

**Everything, Nothing, or Somewhere in Between?: The Centrality of Inerrancy in the  
Christian Church**

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**Abstract:**

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The doctrine of inerrancy, most clearly articulated in the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy in 1978, is a fundamentalist reaction to trends that were rising in the Protestant American church in the 19th and 20th centuries and has become increasingly important for American evangelicals in the past century. For many, inerrancy is now considered a central tenet of Christian faith and a hill to die on for the life or death of Christianity. This paper will focus on the historical and sociological causes and effects of this phenomenon. Although the doctrine does extend a long tradition of Christian understanding of inspiration in a faithful way, the current emphasis placed upon it by many evangelicals is often misleading to Christians and encourages disunity among academics. I argue that American Evangelicals should reimagine approaches to the doctrine of inerrancy and reduce the centrality of the doctrine in order to foster unity and liberty among Christians.

## Introduction

For most of my childhood, I imagined the Bible to have emerged miraculously. If I were to give my own account of the creation of scripture, it might have sounded something like this:

*In the beginning, God created the Bible and the Earth. From the mouth of God, there fell a book: printed, bound in leather, and containing all 66 books of the Protestant Bible in 17th-century English.*

My understanding was developed by well-meaning Sunday school and a Christian tradition centered around adherence to the Bible. While it may seem obviously false, it is similar to what many people imagine when they think about the Bible, especially when they hear the word “inerrancy.” Of course, the understanding of inerrancy represented above is inaccurate, scholarly articulations of the doctrine and the nuances of the phrase reveal. Nonetheless, if this is the impression that many Christians receive about the Bible, it is important to understand where and how these ideas have arisen and to what extent they are a product of the doctrine of inerrancy.

Among evangelical churches in America, the doctrine of inerrancy has grown increasingly important in the last several centuries. This idea of biblical inerrancy, most clearly articulated in the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy in 1978, is a fundamentalist reaction to trends that were rising in the Protestant American church in the 19th and 20th centuries. Many who have reservations about this doctrine or who express a more liberal view on the role of scripture in the church are harshly criticized by proponents of inerrancy.<sup>1</sup> This has led to division

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<sup>1</sup> For example, In 2008, Peter Enns, a major critic of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy was suspended from Westminster Theological Seminary after writing “a book urging wobbly believers to embrace man's role in shaping the Bible.” This kind of firing is not an uncommon occurrence, rather it has been a strategy of innerantists like Norman Geisler since the 1970s. David O’Reilly. “Bible Professor Suspended over Teachings.” July 10, 2008. [https://www.inquirer.com/philly/news/homepage/20080710\\_Bible\\_professor\\_suspended\\_over\\_teachings.html](https://www.inquirer.com/philly/news/homepage/20080710_Bible_professor_suspended_over_teachings.html)

and a strong reactionary tendency among protestants in general. Among Evangelicals and in the Restoration movement specifically, the doctrine has increasingly become a central tenet of the Christian Faith, often leading to the ostracization of those who do not adhere to inerrancy. However, this present reality contrasts the history of the Christian Tradition, making an essential out of a word that once was not even used by Christians. The debate surrounding inerrancy is complex and far from one-sided. On the one hand, a doctrine detailing what it means for scripture to be “God-breathed”<sup>2</sup> is important for many Christians, especially in the face of ever-growing doubt in an increasingly empirical world. On the other hand, the centrality of these claims for many Christians may have the effect of creating a mistrust for academic inquiry of the Bible and of restricting the diverse set of views on Biblical authority contained in the Christian tradition. Further, it seems that the current unfaltering insistence from many evangelicals upon this doctrine has the potential to create unnecessary disunity and strife. Allowing for more interpretational nuance could foster unity and stimulate meaningful academic inquiry within the Christian Church.

