

WHY THE NONINERRANTISTS ARE NOT LISTENING: SIX TACTICAL ERRORS EVANGELICALS COMMIT

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He who begins by loving Christianity better than truth will proceed by loving his own sect or church better than Christianity, and end in loving himself better than all.

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*

The doctrinal basis of our Society's unity rests in part upon the very proper assertion that the Bible is an inspired book, inerrant in the autographs. This commitment to the authority and accuracy of the Bible is a belief we value highly, one we desire to share with those outside our circle, and one concerning which we repeatedly endeavor to convince them. Yet despite our long-term and massive commitment in that direction, despite our meticulous historical, theological and exegetical treatments of the data, the yield in number of converts to our position remains abysmally meager. In fact, if personal impressions can be trusted it seems that more defections occur in their direction than in ours. Some of these defections we knowingly and willingly support by official decision. Some we do not. Of the former I shall not speak. But why, after we have expended so much effort getting them in the fold—and after getting them there, keeping them there—why do they yet reject us? "What's wrong with those noninerrantists?" we ask ourselves. "Can't they recognize truth? Don't they know compelling arguments when they see them?"

Perhaps they do. Perhaps what they see and read from us is not so convincing as we think it is. Perhaps flaws in arguments are like headlights on a dark highway—everyone else's seem brighter and more glaring than our own. That at least is the contention of this essay. Our fundamental position I believe to be sound. Our arguments for it occasionally are not so. After a brief disclaimer, to those failings I presently will turn.

First, the disclaimer. If it is not already clear, I must reiterate that I am not challenging the accuracy or authority of Scripture, which is inviolable. Rather, I am questioning our methods of defending and propagating it, which are not. If I find some aspects of our case for inerrancy less than convincing and can explain why, then we might possibly be able to identify, and to correct, some of the tactical lapses in our dealings with noninerrantists. In the end we might also discover, if we had not already suspected it, that the reason noninerrantists refuse to line up with us on this important issue is not because they are stupid, dishonest, narrow-minded, or reprobate. Perhaps we have not yet made the convincing case we think we have. I, for one, believe some of our

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more commonly repeated arguments are faulty. To date, I have identified what I believed are six such tactical errors we evangelicals frequently commit in defending inerrancy.¹

I. THE SLIPPERY-SLOPE ARGUMENT

Because the issue of the Bible's inerrancy appears to some of us as a watershed issue, we frequently argue that if one takes a stand against full Biblical authority one has stepped onto a "slippery slope" that very probably will lead to further theological concessions and perhaps even to spiritual shipwreck. Examples from the past of people or institutions and denominations that have slid down that slope are marshaled as evidence for our case. Once the anchor of inerrancy is rejected, we reason, one's theological and spiritual stability is jeopardized. We therefore conclude that one ought to hold to Scriptural infallibility for safety's sake. But for several reasons this argument will not do. First, it posits a highly suspect cause-and-effect relationship between one point of doctrine and a subsequent course of events. Every good historian realizes that the relationship between ideas and events is exceedingly difficult to identify and to analyze. The historical reconstruction this argument proposes could involve as many as three historiographical fallacies: (1) the fallacy of *post hoc, propter hoc*, which assumes that if event B occurred after event A, then event B was caused by event A; (2) the fallacy of *cum hoc, propter hoc*, which misidentifies repeated correlation with causation by assuming that if A and B occur in tandem with a great deal of regularity, then A caused B; and (3) the fallacy of mistaking logical sequence with historical causation by arguing that, because B follows A in a logically causative sequence, when B follows A in an historical sequence a cause-and-effect relationship can reasonably be assumed. Whenever we marshal such arguments for our case we leave ourselves open to harsh (and often justifiable) criticism from the outside. Though it is obviously overstated, we ought to remember Wittgenstein's caveat that belief in the causal nexus is often superstition.

