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Opinion

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Why 'inerrancy' doesn't matter

Truett Seminary student recruiters tell me the most frequent question they receive when promoting the seminary at Baptist colleges and universities is about biblical inerrancy. Does the seminary teach that the Bible is inerrant? Do the professors believe in inerrancy? The answers are easy. As a good Baptist seminary, Truett does not dictate what people must believe on secondary matters of doctrine; the professors vary in their views of biblical accuracy while holding firmly to biblical authority.

"But wait a minute," someone will say. "How can you believe in biblical authority and not believe in inerrancy?" That's an important and valid question that needs to be addressed. I hope you will bear with me as I rush in where angels fear to tread.

For at least the past century, the word "inerrancy" has been a buzzword of controversy among evangelical Christians and Baptists in the United States. Nowhere else has it been such a catalyst for debate and division. For centuries, equally sincere God-fearing, Jesus-loving, Bible-believing Christians were satisfied to say that the Bible is inspired, authoritative, trustworthy and (often) infallible. "Inerrancy" was raised as a standard against liberalism and higher criticism of the Bible by the rationalistic Princeton theologians of the 19th and early 20th century. Their names are familiar to all students of American theology: Archibald Alexander, Charles Hodge, A.A. Hodge, Benjamin B. Warfield and J. Gresham Machen. As a group, they formed a dynasty of conservative evangelical theology that helped launch the fundamentalist movement in the early 20th century.

Perhaps the greatest influence of all was exercised by Warfield, who published scores of scholarly and popular books and articles on subjects related to the Bible. He believed strongly in and defended biblical inerrancy. But he did not think belief in it necessary for authentic evangelical faith. Another great evangelical thinker of that time was Scottish theologian James Orr, who did not believe in inerrancy. Warfield and Orr were friends and worked together to fight off liberal theology. Orr contributed to the series of booklets called The Fundamentals that gave the movement its name.

For a long time, evangelical Christians agreed to disagree about inerrancy. Then came the book that fell like a bombshell on the evangelical theological playground—Harold Lindsell's 1976 The Battle for the Bible. The editor of Christianity Today declared biblical inerrancy an essential of evangelical faith and denounced evangelicals who would not affirm it. I was in seminary when the book was published, and I felt the fallout. Suddenly, the peaceful evangelical spirit of respect in spite of disagreement died under the onslaught of an evangelical inquisition about a word.

We still are living with the negative results of that book and of the controversy—perhaps better termed heresy hunt—it launched. Many people are not satisfied to know that I believe the Bible is God's authoritative, supernaturally inspired, written word and that it is infallible. They are not satisfied that, like many conservative evangelicals, I affirm the Bible is perfect with respect to its purpose. It cannot and does not fail to communicate God's transforming message to us. It is the unique instrument of the Spirit's revelation of Jesus Christ and the gospel to God's people and the whole world.

The trouble is that, by and large, "inerrancy" has become a shibboleth—a gate-keeping word used to exclude people rather than to draw authentic Christians together for worship and witness. Even its most ardent and staunch proponents admit no existing Bible is inerrant; they attribute inerrancy only to the original manuscripts, which do not exist. They kill the ordinary meaning of the word with the death of a thousand qualifications. If you doubt that, please read the Chicago Statement on Inerrancy, which usually is considered the standard evangelical account of the concept.

Think about this: If the Bible's authority depends on its inerrancy but only the original manuscripts were inerrant, then only the original manuscripts were authoritative. The logic is impeccable and irresistible. And if "inerrancy" is compatible with flawed approximations, faulty chronologies, and use of incorrect sources by the biblical authors, it is a meaningless concept.

Some defenders of inerrancy will argue that when Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:8 that 23,000 Israelites died in

a single day, he was not in error, even though Numbers 25:1-9 records of the same event that 24,000 died. How is this not an error? One strategy is to say that Paul actually wrote 24,000, but an early copyist made the error. Another strategy is to say Paul was not trying to give a flawless performance in statistics and therefore, given his purpose, this should not be considered an "error."

Neither strategy is intellectually honest. The best approach is to admit Paul made a mistake but one that in no way misrepresents God's message to the Corinthians or to us.

The fact of the matter is that I believe much the same about the Bible as many conservative evangelical theologians and biblical scholars who insist on the term "inerrancy" as a test of authentic evangelical faith. I just don't think that's the best word for what we believe. What we all believe that really matters is that the Bible is inspired, authoritative and infallible in all matters of faith and practice. Our difference lies in the fact that I don't think a word is all that important; what's important is our common belief in the Bible as God's word.

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