### **Biblical Authority in Christian Thought**

The doctrine of inerrancy is rooted in the broader subject of biblical authority. Though the term “inerrancy” is a product of the modern age, its roots lie in a long tradition of understanding the Bible and inspiration. As Andrew Messmer points out, there are records of debates about the inspiration and authority of scripture since the patristic era (2nd-5th centuries) and conflicts among the church fathers with groups like the Marcionites, a prominent group of early Christian heretics in North Africa, forced early theologians to grapple with questions of what inspiration truly means.<sup>3</sup> He finds from these debates that “the predominant view of

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<sup>2</sup> θεοπνευστος

<sup>3</sup>Andrew Messmer. “The Inspiration, Authority and Inerrancy of Scripture in the History of Christian Thought.” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 45, no. 4 (November 2021): 295

inspiration in the early church was what we now call divine dictation, meaning that God's Spirit was the only active agent in the writing of Scripture, with humans playing a strictly passive role."<sup>4</sup> He goes on to discuss the doctrine of inerrancy in the patristic age, arguing that among these church fathers, "there was a consensus that the Bible was inerrant."<sup>5</sup> This statement is anachronistic, imposing a modern term onto ancient thinkers, but it does represent important claims about this age. Namely, he believes that in the patristic era, Christians generally believed that the Bible was without error. However, he does note that this means different things to different theologians, as Origen believed that there were superficial errors in scripture though still placed by God.<sup>6</sup> For Origen, there were clear historical inaccuracies within scripture that he believed were nonetheless the inspired word of God, inserted so Christians would seek the "true, spiritual sense of the passage."<sup>7</sup> This observation from Origen represents a more limited view of biblical infallibility than one might expect. The acceptance of historical inaccuracy that is incidental to the text's instruction calls into question the notion of biblical inerrancy and the presence of this idea from a Patristic thinker questions the appropriateness of labeling him an inerrantist. Nonetheless, Messmer accomplishes an important task by pointing out the continuity in the general belief that the Bible is without error for Christians throughout history. What is undoubtedly true is that Christians throughout history have greatly valued scripture and modern Christians should be slow to deviate from this appreciation of scripture's authority and inspiration.

One finds similar sentiments echoed by many of inerrancy's supporters. One should be slow to judge the theology of a modern notion of inerrancy without stopping to think about how

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 295

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 296

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 297

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 299

it is continuous with a historically orthodox view of Biblical Inspiration and Authority and should be quick to recognize the long tradition of theologians and church fathers who have placed incredible importance on the inspired and infallible nature of scripture.

However, The doctrine of inerrancy contains a much broader set of assumptions than simply “being without error” and authors should be more precise in the ways that they use theological terms. Jonathan Moorhead undertakes a similar task to Messmer in his 2016 article on Inerrancy and church history, coming to similar conclusions.<sup>8</sup> He boldly claims that Inerrancy is *not* a modern invention. His point is important but overstated. While there is significant continuity between a historical understanding of Biblical Authority and the doctrine of inerrancy, the language certainly is a modern invention. To subject ancient authors to modern ways of thinking does them a disservice by attaching a set of assumptions to their writings that they may not necessarily have held. To suggest that the church fathers were “inerrantists” has the danger of implying that they share an understanding of scripture in line with statements like the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, which requires a lengthy explanation full of qualifications for the idea that the Bible is “without error.” It is essential to separate terminology from theology because language matters. When examining the effects of the doctrine of inerrancy, it is less important to dissect the theology of a specific than the ways that doctrine has been applied and understood by Christians in general. Though the doctrine of inerrancy is in many ways consistent with the ways that Christians throughout history have thought about the Bible, the terminology itself and its connotations, rather than its theology, have contributed to disunity among Evangelical Christians in the U.S.

