

## Why Inerrancy is Compatible with Evangelical Wesleyanism

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There has been a major shift within the Wesleyan Theological Society concerning its position on inerrancy. In the first issue of the *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, Kenneth Geiger, former president of the National Holiness Association, wrote that the inerrancy of the original autographs of Scripture was the official position of the National Holiness Association and “quite uniformly, the view of Wesleyan-Arminians everywhere.”<sup>1</sup>

In its first four journals, the doctrinal position of the WTS was stated that the Old and New Testaments were inerrant in the originals. This statement no longer appeared after 1969. However at least nine Wesleyan scholars signed the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy on January 1, 1979: Allan Coppedge, Wilbur T. Dayton, Ralph Earle, Eldon R. Fuhrman, Dennis F. Kinlaw, Daryl McCarthy, James Earl Massey, A. Skevington Wood, and Laurence W. Wood.<sup>2</sup>

The last *Wesleyan Theological Journal* article in support of biblical inerrancy appeared in 1981.<sup>3</sup> In 1984 Kenneth Grider expressed the hope that as the Wesleyan Theological Society began its next twenty years that it would do its homework and not accept the agenda of Calvinistic evangelicalism.<sup>4</sup> Since then the doctrine of biblical inerrancy has been labeled as anachronistic to Wesley’s day, Calvinistic, and a fundamentalist doctrine.

It is anachronistic to claim that John Wesley would or would not have been in agreement with the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. However, Wesley did declare, “Nay, if there be any mistakes in the Bible there may as well be a thousand. If there be one falsehood in that book,

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<sup>1</sup>Geiger, “The Biblical Basis for the Doctrine of Holiness,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 1:1 (Spring 1966) 43. Much early Henry C. Sheldon concluded that American Methodism began with a high view of inspiration which affirmed inerrancy [“Changes in Theology Among American Methodists,” *The American Journal of Theology* 10 (1906) 32].

<sup>2</sup>Norman L. Geisler and William C. Roach, *Defending Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 346-348. All except Earle and Skevington Wood have been published in the *Wesleyan Theological Journal*.

<sup>3</sup>Daryl McCarthy, “Early Wesleyan Views of Scripture,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 16:2 (Fall 1981) 95-105. In 1998 Oden described a great gulf between the ETS and the Wesleyan Theological Society [“The Real Reformers are Traditionalists,” *Christianity Today* 42:2 (9 February 1998): 46].

<sup>4</sup>Grider, “Wesleyanism and the Inerrancy Issue,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 19:2 (Fall 1984) 60.

it did not come from the God of truth.”<sup>5</sup> While the use of the actual term “inerrant” has been more recent, it corresponds to the traditional term “infallible.” Wesley taught, ““All Scripture is given by inspiration of God’ (consequently, all Scripture is infallibly true).”<sup>6</sup>

But it is also anachronistic to claim that Wesley would have adopted the biblical criticism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had he been living now. For example, Joel Green states, “To read the Bible as Wesleyans is not to adopt a precritical stance with respect to the nature and interpretation of Scripture.” Green goes on to suggest that Wesley would have embraced many developments in biblical criticism.<sup>7</sup> But this is just an assumption. Diane Leclerc wrote that “reading the Bible as a Wesleyan does not imply certain understanding about biblical inspiration and the Bible’s authority.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, we are given permission to reject Wesley’s view of inspiration and authority, while still claiming to be Wesleyan.

In the Fall 2011 issue of the *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, Stephen Gunter declared that inerrancy is *not* the issue for evangelical Wesleyans.<sup>9</sup> Yet many evangelical Wesleyans are unwilling to abandon the doctrine and we appreciate the opportunity to clarify our convictions.

In our evaluation of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, we must move beyond simply labeling it as a Calvinistic doctrine. To employ the technique of guilt by association is not true scholarship. Across the history of the Wesleyan Theological Society we have dialogued with process theology and open theism, pentecostal/charismatic theology, postmodernism, Eastern orthodoxy, feminism, and Marxism — just to name a few of our ecumenical dialogues. In every instance we have attempted to objectively discuss areas of compatibility and incompatibility. But have we inconsistently rejected a doctrine which we previously embraced by simply labeling it as “Calvinistic”? Shouldn’t these issues be evaluated on their own merit and not be rejected because of guilt by association? In order to be consistent, must we also reject the doctrines of the Trinity or the virgin birth simply because Calvinists affirm these doctrines?

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<sup>5</sup>Wesley, *Journal*, 24 July, 1776.

<sup>6</sup>Wesley, “The Means of Grace,” Sermon # 16, 3. 8.

<sup>7</sup>Green, “Is There a Contemporary Wesleyan Hermeneutic?” in *Reading the Bible in Wesleyan Ways*, Barry L. Callen and Richard P. Thompson, eds. (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2004), 125.

<sup>8</sup>Leclerc, *Discovering Christian Holiness* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2010), 37.

<sup>9</sup>Gunter, “Beyond the Bible Wars: Why Inerrancy is not the Issue for Evangelical Wesleyans,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 46:2 (Fall 2011) 56-69.

