

Andrew McGowan on Inerrancy

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Challenges to the doctrine of inerrancy from within the evangelical tradition are nothing new. In that respect, Andrew McGowan's recent book *The Divine Spiration of Scripture* is not especially noteworthy.¹ It has, however, caused quite a stir in Reformed evangelical circles, mainly because confessional Reformed theologians (such as McGowan) are generally thought to be more firmly committed to inerrancy than other evangelicals precisely in virtue of their confessional commitments (e.g., to the Westminster Standards). The burden of McGowan's book is to argue that the doctrine of inerrancy is actually a recent development within the Reformed tradition, forged by Old Princeton in response to the challenge of the Enlightenment, and, moreover, that its advocacy was—to be blunt—a big mistake.

In this paper, I want to examine McGowan's main arguments against the doctrine of inerrancy, as that doctrine is articulated in the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.² I believe his arguments are weak and evidence a misunderstanding of both the *core claim* of inerrantists and the *core argument* for that claim. What follows is not intended to be a full book review of *Divine Spiration*. I happen to agree with much of what McGowan says in the book, but here I want to focus solely on his case against inerrancy.³

Before proceeding, I should make clear McGowan's own position as I understand it. McGowan doesn't insist that *there are* factual errors in Scripture (e.g., as to history or science)—what he

¹ A. T. B. McGowan, *The Divine Spiration of Scripture: Challenging Evangelical Perspectives* (Apollos, 2007).

² The Chicago Statement can be read online at <http://www.spurgeon.org/~phil/creeds/chicago.htm>. In 2006, the Evangelical Theological Society adopted the Statement as clarification of its position on biblical inerrancy (see <http://www.bpnews.net/BPnews.asp?ID=24424>).

³ Since the orientation of this critique is predominantly negative, I should state for the record that I have the highest regard for Dr McGowan as a Christian pastor-scholar. On the one occasion I had the privilege to sit under his preaching, he delivered one of the most thrilling expositions of the imputed righteousness of Christ I have ever heard.

calls the 'errancy' view. Rather, his claim is a negative one, namely, that we have no good grounds for insisting that *there aren't* factual errors in Scripture. He believes that the doctrine of inerrancy is neither biblically warranted nor theologically necessary. As such, he disavows both 'errancy' and 'inerrancy' (p. 210). One might say that for McGowan the question "Did the biblical authors make factual errors?" is much like the question "Is the number of cows in the world exactly divisible by three?" We don't know, it doesn't matter, and we shouldn't be asking the question in the first place.

The Core Inerrantist Claim

Contrary to what some critics of inerrancy have suggested, the core claim of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy can be succinctly stated. It is simply this:

(BI) The Bible affirms only truths.

Or, to express the same idea negatively:

(BI*) The Bible affirms no falsehoods.

The basic idea is that whatever the Bible *affirms* to be the case is, as a matter of fact, the case.

Note that the key concept here is that of *affirmation*.⁴ An affirmation is what some philosophers of language call a 'speech act'.⁵ A speech act is something done by an agent through language, either spoken or written. In the case of an affirmation, what the agent is doing is expressing, and perhaps also commending to others, a conviction that something is the case.

⁴ Compare the definitions given by Paul Feinberg and Wayne Grudem: "Inerrancy means that when all facts are known, the Scripture in their original autographs and properly interpreted will be shown to be *wholly true in everything that they affirm*, whether that has to do with doctrine or morality or with the social, physical, or life sciences." Feinberg, 'The Meaning of Inerrancy', in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Zondervan, 1979), p. 294, emphasis mine. "The inerrancy of Scripture means that Scripture in the original manuscripts *does not affirm anything that is contrary to fact*." Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), p. 90, emphasis mine.

⁵ See, for example, the article 'Speech Acts' in the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/speech-acts/>).

Affirmations can be made in many different ways, some more explicit or obvious than others, and whether a particular instance of speech counts as an affirmation will depend on both the speaker's intentions and the context. The same considerations apply to *what* is being affirmed, that is, the *content* of the affirmation. If I were to utter the words, "I want to marry Sarah," I wouldn't necessarily be affirming my desire to wed someone called Sarah. I might, for example, be answering your prior question, "What did John say to you that night?" In that case I would be implicitly affirming something about what John said rather than something about my own desires. (Note also that in this example the *content* of the affirmation is strongly dependent on the *context* of the utterance. Which 'Sarah' are we referring to?) As we will see, an appreciation of the subtleties of affirmation is important when it comes to evaluating the doctrine of inerrancy.