Historiographical fallacies aside, the debatable cause-and-effect sequence we have reconstructed from our (arguably biased) selection of the historical and theological data before us is nevertheless advanced as confidently as if we actually knew the theological and spiritual dynamics at work in the mind or life of any given individual rather than as if we were merely speculating about them. I question whether we know even ourselves so surely as we claim to know others, even vast numbers of others who are in some cases long dead and in other cases unknown to us even by name or by sight. We have cause to be far more modest in our generalizations about historical causation and about the psychological factors operative in believing and in changing belief. When we evangelicals are treated so cavalierly and with such insensitive generalization by those who oppose us, we respond with horror and indignation. I think our response to such treatment is warranted. Yet when we inflict such treatment

¹Because my intention in this essay is to expose fallacies and not colleagues, I purposely have avoided naming names or providing bibliographical references for the errors I cite, even though such citations could easily be made.

on others we are bewildered by the way they cling so tenaciously to their obvious error. Our tactical and procedural unfairness is perhaps one reason they do so.

When we advance the slippery-slope argument against our opponents we fail to appreciate how really weak it is unless and until we aim it at ourselves and feel its actual impact. Imagine, if you will, that a noninerrantist argued, in true slippery-slope fashion, that inerrancy is a dangerous belief that could lead, and has led, to tragic consequences. "James Jones, Bob Jones, and Jehovah's Witnesses believe in inerrancy," he says. "Once you believe that doctrine you could end up a madman, an obscurantist, or a cultist. By all means, then, avoid it. The lesson of history is clear. Once you give in on this point, the camel's nose is in the tent. Who knows where it will lead?" No competent evangelical theologian would be convinced to abandon Biblical inerrancy on that basis. He would see immediately how repulsive and unfair such a case is. But of course when *we* argue that way it is different. Used in favor of inerrancy the case is obviously far more compelling, is it not?

The third reason noninerrantists reject this argument is because it is an argument based on expediency and not on truth. It says, when used alone, that one should believe inerrancy because it works rather than because it is true. By using this argument it appears as if we assume that noninerrantists build their theologies on a utilitarian basis rather than on what they perceive to be a factual one. Our assumption that they are in effect theologically dishonest is highly insulting. Like us, they believe what they believe because they think it true, not because they think it convenient or useful (two concepts that admit of considerable debate themselves). Noninerrantists, like inerrantists, are interested in truth, not merely pragmatic preference. Moreover, if we argue according to the slippery-slope paradigm we do so probably because we find it convincing. That may imply some very uncomplimentary things about us, our epistemology, and our methods.

The fourth weakness of the slippery-slope paradigm is the debatable value judgment inherent in our analysis of the relative desirability of past and present theological conditions. This argument can have force only to those who think the present state of things is worse than the first. Leaving aside the vexed question concerning what constitutes a better or worse theological condition, I know of few liberal theologians who believe Princeton Seminary was a better place in the 1880s than in the 1980s. The slippery-slope argument is absurd to those who think recent trends constitute an advance and not a fall.

In short, the sooner we abandon this approach to the problem the better it will be. This argument is inconclusive, uncharitable, and historiographically and philosophically faulty.

II. THE THEOLOGICAL-DEDUCTION ARGUMENT

In our zeal to defend the reliability of the Bible we often implement arguments based on the theological deductions we draw from certain Scriptural texts. This method of argument not only entails certain exegetical fallacies but also depends upon certain discredited medieval methods of theological formulation. For example, we argue that (1) God inspired the Bible, (2) God does not

lie, and (3) therefore the Bible is without error. But this is a faulty argument in at least two ways. First, it is an "apples and oranges" affair—that is, it falsely identifies errors with lies. Mistakes in Scripture, if they existed, would not be lies. Inaccuracy and moral culpability are not the same. When we detect an error on a student's test or in a student's research paper we do not think him evil or despicable. "A" students are not necessarily more moral than "B" students. When a student tells me something he thinks is true about Zwingli but is not, he is not lying to me. Nor are we to think that either the human author or the Divine Author is lying to us if we find an error in the Bible.

