
INERRANCY AND THE TRINITY:
NEW TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVES—
JOHN 17:6–8 AS A WINDOW INTO
DIVINE COMMUNICATION IN LANGUAGE

Vern S. Poythress*

The New Testament in several of its books and in several ways indicates that the climactic salvation promised and anticipated in the Old Testament has come in Christ. Christ comes in fulfillment of the promises of God and accomplishes a salvation that only God can accomplish. This salvation is actually received, appropriated, and enjoyed by the Christians addressed in the New Testament. Even at times when the New Testament does not elaborate on the nature of God's work, it presupposes an underlying Trinitarian structure: the plan of God the Father is executed in time by God the Son in his incarnation (Eph. 1:3–4) and applied to believers through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13–14). In terms of this underlying structure, the Trinity is pervasive in the New Testament.¹

* Vern Poythress (PhD, Harvard; DTh, University of Stellenbosch) is professor of New Testament interpretation at Westminster Theological Seminary, where he has taught for 39 years, and is editor of the *Westminster Theological Journal*. He is keenly interested in how Christianity and the Trinitarian nature of God impact all areas of life. He has also spent much of his career studying and teaching biblical interpretation and hermeneutics. His many books include *Redeeming Philosophy: A God-Centered Approach to Big Questions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), *Chance and the Sovereignty of God: A God-Centered Approach to Probability and Random Events* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), *Inerrancy and Worldview: Answering Modern Challenges to the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), and *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001). An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in November 2016 in San Antonio, Texas.

¹ Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

DIVINE COMMUNICATION

Now let us examine more closely God's communication to us. It is one aspect of his saving work. And so, we should not be surprised to find that a similar Trinitarian structure underlies divine communication.² Verbal communication from God ultimately means communication originating with God the Father, spoken in the context of the Son as the Word of God, conveyed by the Spirit of God, and interpreted in our hearts through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

We can see this structure in the book of Revelation, which declares itself to be "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place" (Rev 1:1).³ The message originates with God, that is, God the Father, who gives it to Jesus Christ.

The introductory verse describes the whole of the book. But the role of Jesus Christ becomes particularly vivid and prominent in Revelation 2–3. He speaks to the churches. Each of the seven messages begins with the expression "the words of," followed by a description identifying Christ as the one who speaks the words. Then, near the close of each message, we have the refrain, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). What Christ says is also what the Spirit says. And the refrain coheres with other New Testament passages that indicate that having "an ear" and hearing depends preeminently on the Spirit (John 3:3–8). It is the Spirit who opens ears by his presence, bringing the power of God to bear not only on ears but on hearts. Thus, in Acts, when Lydia hears the apostolic message, "The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul" (Acts 16:14).

If we collect verses from other places in the New Testament, we can see that a similar pattern is affirmed beyond the book of Revelation. Second Timothy 3:16 declares that "All Scripture is breathed out by God," and the name "God" suggests that we should think preeminently of God the Father. The word *theopneustos* that is translated "breathed out by God" refers to God's breath, which hints at the role of the Holy Spirit (cf. Ezek. 37:9–10, 14). Second Peter 1:21 also shows us the role of the Spirit in addition to the Father: "For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke *from God* as they were carried along *by the Holy Spirit*." Hebrews 1:1–2 indicates the centrality of the Son in divine speech in the New Testament: "Long ago, at many times and in many

² Ibid., chapters 3–4.

³ Quotations are from the English Standard Version (used with permission).

ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son."

DIVINE COMMUNICATION IN JOHN 17:6–8

There is much material in the New Testament on which to reflect. Rather than conduct a survey of all this material, I would like to focus mainly on one passage that is especially revealing, namely, John 17:6–8:

I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.

This passage does not focus on teaching inerrancy, but it has implications. Let us briefly focus on this passage in its richness, and then, as space allows, move gradually to explore whether there are implications for inerrancy.

THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN RELATION TO JOHN 17

The passage speaks explicitly about the role of the Father and of the Son in giving words to the disciples. It does not mention the Holy Spirit. In fact, the Holy Spirit is not mentioned explicitly anywhere in John 17. But of course, John 17 comes in the context of the earlier teaching about the Holy Spirit in John 14–16. The Holy Spirit has a key role in teaching the disciples:

But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. (John 14:26)

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16:13–15)

In this work, the Holy Spirit uses the words of Christ. John 14:26 mentions "all that I have said to you," and John 16:14 indicates that he "will take what is mine and declare it to you."

