The Battle for Inerrancy: How the Doctrine of Inerrancy is Affecting Christian Relationships and Missions

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ABSTRACT

Christians have often turned to the Bible to justify their battle, whether physical, as is the case with the Crusades; theological, as with the Ecumenical Councils; or ecclesiastical, as in the Reformation period. Today one such battle that has come to the forefront for the North American Reformed Conservative Evangelicals (RCEs) is doctrinal. As in the case of previous battles, this doctrinal fight is deeply rooted in the way the Scripture is being perceived and interpreted. This paper identifies what may be the most significant doctrinal battleground for the RCEs, and explores the rationale that promulgates the conflict. This essay argues that one's perspective on the Bible affects the way mission is undertaken. More specifically, one's view and interpretation of the Bible will determine which doctrinal battles are worth fighting for and why, how such battle affects the posture of relationship to others and how it affects the way mission is conceived and executed.

INTRODUCTION [1]

Christians have often turned to the Bible to justify their battle, whether physical, as is the case with the Crusades; theological, as with the Ecumenical Councils; or ecclesiastical, as in the Reformation period. Today one such battle that has come to the forefront for the North American Reformed Conservative Evangelicals (henceforth RCEs or Reformed) is doctrinal. As in the case of previous battles, this doctrinal fight is deeply rooted in the way the Scripture is being perceived and interpreted. This paper identifies what may be the most significant doctrinal battleground for the RCEs, and explores the rationale that promulgates the conflict. This essay argues that our perspective on the Bible affects the way we do missions. More precisely, *one's view and interpretation of the Bible will determine which doctrinal battles are worth fighting for and why, how such battle*

affects the posture of relationship to others and how it affects the way mission is conceived and executed. This paper will proceed in two steps. First, it identifies inerrancy as the one doctrine that resurfaces persistently in the battle for the Bible and explores the theological reason behind it. Second, it investigates how a commitment to the doctrine stirs the posture of interdenominational relationships and also affects the way mission is conceived and carried out. The scope of this paper is limited to the Reformed Conservative Evangelicals within North America.

INERRANCY: A HILL ON WHICH TO DIE

Texas Judge, Paul Pressler, in his book, *A Hill on Which to Die*, argued that inerrancy was the heart of the problem in the controversy within the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), and it

was worth dying on that hill.[2] He triumphantly concludes, "The SBC controversy was a hill on which to die. Many did die—if not physically, in other ways. It was a hill that had to be won, and won it was."[3] The battle was won, at least within some circles, but not the war as the recent Licona controversy (which we will revisit)[4] points out. Yet more Presslers have risen to take the mantle. In fact, inerrancy has always had proponents and non-proponents in all denominations or non-denomination churches.

The Battle for the Bible

On the one hand, people like Harold Lindsell, John F. McArthur, and Normal Geisler,[5] among others, are strongly convinced that inerrancy is a core doctrine of Evangelicalism, or that Evangelicalism stands and falls on the doctrine of inerrancy. Harold Lindsell claims that the greatest battle for evangelical Christianity was the battle for biblical inerrancy.[6] John F. MacArthur argues that one cannot "hope to be an effective student of the Word of God or to even lead an effective Christian life" if s/he denies the doctrine of inerrancy.[7] On the other hand, people

like Robert Gundry, Peter Enns, and A.T.B. McGowan, among others, believe that inerrancy as understood and defined by the former group is unnecessary, a modern invention. McGowan argues that inerrancy dies 'the death of thousand qualifications.'[8] He vies, "I am arguing for a high view of Scripture, based on a verbal spiration [not inspiration] of the text but . . . reject the implication that thereby the *autograph* must be inerrant."[9] Enns contends, "On a deeper level and ultimately more important level, inerrancy sells God short."[10] By selling out, Enns means that inerrancy creates more problems than solution creating conflicts and misunderstanding. Thus, the doctrine becomes the source of the problem, not the solution. In between, within a broad spectrum, are Clark H. Pinnock, Michael Licona, Ben Witherington III, and Michael Bird, among others. While sympathetic to the idea, they prefer to modify, avoid the term, or disassociate from the traditionalist understanding of inerrancy. This last group can be classified as the limited inerrantist and Geisler and others as unlimited inerrantist, at least for the purpose of this paper.[11] The limited inerrantists do not think either a precise understanding or a clear-cut definition of the term is a necessary factor for Evangelicalism. Mike Licona, while not denying the doctrine of inerrancy argues that "the truth of the Christian gospel does not hang on every word in the Bible being correct, the doctrine of biblical inerrancy is, at the very most, a secondary

2   Paul Pressler, *A Hill on Which to Die: One Southern Baptist's Journey* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman. 2002), 150–160.