The reason we must not draw such blasphemous conclusions is my second point. Such a false identification of Scriptural result with the being and character of God is insupportable. Our method fails to distinguish between the intentions of God (which do reflect his nature) and the resultant phenomena in space and time (which may not). We cannot label (or libel) God by means of our perception of the state of the data. For example, we would consider as ridiculous any conclusion that God had a poor command of Hebrew and Greek because of the occasional grammatical failings in Scripture. Nor could we conclude that he was poor at spelling and mathematics because the Biblical text contains some similarly strange and confusing data. That he permits such things to occur, that he even employs them for his own ends, is no bad reflection on his character or his abilities. God is not to be thought deceitful or duplicitous because Paul's words occasionally are infuriatingly vague or unclear. Other beings than God have had their way in the matter. Their actions do not necessarily reflect on him. By the same token, whether they occurred in the original autographs or in subsequent copies, if errors of fact ever surfaced in the Bible they would not necessarily be lies from God.

Furthermore it does no good to argue that grammatical errors are inconsequential or else not as important as errors of substance. God's idea of "substance" might possibly equate with those entertained by twentieth-century American evangelicals. It might not. We have no sure word that grammatical failings bother God any less (or any more) than errors of number or sequence, for example. We cannot dogmatically assert that Paul's shipwreck of grammar in portions of Galatians is any more or less appealing or appalling to God than the unusual numbers in Kings or Chronicles. It is all guesswork, and the non-inerrantists are not likely to resign their beliefs over that.

III. THE CHRISTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

In our effort to convince others of the Bible's infallibility we frequently make appeal to Christ himself. We appeal, on the one hand, to his recorded words and, on the other hand, to our understanding of the incarnation. Jesus, we say, held to the supreme accuracy of Scripture. Furthermore, in the same way that Christ was without sin the Bible is without error. But these are not telling arguments. Even if we demonstrate beyond any possibility of dissent that the words recorded in the Bible are actually his words and not those of the evangelists, and that Jesus when he so spoke was not accommodating himself to his audience, and that those words reflect a bibliological view identical to that which we espouse, we have not yet got a case against the noninerran-

tists. To evangelicals who, like me, maintain a high view of Christ, such an argument may be a conclusive one. But, judging from those I studied under in seminary and graduate school, I dare say that most theologians outside our circle do not hold such a view of Christ. Unless someone already holds an exalted view of the authority of Christ (which, in most instances, is to say that unless someone already holds a high view of the Bible) such an appeal is unconvincing and circular. Apart from an exalted view of Christ, appeal to his words does not constitute proof. Normally one cannot establish an exalted view of Christ without appeal to the reliability of Scripture, and that—in this case—is begging the question. An appeal to Jesus is conclusive only if Jesus is an authoritative teacher of doctrine and only if the Bible gives reliable data about his teachings. Because noninerrantists believe both these premises are faulty, they must reject our conclusion. We do the same to theirs. In other words, unless our opponents already share certain of our theological presuppositions a mere appeal to Jesus will not settle the issue. Our deft alteration of a bibliological issue into a Christological one (“Don’t argue with me, argue with Jesus”) is flatly ineffectual.

Much less will an appeal to our understanding of the incarnation resolve the question. We sometimes attempt to justify our belief in the inerrancy of Scripture by drawing an analogy between inspiration and incarnation. We trot out all the comparisons we see between the Word becoming flesh and the word of God coming to us in the words of men. From those comparisons we argue that a sinless Jesus is analogous to an errorless Bible. My point is not that no analogy exists. It might. But I deny that we have any sure idea of what it might be. The process of incarnation and its multiform consequences and implications remain a profound mystery to us. How God became a man we do not know. In the same light, the incarnational consciousness is not open to investigation by us, nor can it be used as a convincing basis for argumentation. We do not know what it was like to be both God and man in ancient Judea. Across this great distance in time, and over this great gap in culture, such a retrieval of knowledge is no longer possible, if ever it was. To couple this vast incarnational mystery with our equally sketchy notions of how we imagine God inspired written words long ago and far away into an argument by analogy for the inerrancy of the Bible is, at least as it concerns its evidential value, an exercise in futility. The inherent tenuousness of argument by analogy aside, such speculations have little if any conclusive force. They arise not from demonstrable fact but from mere educated guesswork, perhaps even ignorance. This is only dead reckoning. We know not whereof we speak, and the noninerrantists know that about us on this point. The functional procedures of God on the frontier between the human and the divine in the incarnation may be the same as those on the frontier between the human and the divine in inspiration. Only God knows for sure, and he has not said. In light of that divine silence, noninerrantists will remain unconvinced by our vociferous declamations. And they should. Silence is much to be preferred over arguments drawn from it.

