

## The Practical Implications of the Doctrine of Inerrancy

By Dan Jensen (2022)

(I apologize that a great deal in this essay will be repetitive for those who watched the debate. This is because we actually got into this very issue in the debate and I'm very glad we did. But, I still think it is good to have a full essay on this subject in print. So, I am still putting this essay out.)

In my book, *A False Kind of Christianity* (it can be found on my website), I provide a fairly full defense of the doctrine of inerrancy from a biblical and historical perspective. But, I do not get too into the practical implications of the doctrine. I do believe absolutely that we as theologians need to do our best to explain the practical implications behind every Christian doctrine and commandment found in Scripture. However, I must admit that I am very hesitant to overly explain the truths given to us in God's word. In my estimation, so-called "practical Christianity" has infected the church today, especially in our nation, in deeply problematic ways. In my opinion, the impression is often given that if the professing "Christian" in the pew cannot understand why a particular doctrine or commandment is of practical benefit for him or her, then he or she can pretty much dismiss it. Some are still willing to believe the doctrine or commandment, but they will still see it as rather unimportant. This approach to the faith is dangerous. We do not get to set ourselves up above God and His word. God is not our servant. We are His. Now I am fully aware of the fact that God does indeed serve us in certain ways. Jesus made it clear that He came to serve and save the lost. But, it is so important to understand that this wonderful service is purely at God's discretion. It is like a master freely choosing to serve his slave dinner out of love and compassion. But the master is still the master, and the slave is still the slave. We would do well to remember this.

So, with all that said, if a doctrine or commandment is taught clearly, unequivocally, and repeatedly in Scripture, it must be believed and emphasized. It does not matter to me if

we cannot always understand why this particular doctrine or commandment is so important to God. We must with a childlike faith simply accept that it is, and believe and act accordingly. I truly believe that the entire concept of a childlike faith has largely been lost in almost all quarters among those who profess some version of “Christianity” today, including within much of the true church (Traditional or Conservative or Historic or orthodox Evangelicalism). Within Progressive Christianity, the concept is largely spurned altogether. Yet Jesus was quite plain that we are to have a childlike faith (Matthew 18:1-4). A childlike faith does not mean we are to have a childish faith (1 Corinthians 14:20). I have three degrees, and I am a theologian and an apologist. I hardly believe in a childish faith. However, we are to believe whatever doctrines and commandments God reveals to us in His word, even when we do not fully understand them. This was my emphasis in my book in regard to inerrancy and most of everything else I said as well.

With all that laid out, I do think we should try as a secondary matter to discern as best we can the practical implications for any doctrine or commandment found in the Bible, especially the essential doctrines that are taught beyond all doubt. And because Progressive Christians are so obsessed with the practical implications of faith, I wanted to write this essay to answer the oft-repeated question, “Why do you guys make such a big deal out of inerrancy?” And it should be said, sadly, that even many true Christians ask this question as well. Many of them, especially in the parts of the church that are primarily made up of those of European descent (not necessarily in Europe itself though; I am certainly including Europe here, but I am also thinking of Canada and Australia as well) outside of the U.S., tend to believe in inerrancy formally and even materially, but believe that Americans make far, far too much of the doctrine. It is my hope that this essay will persuade my brothers and sisters in Christ that are in this vein to change their minds on this point.

I must reiterate here, before moving forward, what I pounded home in my book. And that is, according to my understanding of orthodoxy and heresy, if a doctrine is taught beyond all doubt in Scripture, all true Christians are going to believe it. The sheep listen

to Christ's voice (John 10). Now there is a lot of nuance here that I lay out in my book, and I would encourage the reader to read or review that nuance that I discuss at length in my book in the section "Heresy and Orthodoxy," found in chapter 8. Thus, the most practical implication of the doctrine of inerrancy is that if someone truly and fully rejects it, he or she is not regenerate. It doesn't get more practical than that!

With that foundation laid, let us look more deeply into some of the practical implications of the doctrine beyond the fact that it simply must be accepted because God has so plainly revealed it to us. Skeptics often ask, "How on earth can you guys be so committed to inerrancy when we do not even have the original autographs? How can we be so worried about inerrant autographs that we don't even possess?" Progressive Christians and other liberal professing "Christians" often ask a similar question, "So, both sides in this debate (liberal positions vs. Traditional Evangelicalism) admit that we don't have the original autographs; both sides admit that the manuscripts are far from perfect; both sides admit that translations are never perfect even when we feel very confident that we are translating what was written in the original; both sides admit that there are vast cultural differences between ourselves and the authors of the Bible, making all hermeneutical efforts very difficult at times. If this is all so, it seems like we are all saying the same basic thing; namely that we must be extremely cautious when translating, interpreting, and coming to dogmatic conclusions from the manuscripts. Is this not correct?" When we respond in the affirmative, they follow up with, "Ok then, so why are we so worried about the inerrancy of the originals one way or another when we don't have the originals? All we have is the manuscripts, everyone agrees that they are faulty, and so we all have to go from there whether we like it or not, correct?" When we again respond in the affirmative, they follow up with, "So then why is this particular point such a point of division between us? I can understand other points, such as the LGBT+ community, I agree we are very divided there. But why is inerrancy such a sticking point?" And Tony certainly argued in this manner to a large degree in our debate.

