

FOR CLARITY AND CHARITY: A WESLEYAN RESPONSE TO THE SCRIPTURE STUDY COMMITTEE'S REPORT ON ARTICLE IV (THE HOLY SCRIPTURES)

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No church is an island. The Church of the Nazarene's 2009 General Assembly received a resolution to change the denomination's Article of Faith on Holy Scripture, Article IV, by replacing the phrase "inerrantly revealing the will of God concerning us in all things necessary to our salvation" with "inerrant throughout, and the supreme authority on everything the Scriptures teach." The Scripture Study Committee (SSC) took up the resolution and issued a report in time for the 2013 General Assembly. The SSC recommended against the resolution as "untrue to the Wesleyan tradition, incompatible with Wesleyan theology, and unwarranted by the Scriptures themselves."¹ The report supports this recommendation with three sections of argumentation: "The Calvinist Origin of the Assertion of Detailed Inerrancy"; "Why This Calvinist Belief is the Wrong Way to Assert the Authority of Scripture"; and "The United View of Nazarene Theologians." The report focuses on an *internal* constituency: a resolution from some Nazarenes and its potential effect on the denomination. Since no church is an island, however, I will focus on an *external* constituency: other Wesleyan bodies whose relations with the Church of the Nazarene are affected by the SSC report.

During the same quadrennium that the SSC prepared its report, the Church of the Nazarene considered merger with The Wesleyan Church. There was even discussion of a five-way union involving not just those two denominations but also the Free Methodist Church, the Churches of Christ in Christian Union (CCCU), and the Evangelical Friends Church. Following are these denominations' statements of faith on Scripture:

Wesleyan: "We believe that the books of the Old and New Testaments constitute the Holy Scriptures. They are the inspired and infallibly written Word of God, fully inerrant in their original manuscripts and superior to all human authority, and have been transmitted to the present without corruption of any essential doctrine."

Free Methodist: "The Bible is God's written Word, uniquely inspired by the Holy Spirit. It bears unerring witness to Jesus Christ, the living Word. As attested by the early church and subsequent councils, it is the trustworthy record of God's revelation, completely truthful in all it affirms."

CCCU: "The Spirit of God guided the Bible writers so that they wrote without error. The Bible contains all we need to know about God, about ourselves, and about life here and hereafter."

¹ "Report of the Scripture Study Committee to the Twenty-Eighth General Assembly, Church of the Nazarene," *Didache: Faithful Teaching* 13.1. Online: <http://didache.nazarene.org/index.php/vol-13-1>, 4 (all subsequent citations from this source given in-text.)

Evangelical Friends: “We believe the Bible is the written word of God accurate and fully authoritative in all it says.”²

The current Nazarene Article IV resembles the second sentences of the Free Methodist and CCCU articles, while the resolution stands close to the Wesleyan and Evangelical Friends’ articles, the third sentence of the Free Methodist article, and the first sentence of the CCCU article, as the following chart depicts:

Naz. Article	Naz. Resolution	Wesleyan Article	FM Article	CCCU Article	EF Article
“inerrantly revealing the will of God concerning us in all things necessary to our salvation”			“bears unerring witness to Jesus Christ, the living Word”	“contains all we need to know about God, about ourselves, and about life here and hereafter”	
	“inerrant throughout”	“fully inerrant in their original manuscripts”	“the trustworthy record of God’s revelation, completely truthful in all it affirms”	“the Bible writers . . . wrote without error”	“accurate . . . in all it says”
	“supreme authority on everything the Scriptures teach”	“superior to all human authority”			“fully authoritative in all it says”

From this perspective, the SSC report represents an implicit (and doubtless inadvertent) censure of the Church of the Nazarene’s prospective merger partners as being “untrue to the Wesleyan tradition, incompatible with Wesleyan theology,” and indeed, infected with Calvinism! It is as though the Church of the Nazarene were Jane Austen’s Mr. Darcy, who first proposes marriage

² Online: <http://www.wesleyan.org/979/articles-of-religion>; <http://fmcusa.org/uniquelyfm/doctrine/>; <http://www.cccuhq.org/explore/who-we-are/what-we-teach>; <http://www.evangelicalfriends.org/beliefs>.

to Elizabeth Bennet while noting her inferior rank and that his family and his own better judgment are against their union.

