

# A Response to: “If there are errors in the Bible it is worthless.”

**[TLDR] CLIFFNOTES:** The “all or nothing” claim for the Bible does not stand up under scrutiny. We are reliant upon many trustworthy people and written works in our lives that are not inerrant or infallible. We can be confident in the truth of the Bible insofar as it is steadfast in achieving God’s intended purposes. This objection tells us more about the questioner’s *desire* for certainty than the *actual method* God used to inspire the Bible.

As I was reading Gregory A Boyd’s book, *Inspired Imperfection*, I couldn’t help but be reminded of my own conversion to Christianity and then subsequent crisis of faith. Boyd recounts how in his Church the Bible was considered inerrant and literally true, and anything else was unacceptable. He remembers his pastor saying, “If the earth wasn’t created in six literal days, then the whole Bible may as well be a book of lies.”<sup>1</sup> Boyd then recounts how he read a few apologetical books of the fundamentalist variety, then went off to university and took a course on evolution and one on the New Testament. In his hubris and religious zeal, he thought he would overturn the establishment but quickly experienced the same thing many other conservative

Christians go through. In his own words, “. . . my year-old faith came crashing down once I found out the Bible is plagued with all sorts of errors.”<sup>2</sup> xii In a similar vein, I too, once set out to explain every single Bible contradiction and alleged error in order to demonstrate that the Bible was clearly the inerrant word of God. After all, if a collection of 66 (or 73 depending on who you ask) distinct books written over thousands of years by many different authors from all walks of life was error free, it clearly had to be the inerrant Word of God. Humans make mistakes and there is no way a purely human text like this that wasn’t inspired by God could ever be error free. The inerrancy of the Bible was, if I could demonstrate it, in my mind, proof that God

<sup>1</sup> Greg Boyd, *Inspired Imperfection*, p. xi.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. xii.

authored it. My conservative world came crashing down and with a real lack of guidance or access to sources that knew what I was going through, I slowly turned from a conservative evangelical into a liberal and then finally into an agnostic/atheist. The peace, love and as Boyd puts it, “blissful certainty and sense of purpose” were gone. I was left with what I felt was a largely meaningless and bleak materialistic universe. Again. This type of story is not a rare occurrence and one of the major thrusts of this website is aimed at such people.

The idea that inspiration depends on inerrancy is very deeply rooted in many churches today and even in the minds of non-Christians. There is also a remarkable and albeit strange tendency to think that if any part of the Bible is in error, it is all in error or none of it is trustworthy. Christians will often ask, if it has errors, how do we know what is true? I have to wonder, do these Christians not experience the power of God as they read scripture and meditate on its message with an open mind and heart? Is not their experience with the transformative and risen Jesus, often mediated by reading scripture, not the light by which they see the world? How on earth can the presence of errors render such experiences moot?

If it has historical or scientific errors, how do we know it is not wrong when it comes to

salvation? While this question seems forceful upon first hearing it, I’m not convinced people seriously consider this objection before raising it. Where in life do we have inerrant sources? What book, magazine, historical document, doctor, mechanic, school teacher, pastor or church is inerrant? We use erroneous sources all the time and are quite adept at doing so. A work does not need to be *inerrant* to be useful. It just needs to be *reliable* for its *intended purpose*. We can say the same thing about eyewitness testimony in court. It is painfully obvious to experts today that eyewitnesses make all sorts of mistakes. This does not render all eyewitness testimony useless. It simply has to be used judiciously. Clearly, the Bible was not written to be a scientific text nor are some of its parts (e.g., the Gospels) strict historical biographies in the modern sense. Its purpose is to preach the good news so that we might be saved by it. Its purpose is bringing salvation to people. Its record speaks for itself in that regard so we can deem the Bible reliable and useful *for its intended purpose by God*, whether inerrant or not. Historical, scientific or normal human errors do not impugn upon this belief. Orthodox Christians generally believe Jesus is the key hermeneutic to understanding scripture and that the broad strokes of salvation history, particularly in the life and death of Jesus, are beyond dispute. With the Holy Spirit guiding believers, I am not sure

why it is thought the Bible has to be inerrant to be useful? Are we going to shortchange the efficacy of the Holy Spirit? It is a *non sequitur* and rather serves as testimony to the believer's desire for absolute certainty than an accurate picture of scripture.

In responding to the "all or nothing" charge, Paul J. Achtemeier wrote that, ". . . people do not operate in other areas of life on the principle that one mistake or error renders all other statements or acts coming from that source totally untrustworthy. One's trust in a friend is not irrevocably shattered if one finds that in some matter of historical information that friend should prove to be in error. Life has a way of continuing to function, even in the absence of absolutely certainty, and whatever else the Bible may concern, it is surely about life."<sup>3</sup>

In order for the Bible to be considered *useful* and *inspired* it must only serve the purpose for which God intended it. If God desired an inerrant scripture we would have one, no question. Why are many Christians certain God actually cares if the Bible is free from all errors or not? The purpose of the Bible is not to teach us exactly how Judas died or how long it took God to fashion the earth. The point is He created the earth and is sovereign over it. The purpose is to mediate the sacred and bring people to Himself

<sup>3</sup> Paul J. Achtemeier, *The Inspiration of Scripture*, pp. 36-67.

through the redemptive work of Jesus. 2 Timothy 3:15-17 speaks to the purpose of scripture:

**2 Timothy 3:15-17:** and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>16</sup> All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup> so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. NRSV

The most important part of this passage in 2 Timothy is that God left us a record and message of salvation history so that we could come to know him through his Son. This passage could have meant to imply inerrancy, as is often argued (inspired means "God-breathed"), but I will reserve that question for another writing. Personally, I am not convinced the passage itself necessitates this view but I am certain that a text does not need to be factually inerrant to lead us to Jesus, to be useful for teaching, reproof, etc. If we look at the Lucan prologue we see the purpose of his Gospel (Luke 1:1-4). Does Luke have to be completely inerrant in all details for Theophilus to know the truth about the things he was instructed? Can one not write an informative work, the central message of which is true, that has some errors in it? Whether or not the Bible is *inerrant*, its salvific track-record delineates its general trustworthiness in fulfilling God's

*intended purpose.* It has mediated the sacred and helped God bring his message of salvation through Jesus to billions of people.

Though worthy of consideration, I suppose in some sense, asking if every single detail of the Bible is true might be asking the wrong question. Concern over how we can ever know exactly what is and isn't true should be mitigated by looking at the bigger picture of scripture. While correct doctrine has its importance in Church life, ultimately the entire Hebrew Bible can be easily summarized by Jesus:

**Matthew 22:36-40**<sup>36</sup> "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"<sup>37</sup> He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.'<sup>38</sup> This is the greatest and first commandment.<sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'<sup>40</sup> On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." NRSV

We should always be prioritizing the forest over the trees in scripture. After all, we can find scriptural support for an alarmingly diverse set of ideals if we are allowed to "proof-text hunt" the Bible. Unfortunately, this tends to be us anachronistically reading our own thoughts and views and placing them on God's lips rather than letting His scripture serve as conscience and corrector. We must understand that the Biblical authors come from all walks of life, in a very

different time, place and culture, with a different worldview, thousands of years ago. Dare I say it may be irresponsible not to look at the big picture of scripture in its proper historical context? Some may even suggest this needs to be tempered by the magisterial teachings of the Church or Christian Creeds. Either way, I don't expect St. Peter to be giving out entrance exams in the form of theological multiple choice quizzes at the Pearly Gates.