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<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Moorhead. 2016. “Inerrancy and Church History: Is Inerrancy a Modern Invention?” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 27 (1): 86

## The Rise of Inerrancy

Despite its similarities to ideas held by Christians throughout history, the doctrine of inerrancy was not established until the 19th century by thinkers such as B. B. Warfield, who sought to defend challenges against the Bible's truthfulness with mantras like "what the Bible says, God says."<sup>9</sup> Warfield began publishing in 1883 and devoted much of his academic career to examining the doctrine of inspiration, strongly advocating for a doctrine of inspiration that established scripture as "God's words written" and fighting against the understanding of inspiration as God "breathing in" to scripture. Rather, Warfield believed that the verses on inspiration found in 2 Timothy necessitated that scripture was "breathed out" by God.<sup>10</sup> According to Warfield, this difference implied that scripture was, in some sense, the actual words of God, rather than human words that were "breathed into" by God. From his post at Princeton Theological Seminary, his ideas quickly spread among Protestants as a response to pressures of Modernism and Liberalism. These ideas began to hold an increasing amount of sway over American Protestants as cultural pressure rose in the 20th century. Tillman writes "During this[early 1900s] period, to be a fundamentalist meant to be a conservative protestant who took very seriously certain "fundamental" doctrines like Biblical inerrancy, premillennial dispensationalism, and an anti-secular stance."<sup>11</sup> These trends continue as Fundamentalists become more divided from mainline Protestants throughout the 20th century and the doctrine is increasingly popularized as a household issue for Christians across America through widely successful books like Harold Lindsell's *The Battle for the Bible* (1976). Thus, the doctrine of inerrancy became a rallying point for Protestant fundamentalists in an effort to maintain an

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<sup>9</sup> Mark Lloyd. "What the Bible Says, God Says: B. B. Warfield's Doctrine of Scripture." *Ecclesia Reformanda* 1, no. 2 (2009): 184

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p.187

<sup>11</sup> Rachel Elaine Tillman. "American Protestant Fundamentalist Anti-intellectualism in Historical and Critical Perspective." University of Denver ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, (2008): 2

emphasis on the authority of scripture when faced with Liberal trends among mainline Protestants.

However, ideas about inerrancy are nebulous in the face of criticisms relating to issues of textual criticism and potential historical inaccuracies in the Bible. For example, scientific discoveries concerning the age of the Earth and the origin of species put pressure on inerrantists to respond, either through staunch defense of the truth of the Bible or through qualification and redefinition of the doctrine of inerrancy.<sup>12</sup> In the end, Fundamentalists did both. The pressures of scientific discovery did increase the vigor with which fundamentalists insisted on inerrancy as a central element of the Christian faith and in 1978, the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy convened a conference consisting of more than 200 evangelical leaders to compose a statement that articulated the doctrine of inerrancy to its fullest extent. This statement is called the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy and is considered by many *the* definitive articulation of the doctrine of inerrancy for evangelical Christians. This moment is a watershed moment in the history of the doctrine of inerrancy, shaping the future of all further discourse.

### **Inerrancy and its Consequences**

The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy does a great deal more than the claim that “the Bible is without error.” Included in the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy is a reassertion of the idea that the Bible is without error. However, it also contains statements that allow for interpretive differences in how one views the truth of the Bible. For example, Article XIII reads:

We affirm the propriety of using inerrancy as a theological term with reference to the complete truthfulness of Scripture. We deny that it is proper to evaluate Scripture according to standards of truth and error that are alien to its usage or purpose. We further deny that inerrancy is negated by Biblical phenomena such as a lack of modern technical precision, irregularities of grammar or spelling,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p.15



observational descriptions of nature, the reporting of falsehoods, the use of hyperbole and round numbers, the topical arrangement of material, variant selections of material in parallel accounts, or the use of free citations.<sup>13</sup>

This statement affirms the use of the term inerrancy while allowing for a set of things that many might consider ‘errors’ to exist within it. While they previously stated that the doctrine of inerrancy is free from all falsehoods, they do allow for a “lack of modern technical precision” and “observational descriptions of nature.” These statements leave much room for interpretation and are not self-evident in a simpler definition which claims that scripture is in its entirety without error. Due to the qualifications included in this statement, the doctrine of inerrancy became much more reconcilable with modern scientific understanding.

