A Usable Taxonomy for Biblical Inerrancy

Daniel G. Sinclair

Williamson College

Author Note

Daniel G. Sinclair

Masters in Theology Program, CT510

Williamson College

Contact: dgsinclair@gmail.com

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1   Abstract

In Christian leadership and laity, the word "inerrancy" is often misunderstood because it is ambiguous until it is well defined and qualified by a handful of important attributes. For the sake of clarity in writing and discussion, this paper defines a usable taxonomy based on four attributes, bifurcated into mutually exclusive values, including *precision* (Empirical vs. contextual), *scope* (Total v. limited), *specificity* (Verbal v. dynamic), and *locus* (Original v. subsequent). Through examination of the sixteen possible and impossible combinations, four highly probable inerrancy types are identified as worthy of further discussion and use, named *Literal, Semantical, Devotional*, and *Metaphorical* inerrancy. In conclusion, some possible avenues for further development of the attributes, and quantification of individual commitment to these types are suggested.

2   The Origins and Current Debate over Inerrancy

The concepts captured in modern definitions of inerrancy have existed in Christian thought since the fourth century, notably in Augustine (Köstenberger & Yarbrough, 2011, p. 111). However, the term *inerrancy* has a relatively modern coinage, probably emerging in the late 1800's in response to higher criticism, and perhaps first used by the two great Princeton theologians A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield in their book *Inspiration* (Hodge et al., 1979 [original 1881] ; Silva, 1988). Contemporarily, an infamous, public, and ongoing battle over inerrancy erupted from withing the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) between Norman Geisler and Robert Gundry beginning in 1983. While both men consider themselves evangelical, Geisler's exegetical approach is more conservative, and some would say *narrower* than Gundry's highly contextual approach, which some claim seriously undermines the inerrancy and

the historicity of Scripture (Blomberg, 2014, p. 120; Holding, 2015). However, much good discussion has emerged out of their initial talks.[1] [2]

3   Current Definitions and Attributes of Inerrancy

Naturally, Christian theologians have explored the various definition of inerrancy, but helpful distinctions have not filtered down to the Church very well, and the traditional, conservative, very literal approach is the only well-known version – and even worse, it is assumed to mean a merely flat, anti-intellectual literalism. However, the spectrum of definitions at the scholarly level is somewhat well developed, and a representative sample is discussed below.

3.1   The Chicago Statement of Biblical Inerrancy (CSBI)

The CSBI was an attempt by over 200 evangelical leaders to craft a meaningful and complete definition of inerrancy in 1978 (*CSBI*, 1978). However, this set of mostly single-sentence affirmations or denials has been criticized (Enns, 2011), and does not really provide clearly identified and quantifiable attributes that can be used for a taxonomy.

3.2   Horsnell's Taxonomy

One of the most detailed and attribute-oriented definitions that came out of the initial uproar at the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) between Geisler and Gundry is Horsnell's article *Biblical interpretation and the future of evangelicalism in the light of the Gundry-Geisler debate* (1987). He defines the following attributes which he borrows from Fackre who later

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[1] The debate between Gundry and Geisler is recorded in the following articles: Geisler, "Methodological Unorthodoxy," JETS 26, 1 (1983b): 87–94; Gundry, "A Response to 'Methodological Unorthodoxy,'" JETS 26, 1 (1983a): 95–100; Geisler, "Is There Madness in the Method? A Rejoinder to Robert H. Gundry," JETS 26, 1 (1983a): 101– 9; Gundry, "A Surrejoinder to Norman L. Geisler," JETS 26, 1 (1983b): 109–15.
[2] Recently, Gundry has moved to an even more radically liberal position in essays and in his book where he declares that Matthew thought Peter was an apostate (Gundry, 2015) . Gundry's contextualization may have reached the point of undermining the historical or doctrinal cohesion of scripture.

published them in a book (Fackre, 1997), and then forms nine different flavors of inerrancy from

them. These attributes include various levels of accuracy in the following items:

- Autographical quality

- Received text quality

- Biblical accuracy in science, history, and geography

- Harmonization level required

- Latitude in interpretation allowed

- Human agency allowed

- Literary genre(s) recognized

- Historical conditioning (context) applied

From these attribute values, Horsnell offers us these types of inerrancy:

1. The Dictation View

2. *Transmissive Inerrancy*

3. *The Trajectory View*

4. *Intentional Inerrancy*

5. The Infallibility View

6. The Ecclesiological View

7. The Christological View

8. Jesus the Liberator View

9. The Symbolist View

Needless to say, this is an ungainly list, although Horsnell does narrow his list of actual views of

inerrancy-proper to items 2-4. But even these more descriptive terms are not as helpful for

common usage as they could be.