3   Ibid., 306.

4   Mike (Michael) Licona is a New Testament scholar from the Southern Baptist Convention. His excellent, yet controversial book, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic; Nottingham, England: Apollos, 2010), revived the old controversy of inerrancy resulting in people like R. Albert Mohler, Norman Geisler, F. David Farnell and others questioning his commitment to the doctrine.

5   Geisler is the chief proponent of the cause of inerrancy. He was instrumental in ousting Robert Gundry from ETS membership in 1982 because of the latter's position on the doctrine. Geisler has also labeled the attempt to dialogue on the topic of biblical inerrancy in the 'Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy" as "Madness in the Method." Norman L Geisler, "A Review of Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 25, no. 1 (2014): 65.

6   Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 2000), 200.

7   John MacArthur, *Why Believe the Bible?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2015), 23.

8   A. T. B. McGowan, *The Divine Authenticity of Scripture: Retrieving an Evangelical Heritage* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2007), 106. McGowan in referencing the 'death of thousand qualifications' was quoting I. Howard Marshall.

9   Ibid., 124.

10 Peter Enns, "Inerrancy, However, Defined, does not Describe what the Bible Does," in *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2013), 84.

11 This paper uses 'inerrantist and inerrancy' to refer to the unlimited inerrantists and their view unless noted otherwise.

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doctrine."[12] Michael Bird chimes in that even though inerrancy possesses a certain utility in the "battle for the Bible" in the North American context, it is not an essential facet of faith for global Evangelicalism as the majority of world Christians have always upheld the inspiration, authority, and high view of the Bible even in the absence of such nomenclature.[13] However, a strong commitment to the doctrine has found its abode, particularly among many RCEs.

Whatever one's position may be, attributing the doctrine of inerrancy to the modern fundamentalist making as Ernest R. Sandeen theorized,[14] or to the early nineteenth century Princeton theologians'—in particular Benjamin B. Warfield—misunderstanding of the position of the Reformers like Calvin and Luther as proposed by Jack Bartlett Rogers and Donald K. McKim,[15] or to the rationalist creation that emerged from "the heat of the battle [in the early nineteenth century]" as A.T.B. McGowan argued[16] fails to consider the complexity of the issue properly. Ronald F. Satta had argued against Sandeen's thesis by showing that Charles Hodge, father of A.A. Hodge, had published an article defending the exact concept of inerrancy twenty-five years before his son wrote about it.[17] He also asserts "The Early Church's adherence to the mechanical dictation theory of transmission expressed its commitment to verbal inspiration and inerrancy."[18] John D. Woodbridge[19] and recently Jonathan Moorhead,[20] have also countered the thesis of Rogers and McKim by showing that even though the exact term inerrancy was not used, there always were Christians who, beginning from the early church Fathers, have subscribed to the idea of inerrancy. But the more pressing challenge to Rogers and McKim's thesis comes from John D. Woodbridge, who has taken a systematic and critical look at their presentation of Luther and Calvin (and others) and found it to be less than convincing.[21] Helm, a British philosopher, has challenged the claim that inerrancy came about merely as a result of employing rationalistic logic. Such simplistic claim, Helm argues, is built on the failure to differentiate between using reason in a proper way and being rationalistic.[22] Helm's rebuttal is interesting in that he believes Warfield never intended the

12 "On Chicago's Muddy Waters," *Risen Jesus, Inc.*, June 2, 2014, accessed September 27, 2017, https://www

13 Michael F. Bird, "Inerrancy is Not Necessary for Evangelicalism Outside the USA," in *Five Views of Biblical Inerrancy,* 145–146.

14 Sandeen is believed to have set the trajectory for the idea that A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield construed the concept of inerrancy to safeguard their conviction in reaction to the then rising attack of biblical criticism. Ernest Robert Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 126–128. This theory then has been bought and reproduced by the influential historian such as Marsden in his George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, vol. 2nd ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4.

15 Rogers and McKim. *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 458–459.

16 McGowan, *The Divine Authenticity of Scripture*, 114, 121. Mark Noll also sympathizes with Rogers and McKim's position. *The Proceedings of the Conference on Biblical Inerrancy, 1987* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1987), 13. Recently, Ronald Hendel has suggested that inerrancy came about from "The Dream of the Perfect Text" as a response to the challenge posed by the modern critical approach. Ronald Hendel, "The Dream of a Perfect Text: Textual Criticism and Biblical Inerrancy in Early Modern Europe," *Supplements to the journal for the study of Judaism* 175, no. 1 (2017): 517, 539.

17 R. F. Satta, "Fundamentalism and Inerrancy: A Response to the Sandeen Challenge," *Evangelical Journal* 21, no. 2 (2003): 73.

