sinai. Mount Sinai results in the beginning of a written canon. And in that context God teaches the people the importance of paying attention to what is written. This kind of biblical-theological exposition, when extended, can help people to make sense of how the authority of the Bible as the word of God fits into the larger context of life and history. It is, if you will, a kind of story approach to the role of the word of God, and can help people to see its relevance to human living.

Finally, we can take an existential approach, in which we focus on our need. We need guidance because we are desperately fouled up by sin. And sin infects the mind (Eph. 4:17-24). Only a deep sense of need, together with the work of the Holy Spirit, provides a setting in which people are willing to give up everything, including every shred of autonomy, every shred of intellectual independence and pride, to the lordship of Christ:

Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple."  
(Luke 14:25-27)

If we give up, we are willing that Christ will be the master, and we will be disciples. That means listening submissively to his voice. And that voice teaches the authority of Scripture.

---

2 Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967); Archibald A. Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield, *Inspiration* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979); John Murray, "The Attestation of Scripture," in *The Infallible Word: A Symposium by the Members of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary*, ed. N. B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1946), 1-54.