Permit an autobiographical interlude: I have experience with four of these five denominations. My doctorate is through a Nazarene institution. I was a third-generation Free Methodist until for practical, not doctrinal, reasons I transferred membership to The Wesleyan Church. I have taught for Nazarene, CCCU, and Wesleyan institutions and have preached and worshiped in Free Methodist, Wesleyan, and Nazarene churches. I want to build bridges between these denominations that have nurtured me and that I have served. What follows is less an *apologia* for inerrancy than a plea for clarity and charity. Loving one's denominational neighbor as oneself demands listening carefully and speaking truthfully about what the neighbor believes, even if one does not agree.

The Meaning of Inerrancy

We in the Wesleyan tradition know the trouble our doctrine of “Christian perfection” or “entire sanctification” causes. These terms strike outsiders (and even many insiders) as absolutist and unrealistic, implying “sinless perfection.” Following Wesley himself, we have qualified carefully what we mean by these terms. We persist in using them because we believe they signify a reality that has deep roots in Scripture and Christian tradition and that, rightly grasped, promotes spiritual flourishing. Much the same may be said for the term “inerrancy”: it sounds absolutist, hyper-literalistic, and unrealistic, yet its most responsible representatives have carefully qualified its meaning out of the conviction that, rightly grasped, it signifies an important component of Scripture, tradition, and spiritual flourishing.

Wesley defined “Christian perfection” as excluding absolute perfection or a “perfection of degrees.” He also defined “sin” so as to exclude infirmities. In discussing inerrancy, too, definitions of “inerrancy” and “error” are important. The SSC claims that “the concept of ‘error’ is not a helpful one since it is impossible to define what constitutes an ‘error.’ The word seems to imply the need for absolute accuracy, but what degree of accuracy is appropriate? . . . The concept of ‘error’ is an *absolutist* word applied to something which is necessarily a matter of *degree*.” (p. 6) Nevertheless, the SSC believes it possible to define what constitutes error’s negation, inerrancy:

Article IV clearly states that the Holy Scriptures reveal the will of God *inerrantly*. That means that what Holy Scriptures tell us about God and his saving acts and purposes cannot be set aside by any merely human philosophy, metaphysics, or ethics. Human reason and culture are all fallen and therefore suspect when it comes to discerning the will of God, but we each may trust the word of God given to us in Holy Scripture. (pp. 2-3)

In this laudable description, that which is inerrant is trustworthy and not to be set aside in favor of lesser sources’ claims. If “inerrancy” may be defined, surely “error” may be. In ordinary discourse, an error is a failure to follow the expectations governing one’s particular activity. Kicking a ball is an error in basketball but not in soccer. In communication, not all imprecision is error; only *impermissible* imprecision is. Thus a Shakespeare play or a film “inspired by a true story” may take liberties that are acceptable in art forms but unacceptable in a modern history

textbook. Likewise, if I earn \$984 and report it as a thousand dollars, whether or not I have erred or lied depends on whether I am speaking casually to a friend or filing a tax return. Certainly there are degrees of error: the child who says the sum of $2 + 3$ is 4 is less wrong than the one who says 12. But there are also degrees of non-erroneous imprecision: I may tell you that I live in the USA, in my state, in my city, or at a particular street address, and any of those answers is errorless although the lattermost is the most precise. The objection to inerrancy on the bases of the indefinability and unavoidability of error is erroneous.

Some of Wesley's preachers brought the doctrine of Christian perfection into disrepute by their excesses, but it would be unfair to judge his teaching by theirs. Likewise, the doctrine of inerrancy should not be judged by its more extreme advocates. The SSC mentions Harold Lindsell's *Battle for the Bible* (p. 5) but not the most responsible, representative document in mainstream American inerrantism, the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. Consulting the Chicago Statement would have saved the SSC from largely overshooting the mark in the following lines: "Do we insist on the kind of accuracy of modern scientific language which is foreign to all ancient literature? Are round figures acceptable? Must every narrative observe strict chronological accuracy? Are metaphors and parables disallowed?" (p. 6) Compare the Chicago Statement's Article 13:

We deny that it is proper to evaluate Scripture according to standards of truth and error that are alien to its usage or purpose. We further deny that inerrancy is negated by biblical phenomena such as a lack of modern technical precision, irregularities of grammar or spelling, observational descriptions of nature, the reporting of falsehoods, the use of hyperbole and round numbers, the topical arrangement of material, variant selections of material in parallel accounts, or the use of free citations.