IV. THE DEFINITION-OF-ERROR ARGUMENT

Most of us probably have endured the frustration of arguing theological epistemology with our Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox friends. Their

assertions of papal or ecclesiastical and conciliar infallibility seem to us to be protected by the wall of a thousand qualifications. They seem to us to be what Erasmus seemed to Luther: a slippery eel only Christ could grab. Their answers sometimes appear to be evasions. We may think we have struck a telling blow only to find that they maintain their views merely by verbal nuance, not by argument.

Noninerrantists find our definitions of error equally exasperating. To them we seem to employ one sense of the word "error" in reference to the Bible and another the rest of the day. To them, what we quickly would count wrong on a student's test we offer reverential adherence to simply because it occurs in the Bible. To noninerrantists we appear to cheat. We expend prodigious effort justifying a Scriptural writer's statement or harmonizing one Biblical text with another, but when it comes to a student's paper (or a liberal's monograph) negative judgment is hastily rendered. We seldom hesitate to correct sophomores, liberals, or writers in journals. But when it comes to the Bible, our opponents believe we are unwilling to call a spade a spade. Until we can establish—and consistently apply—a definition for error that holds inside the Bible and out, we will not convince dissenters to join us.

V. THE BURSTING-BALLOON ARGUMENT

The fifth tactical failure I have recognized is the sort of argument that implies that the authority of the Bible is very much like a balloon. If you put a pin prick in it anywhere it collapses. Except for its power as a scare tactic, this argument is without merit and will not serve to establish the truth of Biblical inerrancy. I reject it for two reasons.

First, while it springs from and is intended to uphold our profound reverence for Scripture, it accomplishes the opposite result. It treats the Bible with an almost unparalleled procedural disdain. If the Bible is wrong on one point, we say, it cannot be trusted anywhere. If the Bible is not fully reliable, it cannot be trusted at all. But no book in the world, much less the Bible, should be handled with such extremism or rejected on such radical grounds. None of us would throw our telephone book away if we discovered an error (or even several errors) within it. The phone book has proven its reliability in many instances before. Telephone numbers shown to be correct are still correct whether or not the last one you dialed got through to the party you intended. The same holds true for the Bible. Those places in the Bible that truly have been verified by external evidence still remain verified whether or not some portion of Zephaniah is contravened in the future. One error does not undo that fact. When the stakes are so high, as they surely are in terms of our spiritual destiny, premature rejection of any volume that has upheld its credibility so admirably as has the Bible is patently foolish. No noninerrantist will return to inerrancy (and no inerrantist should continue to maintain it) solely on the strength of that advice.

The second weakness of this argument is, if anything, more dangerous than the first. To reject the Bible so utterly and so contemptuously on the basis of an irreconcilable error (or errors) is not a counsel of wisdom but a counsel of despair. Rather than teaching students to commit spiritual suicide, we ought

to be teaching them that even if errors did surface, all is not lost—including their souls. No clear-thinking theologian should teach that if the sequence of the succession of kings is flawed in an OT narrative, or if Luke's political details cannot be made to harmonize with extra-Biblical sources, then Christ is still in his grave, the Bible is false, and everyone will live and die without hope. I find such conclusions detestable. They encourage people to build houses of cards for their souls. They engender misplaced faith by focusing it upon our doctrines about the Bible rather than on the living God behind Scripture and on Jesus Christ, his only Son. Do not wonder that noninerrantists find this dangerous and wrong-headed advice less than compelling evidence for Biblical inerrancy.²

VI. THE EXPECTATION ARGUMENT

This tactical error is committed when we argue that because scholarly investigations have established the reliability of the Bible in so many previous instances, we may reasonably expect they will continue to do so. In time, if we are patient enough and diligent enough, we may confidently expect (indeed publicly assert) that all the cards will fall our way. Yet despite these assured results and our confident predictions, noninerrantists remain noninerrantists. They do so because they understand quite clearly that expectation does not constitute proof. The fact that archaeological investigations seem to support a statement in Joshua does not mean that all Jude says is correct. Simply because I believe that the Bible's integrity has been upheld repeatedly by previous investigation, I can neither conclude nor argue that it always will be. It might. It might not. The verdict is still out on that count, and that is the verdict at issue. We cannot assume the point to be proven and, on the basis of that assumption, urge people to join our side. All we can conclude from past investigations of particular phenomena is what those past investigations actually have concluded. Past analyses are conclusive (if at all) only about previous issues, not those yet to be addressed.