While it was old Princeton Calvinists like Warfield and Hodge who developed a more detailed doctrine of inerrancy, they did so in reaction to the liberal attacks on Scripture which were beginning to come from within the church. Prior to this era, attacks upon the integrity of Scripture had come from outside the church. Yet Cornelius Van Til characterized the Princeton “common sense” apologetic as “Arminian” since it was based on evidentialism and rationalism and not presuppositionalism.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, we must move beyond labels.

Inerrancy is also linked with fundamentalism. The term “fundamental” refers to basic, rudimentary, foundational, or cardinal principles. Any listing of primary Wesleyan doctrines could be referred to as “fundamental” Wesleyan doctrines.

Wesley wrote that the term fundamental was an ambiguous word and that there had been many warm disputes about the number of “fundamentals.”<sup>11</sup> Yet he referred to justification by faith as a “fundamental doctrine of the gospel,”<sup>12</sup> he adds the new birth as another fundamental,<sup>13</sup> and Christian perfection and Christlikeness as “the fundamentals of Christianity.”<sup>14</sup>

J. B. Chapman, editor of the *Herald of Holiness*, also wrestled with this terminology. He stated that Nazarenes believed in the fundamentals and then proceeded to give his list of fundamental doctrines. However, if the question is raised whether Nazarenes are Fundamentalists, using the term as a proper noun, Chapman answered, “Yes, with reservations.” While Chapman had reservations about certain Calvinistic tendencies among Fundamentalists, he had no reservation, however, concerning the inerrancy of Scripture.<sup>15</sup> H. C. Morrison, founder of Asbury Theological Seminary, also maintained a close relationship with the early Fundamentalists.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1955), 264-265; 279. Van Til also made this accusation directly at Warfield in Van Til, *The Protestant Doctrine of Scripture* (Philadelphia: den Dulk Foundation, 1967), 57.

<sup>11</sup>Wesley, “On the Trinity,” Sermon #55, §2.

<sup>12</sup>Wesley, “The Lord Our Righteousness,” Sermon #20, § 5.

<sup>13</sup>Wesley, “The New Birth,” Sermon #45, 1-2.

<sup>14</sup>Wesley, “Upon our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, Discourse the Third,” Sermon #23, IV. See also Wesley, “On God’s Vineyard,” Sermon #107, 5.5.

<sup>15</sup>Chapman, “What is Fundamentalism?” *Herald of Holiness* (6 Oct 1916).

<sup>16</sup>Kenneth Kinghorn, *The Story of Asbury Theological Seminary* (Lexington, KY: Emeth, 2010), 53-62.

I am not contending that Wesleyans must be Fundamentalists, with a capital F, however I am concerned that some, such as Edwin Crawford, are even ready to abandon the label “evangelical” because it is also too Calvinistic.<sup>17</sup> I hope we are not abandoning the *euangelion*. Though we are not necessarily Fundamentalists, we *are* evangelicals.

The problem with a “fundamentalist” approach to Scripture is said to be their belief in propositional infallibility. Here again, we must define our terms. A proposition is a statement which is open to either verification or negation. Propositional truth is a statement in which a predicate or object is affirmed or denied regarding a subject. Thus, when Gunter asserts that one cannot be consistently both a Wesleyan and a Fundamentalist, he is making a propositional statement. We all make propositional statements.<sup>18</sup>

Wesleyans do not necessarily reject the validity of propositional truth. The issue of propositional versus existential truth is not either/or but both/and. We are affirming propositional truth every time we recite the Apostles’ Creed or affirm our Articles of Religion. Any listing of non-negotiables would be a list of propositions. However, faith must go beyond propositions.

The real problem is when our faith is reduced to a set of propositions to be affirmed. It is claimed that propositional truth leads to bibliolatry. According to James 2:19, even the demons affirm the proposition that God exists. Yet the affirmation of that proposition has not saved them. Wesleyan theology believes there must be an existential moment and a transformed life. According to the majority evangelical view of Romans 7, the Holy Spirit can produce a manuscript without error but not an apostle without sin.

Christianity is not based upon words, but upon experience. It is Christ-centered, not book-centered. However, Alister McGrath explained that if Christianity “appears to be book-centered it is because it is through the words of Scripture that the believer encounters and feeds upon Jesus

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<sup>17</sup>Leclerc, *Discovering Christian Holiness*, 301. As early as 1988 Donald Dayton refused to be called an evangelical [Dayton, “The Holiness Witness in the Ecumenical Church,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 23:1-2 (Spring-Fall 1988) 98].

<sup>18</sup>The thesis of *Square Peg: Why Wesleyans Aren’t Fundamentalists*. Al Truesdale, ed. Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2012 is that denominations in the Wesleyan tradition cannot adopt fundamentalism without forfeiting essential parts of what it means to be Wesleyan. However, in 1923 J. B. Chapman, then editor of the Nazarene *Herald of Holiness* wrote, “Of course, our sympathies are entirely with the Fundamentalists and we rejoice in their boldness for God and truth. . . . May God bless and prosper all who stand up for God and His Holy Book!” [“The Victories of the Fundamentalists,” *Herald of Holiness* (7 Feb 1923) 2-3].

Christ.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, Wesley could say, “He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price give me the Book of God!”<sup>20</sup>

According to 1 John 5:10 those who truly believe have the direct testimony or assurance of God through his Spirit. But how do we know that we are not deceived? The epistle of 1 John teaches that if we have the Spirit, we will also affirm the proposition that Jesus is the Christ.