18 Ibid., 74.

19 John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1982), 31–32.

20 Jonathan Moorhead, "Inerrancy and Church History: Is Inerrancy a Modern Invention?," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 27, no. 1 (2016): 75.

21 Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority*, 67.

22 Paul Helm, "B. B. Warfield's Path to Inerrancy: An Attempt to Correct Some Serious Misunderstandings," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 72, no. 1 (2010): 27–31.

doctrine of inerrancy to be the center stage of his theology—D. G. Hart, the notable American historian, also argued similarly about J. Gresham Machen.[23] Attributing this position to Warfield's theological articulation, he contends, is anachronistic, one that fundamentalists and evangelicals employ. Nevertheless, Helm concludes, attributing Warfield's articulation of inerrant Bible to that of rationalism as done by McGowan and others lacks clear evidence and cogent argument and appears to be done more from caricature.[24] Therefore *ad hominem* attacks on the inerrantist are found to be wanting.

If the doctrine of inerrancy is not a fundamentalist making, or a rationalistic invention, or an idea birthed in the heat of the battle, what prompts the inerrantists to be so passionately committed to the doctrine? The answer is both logical/philosophical and biblical/theological. Logically/philosophically, inerrancy for RCEs is tied to the character of God,[25] who cannot lie (Heb 6:18; Titus 1:2). Positively, an infallible God breathes an infallible Word.[26] God, being free from any error, transmitted an errorless message and preserved its veracity from the limitation of human culture, language, and sinfulness.[27] Negatively, if God cannot be trusted to give an inerrant message, he cannot be trusted in other areas as well. Affirming an errant Bible drives Christians back, Woodbridge argues, to

the neo-orthodoxy dilemma of distinguishing the infallible "'central saving message' from the errant difficult surrounding material.'"[28] To them, inerrancy is the fundamental of all other Christian doctrines, because the rest have no divine authority apart from the inerrancy of Scripture.[29] Biblically/theologically, inerrancy is taught in the Bible (John 10:35; Matt. 5:18) and affirmed throughout the church history.[30] If every Scripture is given by the inspiration of God (2 Tim 3:16-17), then Scripture must be infallible (1 Pet 1:23-25), incapable of failing, and therefore, is permanently binding. An *inspired* Scripture is *infallible*, and an inspired and infallible Scripture is *inerrant* (John 3:12; 17:7).[31] Proponents believe that the three are intricately related that when one crumples the other two follow. They may be distinguished but not separated. The crucial issue here is not the word, per se, but also the ideas it represents and its interrelatedness to other doctrines beginning from that of God.

A strong commitment to the idea that not just the narrative but also every single word in the Bible is inspired differentiates the unlimited inerrantist from the limited inerrantist— those who believe that the perfect accuracy of the word and text is not necessary—such as Pinnock.[32] The ongoing petition for inerrancy by the unlimited inerrantists, which to this present moment of writing has 67,004 signatories, states "I affirm that the Bible alone, and in its entirety, is the infallible written Word of God in original text and is, therefore, *inerrant in all it affirms or denies on whatever topic it address* [emphasis

23 D. G. Hart, "Fundamentalism, Inerrancy, and the Biblical Scholarship of J. Gresham Machen," *The Journal of Presbyterian History (1997-)*, no. 1 (1997): 13–28.

24 Helm, "B. B. Warfield's Path to Inerrancy," 42.

25 "What Is Biblical Inerrancy?," *Defending Inerrancy*, n.d., accessed October 6, 2017, http://defendinginerrancy.com/why-is-inerrancy-important/.

26 Article XI "Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," accessed September 17, 2017, http://www.bible-researcher.com/chicago1.html.

27 Article IV "Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," accessed October 6, 2017, http://www.bible-researcher.com/chicago1.html.

28 Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority*, 154.

29 "What Is Biblical Inerrancy?"

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Clark H. Pinnock and Barry L. Callen, *The Scripture Principle: Reclaiming the Full Authority of the Bible* (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2009), 262.

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added]."[33] The unapologetic commitment to the doctrine and desire to enforce the same sets them apart. Mohler argues, "It is not enough to affirm biblical inerrancy in general terms. The integrity of this affirmation depends upon the affirmation of inerrancy in every detailed sense," because the Devil is in the details.[34] The limited inerrantist, on the other hand, allows for minor errors in non-redemptive matters.[35] For them, the doctrine as understood by the former and to uphold the precise term is to die the death of a thousand qualifications since we neither have direct access to the autograph nor can know precisely what was in them.[36] RCEs, however, are convinced that a misuse of the term should not be a reason to abandon the name because every word or theological term is being misused by some. They believe that if Christians cannot affirm the truthfulness of all the small details of the Bible, and thus affirm inerrancy, they cannot trust the heavenly things.[37] They recognize that affirmation of the inerrant Bible does not necessarily guarantee inerrant interpretation, but as Millard J. Erickson argues, retaining the term is important because of the role of one's assumption and pre-exegetical presuppositions in theology—the question is not whether the interpreter has pre-exegetical presupposition but whether s/he scrutinizes them.[38] Even though the meaning of the text is not *determined* by the assumption one brings, it is *affected*;[39] therefore, it is vital not only to retain the term but also to fight for its cause.

