

The Authority and Inerrancy of Scripture

A positional paper – January 2023

Introduction

This paper was commissioned by the elders at GodFirst in order to articulate our full submission to the authority of the Bible. We recognise that any future positional papers will rely significantly on the scriptures and our interpretation of it. In light of this, we will endeavour to adopt a biblical position on any and all topics, by applying a robust hermeneutic as we grapple with various perspectives. Not everyone will start with or submit to the authority of scripture, however, here at GodFirst, the elders are committed to the bible, and it will be our starting point. We contend that without a strong biblical foundation, it becomes increasingly challenging to have fruitful conversations.

This paper is constructed by extracts of two papers; *The Authority and Inerrancy of Scripture* by Matthew Barrett (*The Gospel Coalition*), and *The Inspiration, Inerrancy, and Authority of Scripture* adopted by the general Presbytery in session August 2015.

These edited papers together, capture our unified position on the Authority and Inerrancy of the scriptures. We do not share these organisations doctrinal positions across the theological spectrum.

This paper does not...

... set out detail on how to read and apply the bible in the myriad of life such as parenting or the use of finances etc. How you read and apply the bible is largely beyond the scope of this document. We are fundamentally aiming to communicate our submission to the authority of the scriptures and the brought reasons why we have this view.

Definitions

The doctrine of the authority and inerrancy of Scripture is that; as a corollary of the inspiration of Scripture, the God-breathed Scriptures are wholly true in all things that they assert in the original autographs and therefore function with the authority of God's own

words. We therefore understand the Bible to be the very Word of God in that God Himself revealed His will and purposes to chosen writers (Amos 3:8) who faithfully and precisely recorded what had been revealed to them for eventual and providential inclusion in the canon of sixty-six books.

1. Inspiration

We understand **inspiration** to mean the special act of the Holy Spirit by which He guided the writers of the Scriptures. Such superintendence influenced both their thoughts and their actual choice of words, yet also made full allowance for the divergent backgrounds, abilities, and personalities of the writers. Moreover, inspiration applies to all they wrote as it is found in the canon of Scripture.

2. Infallibility

We understand **infallibility** to mean that the Scriptures are true and reliable in what they intend to assert. Inerrancy is a near synonym to infallibility and has been used more recently to further attest that Scripture as recorded in the original manuscripts, the autographs, is without error. Being without error and completely truthful, the Scriptures are absolutely trustworthy (2 Samuel 7:28; Psalm 119:160; John 17:17; Colossians 1:5). Infallibility and inerrancy likewise apply to all of the Scriptures.