3.3   Erickson's Inerrancy Model

Erickson's *Christian Theology*, a well-regarded one volume systematic theology, is currently in its third edition, and provides a succinct high-level taxonomy of the major views of inerrancy, but his naming is not that descriptive in itself, which again may lead to confusion over what is meant (Erickson, 2013, p. 191). His naming includes:

- Absolute inerrancy

- Full inerrancy

- Limited inerrancy

4   Proposed Attributes of Inerrancy

This paper proposes four attributes that cover the breadth of the qualifiers needed for an adequate definition of inerrancy. These four attributes and their mutually exclusive value pairs include *precision* (Empirical v. contextual), *scope* (Total v. limited), *specificity* (Verbal v. dynamic), and *locus* (Original v. subsequent). Note that the arguably more "demanding" values are capitalized for easier identification. As a caveat before moving forward with this simple four-attribute set, it is acknowledged that the doctrine of inerrancy exists within a web of related doctrines regarding the nature of scripture, such as the authority, clarity (perspicuity), necessity, and sufficiency of scripture (Grudem, 1994, p. 73). In addition, the use and definitions of inerrancy may be impacted by other methodological doctrines such as inspiration, transmission, and compilation of scripture (the canon), as well as hermeneutics, homiletics, and praxis. However, for the sake of argument and helpful encapsulation, inerrancy is considered in relative isolation in this paper, and these four attributes are deemed comprehensive enough for meaningful use and discussion.

4.1   Precision

Our expectations regarding the precision of the Biblical texts impact our interpretation of what is being communicated. Specifically, a modern approach to knowledge is narrowly precise and *empirical* in nature. However, Biblical culture and authors, being premodern, were more *phenomenological* in their approach, and may not have been as exact as we moderns are expecting. Standard hermeneutics requires us to consider the various contexts, including the genre and original culture and idioms of the original authors and recipients of scripture, including the expectations of precision. This *contextual* approach is opposed to the *Empirical* approach (the two values for Precision). With Precision, we are asking, "How exact are the bible's use of dates, names, places, numbers, and other quantitative or qualitative statements?"

Interestingly, theologian Jonathan Frame recommends we not anachronistically apply narrow modern, empirical precision to biblical documents, but the contextual, and that we also not consider them inaccurate or untrue just because they lack precision:

> *God intends to speak to everybody. To do that most efficiently, he (through the human writers) engages in all the shortcuts that we commonly use among ourselves to facilitate conversation: imprecisions, metaphors, hyperbole, and parables, to name a few. Not all of these convey literal truth, or truth with a precision expected in specialized contexts; but they all convey truth, and in the Bible there is no reason to charge them with error. Inerrancy, therefore, means that the Bible is true, not that it is maximally precise….inerrancy is compatible with unrefined grammar, nonchronological narrative, round numbers, imprecise quotations, prescientific phenomenalistic description (e.g., "the sun rose"), use of figures and symbols, imprecise descriptions (as Mark 1:5, which says that everyone from Judea and Jerusalem went to hear John the Baptist). I*

agree with these points, but I do not describe them as "qualifications" of

inerrancy. (Frame & Packer, 2013, pp. 599–600)

4.2 Scope

The scope of the Bible's authority and expected precision may extend to two realms of human living and practice – devotional truths v. historical and scientific truths. Naturally, if we expect *Empirical* precision, we are probably more likely to also expect the Bible to be inerrant regarding history and science, and geography. The two opposing values I have chosen for the scope of the Bible's authority is either a *limited,* pietist view that assumes scripture is only inerrant regarding faith and practice, but not regarding history and science. The other predominant view is a *Total* view, where scripture is considered inerrant in all spheres it touches. With Scope, we are asking, "Do we expect scripture to be accurate only in respect to devotional and religious matters, or also in matters of science and history?"