The 'Bible' that Creates the Battle

The Reform Conservative Evangelicals' unapologetic commitment to the doctrine of inerrancy also leads them to see others who disagree with their view as deviating from the historic faith. This mindset, in turn, justifies their battle against the 'dissenters' as biblical. So, their inerrant view of the Bible becomes responsible for creating further battles. This posture is evident both in their rhetoric and action. The debate over the issue of inerrancy between Ben Witherington III and Don Carson (and John Frame), during the plenary discussion of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) in 2013 illustrates this point. While Witherington deemed it impossible, if not unnecessary, to have a precise definition of the term, Carson disagreed. The latter believed that Witherington's unwillingness, if not apathy, to define the term precisely blurs the line with those who submit to the authority of the Scripture and those who are, according to Carson, "beginning to slip to the other side."[40] At the roundtable conversation with Licona on the subject of his controversial book, Daniel L. Akin, the president of the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminar, NC, emphasized that even though he would consider inviting Licona— Licona was the Director of Apologetics for

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33 "The Bible Petition," accessed January 5, 2018, http://defendinginerrancy.com/sign-the-petition/

34 R. Albert Mohler, "The Devil Is in the Details: Biblical Inerrancy and the Licona Controversy," *AlbertMohler.com*, last modified September 14, 2011, accessed September 27, 2017, http://www.albertmohler.com/2011/09/14/the-devil-is-in-the-details-biblical-inerrancy-and-the-licona-controversy/.

35 Norman L. Geisler and William C. Roach, *Defending Inerrancy: Affirming the Accuracy of Scripture for a New Generation / Norman L. Geisler and William C. Roach* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2011), 13.

36 Ben III Witherington, "The Truth Will Out: An Historian's Perspective on the Inerrancy Controversy," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 57, no. 1 (March 2014): 20, 25.

37 John M Frame, "Inerrancy: A Place to Live," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 57, no. 1 (March 2014): 30.

38 *The Proceedings of the Conference on Biblical Inerrancy, 1987*, 232.

39 Ibid.

40 D. A. Carson and Ben Witherington III, "Plenary Discussion on Biblical Inerrancy," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society Mar 2014* (March 1, 2014): 41–42.

North American Mission Board of the SBC and professor at Southern Evangelical Seminary, NC, (which Normal Geisler founded) until his 'resignation' from both the positions in 2011 after his 2010 controversial book—to speak on campus, he would 'unequivocally answer no' [his precise words are "The unequivocal answer is *no*, I would not] to inviting him to join his faculty, unless his (Licona's) understanding was revised.[41] Akin declares, "'There is too much at stake when it comes to "rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15).'"[42] Licona's words corroborate the seriousness of Akin's declaration: "In addition [to wrongly propagate that I was fired], calls were made behind the scenes to prevent me from earning an income elsewhere. Some SBC professors were harassed for taking the position that interpreting Matthew's raised saints in a non-historical manner is compatible with the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. Others were uninvited from established speaking engagements to being dismissed from their teaching position."[43] What the ETS failed to do to Pinnock,[44] the SBC was, to a certain measure, able to do to Licona. Pressler's words that "Many did die—if not physically, in other ways," seemed to be true indeed. The RCEs' deep respect for the inspired text has fostered a view of Scripture that is inerrant, one that they are willing to die for, and at the same time prepared for others to die along with them.

However, defining the Reformed stance on Bible, others, and mission in terms of its

retaliatory spirit misconstrues their position. RCEs are firmly committed both to the Bible and to Christian unity. While on the one hand, they have alienated others on the basis of the doctrine of inerrancy, on the other they have united on the same doctrine.

INERRANCY: A PLACE TO LIVE

"Inerrancy: A Place to Live" was the title of John M. Frame's presentation on the 2013 Evangelical Theological Society annual conference. In it, he argues that even though inerrancy is a biblical doctrine, a propositional truth, it is more than simply a test of orthodoxy; "[inerrancy] is a place to stand, a way to live."[45] In his speech, Frame exhorts that Christians (those who believe in inerrancy) should be willing and ready to learn from liberals but always be aloof to their presuppositions and worldviews, because even though they share an outward resemblance "They are not just wrong about this or that. They are holding and articulating a worldview that is impossible for us to countenance [here Frame seems to be primarily referring to the liberals while also not ignoring the unlinited errantists] for even a moment. From our point of view, they are far out in left field; from their point of view, we are far out in right field."[46] In Frame's framework, there is no room for compromise, no place to live together between those who deny inerrancy and those who affirm the doctrine when it comes to the matter of faith.