The content of an affirmation is *propositional* in nature, where a 'proposition' (according to philosophical convention) is simply something that can be true or false. Moreover, since an affirmation involves at its core the *endorsement* of a certain proposition (i.e., a commitment to that proposition being true rather than false) an affirmation can be *mistaken* in a way that a question or a request, for example, cannot be.⁶ It's for precisely this reason that the doctrine of inerrancy is concerned solely with the *affirmations* of the Bible, rather than its many other speech acts.

Now, one might object that the core inerrantist claim (BI) is vacuous inasmuch as it says nothing specific about *what* the Bible affirms. A critic might argue that the doctrine of inerrancy is unfalsifiable, since whenever the inerrantist is presented with an apparent error in Scripture he can simply deny that Scripture affirms what the critic thinks it affirms.

It's true that BI doesn't specify *what* the Bible affirms, any more than the doctrine of divine omniscience specifies *what* God knows (it merely states that God knows all truths, whatever those truths may be). But that generality is entirely apt, because BI is concerned with the *character* of the Bible rather than the *content* of the Bible. What's more, inerrantists (like non-

⁶ Compare the following: "John will open the window" (affirmation); "Will John open the window?" (question); "Open the window, John" (request). Only the first of these has the potential to be *in error*.

inerrantists) disagree among themselves as to what the Bible affirms on some points, even while they agree that *whatever* the Bible affirms must be true. But since evangelical inerrantists are typically committed to grammatical-historical interpretation of the Bible, their claims about what the Bible *actually* affirms cannot be arbitrary or ad hoc.⁷

The Core Inerrantist Argument

The core inerrantist claim (BI) is a simple, clear, and substantive claim about Scripture. So far, so good. But why think BI is *true*?

Just as the core inerrantist claim can be succinctly stated, so can the core argument for that claim:

- (1) Whatever the Bible affirms, God affirms.
- (2) Whatever God affirms is true.
- (3) Therefore, whatever the Bible affirms is true.

The conclusion is simply a restatement of BI. The argument is logically valid, since (3) follows necessarily from (1) and (2). (In Aristotelian logic, it has the form: All P are Q; all Q are S; therefore, all P are S.)

Since the argument is valid, its conclusion must be true if its premises are true. But are they? The second premise seems to follow naturally from the doctrine of God's essential goodness and omniscience; if God cannot lie or be mistaken, then He cannot affirm a falsehood. I assume that McGowan would want to endorse this premise.⁸ (If he doesn't, I daresay we have much bigger problems on our hands!)

⁷ "We affirm that the text of Scripture is to be interpreted by grammatico-historical exegesis, taking account of its literary forms and devices, and that Scripture is to interpret Scripture." The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, Article XVIII.

⁸ It's hard to see how denying (2) could be compatible with the Westminster Standards. Consider the answer to Question 4 of the Shorter Catechism: "God is a spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth."

What about the first premise? The support for this premise comes from *Scripture's self-characterization*. The classic treatment of the biblical data on this point, at least in the Reformed tradition, comes from B. B. Warfield's *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*.⁹ Most significant for the inerrantist argument is his famous article, "'It Says:' 'Scripture Says:' 'God Says:'".¹⁰ Warfield demonstrates—conclusively, in my judgement—that both Christ and the New Testament writers, in their use of the Old Testament scriptures, take for granted an equivalence between "Scripture says X" and "God says X".¹¹ In other words: what *Scripture* says, *God* says.

There is no need to repeat the details of Warfield's argument here, since all participants in the contemporary debate over inerrancy will be familiar with it. The only point I want to make here is that the first premise of the core inerrantist argument follows directly from Warfield's conclusion. If Scripture says X, then God says X; and if X is an instance of *affirmation*, then God *affirms* X. What Scripture affirms, God affirms.

So the question I would put to McGowan is this: Do you agree with Warfield that what Scripture says, God says? If you do, on what grounds do you reject the conclusion of the core inerrantist argument? If you don't, can you tell us where Warfield goes wrong?

Before moving on, it's worth noting that this argument is an *intra-faith* one. It's designed only to persuade or reassure those who are *already* committed to the inspiration of the Bible (which would include McGowan, of course) because it takes for granted that Scripture is reliable and authoritative in what it says about important matters of faith, such as the location and nature of God's Word. It isn't an argument aimed at unbelievers—but it's none the worse for that.

