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The Inerrancy of Scripture: The Fifty Years' War . . . and Counting

We are entering a new phase in the battle over the Bible's truthfulness and authority. We should at least be thankful for undisguised arguments coming from the opponents of biblical inerrancy, even as we are ready, once again, to make clear where their arguments lead.

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Back in 1990, theologian J. I. Packer recounted what he called a “Thirty Years’ War” over the inerrancy of the Bible. He traced his involvement in this war in its American context back to a conference held in Wenham, Massachusetts in 1966, when he confronted some professors from evangelical institutions who “now declined to affirm the full truth of Scripture.” That was nearly fifty years ago, and the war over the truthfulness of the Bible is still not over — not by a long shot.



From time to time, the dust has settled in one arena, only for the battle to erupt in another. In the 1970s, the most visible battles were fought over Fuller Theological Seminary and within the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. By the 1980s, the most heated controversies centered in the Southern Baptist Convention and its seminaries. Throughout this period, the evangelical movement sought to regain its footing on the doctrine. In 1978, a large number of leading evangelicals met and adopted a definitive statement that became known as “The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.”

Many thought the battles were over, or at least subsiding. Sadly, the debate over the inerrancy of the Bible continues. As a matter of fact, there seems to be a renewed effort to forge an evangelical identity apart from the claim that the Bible is totally truthful and without error.

Recently, Professor Peter Enns, formerly of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, has argued that the biblical authors clearly erred. He has argued that Paul, for example, was clearly wrong in assuming the historicity of Adam. In *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament*, published in 2005, he presented an argument for an “incarnational” model of biblical inspiration and authority. But in this rendering, incarnation — affirming the human dimension of Scripture — means accepting some necessary degree of error.

This argument is taken to the next step by Kenton L. Sparks in his 2008 book, *God's Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship*. Sparks, who teaches at Eastern University, argues that it is nothing less than intellectually disastrous for evangelicals to claim that the Bible is without error.

His arguments, also serialized and summarized in a series of articles, are amazingly candid. He asserts that Evangelicalism has “painted itself into an intellectual corner” by claiming the inerrancy of Scripture. The movement is now in an “intellectual cul-de-sac,” he laments, because we have “crossed an evidential threshold that makes it intellectually unsuitable to defend some of the standard dogmas of the conservative evangelical tradition.” And, make no mistake, inerrancy is the central dogma he would have us let go.

God's Word in Human Words is an erudite book with a comprehensive argument. Kenton Sparks does not

misunderstand the evangelical doctrine of biblical inerrancy — he understands it and sees it as intellectually disastrous. “So like any other book,” he asserts, “the Bible appears to be a historically and culturally contingent text and, because of that, it reflects the diverse viewpoints of different people who lived in different times and places.” But a contingent text bears all the errors of its contingent authors, and Sparks fully realizes this.

The serialized articles by Sparks appear at the BioLogos Web site, a site with one clear agenda — to move evangelicals toward a full embrace of evolutionary theory. In this context, Sparks understands that the affirmation of biblical inerrancy presents a huge obstacle to the embrace of evolution. The “evidential threshold” has been crossed, he insists, and the Bible has come up short. The biblical writers were simply trapped within the limits of their own ancient cosmology and observations.

But Sparks presses far beyond this argument, accusing the Bible of presenting immoral teachings, citing “biblical texts that strike us as down-right sinister or evil.” The Bible, he suggests, “exhibits all the telltale signs of having been written by finite, fallen human beings who erred in the ways that human beings usually err.”

When Peter Enns and Kenton Sparks argue for an incarnational model of inspiration and biblical authority, they are continuing an argument first made long ago — among evangelicals, at least as far back as the opening salvos of the battle over biblical inerrancy. Sparks, however, takes the argument further. He understands that the incarnational model implicates Jesus. He does not resist this. Jesus, he suggests, “was a finite person who grew up in Palestine.” While asserting that he affirms the historic Christian creeds and “traditional Christian orthodoxy,” Sparks proposes that Jesus made routine errors of fact.

His conclusion: “If Jesus as a finite human being erred from time to time, there is no reason at all to suppose that Moses, Paul, [and/or] John wrote Scripture without error.”

That is a breath-taking assumption, to say the very least. But, even in its shocking audacity, it serves to reveal the clear logic of the new battle-lines over biblical inerrancy. We now confront open calls to accept and affirm that there are indeed errors in the Bible. It is demanded that we accept the fact that the human authors of the Bible often erred because of their limited knowledge and erroneous assumptions about reality. We must, it is argued, abandon the claim that the Bible is a consistent whole. Rather, we are told to accept the claims that the human authors of Scripture were just plain wrong in some texts — even in texts that define God and his ways. We are told that some texts are just “down-right sinister or evil.”

And, note clearly, we are told that we must do this in order to save Evangelicalism from an intellectual disaster.

Of course, accepting this demand amounts to a theological disaster of incalculable magnitude. Rarely has this been more apparent and undeniable. The rejection of the Bible’s inerrancy will please the evangelical revisionists, but it will rob the church of its secure knowledge that the Bible is indeed true, trustworthy and fully authoritative.

Kenton Sparks and the new evangelical revisionists are now making some of the very arguments that earlier opponents of inerrancy attempted to deny. In this sense, they offer great clarity to the current debate. Their logic is clear. They argue that the human authors of the Bible were not protected from error, and their errors are not inconsequential. We are talking about nothing less than whether the Bible truthfully reveals to us the nature, character, acts, and purposes of God.

As Dr. Packer said years ago, “[W]hen you encounter a present-day view of Holy Scripture, you encounter more than a view of Scripture. What you meet is a total view of God and the world, that is, a total theology, which is both an ontology, declaring what there is, and an epistemology, stating how we know what there is. This is necessarily so, for a theology is a seamless robe, a circle within which everything links up with everything else through its common grounding in God. Every view of Scripture, in particular, proves on analysis to be bound up with an overall view of God and man.”

The rejection of biblical inerrancy is bound up with a view of God that is, in the end, fatal for Christian orthodoxy. We are entering a new phase in the battle over the Bible’s truthfulness and authority. We should at least be thankful for undisguised arguments coming from the opponents of biblical inerrancy, even as we are ready, once again, to make clear where their arguments lead.

The books by Peter Enns and Kenton L. Sparks deserve a more comprehensive review and analysis, and these will be forthcoming in weeks ahead. You may also expect a response to the challenges addressed to me at the BioLogos Web site.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

J. I. Packer, "Thirty Years' War: The Doctrine of Holy Scripture," in *Practical Theology and the Ministry of the Church, 1952-1984: Essays in Honor of Edmund P. Clowney*, ed. Harvie M. Conn (P&R Publishing, 1990), pp. 25-46.

J. I. Packer, "Encountering Present-Day Views of Scripture," in *Collected Shorter Writings of J. I. Packer, Volume 1: Honouring the Written Word of God*, (Paternoster Press, 1999), pp. 3-22. [quote here from p. 3]

Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament*, (Baker Academic, 2005).

Kenton L. Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship*, (Baker Academic, 2008).

Kenton Sparks, "[After Inerrancy: Evangelicals and the Bible in a Postmodern Age](#)," BioLogos.org, a series in seven parts, July 5-16, 2010.

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