Wayne Grudem, a member of this conference, reflects on its widespread influence as the Evangelical Theological Society, a parachurch organization, adopted the statement in 2004 of countless other churches, seminaries, and other parachurch organizations have accepted it since.<sup>14</sup> Grudem argues that this council prompted a reclamation of the term ‘inerrant’ from its critics, unification and standardization of the doctrine itself, and a shift in academic culture towards an assumption of inerrancy’s truthfulness.<sup>15</sup> While these effects are seemingly positive, one must question the extent to which they are clouded by bias. For example, his assertion that the statement served to “reclaim” the term from critics reveals an underlying problem of the term: its lack of clarity. The need for such a lengthy statement to reclaim the term from its apparent pitfalls is indicative of the fact that the term is often misleading. Further, his claim that the statement has fostered unity in the church seems blind to the panoply of views on inerrancy among evangelical Christians. Kurka points this out in his reflection on different views of Biblical Inerrancy. He finds that even among fundamentalists, major voices disagree on the ways

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<sup>13</sup>International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, pp.5-6

<sup>14</sup> Wayne Grudem, “Why Has the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy Had Such Wide Influence?: Reflections by a Participant.” *Presbyterion* 48, no. 1 (Spr 2022): 20

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, pp.20-21

one ought to interpret the statement and that among evangelicals, the doctrine of inerrancy continues to be questioned as a whole.<sup>16</sup> The incredible variation among interpretations of this statement leads one to question the extent to which the perceived unity afforded by this statement serves to mask the disunity among evangelical Christians surrounding this topic. Scholar Robert Hull highlights this disunity arguing that the current centrality of inerrancy is inconsistent with the ways in which humanity has been infused into scripture since its inception and that it doesn't allow for enough nuance in the ways that Christians understand biblical interpretation.<sup>17</sup> As Hull argues, though the Chicago Statement seems to foster unity, it seems more likely that it stifles more nuanced interpretation by insisting upon a rigid understanding of biblical authority that is not necessarily consistent with the Bible's origins.

This problem is manifested in the way the doctrine has been incorporated into the creedal statements of Evangelical Institutions. The Evangelical Theological Society, a conservative evangelical organization with over 4,200 members, adopted the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy as an expression of their beliefs on Biblical Inspiration. All members are required to affirm this statement, among other statements of faith, to join the society. The society is particularly influential in the academic world, publishing one of the most widely read Evangelical Christian journals. Notably, they have expelled several members due to publications that question a strict notion of Biblical Inerrancy. For example, In 1983, Robert Gundry was expelled from the society for questioning the historicity of events in the Gospel of Matthew.<sup>18</sup> This trend has continued, as seen in the suspension of Peter Enns from Westminster Theological

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<sup>16</sup> Robert C. Kurka, "Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy." *Stone-Campbell Journal* 18, no. 1 (Spr 2015): 121

<sup>17</sup>Robert F, Jr. Hull. 2002. "The Bible Only?: Too Many (Cracked) Eggs in One Basket." *Stone-Campbell Journal* 5 (1): 19

<sup>18</sup> Ted Olsen. "Inerrancy, Trinitarianism, and...?" November 15, 2007, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2007/november/inerrancy-trinitarianism-and.html>

Seminary in response to his critique of inerrancy and discussion of the human nature of the Bible.<sup>19</sup> These examples are representative of a broader trend among Christian institutions of firing, suspending, or disciplining Biblical Scholars for expressing views on Biblical interpretation that are not explicitly in line with a fundamentalist doctrine of inerrancy. This trend is dangerous for the Church and Biblical scholarship. It creates a culture of division, ostracization, and fear among scholars and prevents theologians from examining the assumptions that underwrite faith. In the very places where Christians are supposed to ask hard questions and think deeply about the Bible and their faith, this pursuit seems to be stifled and punished by rigid adherence to extra-biblical doctrinal statements. In the end, this only leads to greater division in the Church and a more simplistic understanding of faith and Christianity.