If propositional truth alone may lead to legalism, existential truth alone may lead to antinomianism. The biblical teaching is that everything is established by a dual witness. Wesley taught a direct *and* indirect witness. Existential truth must be affirmed by propositional truth. To deny this cuts scripture off from any objective, external verification. Jesus asked, “If I speak to you concerning earthly things, and you do not believe me, how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?” (John 3:12).

One of the propositional truths of Scripture is its self-claim to inerrancy. According to Proverbs 30:5 *every* word of God is flawless. Here צָרָפָה (*sarap*) is used in the context of refined gold. It is devoid of foreign elements. What God says is completely reliable since it has been refined. The emphasis is on the purity of God’s Word, devoid of error.

The process of refining gold is also used of God’s word in Psalm 18:30; 119:140. In 2 Samuel 22:31 and Psalm 18:30 the way of God is perfect and the word of God is flawless. Here the word תָּמִים (*tamim*) is used of God’s attributes and the word *sarap* is used of God’s revelation. *Tamim* is used of animals without blemish. It also describes “what is complete, entirely in accord with truth and fact.”<sup>21</sup> Joseph Benson said the word of the Lord is free from deceit as gold refined by fire.<sup>22</sup>

Because of the nature of Hebrew parallelism, the two descriptive words, *tamim* and *sarap*, are being used as synonyms. Two verses later, in both passages, David declared that God made his way perfect (*tamim*). *Sarap* is also used in Deuteronomy 32:4 to describe the works of God. Thus, his works and his words are pure and free from any mixture of error.

In Psalm 12:6 “flawless” (טָהוֹר - *tahor*) is used of pure gold without alloy. The emphasis here is on the product. These metaphors borrowed from the refining process and focusing on the pure product are meant to convey the concept that all Scripture is without error.

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<sup>19</sup>McGrath, *Intellectuals Don’t Need God & Other Modern Myths* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 21.

<sup>20</sup>1746 Preface to Sermons on Several Occasions, ¶ 5.

<sup>21</sup>Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907), 1071.

<sup>22</sup>Benson, *The Holy Bible, with Notes, All the Marginal Readings, Summaries, and the Date of Every Transaction*. 1811-1818. Rpt. (New York: Carlton & Phillips, 1856), 2:708.

The statement that God's Word is like silver refined seven times probably expresses the concept of absolute purity or total freedom from imperfection.

A straight literal translation of the Masoretic text of Psalm 138:2 reads, "For you have exalted above all your name your word." In the culture of the Old Testament people already understood that the "name" of God was exalted above all things. On the other hand, to say that God exalted his Word above his very name or equal to his name would be understood as an amazing claim for Scripture.

The Scriptures are holy because they come from a holy God. The Scriptures are also true because they come from the God of truth. The Scripture is perfect and its goal is to prepare or equip us completely and perfectly, according to 2 Timothy 3:15-17. Eta Linnemann wrote that if the Holy Scriptures contain error of falsehood, it can hardly be said that

*"all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."* Error and falsehood could not serve such a purpose. How can we dare to allege that there are errors in God's Word in some area of natural science, or history, or some other discipline — we, whose scientific findings of yesterday and the day before are already outdated today? Woe to us if we possess such audacity! Should we not be thoroughly ashamed to say, "Here is an error in God's Word?" How do we intend to endure the flaming eyes of Jesus one day when our learned books which propagate such things are consumed like chaff?<sup>23</sup>

If saving faith is based on the Word of God, as Romans 10:17 teaches, then to destroy confidence in God's Word is to undermine saving faith. Too often, however, fundamentalism has contended for the perfection of the Word *and* the sinfulness of the believer. But why should we contend for Christian perfection and then claim there are mistakes in the Holy Word of God? The Word is active in our sanctification (Psalm 19:7-9). And we maintain that purity by living according to the word (Psalm 119:9).

Jesus declared that the word of God is truth and that we are sanctified or made holy by that truth (John 17:17). The word ἀλήθεια (*aletheia*) refers to things as they are or that which confirms to reality. The reliability and consistency of the sanctified life is tied to the reliability of the Word of God, which is an extension of the very character of God. The Wesleyan message of entire sanctification is not taken seriously in the broader evangelical community, at least in part because we are not upholding the sanctity of the text.

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<sup>23</sup>Eta Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology? Reflections of a Bultmannian Turned Evangelical*, translated by Robert Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1990), 147-148.

The teaching of Jesus Christ in Matthew 5:18 also implies inerrancy. Clarke concluded that “the words of God, which point out his designs, are as unchangeable as his *nature* itself.”<sup>24</sup>

If Scripture is wrong about that the nature of its inspiration, it may be wrong about the doctrine of salvation. The Bible cannot be compartmentalized. To negate a part is to destroy the authority of the whole. William Burt Pope wrote, “The Bible is one organic whole. Truth is in every part; the whole truth, however, is only in the complete Bible.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, the whole is the sum of the parts. The integrity of the parts is equal to the integrity of the sum.