⁹ B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1967).

¹⁰ The article was originally published in *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review*, Vol. 10 (1899), pp. 472-510, and later reprinted in Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, pp. 299-348.

¹¹ Warfield highlights two classes of texts in particular: in the first, "Scripture says" is used as shorthand for "God, as recorded in Scripture, said" (e.g., Gal. 3:8); in the second, "God says" is used as shorthand for "Scripture, the Word of God, says" (e.g., Matt. 19:4-5).

The Case of the Missing Argument

Two things surprised me about McGowan's case against inerrancy. The first is that (unless I've missed it) he nowhere provides a *definition* of the doctrine of inerrancy. It seems to me that anyone who wants to argue against a doctrine ought first to specify clearly what he understands that doctrine to claim. Still, since McGowan expresses his view that the "most significant argument for inerrancy ... comes from the Chicago inerrantists" (p. 104), it's reasonable to assume that his working definition aligns with the one provided by the Chicago Statement.

The second (and greater) surprise is that McGowan doesn't at any point explain *why he thinks the core inerrantist argument is mistaken*. In fact, the argument isn't even accurately represented in the first place. Here's how McGowan characterizes it in chapter 4 of *Divine Spiritation* (the chapter in which he argues directly against inerrancy):

Above all, [the Chicago inerrantists] argue that, since Scripture has its origin in God and since God's character is such that he cannot lie, Scripture must be inerrant. (pp. 104-5)

Is it not the case, however, that [Greg Bahnsen's] own case for inerrancy depends upon an a priori commitment, namely that if God 'inspired' Scripture, therefore it must be inerrant because of his character? (p. 111)

Let me begin by noting the core argument of the inerrantists: God chose to give us the Scriptures through the writers he chose. They spoke directly from him, being under the direct influence of the Holy Spirit. This ensured that the resultant text could be said to be 'God-breathed'. Since God is perfect and does not mislead us and since God is all-powerful and able to do all things, it is inconceivable that he would allow mistakes in this process of Scripture-production. In short, since God is God, we must assume that the Scriptures he gave us are inerrant in every respect. (p. 114)

It is telling, perhaps, that McGowan doesn't directly quote any inerrantists as to their "core argument" or otherwise support his characterization with documentation. The problem with

the way he presents the inerrantist argument is this: although he clearly recognises the role of the second premise in the argument, he *doesn't* recognise the work done by the first premise. There's no acknowledgement of the role that *Scripture's self-characterization* plays in the argument, which may well explain why McGowan never deals directly with (say) Warfield's presentation of the data in support of that premise.

Because of this oversight, it's natural for McGowan to think that inerrantists like Bahnsen are dependent on "an a priori commitment" as to how God would or wouldn't inspire Scripture. But the underlying claim that *what Scripture says, God says* (i.e., the functional identity of Scripture's speech acts and God's speech acts) isn't based on theological speculation. As Warfield's meticulous study demonstrates, it's based on nothing less than *what Scripture says!*

I have tried to explain why McGowan's characterisation of the core inerrantist argument is inadequate. There is, however, a further oversight on McGowan's part. Not only does he neglect to explain why the inerrantist argument is flawed *as it ought to be characterized*, he doesn't even explain why the inerrantist argument is flawed *as he himself characterizes it*. In other words, although he offers arguments *against* the inerrantist conclusion (which I address below), he doesn't attempt to explain why the argument *for* inerrancy is mistaken.

On the topic of logical reasoning in the service of theology, John Frame writes:

Note therefore that when you seek to refute someone's position, it is never sufficient merely to set forth arguments for an alternative (and incompatible) view. Many modern theologians, for example, argue against the orthodox view of Scripture by presenting arguments for liberal constructions, without even considering the biblical evidence that motivated the orthodox view in the first place. Many pro-abortionists talk on and on about women's rights, the tragedy of rape, and so forth, without giving any serious attention to the nature of the fetus, the most crucial datum in the anti-abortion case. A prolifer might be unable to refute the pro-abortion arguments, but he will not on that account abandon his position. He may rightly suspect that something *may* be wrong in the abortionist's case, for he is so certain of the arguments that produced his

own view. *In such situations it is best, then, not only to argue an alternative view but also to refute the arguments that produced the view you are seeking to overthrow.* Even then, of course, an opponent convinced of the rightness of his cause may take refuge in the possibility of your being wrong. But the more you cast doubt on those considerations that weigh most heavily with your opponent, the more adequate your argument will be.¹²

I quote Frame not because he uses “liberal” views of Scripture as an illustration (it would be quite unfair to describe McGowan’s position as “liberal”) but because he expresses well an important point about responsible argumentation. It’s not enough to give positive arguments for your own view (in McGowan’s case, infallibility without inerrancy). You must also refute the arguments that have been given in support of the opposing view. McGowan doesn’t do that—not least because he doesn’t get the core inerrantist argument right in the first place.