3. Clarifying Inerrancy

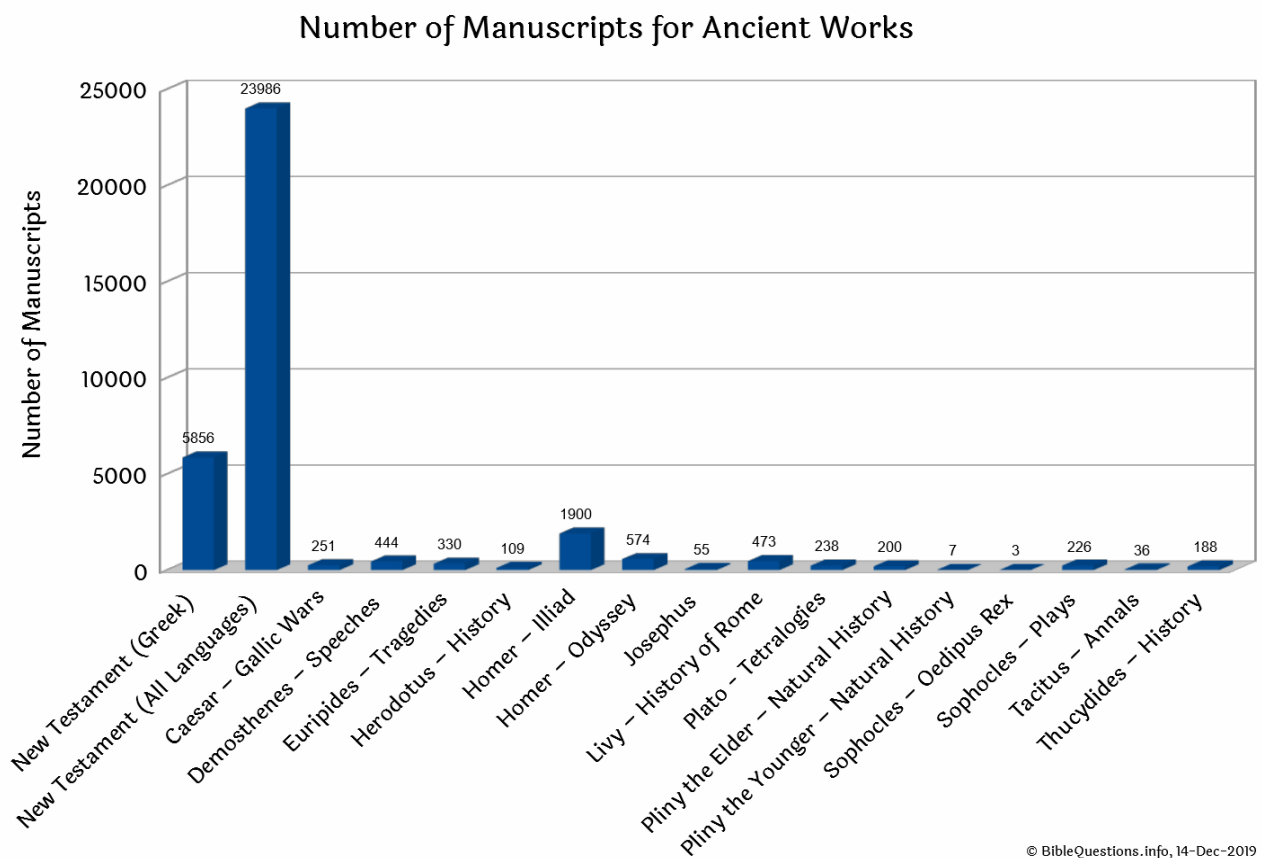
We must qualify what **inerrancy** does and does not mean. Paul Feinberg defines inerrancy as follows:

“When all the facts are known, the Scriptures in their original autographs and properly interpreted will be shown to be wholly true in everything they affirm, whether that has to do with doctrine or morality or with the social, physical, or life sciences.”

If this definition labours to define what inerrancy does and does not mean, that is because inerrancy is one of the most misunderstood and caricatured attributes of Scripture by its critics. **Note several components of this definition.**

To begin with, inerrancy applies to the original **autographs**. That is an important qualification because sometimes critics see mistakes in copies and assume the Bible is full of errors. But when we say Scripture is inerrant, we have in mind that original text breathed out by God through the human authors (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21). The product of inspiration is an inerrant text of Scripture. So far as it has been faithfully copied, translated, and passed down, it is inerrant in its copies. (And it should be noted that the copies we possess are very accurate and any differences do not impact core doctrine).

The diagram below demonstrates the vast number of copies of the New Testament compared to other classical writings. The overwhelming number of copies provide significant scope for the Textual Critic to compare and contrast copies to determine a true original written work.



Moreover, inerrancy means Scripture is “wholly true” in all that it affirms. Or as Kevin Vanhoozer says,

“To say that Scripture is inerrant is to confess faith that the authors speak the truth in all things they affirm (when they make affirmations).”

In whatever Scripture asserts and affirms, it speaks truthfully and in a trustworthy manner. To say it is “wholly” true means we should not limit inerrancy to Scripture’s main doctrinal message. We never see the biblical authors place such a limitation on their writings. Instead, they believe God speaks truly through them in whatever they affirm. So, inerrancy applies to all areas, including its ethical instruction, to name just one example. Just as inspiration is both verbal and plenary, so too is inerrancy.

For more on this please see Appendix A.

4. Authority

We understand **authority** to mean that everything the Bible affirms and teaches is true. As God’s disclosed will and purpose, it is determinative for belief and behaviour. Therefore, the affirmation that the Bible is the “authoritative rule of faith and conduct” is understood to call for accepting the Scriptures as the final and unchanging authority for doctrine and ethics.

Biblical Considerations

The starting point for a correct understanding of the doctrine of Scripture is the Bible itself, which bears repeated and powerful witness to its own nature. It clearly claims divine authority and full inspiration. The teaching of Jesus is foundational for our understanding. He is quoted in Matthew 5:18,

“For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.”