Yet the Word of God came through humanity. According to 2 Peter 1:21 the prophets of old were borne along by the Spirit of God as wind in the sails moves a boat along the water. They did not write under their own impulse, but were impelled by the Holy Spirit. Typically those who hold to a more liberal theology have emphasized the Scriptures as a human production, while those who are more conservative have contended that the Scriptures were divinely inspired. Thus, the “Bible wars” could be characterized as ships that pass in the night. Both sides have contended for half of an axial theme and each side needs the other for balance.

Just as the living Word, the *logos*, must be understood theologically within the tension of the hypostatic union, so the written Word must also be understood within the tension of the human and the divine. But sinfulness is not an essential component of humanity. W. B. Pope wrote that there are two incompatible concepts regarding inspiration: the belief in an Inspiring Spirit responsible for all spiritual truth and the hypothesis that the human element is liable to all the common infirmities of human composition. Pope reminded those who used the Christological analogy to explain inspiration that “it ought not to be forgotten that the human nature of our Lord was sinless and incapable of sin. If its upholders allow that the human element in the Bible is unsusceptible of real error, however affected by infirmity, their doctrine may be made safe, and if safe, it is deeply interesting and instructive.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Clarke, *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments: The Text Carefully Printed from the Most Correct Copies of the Present Authorized Translations, Including the Marginal reading and Parallel Texts; with a Commentary and Critical Notes, Designed as a help to a Better Understanding of the Sacred Writings*. 1811-1825. Rpt. (Nashville: Abingdon, n. d.), 5:70.

Ralph Earle observed, “Jesus used very strong language here to assert the authority of God’s Word” [*Word Meanings in the New Testament* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1980), 1:20]

<sup>25</sup>Pope, *A Compendium of Christian Theology* (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1880), 1:184. This statement sounds very much like the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy that the Bible is inerrant “not only in the whole but in every part.”

<sup>26</sup>Pope, *Compendium*, 1:184-185.

As the ICBI framers explained, “We affirm that as Christ is God and Man in one Person, so Scripture is, indivisibly, God’s Word in human language. We deny that the humble, human form of Scripture entails errancy any more than the humanity of Christ, even in His humiliation, entails sin.”<sup>27</sup>

In the beginning God breathed into mankind his breath (Gen 2:7). In anticipation of Pentecost, Jesus breathed on his disciples (John 20:22). And Scripture is also God-breathed (2 Tim 3:16).

The doctrine of inspiration means that the Spirit so superintended the process of revelation that humanity was temporarily elevated beyond error. Logically, the original autographs had to be perfect and without error if they came from an infallible God and were inspired by the Holy Spirit. God cannot err. The Bible is his Word. Therefore, the Bible cannot err. Thus, inerrancy is a corollary of the doctrine of inspiration.

The same Spirit who overshadowed the virgin Mary so that the living Word was conceived without Adam’s sin also overshadowed the human authors so that their word became the written Word of God without error. Why should that be hard for us to accept since we believe that the indwelling Spirit can also keep us from sin? Since Wesleyan theology has given a greater emphasis to the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit, can we not say that the Holy Spirit temporarily perfected the human authors and superintended the canon of Scripture so that we have the infallible Word of God? The same Holy Spirit now uses that Word of God to perfect the Church of God.

Historically, the canonical books were regarded by the early Church as inerrant.<sup>28</sup> Pseudepigraphal writings were never regarded as divinely inspired because they were in error regarding the true human authorship. It did not matter if the text contained truth. It was inconceivable that the Word of God would even contain incidental error.

God providentially has also preserved his Word across the centuries. We now possess over 5700 New Testament manuscripts and some 10,000 Old Testament manuscripts and fragments. Yet these copies are not necessarily inerrant copies. The objection is raised that if the doctrine of inerrancy extends only to the original autographs and they apparently no longer exist, then we are contending for the inerrancy of a text we have never seen.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Geisler and Roach, *Defending Inerrancy*, 317-318.

<sup>28</sup>John D. Hannah, “The Doctrine of Scripture in the Early Church,” in *Inerrancy and the Church*, John D. Hannah, ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1984), 3-35.

<sup>29</sup>According to Dennis Bratcher this appeal to the original autographs as inerrant is unhelpful. He objects that this concept assumes a single person wrote individual books instead of the community of faith producing them over a period of time as God worked within the community. He then asserts that the Gospels were written from earlier sources [Bratcher, “Thinking about the Bible Theologically: Inerrancy, Inspiration, and Revelation,” in *The Bible*

However, just because we have not seen them does not mean that they have never existed. According to Tertullian the original autographs of the apostles may have existed as late as the second century.<sup>30</sup> The Bible we have comports with the original autographs so that we do have the Word of God insofar as it has been accurately copied.

Why did God not see fit to preserve the original autographs to this day? Perhaps they would have become objects of idolatry. But this is a question that only God himself can answer. It is like the question of the grieving parents who ask, Why did God allow my child to die? God does not always disclose his ways to us. Admittedly, God *could* have assigned an angel to superintend the preservation of the original autographs, but error could have been interjected by copyists. Angels *could* have been assigned to oversee each copy that was made, but error could have been interjected in translation. Again, if angels preserved the truth in preservation, the making of copies, and in translation, why were not angels assigned to every human messenger to preserve the preacher from misinterpreting the text? However, with regard to the preservation of the original autographs I think the answer must be found in the balance of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. God revealed through divine inspiration, but that revelation can no longer be isolated to one manuscript. It must be reconstructed through textual criticism. The original text exists today in the copies and the apparatus and can be reconstructed by comparative analysis to over 99% accuracy. Thus, the concern about whether the text we now have is accurate has been greatly exaggerated.