When we return to John 17 in the light of the earlier chapters, we notice also the language of indwelling: "I in them and you in me" (v. 23; see also v. 21). This language of indwelling builds on John 14, which

indicates that the Father and the Son will come to “make our home with him” through the Holy Spirit who “will be in you” (John 14:23, in relation to v. 17). In the light of the connection that John 17:23 has with John 14, we infer that the Holy Spirit is instrumental in this indwelling of the Father and the Son. The indwelling produces unity among believers (John 17:21–23). At the same time, the unity is a product of the revelation of the Father’s glory given to Christ and then to the disciples (v. 22). This glory is closely connected to the manifestation of God’s “name” (vv. 6, 26; for the connection between name and glory, note the background in Exod. 33:18–19; 34:5). And the name is a condensation of the message that Christ has, revealing the Father. Thus, given the context in which John 17 appears, the work of the Holy Spirit in guiding and in teaching the disciples Christ’s words is presupposed.

TRANSMISSION OF DIVINE COMMUNICATION

So, what relevance does John 17:6–8 and the work of the Holy Spirit have for inerrancy? There are several directions in which to explore implications. Let us start with the structure of transmission that John 17:6–8 unfolds. The Father gives words to the Son, and the Son passes those words to the disciples: “I have given them the words that you gave me” (v. 8). The first stage of transmission for the words lies with the Father. The words are the Father’s words. He transmits them to the Son. The second stage of the transmission involves the Son’s activity. He transmits the words to the disciples.

When we fill in the picture more fully using John 16:13–15, we may include the Holy Spirit. According to John 16:13–15, the Spirit hears what the Father and the Son speak. I put it that way because, according to the principle that the Father indwells the Son, the Father speaks when the Son speaks. So, the Son’s words are *also* the speech of the Father. The Holy Spirit in turn speaks what he has heard, and this speech impacts the disciples. We clearly have a divine communication involving all three persons of the Trinity in their distinctive roles.

The process does not end there, because John 17:20 includes another stage: “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word.” The verse includes two groups of disciples, namely, the ones denominated “these only” and “those who will believe in me through their word.” This verse indicates that in the preceding part of John 17, Jesus has had in view especially the *immediate* group of disciples, preeminently the twelve apostles. They have heard Jesus’s words directly. In John 17:20 Jesus indicates that what they have heard is supposed to be passed on: “their word,” the word of the apostles, goes

out to others, many of whom have had not directly heard the words of Jesus while he was on earth.

So, we find the following sequence of transmission: from the Father to the Son to the Spirit to the apostles to “those who will believe.”

Father → Son → Spirit → apostle → believers

We can see a similar sequence in the book of Revelation. According to Revelation 1:1, the book is “the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him.” Verses 1 and 2 also include the involvement of “his angel” and John, who transmits the message to “his servants,” that is, to believers. So, we have the following sequence:

Father → Son → his angel → John → his servants (believers)

In the case of Revelation, we know from 2:7 and the parallel verses that the Holy Spirit speaks to the churches through John. So, the Spirit is there to transmit, presumably at more than one stage.

The presence of the Spirit reminds us that these sequences are a simplification. The Father and the Son indwell the message of the Spirit. Through the indwelling of the Spirit, the Father and the Son dwell in believers (John 14:23; 17:21, 23), not only in the apostles. In the words that believers receive, the Father and the Son and the Spirit are present, rather than being remote. The words from the apostles are the Word of God, not merely “their word,” as if that meant only the word of men. We can see this implication from John 17:17: “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.” Sanctification is necessary not only for the apostles but for believers in general. How will they be sanctified except through the key means, the truth, which is given in “your word”? The implication, then, is that believers in general, those included in the larger group in verse 20, are recipients of “your word,” that is, the Word of God.