Not only does this argument beg the question by assuming inerrancy for that portion of Scripture where external verification is still lacking, not only is it unfairly disguising expectation as proof or argument, but it fails to note sufficiently the ambiguity of previous investigations. The yield from earlier analyses is not so overwhelmingly compelling as this argument makes it appear. Despite our claims that not a single spadeful of Middle Eastern dirt stands against the Bible, no noninerrantist shares our opinion that our win-loss record in argument and in investigative analysis is absolutely unblemished. We argue as if it were obvious to all noninerrantists that we were 36–0. They would say, in a generous mood, that perhaps we were 16–20, and that perhaps we were not even that good. In many cases the verdict concerning the outcome of an investigation depends in large part upon the person passing judgment. Such verdicts often are far from incontestable. The fact that we continue to evaluate

²Arguments such as this also make objective analysis extremely difficult to achieve. If one believes that spiritual destitution and epistemological chaos inevitably result from a single error in the original autographs of Scripture, one is highly unlikely to be able to recognize such an error or to acknowledge its presence even if it existed.

each new case in our favor does not persuade noninerrantists to become inerrantists. Their expectation from the track record is not that the Bible is error-free but that we probably will continue to claim it is. Perhaps they see better than we do that our verdicts on past arguments and investigations, and the expectations we derive from those verdicts, say at least as much about us as they do about the Bible.

VII. CONCLUSION

Those are, to me, the six chief tactical errors we make in our discussions with noninerrantists. I am persuaded that none of them has merit enough to justify continued use, at least as they relate to our efforts to convince the unconvinced. Exaggerations, question-beggings, faulty logic, uncharitable assumptions, and unsubstantiated conclusions can hardly be said to further our cause. Nor do I believe that our case is any more compelling when these arguments are seen together. Let us not delude ourselves into thinking that the juxtaposition of six flawed arguments constitutes a conclusive case simply because the arguments are joined. The conjunction of inconclusive arguments constitutes a case that can be questioned, perhaps even refuted, at every point. The noninerrantists, at least, think so. That is why most of them stopped reading our books long ago. They think them sometimes silly and sometimes offensive, both to reason and to good taste. I used to hold it as a point of pride that in my schooling in evangelical institutions I was required to read the texts written by the other side, while in my schooling at liberal institutions I was not. Being an inerrantist, I did not understand fully why this was so. I thought it was a clear case of liberal obscurantism. I never noticed how glaring my own headlights were. I kept staring only at theirs.

But where to go from here? My advice is twofold.

First, we can believe in and argue for the Bible's inerrancy only if the Bible is inerrant. Our focus must be, therefore, on the accuracy and reliability of the Biblical data, not upon our theological deductions about them. All arguments must derive from a careful and honest evaluation of the factual accuracy of the Scriptural phenomena. Arguments based upon our theology have been, and will continue to be, unproductive. Conclusions drawn from premises our opponents do not share will leave them unmoved. The case is to be determined by an assessment of the data that is as objective and even-handed as possible. Even that may not win them over. It is, nevertheless, our best chance—the only one, I am told, that they will listen to patiently.

Second, if we counsel our opponents to be open-minded, teachable, objective, and patient scholars of good will, scholars who can feel the weight of the other side's case, then I believe we ought to insist upon the same qualities in ourselves and our colleagues. We ought also to remember that these academic virtues, like spiritual humility, are exceedingly difficult to attain and, once acquired, are not self-conscious and cannot be flaunted. Any scholar who publicly proclaims his objectivity (or even cherishes it in his own private thoughts) probably lacks the very thing he praises. The best of us has ample reason for modesty and considerable room for improvement. A healthy skepticism (or even agnosticism) on many of the points at issue is not unjustified. This, at least, is what the best among us tell me. That is what helps make them the best. The rest of us have miles to go before we sleep.