W. B. Pope explained,

It has pleased God to commit His eternal counsels to human language, and to human language under all the penalty of Babel. From age to age he has raised up men to utter His

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*Tells Me So*, Richard P. Thompson and Thomas Jay Oord, eds. (Nampa, ID: SacraSage, 2011), 62-63]. But here Bratcher is referring to the Quelle or Q source, which no one has ever seen. And so he dismisses the inerrancy of the original autographs because he has never seen them, but affirms the existence of the Q source of the Gospels although he has never seen it. Thus, both positions are attempting to formulate their theology on the basis of their presuppositions. Why is that legitimate for source critics, but not for those who affirm the inerrancy of Scripture? It is not a logical necessity to hold to either the two or four-source view of the origin of the Gospels. See *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels*, Robert L. Thomas, ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002). However, it is a logical necessity to hold that the original autographs were inerrant since God cannot lie (Rom 3:4).

<sup>30</sup>“The Prescription Against Heretics,” ch. 36 in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. (1885; rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 3:260. This evidence is evaluated by Daniel B. Wallace, “Did the Original New Testament Manuscripts still exist in the Second Century?” <<http://bible.org/article/did-original-new-testament-manuscripts-still-exist-second-century>>

words to their fellow-men in their own fleeting speech, and to deposit those words in documents which were not visibly shielded from the vicissitudes of all human things. He did not create for revelation a dialect that should never change, or write it upon tables that might defy the hand of man or the breath of time to destroy them. The ancient tongues of the earliest revelation are now dead languages. The original autographs are lost; nor is there a single sentence extant written by inspired fingers. God's book, like the books of men, has been transcribed and continually reproduced; it has been translated, and must be translated into all the languages of the earth, more or less suffering, *for a season if needs be*, in the process. Christendom does not remember, nor ever can now retrieve, any one central authoritative copy. Such an archetypal Bible might indeed have been preserved in the ark of the church, even as the law was long preserved in the ark of the sanctuary, from the waters of oblivion. It had been a light thing for Omnipotence to do this. But God has ordered it otherwise: and, in ordering it otherwise. He has protected His people from the danger of enshrining and worshipping a book, whilst He has given their faith in perpetuity one of its sublimest exercises.

The church's faith in the permanent integrity of the written word has every presumption in its favour, is sustained by the express assurance of Scripture itself, and is justified by the results of Christian learning.

If God has condescended to inspire holy men to announce and write His will in a book, can we suppose that He would permit their writings to be abandoned to all the chances of time and all the caprices of men? that He would suffer His holy word to see corruption? The very thought is like the first shaking of the foundations. And what man's instinct suggests, the Bible everywhere, and with express emphasis, declares, that as the word of God its every jot and tittle is under a mysterious but most certain defence: with no less assurance than it appeals to inspiration for its origin does it appeal to a special omnipotent Providence for its preservation. Sceptical criticism cannot deny that the Bible contains substantially the same documents as were received by the faith of the church before and after Christ. And reverent criticism glories in her function, as the handmaid of the Holy Ghost, gradually and surely to restore to the sight of man what to the eye of God has always existed amongst the diversified copies,—the true and faithful sayings which first sprang from inspiration. Concerning some of the jots and tittles of the word we may for a time hang in doubt ; but our faith is assured that there is no uncertainty in the Holy Spirit. The foundation of God's word also standeth sure, having this seal. *The Lord knoweth the words*

*that are His.* And we also may yet have absolute certainty. Before the holy volume is rolled up again for ever, it will shine forth in all its faultless glory.<sup>31</sup>

The Scripture, though propositional, is encountered by humans existentially. We come to know it is the Word of God through the *testimonium Spiritus sancti*. John Calvin applied the doctrine of the witness of the Spirit to the internal testimony of the Spirit persuading the regenerate that God is the author of Scripture. The Wesleyan doctrine of the witness of the Spirit is directed toward personal assurance of justification and adoption. But both applications of the doctrine are existential.

However, Mormons also claim that we can know the book of Mormon is from God through a “burning in the bosom.” Yet we know that the book of Mormon contains anachronisms and historical inaccuracies.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, our subjective experience must be affirmed through objective verification. If existential realities have no basis in propositional truth, they cannot be valid. There is something about the Word of God, in and of itself, that makes it the Word of God. It does not depend upon our encounter with it to make it the word of God.

On the other hand, the theology of Phoebe Palmer tended to emphasize a propositional syllogism without the direct existential witness. Christian perfection was to be claimed on the basis of a naked or bare faith in certain propositions without any direct existential assurance. Romans 8:16 is a propositional statement promising an existential fulfillment. Thus, we need not reject propositional truth but we must maintain its balance with existential truth.