These objections to Grudem's characterizations of the effects of the Chicago Statement question the usefulness of the doctrine itself. Though Christians have long since held to an understanding of inspiration and authority, the need to codify these beliefs into a creedal statement and condense them into one word creates a restrictive atmosphere that can be misleading and unrepresentative of the plethora of views held by evangelicals, even by the statement's supporters. This is exactly the problem that Robert Kurka addresses in his article "Has 'Inerrancy' Outlived Its Usefulness?" He notes the tensions surrounding inerrancy in the 21st century and discusses three main reasons why inerrancy is such a troubling doctrine: "Inerrancy defies clear definition," "it promotes ongoing conflict with 'science,'" and it risks the alienation of "the next generation of conservative scholars."<sup>20</sup> These reasons concisely articulate the problems with the current evangelical preoccupation with the doctrine of inerrancy. The issue

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<sup>19</sup> David O'Reilly. "Bible Professor Suspended over Teachings." July 10, 2008, [https://www.inquirer.com/philly/news/homepage/20080710\\_Bible\\_professor\\_suspended\\_over\\_teachings.html](https://www.inquirer.com/philly/news/homepage/20080710_Bible_professor_suspended_over_teachings.html)

<sup>20</sup> Robert C. Kurka. "Has 'Inerrancy' Outlived Its Usefulness?" *Stone-Campbell Journal* 18, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 193-197

of defying clear definition is incredibly important. Kurka writes that “the word tends to conjure up, even for conservatives, a literalistic reading of creation, forced Scriptural harmonization and responses to Bible difficulties, and a dictationist view of inspiration.”<sup>21</sup> If these impressions are true, it seems unlikely that much good is done by insistence on a term that is so misleading, even to its proponents.

Though scholars disagree on the consequences of the doctrine of inerrancy as defined in the Chicago Statement of Biblical Inerrancy, there are some flaws contained in the praises of its supporters. As Hull and Kurka point out, the doctrine is unclear and doesn't seem to provide the unity that its proponents argue that it does. Instead, it may actively foster disunity by alienating many academics, misleading Christians, and creating unnecessary conflict with science. If this is true, a re-evaluation of the doctrine of inerrancy is required, potentially to the point of the phrase's abandonment.

### **Reimagining Biblical Authority in a Modern Age**

As many supporters of the doctrine of inerrancy are quick to point out, Christianity has maintained a relatively consistent understanding of biblical authority and inspiration throughout most of its history. Though the maintenance of this tradition is important, the current approach to this problem among evangelicals has some evident problems. Thus, a reimagining of the ways in which we discuss the doctrine of inerrancy may be necessary. This is not an attempt to reimagine a theology of biblical inspiration, though that may also be necessary. Rather, this reimagining is specifically concerned with the *way* in which we discuss authority rather than the authority itself. Even if the statements made by the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy are in line with an Orthodox understanding of Christianity, the way Evangelicals discuss inerrancy today is detrimental to a true understanding of these concepts and to those scholars who hold opposing or

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p.193

varying views on scripture. Thus, I propose that the current rigidity and connotations of the doctrine of inerrancy could be addressed and rectified through a decreased emphasis on the language of inerrancy and a return to more traditional language surrounding scriptural authority such as that of inspiration. To describe the bible as inspired is in line with a historical understanding of Biblical authority and is a translation of a Biblical word. Though some may worry about the interpretational nuance afforded by this term, this nuance may in fact be a feature, not a bug. If nothing else, the nuance of the term inspiration is true to the ambiguity of the Greek word itself. Lohfink, a Jesuit theologian, provides an interesting perspective on this prospect as he explains how the catholic church has dethroned inerrancy as the reigning lense for understanding scripture. He writes “...biblical inerrancy is seen to be simply a special aspect of the truth of divine revelation. It ceases to be an item of theological tradition which can be associated only in an external and superficial fashion to the central event of revelation.”<sup>22</sup> This stands in stark contrast to the current emphasis many American evangelicals place on inerrancy. These ideas lay the groundwork for what it may look like to shift evangelical attitudes toward biblical authority in a more unifying direction.