McGowan’s Arguments against Inerrancy

I turn now to examine McGowan’s three arguments against the inerrantist view represented by the Chicago Statement, which he takes to be the most defensible version of the doctrine.

1. The Problem of Definition

McGowan introduces his first objection thus:

The first argument against inerrancy, at a very preliminary level, concerns the definition of terms. After all, if it took the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy around twelve pages to define and explain their use of the word ‘inerrancy’ in the famous Chicago Statement, then surely there must be a better word we could use? Any word that requires so much definition, qualification, affirmation and denial must surely have questions as to its value. Not only so, but the definition itself in many ways empties the word of its content. (p. 106)

¹² John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1987), p. 258, emphasis mine.

The most serious problem with this objection is that it conflates *definition* and *explication*. The basic idea of inerrancy can be very clearly and succinctly stated (as I tried to show earlier). However, even after a theological term has been defined, it is usually necessary to further explicate it so as to make absolutely explicit and precise what it does and does not entail. This is entirely proper and it's hard to see why taking "around twelve pages" to do so would suggest any shortcoming in the original definition.¹³ The Chicago Statement isn't merely a definition of biblical inerrancy; it serves as both a definition and an explication. Chicago's 'Summary Statement' consists of only five short paragraphs.¹⁴

What's true of the doctrine of inerrancy is equally true of other doctrines, including those McGowan would defend. Consider, for example, the Reformed doctrine of justification by faith alone. The doctrine can be *defined* relatively briefly, e.g., as the claim that God forgives all our sins and counts us as righteous solely on condition of faith in Jesus Christ. But there is also a need to *explicate* that definition, so as to clarify exactly what it does and does not affirm, to insulate it against misunderstandings and misrepresentations, to contrast it with different views that perhaps use similar vocabulary, and so forth. What are "sins"? What does it mean to "count" someone righteous? Does that entail *actual* righteousness in any sense? What kind of "condition" is in view? What is "faith"? Is it mere intellectual assent or more than that? Does justification by faith alone mean that good works are unnecessary or irrelevant for believers? Who is "Jesus Christ" anyway? And so on.

I daresay that if McGowan were to explicate the Reformed doctrine of justification, he would need to take at least "twelve pages" to accomplish that to his own satisfaction. Would that indicate a problem with the doctrine of justification? Not in the slightest.

McGowan is also concerned that the various qualifications attached to the doctrine of inerrancy by the Chicago Statement end up evacuating it of all content:

¹³ Of course, "around twelve pages" is rather vague. Were they big pages? Was it small typeface?

¹⁴ 216 words, to be precise, which is around the same length as an English translation of the Definition of Chalcedon.

For example, if numbers can be inaccurate but not affect the claim to inerrancy, then when is an error an error? One gains the clear impression that no matter what objection might be brought against the inerrantist position, it would simply be argued that this is an exception quite permissible [sic] within the terms of the definition. (p. 106)

McGowan's decision to illustrate his point with the example of "inaccurate" numbers is unfortunate, since the Chicago Statement makes no mention of "inaccurate numbers" but rather speaks of "round numbers" (Article XIII). Approximation is not inaccuracy. This brings us back to the importance of the concept of *affirmation* and of establishing what is and is not being *affirmed* in any particular instance. If I say to you, "I live three miles from the church," it's obvious I'm not expressing the thought that I live 3.0000000000 (and so on) miles from the church. Likewise, it would be quite misguided to suggest that my statement was "inaccurate" or "in error"! What McGowan considers to be an "exception" that illustrates the vacuity of the doctrine of inerrancy is merely a clarification of how the core inerrantist claim cashes out in cases of numerical affirmation.