Or again, Article 18: "We affirm that the text of Scripture is to be interpreted by grammatical-historical exegesis, *taking account of its literary forms and devices*, and that Scripture is to interpret Scripture."³

The objections to inerrancy examined thus far must be considered as felling straw men, not dealing with the most measured or authoritative articulations of that doctrine. No doctrine deserves acceptance or rejection due to misunderstanding. Having discussed what the teaching of inerrancy means, we turn now to its history.

The History of Inerrancy

The SSC report's Section 2 (pp. 5-6) surveys the history of the "inerrant throughout" position, portraying it as an innovation of post-Reformation Protestant scholastics (particularly Calvinist theologian Francis Turretin). These scholars built a rationalistic system of theology founded on a perfectly inerrant Bible instead of on faith in Christ. "Old Princeton" Calvinists like B. B. Warfield championed this view in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, transmitting it to the Fundamentalists and thence to contemporary American evangelicalism. This view differs not only from the Reformers but also from the Wesleyan view, which is grounded in the

³ Online: <http://www.bible-researcher.com/chicago1.html>. Italics mine.

Anglican Thirty-nine Articles and their assertion of the “sufficiency” (not “inerrancy”) of Scripture for salvation.

Suppose all the above is true: if Calvinists pioneered the term “inerrancy” or developed the concept, this does not automatically make the doctrine inherently Calvinistic or un-Wesleyan any more than using the term and concept “Trinity” makes one Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox. From the start, Wesleyan theology has been eclectic: Wesley himself learned from Luther, the (Calvinistic!) Puritans, the Pietists, and Catholic mystics. More recent influences on Wesleyan theologians include non-Wesleyans like Reformed (hence loosely “Calvinistic”) giant Karl Barth. To dismiss a doctrine solely for its origins is to commit the genetic fallacy.

The SSC’s historical account, however, is contested. It echoes Reformed scholars Jack B. Rogers and Donald McKim’s *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach*.⁴ But John D. Woodbridge’s *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal*⁵ has given a detailed rebuttal, showing that, while the term “inerrancy” is new, the concept was embraced throughout church history, from the Fathers through the Reformers to the early Methodists. Likewise, Harvard’s James Kugel has written that ancient Jewish and Christian interpreters of Scripture “assumed that the Bible contained no contradictions or mistakes. It is perfectly harmonious, despite its being an anthology In short, the Bible, they felt, is an utterly consistent, seamless, perfect book.”⁶ Michael Graves concurs: “The general tendency in the early church was to see freedom from factual error as an entailment of biblical inspiration.”⁷

In the nineteenth through mid-twentieth centuries, the defense of inerrancy by American Calvinists and other evangelicals paralleled the same efforts by the quite non-Calvinistic Catholic hierarchy. Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* (1893) denounces rationalists who reject the Bible’s historical accuracy. In Sections 20-21, he directly affirms all Scripture as inerrant (except for those errors introduced by careless copyists) and rebukes the view that Scripture is inerrant in faith and morals but not in science and history. Leo states that it is no error if biblical writers describe the physical world using phenomenological or figurative language and suggests that the same principle may hold true in the Bible’s historical accounts.⁸ These themes reappear in Pope Benedict XV’s *Spiritus Paraclitus* (1920), Sections 8-29,⁹ and Pius XII’s *Divino afflante Spiritu* (1943), especially Section 37: “For as the substantial Word of God became like to men in all things, ‘except sin,’ so the words of God, expressed in human

⁴ (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979).

⁵ (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

⁶ James Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 15. Online: Amazon.com.

⁷ Michael Graves, *The Inspiration and Interpretation of Scripture: What the Early Church Can Teach Us* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 91.