This helpful simplification can be used to remove some of the ambiguity about which type of inerrancy we are speaking of. Many doctrinal statements employ (purposely?) ambiguous terminology, such as "the bible is true in all that it affirms," which allows for wiggle room, but not clarity regarding scope. Deciding what counts as an "affirmation," is not clear, as shown in this excerpt from a Baptist-Catholic dialogue on inerrancy:

The conviction that the Bible is "without error" in what it affirms. But there are

different interpretations of what this actually means. For Southern Baptists,

inerrancy means that the original biblical text was composed precisely as God

inspired it and intended it to be because of God's superintendence: not just the

thought comes from God, but every word with every inflection, every verse and

line, and every tense of the verb, every number of the noun, and every little

particle are regarded as coming from God. Scripture is "God-breathed," and

> *God does not breathe falsehood, so the text is faithful and true in all it affirms, including the miracle accounts, the attributed authors, and the historical narratives. The 1978 and 1982 Chicago statements on biblical inerrancy are representative of this doctrine. (Report on Sacred-Scripture: Southern Baptist - Roman Catholic Conversation, 1999)*

4.3   Specificity

Specificity has to do with the grammatical precision of inerrancy and inspiration. Here, I employ the same terms and definitions as we use for specificity in bible translation, that is, *Verbal* vs. *dynamic*, i.e. word-for-word vs. concept-level fidelity, the former being the more exacting and conservative viewpoint. With specificity, we are asking "At what level do we expect inerrancy? At the level of the individual words or at the level of the ideas being communicated?"

4.4   Locus

This attribute reflects at which point in the chain of Biblical transmission we expect perfection, i.e. inerrancy. The chain starts at the original *inspiration*, then continues on to the original *manuscripts* ("autographs"), the *transmission* of the copies ("received texts"), the *discovery* of manuscripts (more and better received texts), the *translation* of those manuscripts (hermeneutics), the *teaching* of those translations (homiletics), and the personal *reading* of them (illumination). At which of these points, if any, do we expect inerrancy? The most common positions are inerrancy in the *Original* manuscripts, followed a belief in the inerrancy of preserved copies, or even later *subsequent* stages such as translation (such as in King James Onlyism, see (White, 2009)), or even at the teaching stage if we consider such things as *ex-Cathedra* declarations by a Pope or prophetic utterances by Pentecostal preachers.

5   Attribute Combinations and Groupings

When combined, the attribute values above produce sixteen unique combinations, which

are diagrammed in *Figure 1* and described in the sections below. In addition, general groupings

are identified as our major inerrancy taxonomical qualifiers, and invalid or unlikely

combinations are grayed out.

Figure 1: Attribute Value Combinations with Grouping Names

			Precision (Empirical/contextual) and **Scope** (Total/limited)			
			ET	**El**	**cT**	**cl**
Specificity (Verbal/dynamic) and Locus (Original/subsequent)		**VO**	ETVO Literal	ElVO Devotional	cTVO Semantical (Classical)	clVO Metaphorical
		Vs	ETVs Literal [s]	ElVs Devotional [s]	cTVs Semantical [s]	clVs
		dO	ETdO	EldO Devotional	cTdO Semantical	cldO Devotional
		ds	ETds	Elds	cTds	clds

s   subsequent inerrancy subtype
shaded cells are non-viable combinations

5.1   Empirical Total Verbal Original (**ETVO**)

This combination is the most severe, and demands a high precision, requiring that we

read numbers and quotes listed in the bible as exact (as opposed to estimates, or as paraphrases

of what was spoken). I dub this *Literal Inerrancy (LI)*.

5.2   Empirical Limited Verbal Original (**ElVO**)

This combination requires precision, but only in spiritual matters, which demands

verbatim quotes and no paraphrases in the original text. In empirical matters (history and

science), this reader expects inaccuracies. Typically however, a reader who subscribes to limited

scope will not subscribe to high precision, but this could be viewed as a subtype of *Devotional*

Inerrancy (DI).

5.3 Contextual Total Verbal Original (cTVO)

This combination is the evangelical standard, often called *Classical Inerrancy*. However, in order to divest it of the importance given it by the label *Classical* or *Traditional*, I dub this position *Semantical Inerrancy (SI)*

5.4 **Contextual Limited Verbal Original (clVO)**

This combination leads to a belief in verbal inspiration in the original autographs, but believes the content is largely metaphorical and only accurate on spiritual matters, not empirical ones. I dub this position *Metaphorical Inerrancy (MI)*

5.5 **Empirical Total Verbal Subsequent (ETVs)**

This is the view held by those who hold to "King James-onlyism." Not only are the originals precise and complete in their scope, the actual translation into English was inspired. In their view, all other English translations are errant. I would like to dub this *Subsequent Inerrancy,* but since it is in many ways an outlier, I'll categorize this under *Literal Inerrancy* (LI) as a subtype (s) and use this subtype approach for all *subsequent* Inerrancy types. Technically, any view that demands inerrancy beyond the original autographs is grouped here.