At first blush, these questions/objections seem rather cogent. Inerrancy would at first glance seem to be a doctrine with not a lot of teeth to it. How can I then make it a point

of absolute orthodoxy and fellowship? And often it seems like we are arguing in a circle to our opponents. It seems like we are presupposing an inerrant Bible in order to prove an inerrant Bible. Not only is this circular reasoning, but we don't even have an inerrant Bible from which to prove the doctrine of inerrancy as we are allegedly trying to do! But, none of this actually follows. I do go over in my book how we are not engaging in circular argumentation in our defense of inerrancy (at least I am not), and I encourage the reader to read what I have said there (in the section on refuting other worldviews towards the end of chapter 6). With that said, I do think it worthwhile to reiterate that this is not what I am doing with my defense of inerrancy, and this will be seen as I proceed to explain how the doctrine of inerrancy is deduced and why I believe it does indeed have massive practical implications for the church.

So, let's start from the beginning and work our way up. We do have an abundance of manuscripts for each book of the Bible, especially the NT books. These manuscripts are extremely accurate overall. I will not be defending that here, the reader can read my book for that defense if so desired. When one reads these books with an open mind, one cannot help but be floored by their grandeur. They testify of themselves that they are the word of God, and the only special revelation we need in this life. I will not be defending that point here; again, the reader can read my book for that defense. And while I do not cover this doctrine in my book, it should be said here that all true Christians will submit to these books through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is known as the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. For a fuller discussion of this doctrine, the reader is encouraged to research it on his or her own to come to a better understanding of it. Suffice it to say for the purposes of this essay, I am presupposing it.

And while there are many atrocious translations of these books in many different languages, there are also many excellent translations of these books, taken from the manuscripts in a faithful manner. The internal testimony of the Holy Spirit applies just as much to these translations. In fact, the overwhelming vast majority of Christians around the world only ever read from one of these translations. But, the Holy Spirit guides His children to one of these translations that they can read or have read to them, and

removes the antagonism they would otherwise have towards the translation as unbelievers. He causes them to see the obvious grandeur and power of these translations as overall accurate translations of the word of God.

Despite how some theologians incorrectly articulate the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, no believer could know with certainty that the Bible he or she is reading is inerrant or not upon first reading it. The new believer can only know that it is the word of God in a very general sense. At this point, if the reader is wondering what I mean by “a very general sense,” and how it is even possible philosophically for the word of God to have errors from a hypothetical standpoint, please read my book where I clear all of this up. The reader might also be wondering at this point about true Christians who do not have access to the Bible, and whether or not your average true Christian in the pew really understands all of these distinctions between original autographs; manuscripts; translations; the word of God in a general sense; etc. It is beyond the scope of this essay to answer all of these questions. If anyone would like for me to unpack them, you can make that request by emailing me and I will provide an essay to that effect.

With all that said, the doctrine of inerrancy can only be gleaned from a thorough study of the Bible itself. And because of all the sticky issues discussed earlier, biblical hermeneutics is often not an easy task. All sides agree that doctrine should never be gleaned from sparse evidence. And no doctrine should be made an article of faith unless the biblical evidence behind it is absolutely overwhelming. Using this logic, we come to the doctrine of inerrancy just as we would come to any other doctrine. The Bible teaches the inerrancy of the original autographs as I demonstrate in my book. And it does so in an overwhelming fashion; thus, the doctrine must be seen as an absolute article of faith in contradiction to Chicago (which is otherwise a masterful statement of Christian doctrine).

And here is where the biggest practical implication of the doctrine, other than the fact that the regenerate will accept it, comes into play. If someone is willing to deny what the Bible teaches beyond all doubt in one area, then he or she will clearly be willing to deny

what the Bible teaches beyond all doubt in another area. And as I made clear to Tony in the debate, this is hardly simply an abstract, merely hypothetical, slippery slope argument. This is *precisely* what we have seen over the past 150 years in all strands of Liberal Protestantism. Almost every single major article of faith has been denied in some segment of that religion. And this in turn has caused endless division in almost every major denomination around the world. Augustine made it clear that there would be disastrous consequences to denying inerrancy.<sup>1</sup> He most certainly was correct.

This is why the incessant reminders that we do not have the original autographs are rendered so obsolete. As I made clear to Tony in the debate, we do not see a lot of things that the Bible teaches before us. I used the example of the final state. The Bible clearly teaches beyond all doubt that we will live with God on a perfected new earth for all eternity. But, as of now, we do not see this. This must be taken on faith. By the same logic, it does not matter at all that we do not have the original autographs. We do not need them. None of that changes the fact that we must still believe the original autographs were inerrant because God says that they were. End of discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> You can see my discussion of Augustine and inerrancy on pages 232-236 of my book.