⁸ Online: http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_18111893_providentissimus-deus.html.

⁹ Online: http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xv/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xv_enc_15091920_spiritus-paraclitus.html. Benedict claims that the Church Father St. Jerome held Scripture to be inerrant save for copyists’ mistakes.

language, are made like to human speech in every respect, except error.”¹⁰ During Vatican II (1962-1965), however, Cardinal König proposed that Scripture contained scientific and historical errors. The resulting debate led to the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, which is so ambiguously worded that everyone from full inerrantists to those of König’s persuasion may accept it: “[O]ne must proclaim that the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully, and without error teach that truth which God, for the sake of salvation, wanted to put into the Sacred Writings.”¹¹

While much more evidence could be cited, what is given above suffices to establish my point. Rather than a novelty devised by some rationalistic, mostly American,¹² Calvinists, the doctrine of full inerrancy has been an ecumenical staple of the historical church. It exists in prerationalistic form in the premodern period (e.g., Augustine, Chrysostom),¹³ in rationalistic form in modern times (e.g., Turretin, Warfield),¹⁴ and in postrationalistic form in the postmodern era (e.g., Stan Grenz, Kevin Vanhoozer).¹⁵

Wesleyans are no johnny-wesley-come-latelies to this tradition. Wesley himself opposed Soame Jenyns, who wrote regarding the biblical authors, “In the sciences of history, geography, astronomy, and philosophy, they appear to have been no better instructed than others, and therefore were not less liable to be mislead [*sic*] by the errors and prejudices of the times and countries in which they lived.” Wesley responded, “Nay, if there be any mistakes in the Bible, there may as well be a thousand. If there be one falsehood in that book, it did not come from the God of truth.” Likewise, Wesley countered Bishop Warburton’s assertion that the biblical writers

¹⁰ Online: http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_30091943_divino-afflante-spiritu.html.

¹¹ Denis Farkasfalvy, *Inspiration and Interpretation: A Theological Introduction to Sacred Scripture* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 185-188, 221-233 (quote from p. 226); cf. Brian W. Harrison, “Encyclical Spiritus Paraclitus In Its Historical Context, The,” especially B.1. Online:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=3912>; William G. Most, *Free from All Error: Authorship, Inerrancy, Historicity of Scripture, Church Teaching and Modern Scripture Scholars*, rev. ed. (Libertyville, IL: Marytown Press, 2009), Chs. 6-10.

¹² Against the charge that belief in inerrancy is parochially American, see Scot McKnight, “Is Inerrancy a Game Only Played by American Evangelicals?” Online: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2014/08/11/is-inerrancy-a-game-only-played-by-american-evangelicals/>.

¹³ Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority*, 35-46.

¹⁴ Cf. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, “The Church Doctrine of Inspiration,” in Carl F. H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958), 203-217.

¹⁵ Stanley J. Grenz and Jay T. Smith, *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 136-138; cf. Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 397-402; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Augustinian Inerrancy: Literary Meaning, Literal Truth, and Literate Interpretation in the Economy of Biblical Discourse,” in J. Merrick and Stephen M. Garrett, eds., *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 199-235.

made “no considerable errors”: “Nay, will not the allowing there is any error in Scripture, shake the authority of the whole?”¹⁶

Wesley allows that the Gospels’ genealogies theoretically could have included mistakes, which the Gospel writers did not correct when incorporating them into their narratives.¹⁷ This allowance is used to argue that Wesley cannot have been a full inerrantist, for that view “requires that errors in sources be corrected by inspiration.”¹⁸ This claim, though, is false: full inerrantists can make such a theoretical allowance.¹⁹ Nor does the Anglican Article of Religion on the “sufficiency” of Scripture, bequeathed by Wesley to American Methodism, contradict his inerrantism. In its historical context, biblical sufficiency does not contrast with biblical inerrancy. This is an anachronistic dichotomy. Rather, the claim that Scripture is salvifically sufficient contrasts with the Catholic view that Scripture by itself is an insufficient authority, so that ecclesiastical authority (i.e., papacy, councils, magisterium) is needed to supplement it. The Anglican Article limits inerrant authority *to* Scripture, not *within* Scripture. Wesley inherited this view. United Methodist bishop Scott Jones has summed up Wesley’s stance: “He understands that the very nature of God means that he cannot be ignorant and cannot lie. Since Scripture is divinely authored, it cannot make mistakes. Wesley’s position on infallibility is uncompromising: there are no mistakes in the Bible.”²⁰