The Particularized Haven: A Reformed Asylum

John Frame, in his speech, was merely echoing the sentiment of the Evangelical Theological

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41 Daniel L Akin et al., "A Roundtable Discussion with Michael Licona on The Resurrection of Jesus a New Historiographical Approach," *Southeastern Theological Review* 3, no. 1 (2012): 97.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid., 91.

44 The ETS in 2002 voted to challenge the membership of Pinnock because of his position on inerrancy. But the vote fell short of a needed majority (two third) even though the vote garnered 63%.

45 Frame, "Inerrancy," 29.
46 Ibid., 34.

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Society and many of its members. Inerrancy was one of the central doctrines on which ETS is founded. Its constitution article III reads, "The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs."[47] Its commitment to the doctrine has led to questioning Robert H. Gundry's position in 1983, and eventually to his resignation from ETS, and to the rigorous examination of Clark H. Pinnock and John Sander's views on the matter in 2002.[48] ETS, in its endeavor to oust dissenters, were following the footsteps of their predecessors who hedged a boundary within the doctrine of inerrancy in 1978. In 1977, some scholars gathered to clarify and defend the doctrine of inerrancy and founded the International Council of Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI).[49] In Chicago, the following year about 300 scholars in the conference drafted what is called Chicago Statement of Biblical Inerrancy (CSBI). Even though ETS adopted the idea of inerrancy formulated by the ICBI, belief in the ICBI statement did not become a condition for membership in the ETS.[50] However, within ETS there was and is an active push to interpret inerrancy in the light of the CSBI and to make others conform to the standard.

The struggle to make a safer place for inerrancy transcends a particular denomination or Christian society. In 1973, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) separated from the Presbyterian Church in the United States (southern) "in opposition to the long-developing theological liberalism which denied the deity of Jesus Christ and the inerrancy and authority of Scripture."[51] The Orthodox Presbyterian church founded in 1936 under the leadership of Graham J. Machen,[52] due in part, to the doctrine of inerrancy,[53] was again divided in 2006.

Inerrancy, however, has found a more peaceful place within many Reformed circles. The Southern Baptists came out victories in the battle for inerrancy during the 80s. Gregory A. Wills, a prominent Southern Baptist historian, who is now the Dean of the School of Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, referred to the hiring of David S. Dockery in the 80s as the sign of 'The Conservative Takeover' of the school.[54] Wills calls Dockery, "a bona fide conservative, a convinced inerrantist"[55] who contributed to "building a conservative faculty."[56] Today, the doctrine of inerrancy is celebrated in many circles within the Southern Baptist Convention. Even though Charles Hodge, Warfield, and Machen were able to hold the ground of inerrancy only partially within Presbyterian churches, they did take captive several frontlines. The president of Reformed Theological Seminary (Presbyterian), Ligon Duncan, joined hands with R. Albert Mohler, the president of The

47 "ETS Constitution | The Evangelical Theological Society."

48 Doug Koop, "Closing the Door on Open Theists?," *ChristianityToday.com*, accessed October 8, 2017, http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/january/14.24.html.

49 "International Council on Biblical Inerrancy," accessed October 8, 2017, http://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI.shtml.

50 Geisler and Roach, *Defending Inerrancy*, 37.

51 "History – Presbyterian Church in America," accessed October 8, 2017, https://www.pcanet.org/history/.

52 "Orthodox Presbyterian Church," accessed October 8, 2017, https://www.opc.org/historian.html.

53 Even though there were other forces at play that eventually resulted in Machen's separation from the mainline Presbyterian Church, the battle for right doctrine tied to inerrancy was chief among them. Bradley J. Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalist, Modernists, & Moderates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 25, 219, 229.

54 Gregory A. Wills, *Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1859-2009* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 478–481.

55 Ibid., 479.

56 Ibid., 508.

Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, C. J. Mahaney, the founder of Sovereign Grace Church, and Mark Dever, the founder of 9Marks Ministries to form the Together for the Gospel (T4G) biennial conference, whose confession article reads thus: "We affirm that the sole authority for the Church is the Bible, verbally inspired, inerrant, infallible, and totally sufficient and trustworthy."[57] The 2016 conference had 10,000 participants from 52 countries[58] and more are expected to participate in the 2018 conference to be held in Louisville, Kentucky. A closely associated yet different organization, The Gospel Coalition (TGC), also manifest a strong bent towards upholding the inerrantist view although the words 'verbally inspired Word of God' and 'without error' are used in the place of inerrancy in their confessional statement.[59] Prominent figures, such as Tim Keller (Presbyterian Church PCA), Alistair Begg (pastor of Parkside Church, a nondenominational church), David Dockery (a Southern Baptist who is currently the president of Trinity International University), and John Piper (part of Converge, formerly Baptist General Conference) are some of its council members. TGC Preamble to the Confessional Statement reads, "We are fellowship of evangelical churches in the Reformed tradition deeply committed to the renewing our faith in the gospel of Christ and to reforming our ministry to conform fully to the Scripture."[60] In these camps, the inspired inerrant Word of God

functions as both the propelling and controlling features of mission. Inerrancy is at peace!