5.6 **Empirical Limited Verbal Subsequent (ElVs)**

This combination is highly unlikely, since holding conservative positions on all attributes except scope is inconsistent. However, since it is possible that a *Subsequent Inerrantist* could hold to an otherwise devotional viewpoint, I include this as a subtype (s) of *Devotional Inerrancy (DI)*.

5.7 Contextual Total Verbal Subsequent (cTVs)

Again, this mostly evangelical viewpoint is modified by the marginal position of the need for an inspired *translation*. This then is a *Subsequent* subtype of *Semantical Inerrancy (SI)*, that allows for a more lenient precision.

5.8   Contextual Limited Verbal Subsequent (clVs)

An accurate (i.e. less precise) approach to inerrancy is in concord with a limited scope, but seems contrary to Verbal inerrancy in the translation. It would require a higher view of precision. This is not a realistic combination.

5.9   Empirical Total Dynamic Original (ETdO)

It is unlikely that someone who holds to a precise and complete inerrancy will subscribe to a non-verbal, dynamic specificity of revelation, since the latter obviates such specificity. I therefore eliminate this as a viable view.

5.10   Empirical Limited Dynamic Original (EldO)

It is possible that someone committed to an exacting precision only holds that position for matters of faith and practice, and only dynamic inerrancy. This is a clear *Devotional Inerrancy (DI)*.

5.11   Contextual Total Dynamic Original (cTdO)

This is the standard Evangelical viewpoint, which I dub *Semantical Inerrancy* (SI).

5.12   Contextual Limited Dynamic Original (cldO)

This is another standard, less conservative than the Semantical variety, but perhaps this is the purest, most internally consistent form of *Devotional Inerrancy* (DI).

5.13   Empirical Total Dynamic Subsequent (ETds)

This is another unlikely combination, in that someone who chooses the most severe attributes in all other areas is unlikely to take a non-verbal, dynamic approach to specificity.

5.14   Empirical Limited Dynamic Subsequent (Elds)

Again, the *subsequent* view aligns well with an *Empirical* approach to precision but is not genuinely compatible with *limited* scope and *dynamic* specificity.

5.15   Contextual Total Dynamic Subsequent (cTds)

This combination seems untenable in that a *subsequent* inerrancy is incompatible with a *dynamic* specificity.

5.16   Contextual Limited Dynamic Subsequent (clds)

This combination also suffers from the conflict between *subsequent* inerrancy and *dynamic* specificity.

6   A Simpler Model: Four Major Inerrancy Types Based on Precision v. Scope

While the complete set of four attributes above may in a sense be considered exhaustive, for the sake of usability, we now narrow our list down to two primary attributes, that of *Precision* and *Scope*. We will disregard *specificity* because even though one's view on the level of inspiration (Verbal or dynamic) is important, if we do not assume verbal plenary inspiration of at least the autographs, all meaningful definitions of inerrancy that follow are relatively meaningless. In addition, a better or equal measure of our commitment to literalism at the verbal level may be reflected in our commitment to *precision*, on a spectrum between hyper-empiricism and the less stringent *contextual* approach. Precision can serve as a meaningful proxy for our *specificity* commitments, holding answers for many inerrancy issues that arise whether or not the originals are considered verbally inspired.

We may also disregard *locus*, since outside of the King James-only adherents who claim that the *doctrine of preservation* means we have inerrant received texts, and that we also had inerrant translators for the KJV, inerrant *Original* autographs are the vast majority opinion. Therefore, we may safely ignore both *specificity* and *locus*, and for the latter, choose *Original* autographs for our default *locus*.

With these assumptions, we are not truly losing any major grouping of the sixteen attribute value combinations, we are merely reducing the attribute set to a helpful and broadly

representative pair. If we accept this reduced attribute set we can then plot the remaining two

attributes (*precision* and *scope*) to create a helpful quadrant illustration over which we may plot

ranges of commitment to my previously so-called "mutually exclusive" attribute values in order

to visualize the actual spectrum of commitments to the various sub-theologies that might fall

under these attributes. This nuanced approach allows us to see the value pairs as related in a

mutually *possible* paradox instead of a stark exclusion of one or the other value. The quadrants

are associated with the groupings mentioned in *Section 5 above*, and these meaningful labels

now describe four primary views on inerrancy, i.e. *Literal Inerrancy, Semantical Inerrancy,*