Other early Methodist theologians second Wesley’s inerrantism. Adam Clarke writes of Genesis that “all the modern improvements and accurate discoveries in different arts and sciences have only served to confirm the facts detailed by Moses.” The Pentateuch’s “accuracy of facts, impartiality, simplicity, and sublimity of narrative . . . have never been equaled, and can only be paralleled by the GOSPEL of the Son of God!” After discussing the historical accuracy of the Gospels, he concludes that the Bible is “the only book that is without blemish or error – the book that contains the TRUTH, the *whole* TRUTH, and nothing but the TRUTH.”²¹

¹⁶ Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority*, 213n39; see *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986) 4:82 and 9:150.

¹⁷ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (London: Epworth Press, 1948), 15.

¹⁸ R. Larry Shelton, “John Wesley’s Approach to Scripture in Historical Perspective,” *WTJ* 16.1:40. He applies the same argument to Adam Clarke.

¹⁹ Paul D. Feinberg, “The Meaning of Inerrancy,” in Norman L. Geisler, ed., *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1980), 297-298; Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 257-259. But Feinberg and Erickson note concerns about such an allowance.

²⁰ Scott J. Jones, *John Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 216. Online: Amazon. Cf. the sources cited in Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority*, 213-214n39; Mark L. Weeter, *John Wesley’s View and Use of Scripture* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2007), Ch. 7; William J. Abraham, “Scripture and Divine Revelation,” 118-119, Douglas M. Koskela, “A Wesleyan Understanding of the Authority of Scripture,” 144, and Jason E. Vickers, “The Holiness of Scripture,” 150-151, all in Joel B. Green and David F. Watson, eds., *Wesley, Wesleyans, and Reading Bible as Scripture* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012).

²¹ Adam Clarke and Samuel Dunn, *Christian Theology* (2nd ed., 1835; repr. Salem, Ohio: Schmull, 1967), 52-60; quotes from pp. 52-53, 60; capitalization and italics original.

Richard Watson begins his *Theological Institutes* with a lengthy defense of miracles, prophecies, the historicity of the Pentateuch and the Gospels, and the preservation of the biblical text. Skeptics with “objections founded upon supposed contradictions between different passages of Scripture” will find them resolved by study of the original languages, cultures, and settings, as well as by textual criticism. Watson also deals with scientific objections, noting that Scripture sometimes uses observational language, “as when the sun is said to have stood still.” In the cases of Creation and the Flood, he insists that scientific advances will support the accuracy of the Genesis accounts. He reviews the day-age theory and a version of the “gap” theory as possibilities for harmonizing Scripture and geology, finds both theories exegetically wanting, and defers the solution to the future.²²

Samuel Wakefield critiques those who limit inspiration to the Bible’s doctrinal material: “According to this notion, an intermixture of human infirmity and error is by no means excluded from the Sacred Scriptures. But if it is once granted that they are in the least degree alloyed with error, an opening is made for every imaginable corruption.” Wakefield teaches that the biblical authors were

infallibly preserved from error. Hence we are authorized to consider all the doctrines, precepts, promises, and threatenings which they contain as true, righteous, and faithful; and to believe also that the events which are said to have happened did so happen, and that the words which are said to have been spoken were so spoken.²³

Amos Binney and Daniel Steele write of Scripture’s “genuineness and authenticity,” meaning that its claims of authorship and accounts of historical events are accurate. Binney and Steele allow for either dynamic or verbal inspiration, but state, “Both views secure the Scriptures from all error.” They repeat Watson’s point that biblical difficulties may be resolved through examining the original language, context, and parallel passages.²⁴

All these early Wesleyans ground their theological expositions in the doctrine of Scripture, defending biblical veracity before treating other doctrines. Thomas Ralston reverses this sequence, but his content is much the same as theirs. He traces the modern view that the biblical writers “were liable to error in some of their statements” to the sixteenth-century Socinians and, more recently, to Germany – “a hot-bed of infidelity [i.e., unbelief] in this insidious guise.” He teaches that although the biblical writers could err at other times, when they spoke on God’s behalf and wrote Scripture they were aided by the Holy Spirit “so that all they thus speak or write shall be free from error, and just as God would have it.”²⁵

²² Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes*, 30th ed. (New York: Phillips & Hunt and Cincinnati: Cranston & Stowe, 1850), 1:107-258; quotes from pp. 240, 248.