THE CONTEXT OF INERRANCY

One lesson to draw from these truths is that the doctrine of inerrancy fits within a larger context concerning divine communication, and that this communication has Trinitarian structure. Anti-inerrantists regularly accuse inerrantists of having a simplistic view of divine revelation. Supposedly, inerrantists leave out the illuminating work of the Spirit or the centrality of the Son in revelation. These accusations tend to be unfair. They do not notice the difference between an inerrantist who actually denies illumination or the centrality of the Son and an

inerrantist who fails to mention these elements because he is focusing on the question at hand—namely, inerrancy itself. However, given the regularity of the accusations, it is wise for inerrantists to remind people of the broader Trinitarian context.

TRANSMISSION AND INERRANCY

The sequence in transmitting the Word of God naturally has a close relation to the question of truth. As indicated in John 17:17, 19, the truth is important to the practical value and function of the Word of God. And God is a God of truth. The doctrine of inerrancy, in summary form, says that God consistently speaks truth, that error is opposite to truth, and that therefore what God speaks has no errors. It also maintains that the Bible is the Word of God—it is what God speaks.

The issue becomes more complex because we can observe that the Word of God can come to people even through partially reliable channels. We have the Word of God in translation, and we have preachers. John 17 does not get into the details of this transmission to later stages, but the last stage that it does mention, the stage of “those who believe in me through their word,” potentially includes an extended time, involving translation, copying, and various other forms of transmission down through the generations. When an individual receives the Word of God and digests it through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit is infallible but the believing human reception is not.

These matters are also regularly used by anti-inerrantists. Typically, they say that for us to single out the apostles or prophets or autographic manuscripts is artificial, since, they allege, all that matters in the end is a more-or-less faithful appropriation of the truth at the end of the transmission, namely, with believing reception.

The Gospel of John does not directly address these details. We need a more complex set of arguments, and we need to attend to passages like Exodus 31:18 and Deuteronomy 31 to form a doctrine of canon. The canon is a permanent covenantal deposit in written form.⁴ But there is still a lesson here. We who are inerrantists need from time to time to acknowledge the existence of the later stages of fallible transmission. And we need to affirm the presence of the Word of God and the presence of the Spirit with his work of illumination at these stages.

⁴ See especially Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (S. Hamilton, MA: M. G. Kline, 1989). Note also Rev. 22:18–19, where the inscriptional curse implies that the book of Revelation as a written document is on the same level with Old Testament books.

THE LINE OF INFALLIBILITY

Given the multiple stages in which divine communication unfolds, the obvious question for inerrancy is how far infallibility extends. Anti-inerrantists sometimes ask why, if God was so concerned about inerrant communication, he did not extend inerrancy to inerrant copying and inerrant translation. But inerrantists in reply are right to point out that it is logical for infallibility to end somewhere. Neither copying nor translation is an absolute endpoint, since God intends that the message should be received and digested by ordinary believers. The law is supposed to be written on the heart (Jer. 31:33; Heb. 8:10; 10:16). If God is not pleased to make every individual interpreter of the Bible infallible, neither is he obliged to make translators and copyists infallible. The New Testament itself explicitly recognizes the possibility, even the reality, of corruption when it speaks about false teachers. These false teachers are people who *claim* to be representing some kind of authentic word of God, but who corrupt the truth. It is not a big step to conclude that in principle false teachers could try to engage in copying and translation. So, the natural inference would be that there arises the possibility of corruption at these stages. Copying and translation are authentically the Word of God when they say what the original says.

So, the mantle of infallibility does not extend to every interpreter, nor does it extend to every teacher or translator. It does extend to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. It extends, in fact, to the Spirit's activity in guiding and illumining ordinary believers. All the Spirit's activity is the activity of God himself, and is by nature incapable of failing to conform to the Spirit, who is the Spirit of truth (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13).

However, the response of human consciousness is not infallible. The problem is that we have not been given the capability to discern infallibly the distinction between the products of illumination and the products of our imaginations and their sinful inclinations. We can only say that, in the case of the saving work of the Spirit in illumination, the truth is received and faith engendered. The reception takes place in the midst of remaining indwelling sin.

The doctrine of inerrancy does not focus on this illuminating work of the Spirit, but on the inspiration of the apostles and the prophets and their writings. This is the stage represented by the apostles giving a message to others. Taken in isolation (which is somewhat artificial), John 17:6–8 does not appear to give us a full answer concerning the infallibility of the apostolic message. It does, however, give us a picture that undermines some standard arguments from anti-inerrancy advocates.

