

Inerrancy as a Litmus Test of Evangelical Orthodoxy?

Clarifications on Carl F. H. Henry's View

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Daniel Wallace was correct when he pointed out that Carl F. H. Henry remained averse to setting biblical inerrancy as the litmus test of orthodoxy. But any attempt to enlist Henry in the cause of diminishing the importance of inerrancy among evangelicals would be grossly unwarranted. Yet that seems like the direction Wallace may have been attempting to lead his readers when he wrote:

And it is this very problem that one of the architects of modern evangelicalism, Carl Henry (who could hardly be condemned as being soft on inerrancy!), addressed in his book, *Evangelicals in Search of Identity*. It seems that many evangelicals are still not listening. And yet Henry saw, forty years ago, that the evangelical church was making inerrancy *the* litmus test of orthodoxy to its discredit.¹

There is no actual contention here on this point. The notion that a believer can legitimately lay claim on being a bona fide, orthodoxy, evangelical Christian while also holding that the Bible may contain errors is not in question. The authors and signers of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, for example, said essentially the same thing in Article XIX.² There seems to be a misrepresentation of “many evangelicals” here. There is also a misrepresentation of Henry’s view based on omission. The flip-side of Henry’s view needs to be heard. For while Henry held that while inerrancy is not a test of evangelical *authenticity*, he did maintain that it still remains a test of evangelical *consistency*. That is,

¹ Wallace, “Review of Defining Inerrancy.”

² Sproul, *Explaining Biblical Inerrancy*, 61. While Carl Henry did not participate directly in the Chicago Council on Biblical Inerrancy or sign the statement produced there he was extremely interested in it and did affirm its articles later. Henry also played important roles in the subsequent ICBI summits and statements.

one could be saved and orthodox on all other essential evangelical beliefs and not believe in inerrancy. Nonetheless, a staunch commitment to biblical inerrancy remains vital to the life and endurance of the Christian Church.

In *Evangelicals in America*, Ronald Nash praised Henry as representing “the very best of evangelical scholarship over a period of some forty years.”³ In the preface, Nash noted that Carl Henry himself had been “kind enough to offer suggestions and corrections as this book neared completion.”⁴ This is surely enough to make it rank highly as an authoritative source for Henry’s views on the evangelical movement and inerrancy. The first of several helpful clarifications about Henry’s view Nash provided is:

Carl Henry, himself a firm advocate of inerrancy, agreed with Lindsell that the doctrine of biblical inerrancy was in fact being denied in a number of institutions that were supposed to be evangelical. But *Henry disagreed with Lindsell’s insistence that the doctrine of inerrancy was the litmus test of being a true evangelical. However much Henry regretted the fact that some evangelicals were wavering on the doctrine of inerrancy, he was not quite ready—on that count alone—to dismiss them from the evangelical camp.*⁵

³ Nash, *Evangelicals in America*, 89-90. Nash’s tribute to Henry may be helpful for those who are not familiar with him:

While Carl F. H. Henry’s name is not nearly so familiar to the general public as that of Billy Graham or Jerry Falwell, he has probably had more influence on the development of contemporary Evangelicalism than anyone, save Graham. Without question, Carl Henry is the foremost evangelical theologian of the twentieth century. . . He was undoubtedly the intellectual leader of the evangelical movement that began in the late 1940s. When Fuller Seminary was started in the late 1940s, Henry was a member of the founding faculty. . . In 1956, Henry left Fuller to become the founding editor of *Christianity Today*. After leaving the journal in 1968, Henry taught at such schools as Eastern Baptist Seminary, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Calvin Theological Seminary, and Hillsdale College. . . Henry is the author or editor of more than thirty books. The culmination of his publishing activity is his massive six-volume work *God, Revelation and Authority*. According to Henry, the time has come to be done with nebulous views of the Christian God and with skepticism about either humankind’s ability to attain knowledge about God or God’s ability to communicate truth. In Henry’s view, the entire enterprise of Christian theology must be grounded on God’s self-revelation. . . Revealed religion is possible because God has made humankind in his image and has given him ability to perceive the trust that God has revealed. Carl Henry represents the very best of evangelical scholarship over a period of some forty years.

⁴ Ibid., "Preface."

⁵ Ibid, 98; emphasis added.

Second, Nash also provided insight into why Henry wasn't willing to make inerrancy

the litmus test:

There are several aspects to Henry's stand on this issue: (1) Some religious cults (for example, the Jehovah's Witnesses) that are decidedly non-evangelical accept biblical inerrancy. Therefore, an acceptance of inerrancy cannot be the only test of true Evangelicalism; (2) nonetheless, *Henry maintains, inerrancy is normative for evangelicals; it is a position that evangelicals should accept;* (3) but Henry believes it is too extreme to say that someone is not really an evangelical if he or she rejects inerrancy while still subscribing to all the great historical creeds; (4) *it would be more accurate, Henry thinks, to say such a person is an inconsistent evangelical.*⁶

Third, Nash also portrays Henry's attitude about the critical importance of evangelical scholars holding firmly to the doctrine of inerrancy:

Have the defenders of inerrancy answered all the challenges? Have they resolved all the problems? Carl Henry admits that they have not. But, Henry counters, while the list of alleged errors in the Bible has grown shorter over the years, the list of the errors made by critics of Scripture grows longer. While the inerrancy case is not helped by simply ignoring the problems, Henry declares, the history of the attack on inerrancy provides grounds for optimism that future discoveries will resolve the remaining difficulties. *The critically important question is whether evangelical scholars approach the Bible with the conviction that it is wholly trustworthy and reliable and that all of its teaching is the word of God, who cannot lie.*⁷

