

The Creeds of the Church

Session 11—The Theology of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy

I. Review

- A. R.C. Sproul convened the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy in Chicago in 1978 to discuss the issue of inerrancy. He and the other 200 pastors and leaders felt that the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture was under attack from the relativistic hermeneutic that had crept into the church as a result of the theology of Barth and others.
- B. The product of their work over the course of three days was the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.

II. The Statement

Articles of Affirmation and Denial

NB: The Chicago Statement takes the form of a series of affirmations and denials, ostensibly to make the signers' positions as clear as possible. This format would be adopted by later statements as well.

Article I

*We **affirm** that the Holy Scriptures are to be received as the authoritative Word of God. We **deny** that the Scriptures receive their authority from the Church, tradition or any other human source.*

This marks the Statement as ideologically Protestant. They are denying the Roman Catholic idea that since the Church recognized the canon of Scripture, it wields authority over the canon, even to the point of being itself inspired (inerrant?) rather than the Bible being so.

Article II

*We **affirm** that the Scriptures are the supreme written norm by which God binds the conscience, and that the authority of the Church is subordinate to that of Scripture.*

*We **deny** that Church creeds, councils or declarations have authority greater than or equal to the authority of the Bible.*

The Council is here acknowledging that there is value in creeds and confessions, inasmuch as they reflect biblical truth, and help guide and govern particular church groups or bodies in their interpretation of Scripture. Nevertheless, these creeds and confessions must always be seen as subordinate in authority to the Bible itself.

Article III

*We **affirm** that the written Word in its entirety is revelation given by God.
We **deny** that the Bible is merely a witness to revelation, or only becomes revelation in encounter, or depends on the responses of men for its validity.*

This is clearly counter to the neo-Orthodox ideas of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, et al, that the Bible merely becomes revelation depending upon the nature of its reception by humans.

Article IV

*We **affirm** that God who made mankind in His image has used language as a means of revelation.
We **deny** that human language is so limited by our creatureliness that it is rendered inadequate as a vehicle for divine revelation. We further deny that the corruption of human culture and language through sin has thwarted God's Work of Inspiration.*

This article pertains to one of the recourses of the higher critics, who appeal to the limits and inaccuracies of human language to justify their skepticism of the written Word. The authors here do not deny that there are limitations to human language, but rather that such limitations make it impossible for God to use human language to communicate truth about himself.

Article V

*We **affirm** that God's revelation in the Holy Scriptures was progressive.
We **deny** that later revelation, which may fulfill earlier revelation, ever corrects or contradicts it. We further deny that any normative revelation has been given since the completion of the New Testament writings.*

Here the Council is recognizing that the nature of the Bible as a compilation of documents written at different times and for different purposes means that information given later will necessarily paint a fuller picture than that derived from previous information. This reality can be true without any suggestion of contradictions. Additionally, this article rejects any "normative revelation" post canon. This does not discount the testimony of the people who receive communications from God, but it rejects such communication as authoritative in any way for the church.

Article VI

*We **affirm** that the whole of Scripture and all its parts, down to the very words of the original, were given by divine inspiration.
We **deny** that the inspiration of Scripture can rightly be affirmed of the whole without the parts, or of some parts but not the whole.*

The doctrine of "verbal, plenary inspiration" is seen in this article. This counters the neo-Orthodox view that the ideas of Scripture are inspired, but not necessarily all the words.

Article VII

*We **affirm** that inspiration was the work in which God by His Spirit, through human writers, gave us His Word. The origin of Scripture is divine. The mode of divine inspiration remains largely a mystery to us. We **deny** that inspiration can be reduced to human insight, or to heightened states of consciousness of any kind.*

Since the doctrine of verbal, plenary inspiration is often associated with a “dictation theory” of inspiration (that God dictated the words of the Bible to the human authors) the Council is here distancing itself from this idea. They instead affirm that the precise mode of inspiration is a mystery, but that it is not explainable by an appeal to otherwise familiar human experiences such as heightened consciousness, etc. It is an act of God.

Article VIII

*We **affirm** that God in His Work of Inspiration utilized the distinctive personalities and literary styles of the writers whom He had chosen and prepared. We **deny** that God, in causing these writers to use the very words that He chose, overrode their personalities.*

This is a very important article for the sake of hermeneutics. Distancing themselves from the dictation theory of inspiration was not enough for the Council. Here they go even further, insisting that God’s inspiration of Scripture was such that the personalities and literary styles of the human authors of Scripture were not damaged or overridden. One implication of this is that personalities and literary styles must be taken into account when interpreting Scripture. That is to say, not every book of the Bible can be interpreted according to the same hermeneutic and not every author uses the same word in the same way.

Article IX

*We **affirm** that inspiration, though not conferring omniscience, guaranteed true and trustworthy utterance on all matters of which the Biblical authors were moved to speak and write. We **deny** that the finitude or fallenness of these writers, by necessity or otherwise, introduced distortion or falsehood into God’s Word.*

In some ways, this article is merely re-iterating what was said in Article IV. The limits and fallibility of human language and nature do not negate the process of inspiration or the result of inerrancy.

Article X

*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.*

While it is true that God inspired the original authors of the biblical documents, not those who copied them or those who translated the copies, it is still true to speak of the translations we have today as “the Word of God.” This is true because God has preserved his Word to a miraculous extent throughout the generations, and so the Bible we have before us today is a remarkably trustworthy reflection of the original documents.