²³ Samuel Wakefield, *Christian Theology* (1862; repr. 1985, Salem, Ohio: Schmul), 1:71-82; quotes from pp. 77, 81.

²⁴ Amos Binney and Daniel Steele, *Binney’s Theological Compend* (New York: Abingdon, 1902), 20-33; quotes from pp. 20 (de-capitalized), 22.

²⁵ Thomas N. Ralston, *Elements of Divinity* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1924), 565-603; quotes from pp. 596-597.

To conclude: Instead of a modern invention of American Calvinists who have lured latter-day Wesleyans into betraying their heritage, inerrantism is a traditional, ecumenical belief, shared by Wesley and important early Methodists. Even the rationalism of grounding theology in an inerrant Bible is not distinctively Calvinistic but appears in Methodist writings between Wesley and Ralston. The SSC's charge that inerrantism and rationalism are "untrue to the Wesleyan tradition" and "incompatible with Wesleyan theology" falls into the "no true Scotsman" fallacy, one which excludes Wesley himself and other Methodist luminaries as "no true Wesleyans."

The Practice of Inerrancy

Lastly, the SSC critiques inerrantism's practical effects: it diverts attention to unprofitable debates about unimportant details. . . .

What persuades us of the truth of Scripture is that when it is preached in the power of the Spirit we come face to face with the Lord. . . . Paul gives us [1 Cor. 15:3-5] as the central facts of the gospel, and we believe that there is no good reason to doubt their historicity. . . . [T]he narrative of the gospel carries conviction when we evangelize – not by persuading the seeker that we can determine accurately how many angels were at the tomb. (pp. 6-7)

The SSC rightly stresses the paramount importance of "the central facts of the gospel" and the Holy Spirit's testimony to its truth. Any evangelistic approach that distracts from these essentials is damnable. But two replies pertain. First, sometimes faith in an inerrant Bible does lead to faith in Christ, as when first-century Jews or twenty-first century Jehovah's Witnesses embrace the trinitarian gospel. At other times, faith in Christ leads to faith in the Bible's inerrancy as one comes to adopt Christ's attitude of total trust in Scripture. Still other times, faith in Christ and in an inerrant Scripture grow up together in a mutually reinforcing manner, particularly in the case of church children.

Secondly, beyond conversion and the basic facts crucial to it lie discipleship and scholarship, both of which lead students of Scripture to encounter its (relatively) "unimportant details." Skeptics challenge the reliability of these details just as they do the "central facts of the gospel." Students of Scripture may respond in a variety of ways. They may conclude that a Bible mistaken in the lesser things must be mistaken in the greater and jettison their faith entirely (we may term this the "Bart Ehrman" way). They may attempt to resolve every single difficulty, no matter how implausibly, to shore up a fragile faith (the "insecure inerrantist" way). They may grant that the Bible is mistaken in some or even many things while still being reliable in its central message (depending on how many and which things are counted as errors, this view's representatives range from Barth and John Bright on the conservative end to Harry Emerson Fosdick and Rudolf Bultmann on the radical end). They may take an agnostic stance on the truth-status of the "unimportant details" (the way recently advocated by A. T. B. McGowan²⁶). Or they may seek plausible resolutions to difficulties and, where these are not forthcoming, defer to the future, acknowledging that "now we see through a glass darkly" and meanwhile continuing to

²⁶ A. T. B. McGowan, *The Divine Authenticity of Scripture: Retrieving an Evangelical Heritage* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2007).