Devotional Inerrancy, and *Metaphorical Inerrancy.*

Figure 2: Precision v. Scope of Inerrancy
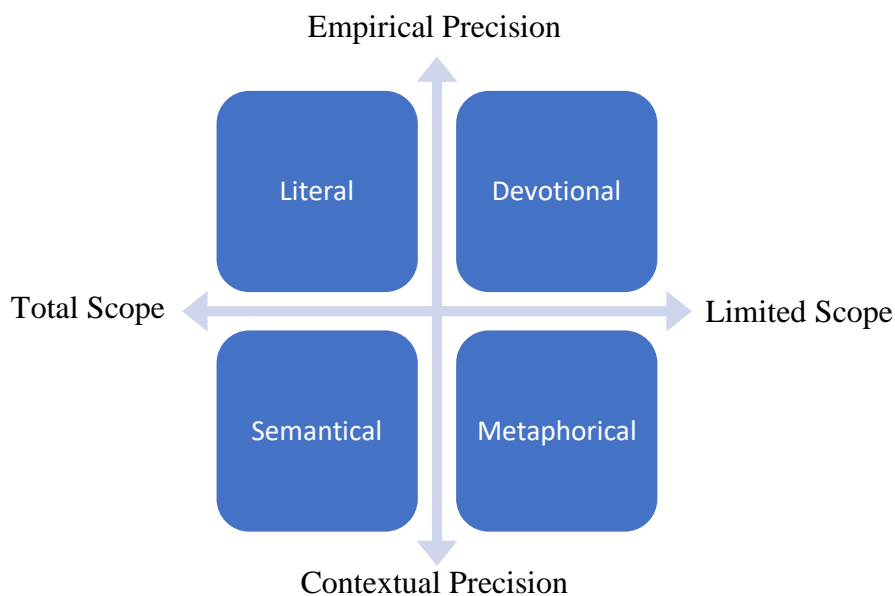
6.1   Literal Inerrancy (LI)

Literal inerrancy has been championed by the American Fundamentalist movement, is

commonly known as the American Inerrancy Tradition (AIT), and has been stalwart in

promoting the authority and accuracy of scripture over all of life and over all matters it touches

("Michael Bird on Biblical Inerrancy," 2013). Even though Fundamentalism is often resistant to

the hermeneutical contextualization or metaphorization of passages when they seem used to

explain away the moralistic or historical claims of the bible, it does employ its own semi-

contextual historical-grammatical hermeneutic. This allows the application of some level of

linguistic, cultural, and genre-based methods in litearlist hermeneutic. However, in general,

literalists have a lower view of not only the critical method in general, but are more conservative

in their inerrancy (see attributes in Section 3.2 above) and in such deeper sub-attributes such as

authorial intent (the author's knew less about the content than God was intending), historical-

cultural conditioning (the content was less effected by cultural understandings and more

universal in their inspiration), the authority of tradition, etc. (Horsnell, 1987, p. 11).

6.2   Semantical Inerrancy (SI)

SI holds that the bible is authoritative and inerrant across the entire scope of its content,

including history, science, and spiritual matters. However, its approach to precision is one that

allows for a much greater scope of interpretive hermeneutical methods, putting more emphasis

on the critical method, authorial intent, and figures of speech and genre. It is also more willing to

challenge traditional orthodoxy than the literal approach.

6.3   Devotional Inerrancy (DI)

DI holds that the bible is only precise in matters of faith, but not necessarily with respect

to science or history. However, it holds a high-precision view in these matters, considering the

bible to be true and exact in devotional teachings and prescriptions.

6.4   Metaphorical Inerrancy (MI)

MI holds that the bible is only not highly precise, and probably only authoritative with

respect to devotional matters, not in history and science. Not only are most biblical narratives

considered primarily valuable as metaphor, if not *only* as metaphorical and inspirational material,

the Bible is more *suggestive* than *prescriptive* in devotional matter. This "lowest" view of

inerrancy may stoop to even considering scripture as inspired at the same level as other religious texts, or not authoritative in any meaningful way.

7   Conclusion and Future Research

I anticipate a day when no one will mention the word "inerrancy" without one of these modifiers. Personally, I hold to an SI position, having reached this position based on my own reason and experience in exodus from a more literalistic approach. Today, I purposely avoid organizations that proudly wear the literalist approach. These are typically identifiable by a statement of faith that merely includes the word "inerrancy," because as I wrote, the most commonly understood meaning of this is a literalist hermeneutic. Churches and organizations that find this approach too limiting and theologically harmful typically omit this word from their self-definitions and use in its place the terms "inspired", "infallible", and "authoritative."