These same positions are clear in the words Henry himself penned:

- (1) Inerrancy is the evangelical heritage, the historic commitment of the Christian church.⁸
- (2) Evangelical scholars are fully aware that the doctrine of the Bible controls all other doctrines of the Christian faith.⁹
- (3) Evangelicals do not dispute the fact that for a time at least Christianity may function with an impaired doctrine of Scripture. But it does so at its own peril and inevitably must then lose much of its essential message.¹⁰
- (4) If the strength of American evangelicalism rests in its high view of Scripture, its weakness lies in a tendency to neglect the frontiers of formative discussion in contemporary theology¹¹
- (5) It is no accident that those who deplore the concept of biblical inerrancy are increasingly uncomfortable with the doctrine of biblical inspiration as well, and prefer to speak instead, sometimes quite amorphously at that, only of the authority of Scripture.¹²
- (6) The first thing the Bible says about itself is not its inerrancy or its inspiration, but its authority. . . . Just as in the Gospels the most important thing is the incarnation, death and resurrection, while the how of the incarnation, the virgin birth, lies in the hinterland; so also in respect to the doctrine of Scripture, while inspiration is as clearly taught as the virgin birth, it lies rather in the hinterland. The

⁶ Ibid., 117;. Emphasis added. Nash also wrote, "For Henry's own views on inerrancy, see Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 4, 129-242."

⁷ Ibid., 101—2; emphasis added.

⁸ Henry, *Carl Henry at his Best*, 29

⁹ Ibid., 61.

¹⁰ Ibid., 61. Excerpted from *Frontiers in Modern Theology*, 139

¹¹ Ibid, 62.

¹²Ibid, 28—29.

Bible teaches is authority and inspiration explicitly, while inerrancy, it seems to me, is an inference from this.¹³

(7) Those who reject inerrancy have never adduced any objective principle, either biblical, philosophical, or theological, that enables them to distinguish between those elements which are supposedly errant in Scripture and those that are not.¹⁴

(8) An unregenerate inerrantist is spiritually worse off than a regenerate errantist. But an unstable view of religious knowledge and authority jeopardizes not only an adequate definition of regeneration but one's insistence on its absolute necessity. The alternatives therefore seem much like choosing whether to have one's right or left leg amputated.¹⁵

(9) If one asks what, in a word, eclipsed the biblical doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture, what theological redefinition of inspiration in nonconceptual categories, and what encouraged neo-Protestant denial of inspiration as a decisive New Testament concept, the answer is modern biblical criticism.¹⁶

In summary, the parts of Henry's view that Wallace neglected to mention are:

- (1) Biblical inerrancy is the evangelical heritage.
- (2) Inerrancy is the historic commitment of the Christian church.
- (3) Inerrancy is normative for evangelicals.
- (4) Inerrancy is the position evangelicals should accept.
- (5) Henry regretted the fact that some evangelicals were wavering on the doctrine of inerrancy.
- (6) One cannot be a consistent evangelical while denying inerrancy.
- (7) A denial of inerrancy is an impaired view of Scripture.
- (8) It is "critically important" for evangelical scholars to hold to an uncompromising view of biblical inerrancy.
- (9) Those who hold an impaired view of inerrancy probably hold an impaired view of biblical inspiration as well.
- (10) Those who deny inerrancy have no objective principle by which to distinguish truth from error in the Bible.
- (11) The doctrine of the Bible controls all other doctrines of the Christian faith.
- (12) When evangelicalism denies inerrancy at its own peril and inevitably loses much of its essential message.
- (13) The strength of American evangelicalism rests in its high view of Scripture (which involved the belief in inerrancy).

¹³ Ibid, 28. Note that Henry does not say it is a "mere inference" as if a logical inference of implications of one doctrine stem into another doctrine were a bad thing. Henry was a champion of the validity and importance of logic. He seems to be saying that those who believe that the Bible is divinely inspired should also see that it follows logically that the divinely inspired scriptures cannot possibly contain error.

¹⁴ Ibid, 29.

¹⁵ Ibid, 29.

¹⁶ Ibid, 29.

When Henry was asked about the possibility of reliving his life and redoing whatever he could, he responded:

From the outset of my Christian walk I have treasured the Book that speaks of the God of ultimate beginnings and ends, and illumines all that falls between. . . . An evangelical Christian believes incomparable good news: that Christ died in the stead of sinners and arose the third day as living head of the church of the twice-born, the people of God, whose mission is mandated by the scripturally given Word of God. The term evangelical—whose core is the “evangel”—therefore embraces the best of all good tidings....That good news as the Apostle Paul makes clear, is validated and verified by the sacred Scriptures. Those who contrast the authority of Christ with the authority of Scripture do so at high risk. Scripture gives us the authentic teaching of Jesus and Jesus exhorted his apostles to approach Scripture as divinely authoritative. There is no confident road into the future for any theological cause that provides a fragmented Scriptural authority and—in consequence—an unstable Christology. Founded by the true and living Lord, and armed with the truthfulness of Scripture, the church of God is invincible. Whatever I might want to change in this pilgrim life, it would surely not be any of these high and holy commitments.¹⁷

What does all this add up to? Clearly Henry held firmly that belief that inerrancy is critical if not crucial to the orthodoxy of the evangelical church—at least in any vital and enduring sense. In view of all these statements, it is difficult see how it does not add up to the belief that inerrancy is ultimately (if not immediately) a kind of litmus test for orthodoxy. The paradox may be stated this way:

An evangelical can remain orthodox and evangelical without being an inerrantist;

but evangelicalism cannot remain orthodox when evangelicals are not inerrantists.

¹⁷ Carson and Woodbridge, *God and Culture*, 392—393.

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