believe all Scripture to be totally trustworthy (the “secure inerrantist” way).²⁷ The practical differences between a conservative errantist, an inerrancy agnostic, and a secure inerrantist are more semantic than substantive – a fact which should encourage mutual respect and rapprochement, not recrimination.²⁸

It also bears noting that inerrantism does not require a Young-Earth Creationist view of Genesis, a Dispensationalist view of Revelation, or a hyper-literalistic view of any biblical book between the two.²⁹ The SSC’s equation of “inerrancy throughout” with the “complete detailed factual literal accuracy of every part of Scripture” (p. 4) erects another straw man. As the Chicago Statement’s Article 18 (quoted above) affirms, interpretation must account for Scripture’s literary devices and genres. Furthermore, as the SSC correctly claims, interpretations of Scripture are not infallible (p. 3) and must be open to revision based on fresh evidence. Whatever one thinks of his specific conclusions, Richard Watson’s openness to reinterpreting Genesis 1 in light of emerging science stands as a model for Wesleyans.

In All Things Charity

This paper’s purpose has not been to persuade individuals or the Church of the Nazarene to adopt the “inerrant throughout” position. I concur with the SSC that such a revision of Article IV “could have very serious results for our unity and could do serious damage to the Church of the Nazarene” (p. 10). What I hope to convey is that a change of understanding and of tone is much needed. Continued use of errant historical reconstructions, questioning the theological parentage of those who hold to inerrancy, and the like serve only to provoke disunity within the Church of the Nazarene and problematize unification between it and inerrantist Wesleyan denominations. Consider these lines near the SSC report’s conclusion:

[T]he inerrancy view “has become the trademark and battle cry of rigid, right wing, Calvinist fundamentalists” and does not belong in the Wesleyan tradition. Nonetheless, . . . Article IV is a “roomy one”: and . . . both the rigid fundamentalist who believes in inerrancy can assent to the article, while those “who take a less rigid view . . . also have elbow room.” (pp. 9-10)³⁰

The *intent* is to portray the Church of the Nazarene as a “Big Tent” in which both inerrantists and non-inerrantists can dwell. The *tone*, though, works at cross-purposes by its pejorative depiction of anyone who disagrees with the author’s view and the underlying demand for doublethink – “You can belong to our denomination and still believe in full inerrancy *as long as you accept*

²⁷ See Sinclair B. Ferguson, “How Does the Bible Look at Itself?” in Harvie M. Conn, ed., *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic: A Tradition, a Challenge, a Debate* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 64-65.

²⁸ McGowan, *Divine Authenticity*, 14, 126, 211-212; George C. Fuller and Samuel T. Logan, Jr., “Bible Authority: When Christians Do Not Agree,” in Conn, *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic*, 237-251.

²⁹ Moisés Silva, “Old Princeton, Westminster, and Inerrancy,” in Conn, *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic*, 74-75; Craig L. Blomberg, *Can We Still Believe the Bible? An Evangelical Engagement with Contemporary Questions* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2014), Chs. 4-5.

³⁰ Wesley Tracy’s view is being described and quoted from *Herald of Holiness* (Jan. 1992), 33.

that you're wrong and don't truly belong." This is hardly a message that makes for intra-denominational peace, much less interdenominational merger!

Far more constructive is the tone found in Scottish Methodist I. Howard Marshall's book *Biblical Inspiration*.³¹ He carefully, charitably describes both his own position (which approximates that of the SSC) and that of full inerrantists, making sure to consult the Chicago Statement. Marshall writes for a broad audience, not simply fellow Wesleyans. For an example of an irenic discussion of differing doctrines of Scripture written by a Wesleyan for Wesleyans, consider the 1894 United Brethren textbook *Christian Doctrine*: it surveys four views of Scripture, the last of which limits divine inspiration and infallibility to the Bible's doctrine and ethics. The textbook does not accuse holders of any of the four views of being un-Wesleyan, but respectfully stresses the elements of truth in each view and the common ground that they share.³² It serves as a winsome model for those who pursue the path of perfect love.

³¹ Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College Publishing, 2004.

³² Bishop Jonathan Weaver, ed., *Christian Doctrine* (Dayton, Ohio: United Brethren Publishing House, 1894), 390-397.