

Wm.

**BAPTISTS ARE
INERRANTISTS**

Wm. Loyd Allen

I have never heard of a local Baptist church that excluded a church member because the member did not believe in biblical inerrancy.

Still, some Baptists are inerrantists and believe that the Bible is completely without error, not only in matters of religious faith, but also in the areas of science and history. However, inerrancy is not a requirement for authentic Baptist identity, and it supplies nothing vital to Baptists' allegiance to the Bible as the primary authority for faith and practice.

"Baptists are inerrantists" says too little about both Baptists and inerrantists, but it is a mistake easily come by. A few moments on any Internet search engine will produce numerous statements similar to this one from Morris Fork Baptist Church: "Historic Baptists believe . . . in the inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures."¹ The Southern Baptist Convention committee that produced that mega-convention's latest confessional statement said they believed "with Christians throughout the ages" that "the Bible is inerrant, infallible."² Such oft-repeated claims have led to the myth that authentic Baptists and the doctrine of biblical inerrancy are inseparable.

More on Baptists

Baptists are not Baptist because they are inerrantists. Those who are inerrantists would not cease to be true Baptists if they ceased to be inerrantists.

Baptist diversity—According to theologian Fisher Humphreys, inerrancy is a minority tradition in the Baptist experience.³ The Baptist World Alliance is a fellowship of 206 Baptist unions and conventions with a membership of more than 47 million baptized believers. Some BWA member organizations declare for biblical inerrancy; many do not. Biblical inerrancy is not a criterion for fellowship in the BWA. The myth that Baptists and inerrancy are indivisible persists partly because some Baptists mistake their particular corner of the Baptist world for the larger tradition.

Baptist identity—The old witticism that wherever

two Baptists gather together at least three opinions appear implies an important fact: Baptist identity is not based upon majority vote or doctrinal checklists. Opinion polls are poor instruments for measuring Baptist identity. Southern Baptists' former majority approval of slavery and racism does not make those views compatible with the Baptist heritage of freedom.

Being Baptist has more to do with *how* doctrinal viewpoints are arrived at than *which* conclusions are reached or *what percentage* of Baptists hold them. Baptists come to doctrine through local autonomous congregations, acting to preserve each individual member's liberty to obey Christ alone.

Baptist groups might include and exclude members based on certain doctrinal issues, including inerrancy, but the key to their Baptistness is not the doctrinal formulations around which they group themselves. They are Baptist to the extent that their structures and processes promote freedom of conscience, local church autonomy, and accountability to Christ alone. This freedom-based way of doing Christian faith has led to authentic Baptists of many stripes, including those who accept biblical inerrancy and those who do not.

Baptists and/as evangelicals—Confusion regarding the connection of Baptists to American evangelicalism contributes to the myth that inerrancy is necessary for Baptistness. The beliefs and practices of Baptists and American evangelicals overlap in many areas,⁴ but in America many evangelicals have chosen inerrancy as their identifying mark. By 1949, the interdenominational Evangelical Theological Society made inerrancy its doctrinal basis.⁵ Inerrancy may identify many evangelicals; it may establish evangelicalism among Baptists; but it is useless for judging Baptist authenticity.

More on Inerrancy

The myth that Baptists are inerrantists promises a precision it cannot deliver. It fails to say enough about inerrancy, just as it fails to say enough about Baptists.

Nineteenth-century scholarship challenged com-

monly held views of the nature of scripture. The current theory of biblical inerrancy appeared in response to those challenges. A group of nineteenth-century Princeton theologians developed biblical inerrancy in its classic expression to give credence to the truth and trustworthiness of the Bible. They proposed that God inspired the words of the Bible in the original autographs (the first manuscripts) in a manner that precludes errors (true discrepancies) in any area of reality. The original autographs qualification is a fallback position taken in light of research that made untenable any appeal to the inerrancy of the existing scriptural record.

Those who support the myth that (real) Baptists are (or ought to be) inerrantists believe the theory of inerrancy can preserve trust in the Bible, discourage external qualifications imposed on the text, and unify Baptists around scripture. Yet, inerrancy historically has achieved none of these objectives.

Undermines trust—Most Baptist inerrantists take for granted a uniformity in the biblical witness that does not exist. These uncritical inerrantists hold this view by aggressive acts of denial. For example, college New Testament classes often ask students to read and compare similar accounts, such as the Resurrection narratives. Frustrated by efforts to harmonize the stories, anxious inerrantist students often drop out of class.

This anxiety and denial reveals an underlying fear of plain comparison of scripture to scripture. The imposed theory of inerrancy creates this fear. If trust in God depends on a text without discrepancies, and a plain reading of the text reveals irresolvable discrepancies, then reading the text as it is threatens faith in God. Such a crisis of faith is a function of the a priori theory of inerrancy.