The new trend in contemporary Wesleyan theology is to abandon full inerrancy in favor of soteriological inerrancy. In his monthly column “Words of Faith” for *Herald of Holiness*, Rob Staples wrote on “Inerrancy” in June 1998. He rejected “epistemological inerrancy” and opted for “soteriological inerrancy.”<sup>33</sup>

*Epistemology* deals with the nature, limits, and validity of knowledge. The most basic question in theology is, “What is the source of knowledge?” Only after the source of knowledge and truth has been established as reliable, can we go on to discuss other matters, such as salvation. Since the Bible is epistemologically inerrant, everything it says on any subject must be true and we can trust its message of salvation.

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<sup>31</sup>Pope, *The Abiding Word* (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1855), 7-8.

<sup>32</sup>Gleason L. Archer, Jr, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody, 1974), 501-504.

<sup>33</sup>Rob L. Staples, “Inerrancy,” *Herald of Holiness* (June 1998): 5. This became part of Staples, *Words of Faith* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2001), 21-22.

But Staples rejected this approach, declaring that Wesleyan theology works differently. For Wesleyanism, Staples said the most basic theological question is, “What must I do to be saved?” “In Wesleyan theology, salvation *is* truth. Truth is determined by what salvation is, not the other way around.” Yet we are expected to accept this paradigm on the authority of Staples. He does not demonstrate that Wesley ever held such an epistemology. There are many answers to the question, “What must I do to be saved?” Why would we regard the biblical answer as inerrant and reject the answers of tradition, reason, experience, and even other religions? Thus, we place ourselves in a difficult situation when we try to subjectively determine the limits and ramifications of soteriological inerrancy. This is a form of reductionism.

To support his position, Staples quoted John Wesley’s statement, “I want to know one thing, the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore.” Staples quoted from Wesley’s preface to his sermons. Yet in this preface Wesley continued, “God himself has condescended to teach the way: for this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price give me the Book of God! I have it. Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be *homo unius libri* [a man of one book].”

Does it matter whether this Book is inerrant? Does revelation from an omniscient God demand inerrancy? If God spoke, error is inconceivable. Staples dismissed full inerrancy by arguing that all that matters is salvation. But one cannot argue that the “one thing” Wesley wanted to know was only salvation any more than one can argue that Wesley read only one book.

Ironically, Staples then makes this disclaimer, “This does not mean that we can separate the Bible’s teaching about salvation from its statements about other matters and claim that the latter may contain errors, while those texts that speak of salvation do not. That would be a precarious position. Who is to decide how to separate the two kinds of texts? Who is to say whether a text does, or does not, relate to salvation?” In reality the *whole* Bible is about salvation. Staples has just pinpointed the weakness of his own position. Klug explained

If scholars themselves determine what the Word or “message” is, then plainly they are responsible for establishing whatever is canonical about the canon. Obviously this can be a very subjective exercise. With each exegete or Bible scholar conceiving it to be his task to locate the “canon in the canon,” there can be no guarantee of that message, or the Word.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Eugene F. Klug, “Foreword,” in Gerhard Maier, *The End of the Historical-Critical Method* (1977; rpt. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), 9.

While the primary teaching of the Bible is God's redemptive program through Jesus Christ, in providing this salvation God entered our world to deal with us in our history and geography. The record of God's salvation, thus, touches other areas of knowledge as well as spiritual truth. This does not mean the writers knew more about history and science than people do today, but it does mean that God preserved them from misleading us in any statement.<sup>35</sup>

However, Wesley did acknowledge that difficulties exist in reconciling the genealogies of Matthew and Luke. Wesley argued that both writers worked with the material to which they had access. "Nor was it needful they should correct the mistakes, if there were any."<sup>36</sup> It should be noted that Wesley did not affirm mistakes in the genealogy. But he did recognize the possibility of mistakes in the Jewish records. Again Wesley's position is compatible with the Chicago Statement of Biblical Inerrancy, Article XIII which denies 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."<sup>37</sup>

The message of Scripture is set in "time and space." Would Dr. Staples argue that the Jewish exodus from Egypt depicts salvation, but the actual historical setting is unimportant? The Mormon scriptures also depict a plan of salvation, but evangelicals reject these books because they contain anachronisms and historical inaccuracies. Shall we simply focus on the salvation message in the books of Mormonism and ignore these inaccuracies as unimportant details?

That is why early Methodism held to the concept of full or plenary inerrancy. John Wesley wrote concerning the Holy Scriptures

*This is that word of God which remaineth for ever: of which, though heaven and earth pass away, one jot or tittle shall not pass away. The Scripture therefore of the Old and New Testament, is a most solid and precious system of Divine truth. Every part thereof is worthy of God; and all together are one entire body, wherein is no defect, no excess.*<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Robert L. Saucy, *Scripture* (Nashville: Word, 2001), 158.

<sup>36</sup>Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (1754; rpt. Salem, OH: Schmul, 1976), 10.

<sup>37</sup>See Daryl McCarthy, "Wesleyan Founders and Scripture," *The Arminian Magazine* 27:1 (Spring 2009) 10-11.

<sup>38</sup>Preface to *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, ¶ 10, p. 5.