Jesus thought of the Scriptures as being eternally significant even in their slightest detail. If Jesus did not believe in the full inspiration and infallibility of the Scriptures, the force of His argument is lost.

Jesus' insistence on the truthfulness and authority of every part of the Scriptures is seen in other passages as well. In John 10:34–38, He points to a brief statement from the Psalms (82:6) and argues that neither it nor the other parts of the Law can be broken. If Jesus had thought of the Scriptures as being only partially inspired and subject to errors of detail, He certainly would not have spoken as He did. In Matthew 22:32, the validity of Christ's statement rests on a precise scriptural detail, namely, the present tense of the verb, "I am." In His questioning of the Pharisees in Matthew 22:43–45, the force of the dialogue rests on the use of one word, "Lord."

Jesus' confidence in the details of Scripture is reflected in the New Testament Epistles as well. For example, in Galatians 3:16, Paul depends on a distinguishing of number— singular and plural— "seed" versus "seeds," for the force of his argument. Such reliance on minute details involving tenses, particular words, and singular and plural, are meaningful only in light of fully inspired Scriptures that are inerrant even in their detail.

One of the most forceful statements on the full inspiration of the Scriptures is found in 2 Timothy 3:16. This passage, as translated by many English versions (KJV, NASB, NLT, NRSV, NET, et al.) begins "All [or "every"] Scripture is inspired by God" [or "given by inspiration of God"]. However, the Greek term translated "inspired" is *theopneustos*, literally "God-breathed." The NIV more vividly translates "God-breathed"; the ESV similarly reads "breathed out by God." *Theopneustos* points to God as the source of Scripture but also signifies that Scripture remains vibrant as the Spirit of God continuously makes God's Word alive to receptive readers and hearers.

The writer to the Hebrews expresses a similar understanding,

“For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

What should also be noted about the nature of “God-breathed” Scripture is its immediate and practical relevance to the life of the people of God. Paul goes on to say that it “is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

The inspired Word is intended to enter into and order every aspect of the public and private beliefs and behaviours of Christians. This passage also asserts that what is true of one part of Scripture is true of all the Scriptures; that is, the Scriptures in part and in whole are uniquely the product of God. The Scriptures at the time Paul wrote to Timothy were what we know as the Old Testament. But Paul called Timothy to include in the understanding of Scripture “my [Paul’s] teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance” (3:10). Moreover, Paul went on to challenge Timothy to “continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of” (3:14). From infancy he had been instructed in “the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (3:15). So, Paul includes in his “all Scripture” the message he had been given and had preached, the message that formed the basis for the New Testament. And Peter, in fact, asserts that Paul’s letters are among the Scriptures (2 Peter 3:15–16).

Another important passage that provides a great deal of insight on the function and nature of inspiration is 2 Peter 1:21,

“For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along (pheromenoi) by the Holy Spirit.”

In context, this verse suggests the uniqueness of the Scriptures when compared to humanly inspired statements and declares “the prophetic message as something completely reliable”

(1:19). The persons who wrote the Scriptures did so by means of a unique and powerful action of the Holy Spirit.

So, the uniform witness of the Scriptures is clear: God communicated to the mind of the writer (**revelation**); the Holy Spirit guided the transmission of His revelation into words (**inspiration**); and, through the continuing activity of the Holy Spirit (**illumination**), we receive the original revelation as we encounter the Scriptures.

Implications of Doctrine of Scripture

The claim that the Scriptures are the revelation of God to humans, the authoritative rule of faith and conduct, demands that they be seen as worthy of such affirmation. Would God provide humans with a flawed instrument by which to direct their lives? Would He not ensure that the source of faith and conduct be without error, fully trustworthy? He has inspired writers by the Holy Spirit and in that process given for our direction and guidance texts that are fully reliable to guide us to salvation, worship, and service.

It is noteworthy that the Scriptures repeatedly claim to be “God's Word.” The Old Testament is abundant with such phrases as “and God said” (Genesis 1:3, 6, 9, 14, 20, 24), “This is what the LORD says” (Exodus 4:22; 1 Samuel 2:27; and over four hundred additional passages), and “The word of the Lord came” (Genesis 15:1, 4; 1 Samuel 15:10; Jeremiah 1:2, 4, 11, 13). In other passages, Scripture is equated directly with divine authorship: “It says” (Romans 3:19; 15:10; 1 Peter 2:6); “It is written” (Matthew 4:4, 6, 10; Acts 1:20); and “Scripture says” (Romans 9:17; 10:11; 11:2). This shows that God’s voice, spoken to the prophets, is equated with the Scriptures. The writers claim to be writing God’s words.