THEORIES OF THOUGHT INSPIRATION AND SPECIAL CASES

For example, one form of anti-inerrancy position maintains that God “inspired” the apostles and prophets by giving them ideas but not words. According to this view, the ideas are given by God, but God left the apostles to their own devices to find words to clothe and communicate the ideas. This theory gets in trouble with John 17:8, because Jesus talks about “the words,” not merely ideas.

If this argument fails, anti-inerrantists might regress to another argument, namely, that the communication from the incarnate Christ in John 17 and elsewhere in the Gospels is a special case. Though the apostles did receive words from God at that time, at all *other* times they are on their own as to what words and discourses they craft to communicate the gospel as best they can.

The trouble with this theory is that John 17 as a whole makes the communication from Jesus to the apostles central to the whole program of redemption. It is through those words and the effects that they have on the apostles that the apostles are prepared and that believers are made one and see Christ’s glory. It is natural to see Christ’s communication in John 17 as a kind of central exemplar, a key instance that by its centrality defines all other instances of divine communication. Hebrews 1:1–2 makes a similar point by saying that God’s communication in the Son is the climax to which Old Testament prophetic speech pointed and for which it prepared.

Moreover, as we have seen, Revelation 1:1–2 indicates that a similar divinely originated process takes place in the composition of the book of Revelation.

THE QUESTION OF TRUTH IN LANGUAGE

Another route explored by anti-inerrantists is to question the adequacy of human language to communicate truth. In their minds, they draw a firm line between God, who is the Creator above us, and all human beings. They allege that inerrancy comes to an end once a message gets to any human being (including an apostle). Allegedly, finite minds and finite language can never be infallible in communication. This attack on inerrancy has two prongs. The more recent one, prominent in postmodern thought, involves skepticism about meanings in human language. This theory runs into trouble with John 17:8 because in that verse the first two stages in transmission, from the Father to the Son and from the Son to his disciples, both involve verbal communication. Jesus speaks of “the words.” He refers to “the words that you gave me,” and claims that these are the same words that he has “given them.” Now,

Christ has a human nature, and speaks to the disciples in words that are humanly intelligible. But he also has a divine nature. The words that he gives are not merely human, but also divine. If we doubt this, we only have to remember that the words originated with God the Father, who has a divine nature but not a human nature. So, there is no question that the Father's words have divine authority, power, and truth. Some anti-inerrantists might want to evade this conclusion with the respect to the incarnate Son, by using a kenotic view of the incarnation. But this route is barred not only by the heterodox character of kenotic theory (we will forego a long discussion of that) but by the fact that in John 17 the origin from the Father is incompatible with a kenotic theory that would empty the words of divinity by appeal to an alleged laying aside of divinity due to the incarnation. The words are the words of the Father, not merely of the Son.

In addition, the words in question are efficacious. Jesus understands the words. The Holy Spirit, who has been introduced in John 16:13–15, understands what belongs to the Father and the Son. And the disciples actually receive the words, and undergo monumental spiritual change under their influence. They “have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.”

Lest the anti-inerrantist still believe that the words from the Father have a paltry content, we may look more closely at John 16:13–15, which is the key passage indicating the role of the Holy Spirit in the conveyance of the truth. This latter passage speaks of “all that the Father has,” which is also what the Son has (v. 15). So, the origin of communication to the disciples lies in the divine fullness of communion in which the Father and the Son share all that the Father has. We cannot reduce the content to a merely finite human sharing.

TRUTH AND PERSONAL ENCOUNTER

A second route taken by anti-inerrantists is to put a wedge between propositional truth and personal encounter. It is alleged that divine revelation is always and only personal encounter without propositions. Inerrantists are accused of reducing the richness of union with God to lifeless propositions. Yes, inerrantists typically emphasize propositional revelation. That emphasis is natural because verbal meaning is what is being attacked. By itself, their choice of emphasis does not imply that they excise other dimensions of fellowship with God.