Reformed conservative evangelicals, with their strong commitment to biblical inerrancy, find the denial of the doctrine a rejection of the truthfulness of the Bible. Therefore, finding a safe asylum to preserve the purity of the gospel becomes not only essential but also a task that a true Christian must undertake, so they contend. But this sacred space is not to be found in the broader Christian coalition such as the World Council of Churches (WCC) or other ecumenical partnerships, because "[They] are convinced that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has been misrepresented, misunderstood, and marginalized in many Churches and among many who claim the name of Christ. Compromise of the Gospel has led to the preaching of false gospels, the seduction of many minds and movements, and the weakening of the Church's Gospel witness."[61] Where inerrancy is denied is not a place they can live with; they needed to find a safer haven.

Inerrancy, however, is not a doctrinal island; inerrancy is interconnected to one's view of inspiration, hermeneutics, and exegesis, the last of which we will discuss below.

The Prioritized Gospel: An Exegetical Product

Is there a correlation between hermeneutics/ exegesis[62] and inerrancy? Does affirming or denying inerrancy affect the way one interprets the text? If the question is whether it is legitimate for there to be a connection, the answer can be contested.[63] However, if the question is

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57 "Affirmations & Denials," *Together for the Gospel*, accessed October 9, 2017, http://t4g.org/about/affirmations-and-denials/.

58 This number is the official report received through email from a T4G official representative.

59 TGC, "Confessional Statement," article 2, accessed January 5, 2018, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/about/foundation-documents/

60 TGC, "Preamble," accessed January 5, 2018, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/about/foundation-documents/

61 T4G, "Affirmations and Denials," accessed January 5, 2018, http://t4g.org/about/affirmations-and-denials/

62 I am using the term exegesis and hermeneutics interchangeably, stripping off all the intricacies involved in the term, merely to refer to the way we interpret the Bible.

63 Moises Silva has argued that tying inerrancy to specific hermeneutical boundary lines is a meaningless pursuit, a medicine that can be worse than the disease. Harvie M.

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whether those who affirm inerrancy are prone to interpret the text in a particular way as opposed to those who deny the doctrine, the answer is yes. For instance, two scholars who have different opinions on inerrancy may come up with same interpretation of a particular text. In this case, one's view on inerrancy does not infringe on one's interpretation. However, in the case of seeming discrepancies between texts the inerrantist is more likely to default to resolve rather than accept the contradictions, whereas those not committed to textual inerrancy may not necessarily be bothered by it.[64] Or in the case of complicated passages, the errantist is likely to embrace explanations different from the inerrantist.[65] There is, therefore, a correlation between inerrancy and exegesis, at least among some.

How then does the correlation between inerrancy and exegesis work out concerning mission among the Reformed circle? Even though there has not been a rigorous study in this area (at least that I am familiar with), there is a general tendency for the inerrantists, first, to consciously justify their methodology based on their commitment to the doctrine; second, to subconsciously be guided by the idea of inerrancy in their reading of the text. The example of the latter case may be what Silva observed among many conservative Christians: "For many believers, unfortunately, assurance that the Bible is truth appears to

be inseparable from assurance about the traditional interpretive positions, so that if we question the latter, we seem to be doubting the former."[66] The word inerrancy has become so entrenched among some Christians that a denial of the word is considered a rejection of the concept. The examples for the former case are the two works of Millard J. Erickson and J. I. Packer under the same title *Implications of Biblical Inerrancy for the Christian Mission*.[67] This theological commitment to the doctrine becomes more evident when applying the text to the practical aspect of mission.

In general, those who place more emphasis on the plain reading of the text tend to prioritize verbal evangelism over good works, though not dichotomize the two. This correlation is understandable because inerrantists, as Erickson observes, tend to place "a particularly high value upon retaining the basic content in the process of giving various expressions to the message" of the gospel.[68] For this group, retaining the basic structure and content of the biblical text is crucial since the meaning lays *in* the inspired texts, not "beneath, above, beyond the actual words of the Bible."[69] Thus any proposal that appears to undermine the propositional nature of revelation is questioned. For instance, Vanhoozer's approach that capitalizes on the Speech-Act theory[70] by giving

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66 Conn, *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic*, 78.