Moreover, the Scriptures also repeatedly claim to be “truth,” as vividly expressed in Jesus’ high priestly prayer: “your word is truth” [alētheia, not alēthēs; that is, “truth,” not “true”] (John 17:17). The Old Testament regularly reiterated God’s truthfulness: “God is not human, that he should lie” (Numbers 23:19); “Sovereign Lord, you are God! Your covenant is trustworthy, and you have promised these good things to your servant” (2 Samuel 7:28);

“Your word, Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens” (Psalm 119:89); and “Every word of God is flawless” (Proverbs 30:5).

Similar passages from the New Testament are found in Paul’s teaching about “God, who does not lie” (Titus 1:2) and in the letter to the Hebrews that similarly notes “it is impossible for God to lie” (Hebrews 6:18). Truth is an attribute of God; the Spirit of God is the Spirit of truth (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13).

Historical Considerations

With regard to the doctrine of inspiration, just as other salient doctrines of the Christian Church, it is important to understand what the Church has believed through the centuries. While discussion on the inerrancy of Scripture is primarily a phenomenon of more recent years, a survey of church history suggests that the church has long held a high view of the inspiration of the Scriptures with belief in infallibility and inerrancy implicit in that view.

During the Patristic Period, the Scriptures were considered to be the unique work of the Holy Spirit carrying forth a divine message. To the church fathers, inspiration extended even to the phraseology of the Bible. Thus, Clement of Alexandria underscored Christ’s words in Matthew 5:18 by saying that not a jot or tittle shall pass away because the “mouth of the Lord the Holy Spirit hath spoken these things” (Protepticus [Exhortation to the Heathen], IX).

Gregory Nazianzus suggests that the smallest lines in the Scriptures are due to the care of the Holy Spirit, and that we must be careful to consider every slightest shade of meaning (Oration 2, 105). Justin Martyr distinguished between human and divine inspiration and spoke of the divine Word that moved the writers of the Scriptures (The First Apology, 36). Irenaeus asserted that we can be;

“most properly assured that the Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God and his Spirit” (Against Heresies 2.28.2).

There can be little doubt that the early fathers had a very high view of inspiration, and that this view extended to the minute details of the Scriptures.

The Reformers, in a search for authority, readily accepted the doctrine of inspiration and, by implication, infallibility and inerrancy. Zwingli appealed both to the Old Testament and New Testament in his defence of pure Christian doctrine (see his, *On the Clarity and Certainty of the Word of God*). Calvin asserted that because the Holy Spirit authenticates the Scriptures “we affirm with utter certainty (just as if we were gazing upon the majesty of God himself) that it has flowed to us from the very mouth of God by the ministry of men” (*Institutes*, I, 7, 5). Luther argued for a high view of inspiration and thought of the Scriptures as being above error (see his *Answer to Latomus*, 8.98.27). While the Reformers did not devote a decisive part of their theology to the subject of inspiration, it is conclusive that they accepted the full authority of the Scriptures.

The age of rationalism levelled its attack against the application of inspiration to the minutia, that is, the small details, of the Bible. In the spirit of the Renaissance, linguistic and textual studies flourished. The rationalistic approach suggested that if errors could be demonstrated to exist in the text of the Scriptures, the whole doctrine of inspiration would crumble. This kind of thinking ignited a rash of claims that the Bible was full of errors, its critics hoping thereby to destroy the whole doctrine of inspiration.

The response to the charges that the Scriptures are filled with error is first to appeal to the claims of Scripture itself as has been done in this paper. If we accept that the Scriptures are the Word of God, as clearly stated in the biblical text, that Word must take precedence over our rationalizations.

Summary

The doctrine of the authority and inerrancy of Scripture is rooted in the doctrine of God; as God is true and trustworthy, so is his word recorded in the original autographs of Scriptures. This means that all things that the Scriptures assert are wholly true, both in the Old Testament, the Scriptures of Jesus and the apostles, and in the New Testament, the writings

of the apostles. So far as the original autographs have been faithfully copied, translated, and passed down, Scripture is inerrant. This inerrancy means that everything that Scriptures assert, with its accurate copies, function with the authority of God's own Word for Christians.