As to the charge of unfalsifiability, I invite the reader to review my earlier remarks. All I will add here is that the inerrantist isn't free to *merely invent* an exception, on an ad hoc basis, in response to allegations of errors in Scripture. Rather, he must offer a plausible argument on the basis of accepted principles of biblical interpretation (semantic range of words, historical context, cultural conventions, etc.) that Scripture does not in fact affirm what the critics takes it to affirm. In my experience, that is what biblical scholars committed to inerrancy do *as a matter of course*. McGowan and other non-inerrantists may find these arguments unpersuasive, but that implies nothing problematic about the *definition* of inerrancy.

2. The Problem of the Autographa

McGowan's second argument against inerrancy takes aim at one of the most prominent qualifications placed on the doctrine, viz., that inerrancy "pertains only to the oral or written

proclamation of the originally inspired prophets and apostles.”¹⁵ As Article X of the Chicago Statement clarifies:

We affirm that inspiration, strictly speaking, applies only to the autographic text of Scripture, which in the providence of God can be ascertained from available manuscripts with great accuracy. We further affirm that copies and translations of Scripture are the Word of God to the extent that they faithfully represent the original.

We deny that any essential element of the Christian faith is affected by the absence of the autographs. We further deny that this absence renders the assertion of Biblical inerrancy invalid or irrelevant.

McGowan apparently thinks this qualification presents a serious problem for inerrancy. He writes:

The second argument against inerrancy concerns the emphasis placed on the *autographa* by those in the Warfield tradition. If textual inerrancy is so vital to the doctrine of Scripture, why did God not preserve the *autographa* or precise copies of the same? Indeed, if inerrancy only applies to the *autographa* (which we do not possess), then surely it is a somewhat pointless affirmation? Everyone accepts that there are errors in the extant manuscripts and translations. What is the point of insisting that there once existed (very briefly) perfect versions of these texts, if we no longer possess them? (p. 109)

Appropriately enough, McGowan directs his fire at Greg Bahnsen’s essay, ‘The Inerrancy of the Autographa’, commissioned in defence of this feature of the Chicago Statement. He quotes Bahnsen thus:

Only with an inerrant autograph can we avoid attributing error to the God of truth. An error in the original would be attributable to God Himself, because He, in the pages of Scripture, takes responsibility for the very words of the biblical

¹⁵ Carl F. H. Henry, quoted by Greg L. Bahnsen, ‘The Inerrancy of the Autographa’, in *Inerrancy*, ed. Geisler, p. 157.

authors. Errors in copies, however, are the sole responsibility of the scribes involved, in which case God's veracity is not impugned. (pp. 109-10)

Remarkably, McGowan's response to Bahnsen amounts to one solitary sentence:

This is a curious argument, which implies that God has no further interest in, nor control over the biblical texts after the *autographa* have been produced. (p. 110)

If Bahnsen's argument is curious, McGowan's response is more so. In the first place, Bahnsen nowhere implies that God "has no further interest in, nor control over" the subsequent copies. Bahnsen's point is simply that scribal errors *do not impugn the veracity of God*. The reason is obvious: divine inspiration (or 'spiration' if you prefer) pertains to the biblical authors and not to the copyists. What Scripture affirms, God affirms; but God does not necessarily affirm what a *miscopied text* of Scripture affirms, if the affirmations in question are not present in the original. I confess I find it hard to understand why McGowan misses this simple point.

The second curiosity is that McGowan doesn't actually engage with Bahnsen's main argument, namely, that factual errors in the originals *would* impugn the veracity of God. If the biblical authors had made any mistaken affirmations, those mistakes would be rightly attributable to God, since He declares those affirmations to be His own. Where does McGowan think this argument goes wrong? He doesn't tell us.

McGowan suggests that it is "pointless" to focus on the autographa for the simple reason that "we no longer possess them". The problem with this line of argument is that it completely ignores Bahnsen's distinction between the "autographic text (the words)" and the "autographic codex (the physical document)".¹⁶ Bahnsen goes to great lengths to explain that while in one (trivial) sense we do not possess the original texts of Scripture, in another (crucial) sense we do indeed possess them *by virtue of the assured results of textual criticism based on a wealth of manuscript copies*.

¹⁶ Bahnsen, p. 172. In philosophical terminology, this corresponds to the distinction between 'types' and 'tokens'. See, for example, the article 'Types and Tokens' in the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/types-tokens/>).