Richard Watson declared,

But their plenary inspiration consisted in this, that they were kept from all lapses of memory, or inadequate conceptions, even on these [historical] subjects; and on all others the degree of communication and influence, both as to doctrines, facts, and the terms in which they were to be recorded for the edification of the Church, was proportioned to the necessity of the case, but so that *the whole* was authenticated or dictated by the Holy Spirit, with so full an influence, that it became truth without mixture of error, expressed in such terms as he himself ruled or suggested.<sup>39</sup>

Adam Clarke concluded, “Men may err, but the Scriptures cannot; for it is the *Word of God* himself, who can neither mistake, deceive, nor be deceived.”<sup>40</sup>

As early as 1862 Samuel Wakefield anticipated the weakness of limited inerrancy.

Some who advocate the doctrine of Divine inspiration limit it to the prophetic parts of Scripture; while others extend it to the *doctrinal* parts also, but not to the historical. There are many who maintain that the inspiration of the sacred writers was only occasional; that they were not always under that immediate and plenary influence of the Holy Spirit which renders their writings the unerring word of God; and that consequently, as they were sometimes left to themselves, they then thought and reasoned like ordinary men. 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. And to admit that the sacred writers were only occasionally inspired, would involve us in the greatest perplexity; because, not knowing when they were or were not inspired, we could not determine what parts of their writings should be regarded as the infallible word of God. To tell us, therefore, that they were inspired only on certain occasions, while we have no means of

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<sup>39</sup>Richard Watson, *Conversations for the Young: Designed to Promote the Profitable Reading of the Holy Scriptures* (London: John Mason, 1830), 14-15. See also Watson, *Theological Institutes* (1823-1829; rpt. New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1889), 1:248.

<sup>40</sup>*The Miscellaneous Works of Adam Clarke*, James Everett, ed. (London: T. Tegg, 1836-1837), 12:132, see also Clarke, *Commentary*, 5:11.

ascertaining what those occasions were, is the same as to say that they were not inspired at all.<sup>41</sup>

In the Fall 1998 issue of *The Arminian Magazine* I wrote a short article expressing my concerns with soteriological inerrancy, as articulated by Dr. Staples.<sup>42</sup> I then received a four-page letter from Dr. Staples. His main concern was that I did not understand the difference between “limited inerrancy” and “soteriological inerrancy.”<sup>43</sup>

According to Staples soteriological inerrancy is expressed in the sentence, “The entire Bible is inerrant for salvation.” Limited inerrancy is expressed in the sentence, “The parts of the Bible that deal with salvation are inerrant while the other parts may contain errors.” Staples gave me a second example of limited inerrancy, “The Bible is inerrant only in those parts that deal with salvation.”

Staples wrote, “I have never yet met a Fundamentalist who did not try to tar the “soteriological inerrantists” with the “limited inerrantist” brush, even when the difference is as obvious as the nose on my face.”<sup>44</sup> Perhaps that is because both terms amount to the same thing.

As I compare the two positions, the difference I see is that the first statement expresses only the positive proposition. It does not deal with the negative implications. But if the entire Bible is inerrant *only* for salvation, then it seems that soteriological inerrancy is also limited inerrancy. I can only conclude that Staples does not accept full inerrancy when he says in his article on inerrancy that divisiveness occurs whenever the issue of inerrancy “has reared it’s ugly head.”

It seems that the difference between soteriological inerrancy and limited inerrancy is that in the first case you merely state the positive proposition and hope that no one asks about the negative implications. If they do ask, you then claim you are being misunderstood. In spite of semantic gymnastics, there seems to be no practical difference between soteriological and limited inerrancy.

This reminds me of the Calvinists who uphold limited election, but cry “foul” if you try to pin “double predestination” on them. They want to affirm the position that God elects some to salvation, but they reject the logical corollary that the non-elect are thus predestined to damnation.

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<sup>41</sup>*A Complete System of Christian Theology* (1862; rpt. Salem, OH: Schmuel, 1985), 77-78.

<sup>42</sup>Vic Reasoner, “Defending Biblical Inerrancy,” *The Arminian Magazine* 16:2 (Fall 1998): 6-8.

<sup>43</sup>At one point in the letter Staples accused me of libel in misrepresentation of his position. Because that is a serious allegation, I submitted myself to the judgment of my peers. After reading both sides their conclusion was that the dog which yelps is the one that got hit.

<sup>44</sup>Rob L. Staples, Letter to Vic Reasoner, 26 October 1998.

In his letter Staples declared, “I have never claimed that there were errors (either minor or major) in the Scriptures. I have no proof that such exists.” But Staples continued to say that if there were that I would either have to throw away my faith in Scripture and hence in salvation or explain away the discrepancies. Staples continued, “We true Wesleyans do not have to worry about the former, nor waste time and effort on the latter.” Staples gave this illustration.