“The trustworthiness of the Scriptures lies at the foundation of trust in the Christian system of doctrine and is therefore fundamental to the Christian hope and life.”

These words from Benjamin B. Warfield highlight just how important the doctrine of inerrancy is for the church. Abandon it, and the entire Christian system of doctrine now rests on a shaky foundation.

That is because without it, our assurance in Scripture's full truthfulness and total trustworthiness is thrown into question. Doubt naturally follows for the preacher of God's Word: “How can I know whether the passage I am preaching is reliable?” Much is at stake, then, with inerrancy. Faith and practice readily depend on whether we can trust God's Word and whether it is God's Word at all or in its entirety.

The God of Truth

As hinted at already, it is appropriate to associate inerrancy with God himself. Inerrancy is, after all, a corollary of inspiration. It is because Scripture is breathed-out *by God* (2 Tim. 3:16) that it is also truthful in all it affirms. The God who has breathed out his Word has done so in a way that is truthful; what else would we expect from a triune God who is truth itself (John 1:18; 8:40; 14:6; 17:3, 17; 18:37; 1 John 4:6)?

Assumed in such a statement is the belief that our doctrine of Scripture should be grounded in our doctrine of God. If God is Scripture's author, then we should not divorce the character of the divine author from the character of his divine speech. After all, this is *God's Word* we are describing; Scripture has many human authors, but it ultimately originates from one divine author. While God and the text are distinct, nevertheless, the text is his speech act; it should not surprise us that it reflects his character.

Communicable attributes characterize his communicable speech, and truthfulness is one of them. As the God of truth and the God who is truth, he speaks a word of truth. The truthfulness of the text reflects the truthfulness of its divine author. Hence the psalmist could say that the God whose way is “perfect” communicates a word that always “proves true” and, for that reason, is a comfort to those who trust in it for their salvation (119:96; cf. 119:160).

**The truthfulness of the text reflects the truthfulness
of its divine author.**

“But wait, isn’t Scripture written by human hands? We all know humans are fallible creatures,” one might object. It is true that humans are fallible. And apart from the Spirit’s superintendence, any human author would be fallible. But since it is the Spirit of God—also called the Spirit of truth (John 15:26)—that carries along these human authors (2 Peter 1:21), what they say is what God says, and no human error is mixed in with it. Surely this is not beyond God’s omnipotent abilities. If we, as Christians, believe the Son of God himself can become incarnate yet without sin in order to communicate a saving word to us as the Word (John 1:1, 14), then carrying along the biblical authors so that they speak truthfully is a small thing by comparison.

Conclusion - Inerrancy and Authority

- We affirm that God has provided for all time an inspired, inerrant, and authoritative record of His revelation in the Bible, our Holy Scriptures.

- We hold that the Scriptures are God’s sufficient and authoritative disclosure for the salvation of all people, and therefore are authoritative for belief, teaching, and practice.

- The Scriptures define the believer’s worldview, morality, and ethics.

- Moreover, the Scriptures are not simply one authority among others; they are the final authority.
- The Holy Spirit, who inspired the writers in their task of recording the revelation of God, breathes life into and through the writings so that they continue to speak with clarity and authority to the contemporary reader. He does not speak through supposed prophets or religious leaders to teach any belief or action not validated in the Scriptures.
- Accordingly, we reject any contemporary philosophy, interpretive method, or purported prophecy that attempts to contravene or alter the nature and meaning of “the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people” (Jude 3, 2 Peter 1:20–21).

We, the elders at GodFirst, approach the bible with humility, asking that the Holy Spirit speak through it, conforming our wills and worldviews to it. We grant absolute primacy to the biblical revelation, assured that it will guide us into all truth.