In the future, it would be helpful to develop a survey based on these attributes to test individuals in order to place them on the grid in *Figure 2* above. Further definition of the sub-attributes must be developed, and questions should cover the variety of levels of commitment to these sub-attributes, such as authorial intent, historical-cultural conditioning, authority of tradition, etc. Additionally, questions may be developed around major dilemmas that fall under these attributes, such as one's approach to the creation narratives, the reality of or mythological assumptions around the early patriarchs, or the extent and reality of the Noahic flood. Lastly, various positions on other doctrines such as inspiration, transmission, and formation of the canon, as well as hermeneutics, homiletics, and praxis should be mapped for measuring one's place on the quadrant graph.

8   Epilogue

I began studying this topic because I perceived a gap in inerrancy logic, specifically that if our received texts are not inerrant, even a 99% surety does not guarantee that we can trust all of what we read, especially in our translations, which are one step removed from the received texts, and two from the autographs. Does the whole tapestry of trust in the scriptures unravel without 100% surety? Is 100% inerrancy in the texts we have required for trust in the scriptures? I suppose I could have explored these questions in this paper, but felt that some foundational work in taxonomy needed to be done first, at least for myself. Especially since I think that misunderstanding of what inerrancy means is the cause of a lot of doubt and confusion, and the promotion of the literalist approach may actually be counterproductive to sound theology, faith, and practice. To whit:

> *Evangelicals today may need remedial education about inerrancy, they don't need to abandon it. (Kevin J. Vanhoozer in Merrick & Garrett, 2013, p. 133)*

> *Everything hinges on a clear and careful definition, and once this is in hand, many objections will be seen to e attacking either a caricature or a false implication of the doctrine. (Kevin J. Vanhoozer in Merrick & Garrett, 2013, p. 207)*

> *[The literalist approach] is not helpful because it is reductionistic and adversarial. It produces not a faith seeking understanding but a rationalism seeking certainty. (Michael F. Bird in Merrick & Garrett, 2013, p. 69)*

> *Proponents of inerrancy must take great care to distinguish the notion of literal truth from a literalism that runs roughshod over the intent of the author and the literary form of the text….For the sake of clarification, let us define*

literalism as the view that equates what is said *(that is, meaning)* with semantic

content *(that is, the proposition semantically expressed by the sentence*

regardless of context). At the limit, literalism runs roughshod over figures of

speech and forms of discourse such as irony, in which what one says is often the

opposite of what one means. (Kevin J. Vanhoozer in Merrick & Garrett, 2013,

p. 219)

Therefore, my primary goal was first to define inerrancy in a usable, accessible taxonomy.

Regarding my reservations about the lack of inerrant manuscripts and the insufficient

defenses that we (a) know 99% of the words of the original (Grudem, 1994, p. 96), (b) have no

significant doctrines in question, and (c) can trust the doctrine of the Preservation of Scripture to

give us 100% surety, I have had to arrive at a new detente in my thinking. I entirely agree with

Grudem that if inerrancy at least at the original autographs is denied, we can no longer trust the

scriptures and our trust in scripture may entirely collapse (Grudem, 1994, p. 100). Conversely, I

also conclude that if we require 100% surety in everything, inerrancy is required not only in the

autographs, but in the received texts and translations (which is the King James Only approach to

solving the dilemma with trustworthiness of translations), as well as possibly in teaching and

personal illumination, which we know are not possible. This is perhaps an example of "turtles all

the way down," but in reverse ("Turtles All the Way Down," 2020). So to my surprise, I find that

the inerrancy of the original autographs may be a necessary but *minimalist* solution, not a narrow

conservative one.

In answer to my problem with "1% errant" manuscripts, I find a better solution is to rely

more on the *illumination* of the Spirit, which can cover that gap, and which might even allow for

errant autographs, while still maintaining the authority and truthfulness of scripture. Ultimately,

if we rely on the perfection of scripture, I think we have a one-legged stool, or at least put an

unnecessary weight on that leg. And I still hold that if we push literalistic and inflexible

inerrancy, and hold it as a first doctrine, it distorts and weakens Christian truth claims. Again, to

whit:

> *While inerrancy helpfully insists upon the factuality of Christianity, extracting*
>
> *it from its context in the doctrine o revelation and placing it at the head of*
>
> *Christian doctrine can ironically lead to a diminishment of Christian truth.*
>
> *(Stephen M. Garrett in* Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy, *2013, p. 14)*

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