Encourages qualifications—Scholarly inerrantists are not in denial. They recognize the difficulty of maintaining the theory of inerrancy, yet support it as a firewall securing the truth and reliability of the Bible. Multiple qualifications make up the firewall. Ironically, a theory designed to create an unfiltered reading of the

Bible has become heavy laden with the very kind of security patch filters it set out to eliminate.

The most widely accepted current definition of inerrancy, “The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, 1978,” consists of “5 Short Statements” followed by 19 articles, each containing a statement of affirmation and denial.⁶ A section of Article XIII reads:

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 metrical, variant selections of material in parallel accounts, or the use of free citations.

This definition means the Bible is true if rightly interpreted. For scholarly inerrantists, the term “inerrancy” as qualified by 19 articles containing 38 different propositions is the only or best way to preserve that concept.

Inerrancy is an extra-biblical term rare or unknown until the Protestant Reformation and of little consequence in most historic Baptist confessions of faith. Broad standard inerrancy definitions allow the claim that the theory, by some other name, is what Christianity has always believed. Article XVI of the Chicago Statement says the doctrine of inerrancy has been integral to the church’s faith throughout history and is not a doctrine invented by scholastic Protestantism. Currently, many deem the term “inerrant” the only adequate designation of the historical Church’s expressions of trust in the Bible, even though that term carries little or no specific meaning apart from a detailed, modern Protestant definition.

Inerrancy does address real threats employed against biblical authority in a relativistic age.

David Dockery, one of the most irenic, just, and scholarly of Baptist inerrantists, is right to issue this challenge to opponents of inerrancy theory: “[They] must find a way adequately to address the issue of the Bible’s complete truthfulness.”⁷ Perhaps the same could be said of inerrancy’s proponents.

Fractures community—Historically, inerrancy divides rather than unites. A boundary-drawing tool, it excludes by forced choice: errant versus inerrant. Inerrancy first divides inerrantists from non-inerrantists, and then it divides inerrantists from other inerrantists, all the while failing to divide those who trust the Bible is divinely inspired from those who do not.

Inerrantists who confuse interpretation with inspiration increase the divisiveness. Uncritical inerrantists are convinced the Bible is self-explanatory. They expect self-evident interpretations from inerrancy, which is their shield against biblical simplicity being compromised by modern methods. To disagree with their interpretations—scripture forbids ordained women, for example—is to disbelieve the Bible. Naive inerrantists mistake rejection of their interpretations for rejection of the Bible, and move to exclude the supposed unbeliever. By this means, inerrancy theory fractures community. Irenic scholarly inerrantists distance themselves from such practices, but usually have proven impotent to stop them.

Harold Lindsell’s book, *The Battle for the Bible* (1976), wreaked havoc in the Evangelical Theological Society by just such a process of progressive exclusion. Ten years later, David Dockery needed nine numerals to list the main variations among the divided inerrantists.⁸ Inerrancy controversy split Northern Baptists in 1932, and at this writing Southern Baptists continue a similar purge begun over two decades ago.

Real Consequences

The myth that Baptists are inerrantists has real consequences. It distorts and confuses the nature of the Bible itself. It confuses a specific interpretation of the Bible with faithfulness to the Bible. It distorts and confuses the meaning of Baptist identity. It distorts and confuses Baptist history. It divides rather than reconciles, fragmenting Baptist community. The Baptist tradition is one of profound commitment to the authority of the Bible. That tradition is also one of enormous diversity in terms of how Baptists have approached and interpreted the Bible. It is a myth to say that Baptists are inerrantists.

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1. Morris Fork Baptist Church, Meadow Bridge, West Virginia (<http://members.citynet/mfbc/bibliogy.shtml>), accessed May 5, 2003.
2. Baptist Faith and Message Study Committee, May 26, 2000, in “Committee Response to Initial Feedback” SBCNet (<http://www.sbc.net/bfm/bfmfeedback.asp>), accessed May 4, 2003.
3. Fisher Humphreys, *The Way We Were*, rev. ed. (Macon: Smyth and Helwys, 2002), 90-92, 138-39.
4. “Evangelicalism,” *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, 413.
5. “Inerrancy Controversy,” *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, 575.
6. “Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy” (<http://www.uni.org/chicago.htm>), accessed May 8, 2003.
7. David Dockery, “Understanding Evangelicalism Biblically,” Plenary Address, Evangelical Theological Society, Colorado Springs, Colorado, November 15, 2001 (http://www.uu.edu/dockery/111501-ets.htm#_ednref5), accessed May 8, 2003.
8. David Dockery, “Variations on Inerrancy,” *SBC Today* (May 1986): 10-11.

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