67 Millard J. Erickson, "Implications of Biblical Inerrancy for the Christian Mission," in *The Proceedings of the Conference on Biblical Inerrancy, 1987*, 223–236. J.I. Packer, "Implications of Biblical Inerrancy for the Christian Mission," in *The Proceedings of the Conference on Biblical Inerrancy, 1987*, 245–250.

68 Erickson, "Implications of Biblical Inerrancy for the Christian Mission," 233.

69 David J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2006), 247.

70 Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning in the Text: The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality or Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 208-214.

Conn, *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic: A Tradition, a Challenge, Debate* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1988), 79.

64 Ibid., 32.

65 One example would be the explanation of Joshua 6, the story of the fall of Jericho Wall. While the inerrantist Mohler sees the story as a historical event (Mohler, "When the Bible Speaks, God Speaks," 49-50), the errantist Enns sees it as a fictional narrative, arguing "a significant elaboration on a historical kernel, not a reliable record of a historical event." Peter Enns, "Inerrancy, However Defined, Does Not Describe What the Bible Does," 93–96.

credence to the Theo-drama of the Bible,[71] not just the propositional text, as the authority has been called into question.[72] Christopher H. Wright, who argues that the authority of the text cannot be limited to just the meaning *in* the text but must also come from the larger authority to which the text points, namely the reality of God, reality of the biblical story, and the reality of God's people,[73] has also not escaped the scrutiny of the Reformed Christians. Wright's missional application has been challenged on the ground that he illegitimately broadens the authority of the text.[74] While people like Wright see evangelism and good works as equally important aspects of the mission, people like Hasselgrave place greater emphasis on such texts as Matt 28:18-19 and prioritize the verbal proclamation of the gospel.[75]

One of the key-factors in mission for the Reformed Christians then is the prioritization of the gospel without dichotomization from good works. Echoing the famous Dutch theologian J. H. Bavinck, who saw the glorification of God through the planting of churches and conversion of the heathens as the ultimate goal

of the mission,[76] Kostenberger and O'Brien conclude their extensive study of the Bible on mission thus, "[T]he ultimate goal of the divine mission is the glory of God—that he might be known and honored for who he really is . . . ."[77] The keyword for our purpose here is *known* since for them the proclamation of the gospel occupies primary or the initial task.[78] However, they also acknowledge that evangelism and making disciples are not the only goal in mission. Making disciples accompanies Christians living out authentic faith. Even though they prioritize evangelism, they do not dichotomize good works from evangelism. Carson agrees with them when he contends, "Because the gospel is news, good news . . . it is to be announced . . . Though it properly grounds ethics, aphorisms, and systematics, it is none of these: it is *news*, and therefore must be publicly announced.[79] But immediately he goes on to add, "But I do not see how one can be said to be truly preaching the gospel without spelling out the demands that the gospel makes."[80] This 'prioritized' gospel, though without being dichotomized from good works, then is the result of their hermeneutics.

In the footsteps of the notable figure John Stott, Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert conclude their book on mission—a book, according to Carson's endorsing words, is the best one among the many books to have recently appeared on mission—thus

71 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, Ky: WJK Press, 2005), 37-114.

72 Paul Helm has strongly criticized Vanhoozer on the ground that his Theo-drama undermines the propositional aspect of revelation. Paul Helm, *Faith Form and Fashion: Classical Reformed Theology and Its Postmodern Critics* (Eugen, Oregon: Cascade Books: 2014), 130-178. Geisler argues that Vanhoozer's use of Speech-Act denies the traditional understanding of propositional revelation and therefore, in essence, denies the historic doctrine of inerrancy. Geisler and Roach, *Defending Inerrancy*, 135–142.

73 Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 53–54.

74 John Wind, "Not Always Right: Critiquing Christopher Wright's Paradigmatic Application of the Old Testament to the Socio-Economic Realm," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 19, no. 2 (2015): 88–98.

75 Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict*, 136.

76 J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1960), 155–156.

77 Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter Thomas O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission*, New studies in biblical theology: 11 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 263,

78 Ibid., 268.

79 D.A. Carson, "What Is the Gospel?—Revisited," in *For the Fame of God's Name: Essays in Honor of John Piper*, C. Samuel Storms, et al., (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2010), 158.