When I lived in the San Francisco area, years ago, I often crossed the Golden Gate Bridge. I never questioned the structure of the bridge. I never wondered if there were some rusty bolts or weak cables in the structure, or if the sea water might have weakened the piers underneath. Now there may have been some weaknesses, but I had no proof of such, although I did see them painting the structure from time to time, to prevent rust. But even if such weaknesses existed, the purpose of the bridge, and my purpose in crossing it, were to get me to the other side. I trusted the engineers and the inspectors to keep it safe for cars to cross. If I had known there was a rusty bolt on the bridge, or one hairline crack in one of the girders, and had been a “fundamentalist motorist” (to coin a term) I would have had to refuse to cross the bridge, considering it unreliable. If a few minor defects had shown up (and I never knew about it if they did) it would not have affected my determination to get to the other side, and it did not cause me to refuse to use the bridge for the crossing. Thus the bridge was perfect, infallible, (“inerrant”), for the purpose for which it was built. And that applies to the whole bridge, not just to the “transportational” (read “salvational”) parts of it. The bridge, the whole bridge, not just parts of it, not just the pavement on which my tires rolled, was absolutely inerrant for getting me to the other side.<sup>45</sup>

In 2006 Dr. Staples sent me an email stating that he had been asked to collect his papers for the Nazarene Archives. In the process he came across his 1998 letter to me. After showing that letter to a number of people, their conclusion was that his letter contained the best exposition of the Wesleyan view of Scripture they had ever seen because it “clearly shows how we differ from both Liberals and Fundamentalists.”

Staples closed, “I have you to thank for eliciting that letter out of me, so I am writing to do so now, belatedly as it may be.”<sup>46</sup> And yet I am not as impressed with his exposition as he is. To cross a bridge without the knowledge that it contains structural damage is presumption. Would Staples cross the same bridge if he knew it was in a weakened condition? Bridges can collapse.

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<sup>45</sup>Rob L. Staples, Letter to Vic Reasoner, 26 October 1998.

<sup>46</sup>Rob L. Staples, “On Scripture,” email 8/15/2006

On August 1, 2007 the I-35W Mississippi River bridge (officially known as Bridge 9340) was an eight-lane, steel truss arch bridge that carried Interstate 35W across the Mississippi River in Minneapolis. During the evening rush hour it suddenly collapsed, killing 13 people and injuring 145. The bridge was Minnesota's fifth busiest, carrying 140,000 vehicles daily. The National Transportation Safety Board cited a design flaw as the likely cause of the collapse.

Furthermore, Staples' analogy of an inanimate, decaying bridge is inadequate. Scripture was not only God-breathed, but that God-breathing is ongoing as God continues to speak through his written Word. Is modern Wesleyanism afraid that science will discredit the Scriptures? If the Bible is described in terms of a bridge, then the good news is that it is solid and in no danger of collapse. W. B. Pope expressed his strong conviction that "this book, or library of books, is the record of that Providential government for the sake of which the world exists" and that "we may be sure that it will not be contradicted in fundamental points by anything that the records of nature, or the authentic annals of history, will disclose."<sup>47</sup> There are reasonable explanations to apparent contradictions which are stronger than the basis of the supposed doubt.<sup>48</sup> Those who hold to a high view of inspiration will find that most of our problems are matters of hermeneutics. I approach the text with the assumption that God knew what he was saying, but the problem is with my limited understanding.

J. B. Phillips wrote that although he did not hold fundamentalist views on inspiration he was continually struck by the living quality of the material he was translating. He said he "felt rather like an electrician rewiring an ancient house without being able to 'turn the mains off.'"<sup>49</sup> This is because of the power of the Word. It is the revelation of God and is not more in danger of collapse than God himself.

However, the ultimate issue for evangelical Wesleyans is not inerrancy. It is authority. Authority is the logical conclusion of divine inspiration. The purpose of inspiration was to convey truth. God is the source of all truth; truth without error. Therefore, inspiration demands inerrancy. If the Bible contains errors, its authority is limited. But if the work of the Holy Spirit was to transmit revelation to the human authors and to superintend their writings, then a Bible with historical and scientific errors reflects on the capability of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>47</sup>Pope, *Compendium*, 1:190.

<sup>48</sup>This is the case with Thomas Jay Oord's list of "mistakes."  
<[http://thomasjayoord.com/index.php/blog/archives/problems\\_with\\_biblical\\_inerrancy/](http://thomasjayoord.com/index.php/blog/archives/problems_with_biblical_inerrancy/)>

<sup>49</sup>Phillips, *Letters to Young Churches* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), xii.

It also implies that only the intellectual elite are equipped to determine what parts of Scripture are correct. Thus, authority is an inescapable concept. The only question up for debate regards who or what will be our final authority. According to William Abraham,

For Wesley, Scripture was the Word of God, dictated by God, authored by God even as it was written by human authors. To speak of Scripture was to speak of God; more accurately, it was to speak aptly and rightly of God, for Scripture gives us access to God. More abruptly, to refer to Scripture was to refer to the foundations of theology, the touchstone of theology; to invoke Scripture was to speak from and for God; it was to exercise the vocation of the theologian.<sup>50</sup>

While Abraham proceeds to reject this epistemological construal of Scripture as a dead-end, the question is how much of Wesleyan theology can be rejected while still being considered “Wesleyan.” This is a more relevant question than whether one can be Wesleyan and affirm full biblical inerrancy. In light of the consistent position of early Wesleyan theologians regarding the nature of inspiration, how is it that those of us who echo the sentiments of those early theologians are somehow dismissed as being Calvinists? Is the contemporary Wesleyan tent big enough for those of us who affirm biblical inerrancy?

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<sup>50</sup>Abraham, “The Future of Scripture: In Search of a Theology of Scripture,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 46:1 (Spring 2011) 11.