Kurka also similarly imagines a new way of understanding inerrancy and biblical authority in general. He argues that instead of rampant preoccupation with inerrancy, Christians could shift toward a different focus of scripture:

In a strange sort of way, inerrancy’s preoccupation with the informational content of the Bible parallels the approach to the text of classical liberalism. Both tend to approach the Sacred Text as an object to dice, dissect, and align with prior presuppositions about theology, history, and science. On the other hand, if we recognize Scripture as fundamentally worldview, evangelicals are enabled to ask the right questions and more importantly, live the right life. Is anything more congruent with a high view of the Bible?<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Norbert Lohfink. *The Inerrancy of Scripture and Other Essays*. North Richland Hills, TX: BIBAL Press, 1992. 51

<sup>23</sup> Robert C. Kurka. “Has ‘Inerrancy’ Outlived Its Usefulness?” *Stone-Campbell Journal* 18, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 201

This vision of the bible as a worldview seems to be much more fruitful than an intense preoccupation with the minutiae of factuality within scripture and it is through visions like these that Christians may begin to move past the disunity created by the current centrality of the doctrine of inerrancy.

It still needs to be determined how exactly this can be accomplished, especially in the increasingly divided world that Christians live in. However, these changes could begin with Seminaries that require professors to subscribe to statements affirming inerrancy. This would allow for academic inquiry that is more honest, without fear of adhering to a standard of Biblical Interpretation found outside of the Bible. Further, a start could be found in the way that Christians talk and think about this issue. The issue has been framed as a “battle for the Bible.” In this framing, the stakes are high and central to the message of the gospel. This framing is unnecessary and divisive. Inspiration is important but it is not more than the gospel. The Nicene Creed should always take precedence over the Chicago Statement. Thus, Christians could seek to reconcile with those whom they disagree with and rejoice in their shared faith in Jesus Christ. If pastors, theologians, and Christians were able to accept these differences in Biblical Interpretation without ostracization and polarization, this “battle for the Bible” could simply be a discussion about the Bible; fostering unity and faith rather than dissent and confusion.

### **Conclusion**

As one who is considering a path of vocational ministry and who intends to be a lifelong member of the Church, I care deeply about responsible interpretation of the Bible and Christian unity. For many in the inerrancy debate, these two values seem to be in tension. However, I would urge Christians to consider the long history of diverse thought surrounding biblical authority and inspiration; I would urge Christians to celebrate the humanity found both in the

creation and interpretation of scripture; and I would urge Christians to value the call of scripture on their lives more than the details of historical accuracy or inaccuracy. This requires a change in priorities, not theology. Reconsidering the centrality of inerrancy doctrine would subordinate this complex and conflict-ridden term to the call of the gospel. While further inquiry must be made on the subject, a shift towards less polarizing language is a start in the direction of reconciliation. This shift perhaps would return to an increased emphasis on the language of “inspiration” and a decreased emphasis on the doctrine of inerrancy. Rather than holding Christians to a rigid creedal statement surrounding scripture, a shift away from strict adherence to inerrancy accepts the questions that remain about biblical authority that Hull points out. This shift encourages an emphasis on content rather than detail, inviting Christians to consider the call of the Bible on their lives rather than the ways it speaks to historical events. This shift in emphasis and terminology is not a disavowal of notions of biblical inspiration, but an admission that doctrines of inspiration must be subordinate to the gospel and that there is still much to be understood about the nature of scripture. Though there is a need to maintain an Orthodox understanding of scripture amidst the pressures of modernism and liberalism for many evangelicals, we must also be wary of the ways doctrine may take precedence over the gospel itself. In pursuit of unity, grace, and love, Christians must abandon inerrancy’s centrality, rejoicing in the mystery of the Word of God.

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