In fact, the anti-inerrantist theory of wordless personal encounter does not fare well when we come to John 17:6–8. To begin with, let us observe that the word *propositional*, though useful, is not altogether

satisfactory. In some uses, it may mean that a communication contains meaning claims and statements that make a claim concerning the truth. We certainly want to say that the Bible and Jesus's words contain such claims. But the same word *propositional* can for some people connote a kind of isolated, idealized form of meaning, independent of any particular embodiment in language, such as might be desired in the context of a limited system of formal logic. Needless to say, the latter sense of the word *propositional* is not what we need. The communication in John 17:6–8 is rich and personal. It is also meaningful. It communicates truth.

Do we need to polarize between knowing persons, knowing truths, and knowing how to live (wisdom)? Hardly. John 17 contains all three in intimate union. In verse 3 Jesus says, "This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." This verse focuses on personal knowledge of the person of God the Father and the person of God the Son. This knowledge is given to disciples, according to verses 7–8. But in these verses the knowledge of the Father and the Son is closely tied to knowledge of particular truths, introduced by "that" (Greek ὅτι). We hear "that everything that you have given me is from you" (v. 7); "that I came from you"; and "that you sent me" (v. 8). The disciples grasp particular meanings expressed in verbal communication. And then, they also know wisdom, the wisdom of how to live. The word *wisdom* is not used, but it is implied by the language of "eternal life" (v. 3), and the language that "they have kept your word" (v. 6). All three aspects—personal knowledge, knowledge of particular, meaningful truths, and skill in living—come together. All three are received simultaneously through the personal, meaningful, life-giving words from the Father through the Son to the disciples, given in the power of the Holy Spirit.

We may if we wish have three labels for the three intertwined aspects. First, the personal dimension of Jesus's communication can be described as personal *presence*. He himself, as a person (and the person of the Father as well), is present in the midst of the words he speaks. This union of personal presence and speech is characteristic of human face-to-face communication. We are simultaneously aware of the person and the speech. The speech reveals the person, and the person expresses his concerns in meanings in the speech.

Second, the meaning-dimension can be described simply as *meaning* that is expressed.

Third, the wisdom dimension, the skill in living, can be described as a manifestation of *control*. First of all, God through the Holy Spirit exerts power that transforms the disciples. Second, the disciples themselves

gain ability to live, which involves a controlling skill directed to their bodies and their environment.

These three aspects are not separable, but three ways of looking at the entire communication. The meanings exert control on the disciples' thinking and their view of Jesus and the Father. The meanings express the personal presence of Jesus. Jesus manifests his personal presence in meaning and in control.

These three aspects are a reformulation of John Frame's triad of perspectives on lordship, except that he has the three labels presence, authority, and control (and usually in another order—namely, authority, control, and presence).⁵ I have substituted *meaning* for *authority* because in verbal communication it is primarily through meanings that the speaker undertakes to exert authority with respect to those who hear.⁶

From the standpoint of the doctrine of the Trinity, the interesting thing here about Frame's triad is that it is derived from the Trinity. When God exercises his lordship, he manifests the authority of the Father, through the executive control of the Son, in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Pulling apart presence and meanings, as some anti-inerrantists propose, results in tension not only with the particular details of John 17, but also with the underlying unity of divine communication based on intra-Trinitarian harmony (coinherence).

THE WORD OF GOD AND THE NAME OF GOD

Finally, anti-inerrantists sometimes depreciate the status of the written word by emphasizing the priority of the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. The written word allegedly has revelatory significance only as a fallible witness to the incarnate Word.

But again, this polarity fights against the way that John 17:6–8 functions in its environment. To begin with, the introduction of the eternal Word in John 1:1 occurs in the context of allusions to Genesis 1. God the Son as the eternal Word always exists. But he is also active in creation: "all things were made through him" (John 1:3). Thematically, the Word in John 1:1 is connected to the plural words of God's commands in Genesis 1, such as the command, "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:3). As Psalm 33:6 summarizes it, "By the *word* of the LORD the heavens

⁵ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1987), 15–18; John M. Frame, "A Primer on Perspectivalism," 2008, accessed November 21, 2016, <http://frame-poythress.org/a-primer-on-perspectivalism-revised-2008/>.

⁶ Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, chapter 3.

were made, and by the *breath* of his mouth all their host.” We infer that the particular words of the Lord in Genesis 1 have their deeper foundation in the eternal Word, whom they express.