Article XI

*We **affirm** that Scripture, having been given by divine inspiration, is infallible, so that, far from misleading us, it is true and reliable in all the matters it addresses.*

*We **deny** that it is possible for the Bible to be at the same time infallible and errant in its assertions. Infallibility and inerrancy may be distinguished, but not separated.*

The terms, “infallible” and “inerrant” are often used interchangeably, but they have different definitions. “Infallible” speaks to the inability to err—it is an abstract, hypothetical concept. “Inerrant” speaks to the concrete reality of not having erred—it is a practical, measurable concept. This article rejects the tendency of some institutions to attempt to use the adjective “infallible” as a substitute for “inerrant” in an effort to avoid the real issue.

Article XII

*We **affirm** that Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud or deceit.*

*We **deny** that Biblical infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious or redemptive themes, exclusive of assertions in the fields of history and science. We further deny that scientific hypotheses about earth history may properly be used to overturn the teaching of Scripture on creation and the flood.*

Another attack on the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible comes in the form of the suggestion that the Bible is authoritative and reliable in everything pertaining to spiritual or religious matters, but that, since it isn’t a science or history textbook, its claims in those areas should not be taken seriously. This article rejects that notion and affirms that the Bible is inerrant on scientific and historic matters that it addresses as well. **NB:** While it insists that “the teaching of Scripture on creation and the flood” cannot be overturned by other hypotheses, it deliberately leaves open exactly what the Scripture’s teaching on those matters are, specifically.

Article XIII

*We **affirm** the propriety of using inerrancy as a theological term with reference to the complete truthfulness of Scripture.*

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

Some people say simply that the term, “inerrancy” is unhelpful. The Council disagrees. It further clarifies that the Bible can still be spoken of as inerrant despite characteristics particular to the age in which the biblical documents were written (“lack of modern technical precision . . . observational descriptions of nature, etc.”). This corresponds with Article VIII’s assertion that

the Bible utilized—and did not override—the particular personalities and literary styles of its human authors.

Examples of the phenomena:

Lack of modern technical precision—Round numbers (Gen. 26:12; Lev. 26:8; Matt. 19:29)
Irregularities of grammar or spelling—Especially in Revelation (grammar) and Paul (spelling)
Observational descriptions of nature—Sunsets and sunrises
Reporting of falsehoods—The Bible records what false prophets say, etc.
Use of hyperbole and round numbers—See above
Topical arrangement of materials—The gospels arrange material topically, typical of the time
Variant selections of material in parallel accounts—This is also typical of ancient writers
Use of free citations—Ancient cultures were not as concerned about plagiarism

Article XIV

*We **affirm** the unity and internal consistency of Scripture.*

*We **deny** that alleged errors and discrepancies that have not yet been resolved vitiate the truth claims of the Bible.*

There are, undeniably, some discrepancies in the Bible that have not yet been resolved according to everyone's satisfaction (E.g. did Michal have children? [II Sam. 6:23 vs. II Sam. 21:8] or what was Ahaziah's age when he began to rule [II Kings 8:26 vs. II Chron. 22:2] etc.). This fact must not be seen as affecting the inerrancy of the Bible.

Article XV

*We **affirm** that the doctrine of inerrancy is grounded in the teaching of the Bible about inspiration.*

*We **deny** that Jesus' teaching about Scripture may be dismissed by appeals to accommodation or to any natural limitation of His humanity.*

Both the suggestion that Jesus “accommodated” ancient ideas without correcting them and the notion that his humanity limited his own knowledge are unsustainable. If Jesus knew some supposed truth (e.g., that Adam and Eve weren't historic figures) but didn't correct the false view (and in fact used it to substantiate his teaching) then he is an untrustworthy teacher. If Jesus did not know this imagined “truth,” then he is an unreliable teacher.

Article XVI

*We **affirm** that the doctrine of inerrancy has been integral to the Church's faith throughout its history.*

*We **deny** that inerrancy is a doctrine invented by Scholastic Protestantism, or is a reactionary position postulated in response to negative higher criticism.*

Many critics have argued that the idea of inerrancy is the invention, either of “scholastic Protestantism” (the heirs of the Reformers in the 1600s and 1700s) or of the Fundamentalists in reaction to the modernist debate of the early 20th century. This article rejects both of these

notions and affirms that the idea of inerrancy (if not the specific term) has been around for the entire history of Christ's church.

Article XVII

*We **affirm** that the Holy Spirit bears witness to the Scriptures, assuring believers of the truthfulness of God's written Word.*

*We **deny** that this witness of the Holy Spirit operates in isolation from or against Scripture.*

The work of the Holy Spirit is real and precious. But this work is not an alternative to an inerrant Scripture (vis. neo-Orthodoxy). He works in and through the Bible.

Article XVIII

*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.*

*We **deny** the legitimacy of any treatment of the text or quest for sources lying behind it that leads to relativizing, de-historicizing, or discounting its teaching or rejecting its claims to authorship.*

Picking up from Articles VIII and XIII, this article affirms that the Bible must be interpreted according to its appropriate style, via careful exegesis. This should not be taken to mean, however, that humans are the authorities, dictating meaning to the Bible or with the ability to decide what to believe or not believe in the Bible.

Article XIX

*We **affirm** that a confession of the full authority, infallibility, and inerrancy of Scripture is vital to a sound understanding of the whole of the Christian faith. We further affirm that such confession should lead to increasing conformity to the image of Christ.*

*We **deny** that such confession is necessary for salvation. However, we further deny that inerrancy can be rejected without grave consequences, both to the individual and to the Church.*

A belief in and confession of inerrancy is vital to "a sound understanding" of the Christian faith, but not "necessary for salvation." This is an important clarifying statement. The Council does not wish to anathematize those who hold a slightly different view, but it seeks to express grave concerns over the denial of inerrancy and the errors that must come from that.