Further Reading

- Craig Carter, Video interview: Does our doctrine of God affect our doctrine of scripture?
- Guy Waters, Video interview: What does inerrancy tell us about the character of God?
- Matthew Barrett, *God's Word Alone: The Authority of Scripture*. See an author interview [here](#) and [here](#).
- Matthew Barrett, Ten videos on the doctrine of Scripture.
- Matthew Barrett, Twenty-one lectures based on *God's Word Alone*.
- J. I. Packer, *"Fundamentalism" and the Word of God: Some Evangelical Principles*
- John Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal*
- Peter Lillback and Richard Gaffin Jr., eds., *Thy Word Is Still Truth: Essential Writings on the Doctrine of Scripture from the Reformation to Today*
- Peter Williams, Video interview: Why is divine authorial intent so important for biblical interpretation?
- R. C. Sproul, Video interview: Inerrancy and your Church
- "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," in Norman Geisler, ed., *Inerrancy*. For a brief historical review, see [here](#).

Appendix A

In asserting the inerrancy of the Scriptures, we refer to the autographs (the original manuscripts as they first came from the author[s]). Strict inerrancy is claimed only for the original writings. Those original manuscripts, of course, no longer exist; however, their wording can be determined with amazing precision. Experts in textual criticism throughout the centuries have carried out, and continue, rigorous comparisons of thousands of ancient biblical texts to carefully determine the original. The Bible is, in fact, the best-attested book of antiquity and we are assured of a reliable text that is indeed trustworthy. Moreover, it demonstrates God's providential care in the exacting, painstaking work of faithful scribes and scholars through the centuries.

We can also be assured that our major translations of the Bible, to the extent they are faithful to the original texts, reliably communicate the infallible Word of God today. The reader can trust that these major translations have been made by, and are continuously reviewed by, reputable scholars who are committed to the task of conveying accurately the Word of God from the original languages to modern readers.

It is important to note that claims of inerrancy are directed toward what Scripture affirms and asserts rather than information that is merely accurately reported. The Bible does correctly record false statements by ungodly people (e.g., the comforters of Job) and even the words of Satan (e.g., Genesis 3:1–5). The biblical writers also on occasion quote from non-canonical and non-inspired writings, which would show the truthfulness of that quoted but not extend authoritativeness to the source (e.g., Jude’s use of the assumption of Moses and the Book of Enoch). Likewise, every act recorded in Scripture is not thereby to be considered in keeping with God’s divine order.

The inerrancy of the Scriptures must also be considered in light of their historical and cultural setting. The Bible comes to us from the Ancient Near East, a culture and time far distant from the present. Thus, the scientific exactness in numbers and quotations that are expected of contemporary technical writing may not be applicable to the biblical texts. As modern authors often do, the biblical writers used the language of appearance to describe their world. That is, they wrote from their perspective and not in technical terms. So, for example, they could talk (as moderns still do) about the sun “rising” or “setting” and be fully truthful. With regard to miracles, the writers tell us what they saw and experienced without trying to explain the mystery in scientific terms. So, for example, the miracle of the crossing of the Red Sea is reported matter-of-factly, “the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land” (Exodus 14:21–31). Other Old and New Testament miracles were likewise reported just as they were observed. The writers report the mighty acts of God which they experienced and attribute those acts to His gracious intervention. Their ultimate goal in writing is to call their readers to the same faith they exemplified in their mighty God.

The inerrancy of the Scriptures is not invalidated by the use of multiple figures of speech and various literary genres. Parables, analogies, allegories, similes, metaphors, hyperboles, symbols, etc., are to be found throughout the Bible. Among others, the writers employed narrative, poetic, apocalyptic, prophetic, didactic, and epistolary genres as they conveyed the truth of God. Accurate interpretation of the biblical texts requires careful attention to their literary form.

In that the Holy Spirit used humans in the process of producing the Scriptures, it is to be understood that the human authors employed their particular grammatical skills. So, finding what might be considered by moderns as incorrect grammatical constructions does not in any way detract from biblical inerrancy.

To find in the Bible items that are not presently understandable or that may seem erroneous or contradictory does not mean that the Bible is in error. Again and again, advancing historical, archaeological, and philological studies have verified biblical reports once claimed to be erroneous. The historical details of the Bible have an amazing record of validation. Humility requires us to continue to search for understanding when confronted with the occasional problematic passage and not peremptorily misjudge the Scriptures as containing error.

The personal God of creation, redemption, and consummation so desired to communicate with the people He created that He chose to make himself known. He superintended the conveyance of that revelatory activity to writing in such a powerful manner that it is fully trustworthy. He continues in the power of the Holy Spirit to illumine His written revelation to the hearts and minds of people who open themselves to reading, hearing, and obeying the Bible in its life-giving force.