An analogy may help here. As I write this, I am waiting for an important document to be sent to me by fax. The content of this document has significant legal and personal implications. When I go to the fax machine to pick it up, I will have in my hand a copy (facsimile) of the ‘original’ document. It’s true that I won’t *physically* possess the original document. So should I be concerned whether or not there are errors in that original? The answer ought to be obvious. In an important sense, the faxed copy *is* the original document—if the fax machine is working properly. The two physical pages contain *one and the same text*. What one affirms, the other affirms.

At this point, McGowan will likely object that the analogy is flawed. My fax machine may perform perfectly, but the scribes who made copies of the biblical texts did not. As both inerrantists and non-inerrantists acknowledge, they occasionally made mistakes (and some even made deliberate alterations, however well-intentioned). But the analogy can be adapted accordingly. Suppose instead that I have 200 fax machines, each of which functions less than perfectly. For every document received by fax, a small proportion of the words in the text of the document are obscured, or perhaps even changed to other words. If, however, the original document is sent to me *through all 200 fax machines*, I will have 200 copies from which (by means of comparison) I can derive a reconstruction of the ‘original’ document *with a very high degree of confidence*. Indeed, I can be nearly certain about what the original document does and does not affirm. Will it be irrelevant to me whether or not the original document is *correct* in what it affirms? On the contrary, it will be very important indeed. In the first place, the credibility of the document’s author depends on its accuracy. Moreover, any false affirmations in the original document could have serious practical consequences for me.

The difference between inerrantists and non-inerrantists regarding the original text of Scripture boils down to this. For inerrantists, successful textual criticism uncovers a bedrock of truth. For non-inerrantists, successful textual criticism uncovers... well, that’s precisely the point. We don’t know. For any given affirmation of the original text of Scripture, we have no way of objectively gauging whether or not it is a *true* affirmation. We can make probability judgements about the results of textual criticism, and those probability judgements look very healthy

indeed. But we have no way of making probability judgements about the individual affirmations of the *autographa*—unless, of course, the core argument for inerrancy is sound.

3. The Problem of the Phenomena

McGowan's third argument against inerrancy "concerns how we deal with textual issues such as apparent conflicts and contradictions." Faced with these textual difficulties, McGowan observes, inerrantists "will typically reply in one of two ways":

Either they will argue that this is only an antimony, an apparent but not real contradiction, or they will argue that if we had the *autographa* we would see that the problem does not exist there, only in errant manuscripts, because of errors in the copying over the centuries. (p. 112)

I have to wonder from what inerrantist literature McGowan has drawn his conclusions. In my experience, these two 'escape hatches' are rarely employed and only then as a last resort. Far more commonly, inerrantist scholars will offer one or more *exegetical explanations* as to why the conflict is merely apparent. McGowan may not find such explanations satisfying, but it is simply misleading to suggest that they are not offered as a matter of course.

In support of his point, McGowan borrows an example from I. Howard Marshall:

In the story of Jairus as recorded by Matthew it is simply said that when Jairus first met Jesus he told him that his daughter was dead (Matt. 9:18). According to Mark and Luke, however, the daughter was merely on the point of death at the beginning of the story and it was only later—after the incident of the woman with the haemorrhage—that Jairus and Jesus learned that she had actually died (Mark 5:3 f.; Luke 8:49 f.). There is a clear contradiction between the initial words of Jairus as recorded by Matthew and the other Evangelists. We can, of course, explain the contradiction quite easily and acceptably by saying that Matthew, whose generally policy was to tell stories about Jesus in fewer words than Mark, has abbreviated the story and given the general sense of what happened without going into details. But the fact still remains that Matthew has

attributed to Jairus words which he did not actually say at the time stated. (p. 113)

Unfortunately for McGowan, this example proves either too little or too much. Does he think that Matthew *affirmed a falsehood* (intentionally or otherwise)? If so, then his insistence that he isn't arguing for 'errancy' falls flat.¹⁷ He must conclude that Scripture contains errors after all (in the sense that the inerrantist defines 'error'). On the other hand, if McGowan *doesn't* believe that Matthew affirmed a falsehood, he can't reasonably conclude that this example poses any difficulty for the inerrantist.