80 Ibid., 163.

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We agree! Fully, wholeheartedly, unreservedly, and without the slightest contrary shiver in the liver, we agree! We are of the strong opinion that the Bible teaches that we Christians are to be people of both declaration and demonstration, and that our churches are to be communities of both declaration and demonstration . . . .[81] [However] It is not the church's responsibility to right every wrong or to meet every need, though we have biblical motivation to do some of both. It is our responsibility, however—our unique mission and plain priority—that is unpopular, impractical gospel message gets told, that neighbors and nations may know that Jesus is Christ, the Son of God and that by believing, they may have life in his name.[82]

Indeed, the Reformed Conservative Evangelicals have found a way to live out their faith. Their passionate commitment to the doctrine of inerrancy has not only pushed them to a haven to celebrate their victory, but their commitment to the inspired text of the Bible has stirred them to live and carry out God's mission, albeit in a manner that is consistent with their interpretation of the Bible.

The Purified Message: A Contextualized Strategy

The Reformed commitment to a particular form of mission—in our case, the prioritizing of the verbal proclamation without dichotomizing from good works—yields a specific kind of contextualization. Erickson and Packer argue, respectively, that holding to the doctrine of "inerrancy leads to a more complete and more consistent forms of [missional] implications"[83]

and allows Christians to bring out the text of the Bible "purely and precisely via his lips in its application to those who he addresses."[84] Those who affirm the doctrine are likely to adhere more strictly not only to the biblical categories but also to the words of the Scripture in translation, interpretation, and theologization. A case in point is the approach taken by the members of Biblical Missiology who are uncompromising about the propositional truth of the Scripture and are skeptical of contextualizing methods that uncritically borrows from social sciences, anthropological insights, and cultural and religious categories.[85] Hasselgrave asserts, "[T]extual accuracy is more important than supposed cultural relevance" since the words of the Bible are *God-breathed*.[86]

The philosophical underpinning behind the Reformed approach to contextualization is the commitment in the ability of human reason, when exercised rightly, to understand and interpret the text accurately so that what they know is what God is communicating.[87] They are committed that the Bible when read as intended, "*accurately reflect*[s] what Scripture teaches . . . [so that they] can say that [their] interpretation is true and biblical."[88] Contra Eugene Nida, who developed the Dynamic Equivalence Bible-translation Theory—whose influence is visible in organizations such as

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81 Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?: Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2011), 223.

82 Ibid., 249.

83 Erickson, "Implications of Biblical Inerrancy for the Christian Mission," 223.

84 Packer, "Implications of Biblical Inerrancy for the Christian Mission," 249.

85 Biblical Missiology Statement of Practice for Missions, "Biblical Missiology," accessed September 20, 2017, http://biblicalmissiology.org/.

86 Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict*, 263.

87 Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), 65.

88 Steven J. Wellum, "Postconservatism, Biblical Authority, and recent Proposal for Re-Doing Evangelical Theology: A Critical Analysis," in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, eds. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, Justin Taylor (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2004), 173.

SIL (Summer Institute of Language), WBT (Wycliffe Bible Translators), UBS (United Bible Societies),[89] and some other institutions—RCEs are convinced that language in itself is God's gift and not merely a human invention. Therefore, the Supra-cultural truths can be deduced from Scripture and communicated across cultures. The Reformed Christians are more optimistic that in spite of one's context one can access the objective meaning of the text. Such conviction, on the one hand, allows them to focus on a rigorous study of the text, yielding volumes of biblical and systematic theology books. The same conviction, on the other hand, prompts them to be suspicious of any claim that relativizes absolute claims.

However, over-confidence in one's ability to deduce facts from the Scripture also has led some Reformed Christians to point fingers at others too quickly. A case in point is that of John MacArthur calling N.T. Wright's New Perspective on Paul a heresy.[90] The outsiders see this kind of conduct as uncharitable. While not all RCEs share MacArthur' sentiment, it would be fair to admit that their doctrinal rigidity—for good or ill—yields a more constrained approach to contextualization.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that how one views and interprets the Bible influences the decisions s/he makes regarding what doctrinal battle deserves fighting for, what and how boundaries are drawn for Christian fellowships, and how mission is conceived and executed. To substantiate the thesis, the paper has drawn attention to how the Reformed Conservative Evangelicals' commitment to the verbal and plenary inspiration compelled them to see the doctrine of inerrancy as an irreconcilable doctrine that must be fought for even to the exclusion of those who bear the name of Christ. But at the same time, commitment to inerrancy has become a stimulating factor for cultivating a broader Christian fellowship. Additionally, a strong emphasis on the doctrine has also affected how the Scripture is interpreted and applied in contexts. Thus how one looks at the text and interprets it have effects far beyond one's conscious awareness.

Two particular points seem appropriate. First, since inerrancy is both biblical/theological and logical/philosophical upshot, it should at least be on the same ground that a rejection or disagreement must be voiced. Second, it is incumbent upon all Christians to carefully approach the text, as it will determine how one determines doctrinal battlefield, demarcates relational boundaries, and decides missional frontiers.

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90 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZJEZiLfYHk

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