John 1:1 stands at the beginning of the Gospel of John in anticipation of the fact that the Word who was mediator of creation becomes incarnate (1:14) and mediator of redemption. He brings redemption partly by speaking. He has much to say. The opening in John 1:1 therefore gives further weight to the discourses of Christ, because it indicates that they have their ultimate root in his divine nature in communion with the Father who sends him and who speaks through him:

For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me. (John 12:49–50)

So, in the Gospel of John we have two “levels” of speech, as it were. The Father speaks the Word eternally. And the Word incarnate speaks particular words that particularize the Father’s speech. The discourses, the long communications using words, are both what the Father says to the Son and what the Son says in the Father’s name and authority to the disciples. To tear apart the Word and the words is to run against the picture given in John.

John has still another verbal expression, concerning the *name* of God. In John 17 Jesus says that he has manifested the name of the Father (v. 6). He asks that the Father would “keep them in your name” (v. 11), even as the Son has “kept them in your name” (v. 12). In both verse 11 and verse 12 Jesus defines the name more specifically as “your name, which you have given me.” The giving of the name underlines again the communication from the Father to the Son as the Son accomplishes the work of redemption.

And what is the name here? We cannot undertake a full analysis. Suffice it to say that, in many Bible contexts, names are meaningful descriptions intending to say something about the one so designated. In the case of God, the name is a verbal mark and condensation standing for his character. The name of God communicates in summary form who God is. Thus, the idea of manifesting the name of God has a close coherence with the words (plural) that Jesus speaks, the discourses by which the disciples come to know God and Jesus Christ, in whom is eternal life (John 17:3).

The three forms of the Word of God cohere: the eternal Word, who is the person of the Son; the discourses of Christ, which manifest the Word

and his meanings; and the name, which sums up the discourses in accessible form.

By contrast, neo-orthodox theory of revelation, though claiming to be biblical and Christ-honoring, gets in trouble with respect to the discourses of Christ and the name, which verbally summarizes the discourses. Christ the Word is affirmed in neo-orthodoxy, but can Christ speak discourses? And can we name the name of God in truth in language on the basis of his discourses? Neo-orthodox reservations that limit the authority of Scripture, when taken seriously as principles, limit also the speeches of Christ himself. And so, we have a Word that cannot really communicate words to us.⁷ It is all in deep tension with the Gospel of John and with John 17:6–8 in particular.

AND WHAT IF JOHN GOT IT WRONG?

The final shot of some anti-inerrantists is to question whether John got it right. If their theory of divine communication is at odds with John 17:6–8, they conclude that the passage is wrong. (They have a deeper confidence that comes from somewhere else.) So, an anti-inerrantist may claim, John 17:6–8 is the word of the human author, and only “indirectly” or not at all a word from God. That is, they claim that John did not get it fully right. The modern anti-inerrantist could say, for example, that 17:6–8 represents an invented speech, which the author pictured Jesus as saying, and which the author uses to present his helpful but more-or-less flawed version for understanding the person of Christ.

What shall we say? I do not agree with this construal, but how do we answer someone who insists on rejecting or “reinterpreting” the significance of John? It is difficult to know what could be said to persuade such a person. But we can at least observe that he has gone quite far out of the way of respecting biblical authority in any meaningful fashion. If John is wrong here, it is not a peccadillo, but a distorted construal of the central significance of divine revelation in Christ. If a person cannot trust the Bible concerning such a central issue

⁷ Except, of course, “indirectly” and “dialectically.” So, there is a yes and a no as well, which makes things muddy in comparison to the free atmosphere of the Gospel of John. On neo-orthodox problematics, see also John M. Frame, “God and Biblical Language: Transcendence and Immanence,” in *God’s Inerrant Word: An International Symposium on the Trustworthiness of Scripture*, 159–177, ed. John W. Montgomery (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974), accessed November 11, 2016, at <http://frame-poythress.org/god-and-biblical-language-transcendence-and-immanence/>.

of revelation, an issue that affects our ability to have eternal life (John 17:3), he might as well admit to himself that for practical purposes he is assuming that the Bible is merely one more human religious document, no more trustworthy than any other. And it cannot be trusted in particular to give us an accurate portrait of Jesus “as he really was.” If that is true, becoming a disciple of Jesus is impossible. And genuine Christianity is too. Let not such a person delude himself by still trying to persuade himself that he has a genuine commitment to the lordship of Christ.