In fact, his example nicely illustrates why it is important to grasp what I explained earlier about the subtleties of affirmation. What exactly is Matthew affirming through his (written) speech acts? As we evaluate what Matthew wrote, we need to take into account both authorial intention and context, with particular reference to the literary conventions of the time. Did Matthew *intend* for his readers to take it that Jairus *literally* spoke the words attributed to him in 9:18? Did the conventions of his day allow for such a degree of paraphrase and narrative compression when recounting historical events? The answers to questions such as these will determine whether Matthew's *affirmations* are true or false. It strikes me as perfectly plausible to conclude that Matthew does not affirm anything false or incompatible with what the other Synoptics affirm.

One of the best known recent discussions on apparent contradictions between the Gospels is found in Craig Blomberg's *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*.¹⁸ When I consulted it to see whether it addressed this particular example, I discovered that not only does Blomberg directly address this 'problem' text, he also quotes the very same passage from Marshall that McGowan uses!¹⁹ Blomberg then contrasts Marshall's assessment with that of Robert Stein:

In light of Matthew's tendency toward abbreviation we can better understand what has happened in Matthew 9:18-19, 23-25. Matthew summarized the story

¹⁷ See, e.g., pp. 13, 124-25, 137, 210.

¹⁸ Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1987).

¹⁹ Blomberg, p. 135.

of Jesus' raising of Jairus's daughter ... What he omits are various interesting but unnecessary details such as that when Jairus first arrives his daughter is not yet dead ...

Matthew's account is *an inerrant summary* of Jesus' raising of Jairus's daughter. Difficulties are encountered if the details of this summary are pressed *in a way that Matthew never intended*.²⁰

Blomberg comments:

A synthesis of these two opinions might state that Matthew's account seems to have a minor 'error' according to certain modern definitions of the term *but not according to most ancient ones*. But surely it is the latter that counts; even the most ardent defenders of biblical inerrancy admit that the original intention of Scripture must be the final arbiter, so Stein's verdict seems slightly fairer.²¹

Blomberg's book was published 20 years before *Divine Spiritation* (and Stein's, 23 years). What's most disappointing about McGowan's appeal to the Jairus story is that he appears unaware of—or worse, unconcerned to engage with—standard inerrantist treatments of the issue. His discussion is superficial and unfairly suggests that inerrantist scholars have offered only facile solutions to difficult problems.

McGowan is apparently content to hang his third argument against inerrancy on this one example. He offers no other examples, beyond a reference to Herman Ridderbos pointing out “similar problems in the different versions of the Lord's Prayer and the Beatitudes.” As such, there is nothing further to say in response, except to express a confidence that any further “textual issues” McGowan might cite can be dealt with along similar lines, based on an understanding of speech acts and commonly accepted principles of grammatical-historical interpretation. In any event, McGowan's third argument fails as support for his own position over against the inerrantist's.

²⁰ Stein, quoted in Blomberg, p. 136, emphasis mine.

²¹ Blomberg, p. 136, emphasis mine.

Inerrancy: Rationalistic or Just Plain Rational?

McGowan's final salvo against the doctrine of the inerrancy is his charge that it is a "rationalist implication". This is a rather surprising accusation, since inerrantists are more commonly accused of *irrationalism* than rationalism! At the heart of McGowan's charge, however, is the idea that inerrantists have based their doctrine on an "unwarranted assumption about God":

The basic error of the inerrantists is to insist that the inerrancy of the *autographa* is a direct implication of the biblical doctrine of inspiration (or divine spiration). In order to defend this implication, the inerrantists make an unwarranted assumption about God. The assumption is that, given the nature and character of God, the only kind of Scripture he could 'breathe out' was Scripture that is textually inerrant. If there was even one mistaken in the *autographa*, then God cannot have been the author, because he is incapable of error. (p. 113)

I have already shown that inerrantists commit no such error. Their core argument makes no unwarranted assumptions about God or about His methods of inspiration. Rather, the argument is grounded in (1) the biblical doctrine of God, which entails that He cannot affirm falsehoods, and (2) Scripture's self-characterization. Nevertheless, McGowan proposes to prove his point in three ways:

First, I shall demonstrate the inerrancy is, at best, an implication rather than a biblical doctrine. Second, I shall demonstrate that it is rationalist. Then, third, I shall demonstrate that the underlying assumption underestimates God and undermines the significance of the human authors of Scripture. (p. 114)

McGowan's first argument, then, is that inerrancy is *at best* an implication of a biblical doctrine. He explains:

Those who advocate inerrancy might well (and do) argue that it is a legitimate and natural implication of the doctrine of divine spiration, but they cannot argue that inerrancy is itself taught in Scripture. (p. 114)

[Carl Henry] recognized that inerrancy is not a biblical doctrine but an implication drawn from another biblical doctrine (inspiration). (p. 115)

McGowan doesn't seem to realise that an implication of a teaching of Scripture *is itself a teaching of Scripture*.²² Likewise, an implication of a biblical doctrine *is itself a biblical doctrine*. The Westminster Divines clearly recognised this point of logic:

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by *good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture*.²³

I have argued that inerrancy can be deduced "by good and necessary consequence" from what the Bible teaches about God and God's Word. If this argument is sound, then McGowan ought to accept inerrancy as a biblical doctrine, just as he accepts (say) the Trinity as a biblical doctrine.

Interestingly, however, McGowan seems to back away from his initial argument by suggesting that inerrancy is "not a *legitimate* implication" (emphasis mine). But as I have pointed out, McGowan nowhere explains what's wrong with the core inerrantist argument.

McGowan quickly moves on to focus his charge of rationalism:

In the inerrantist argument, truth is largely viewed in propositional terms and theological method is conceived of in scientific terms. Thus the impression is often given that the whole Bible can be reduced to a set of propositions that can then be demonstrated to be 'true'. (p. 116)

McGowan is quite correct that the core inerrantist argument views truth in propositional terms. I have already explained the philosophical reasons for this, and it's hard to see what's problematic about it. The concept of truth involved in the core inerrantist claim is *by definition* propositional. McGowan doesn't explain why that's inappropriate or 'rationalistic'. Doesn't he

²² See Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, p. 247.

²³ Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter I, 6.

believe that the Bible expresses (among other things) true propositions? Surely he hasn't bought into the neo-orthodox antipathy toward propositional revelation!

What about the suggestion that the inerrantists' theological method is "conceived of in scientific terms"? I have no idea how that charge could be made to stick against the inerrantist argument I presented earlier. It should be obvious that the core inerrantist argument doesn't involve any attempt to reduce the Bible to "a set of propositions that can then be demonstrated to be 'true'"! Fortunately for inerrantists, the argument for their position is much easier to formulate and defend, as I have tried to demonstrate.

Finally, McGowan maintains that the inerrantists' "unwarranted assumption" (which we have already seen is neither unwarranted nor an assumption) "underestimates God and undermines the human authors":

Perhaps the most striking problem with the rationalist implication concerning inerrancy is that it limits God. It assumes that God can only act in a way that conforms to our expectations, based on our human assessment of his character. It assumes that whatever God does must conform to the canons of human reason. It also assumes that our desire for epistemological certainty must be satisfied and that it can be satisfied only through the receiving from God of inerrant autographic texts. (p. 118)

Given what I have already argued, the response to these claims is very simple. The only 'limits' inerrantists place on God and His actions are *those limits imposed by the teaching of Scripture*, as they read it. In other words, McGowan's objection begs the question against inerrantists by assuming that Scripture *doesn't* teach its own inerrancy (either explicitly or by implication). Yet, as I have noted, for all his insistence that inerrancy is an extra-biblical doctrine he has conspicuously failed to engage with the inerrantist arguments on that point (such as Warfield's famous article). McGowan's charge of rationalism against inerrantists thus falls flat.

Conclusion

I don't doubt that Dr McGowan had the best interests of Christ's church at heart when he wrote *The Divine Spiration of Scripture*. The doctrine of biblical inerrancy can be difficult to defend and has the potential to divide evangelicals in ways that hinder rather than further the cause of Christ. If you believe, as McGowan does, that the Bible doesn't teach its own inerrancy and that the main arguments for the doctrine are flawed, naturally you will want to take issue with the prominence given to biblical inerrancy by evangelical scholars and pastors.

Nevertheless, whatever his motives, McGowan's case against inerrancy is badly flawed in four respects, as I have tried to show. First, he mischaracterizes the core inerrantist argument; second, he fails to explain why the core inerrantist argument (as he represents it) is unsound; third, his main arguments against inerrancy can be readily defused once the core inerrantist claim is properly understood; and finally, his charge of rationalism against inerrantists misrepresents their position and sidesteps their exegetical arguments. *Divine Spiration* thus provides no good reason to think that inerrantists are the ones in error.

The foundational argument that undergirds the doctrine of inerrancy remains unscathed. What Scripture says, God says. What Scripture affirms, God affirms. Let God be true, and every man a liar.