

Inerrancy and Infallibility

Topic

Inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture

Theme

God's inspiration of the Scriptures ensures that they are inerrant and infallible.

Desired Learner Response

The learner will state his confidence in the inerrancy of Scripture and will humbly submit to its authority in his life.

Materials

- Resource 3

Scripture Focus

Ps. 19:7–12; Prov. 21:1; 30:5; Luke 24:13–35; John 17:17; 1 Tim. 1:4; 4:7; 2 Tim. 4:1–5; Titus 1:2; 2 Peter 1:16

Summary

This lesson defines inerrancy and infallibility, underscores their importance, and then addresses arguments for a qualified view of inerrancy. The goal is for learners to understand that all of the Bible is inerrant and infallible and that its historical portions record real history. Any claim that the Bible's history is anything but a record of actual events is false.

Outline

I. Definitions

- A. Inerrancy
- B. Infallibility

II. Importance

- A. Inerrancy and authority
- B. Inerrancy and interpretation

III. Debate

- A. Arguments for qualified inerrancy
 1. Based on language
 2. Based on content
- B. Answers to qualified inerrancy advocates
- C. Ambitions of qualified inerrancy advocates

Memory Verse

*"Every word of God is pure:
he is a shield unto them that put their trust in him"
(Proverbs 30:5).*

GETTING STARTED

Oops!

Search the internet for examples of misspellings on signs. Read or show them to your class. The following are a few examples.

- School Suplies (sign in a Kmart)
- Parant Night Tonight (message on a school sign)
- Congradulation Spelling Bee Winners (message on a school sign)
- Your the Best Teacher Ever (embossed on a special card for a teacher)
- ABC's Chilren's Academy (advertisement on a billboard)

ASK: When have you inadvertently made a similar mistake?

ASK: If you were to handwrite a brand new book, how error free do you think your book would be?

It is nearly impossible to write an entire book without making one single error. Yet we know it has been done at least sixty-six times. This lesson is about the inerrancy of Scripture and the importance of that doctrine for our faith and practice.

Mostly Right

Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia that anyone can edit as they see fit. While it is helpful in some regards, some of the articles were no doubt written by people who don't really know the subjects.

ASK: What might you be comfortable looking up on Wikipedia? (Q1)

ASK: What questions would you not go to Wikipedia for answers? (Q2)

While the founders of Wikipedia succeeded in creating an editable online encyclopedia, they could never promote their site as completely trustworthy. There are some theologians who are trying to pin that same criticism on the Bible, saying it can't be completely trusted. This lesson addresses that criticism and presents the case for the inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. Definitions

The Bible is often referred to as inerrant and infallible. Those two words are critical for our faith and practice. This lesson will focus on their meaning and importance as well as the debate within evangelicalism concerning the inerrancy of Scripture.

A. Inerrancy

The word *inerrancy* comes from the Latin word *errare*, meaning *to wander*. That meaning seems to suggest that *inerrancy* is associated with a departure from something. *Departing* is not a good action to associate with *truth*. But the Latin

Review lesson two for commentary on the inspiration of Scripture.

Lesson five discusses the transmission of God's Word, showing the extreme care and accuracy by which the Bible was protected from egregious error and copied for future generations.

prefix *in* is negative. It fills out the meaning of the word so that *inerrancy* means to be *free from error*. Whatever is *inerrant* could be said to have *not wandered from the truth*. When we say the Bible is inerrant, we are saying that it is without error. But a fuller definition of *Biblical inerrancy* is needed to understand its full application.

Biblical inerrancy means the Bible is free from error and that it speaks the truth whether it addresses doctrine, ethics, or history. Of course the Bible records lies and deception, but it never presents them as truth. For example, a large portion of the book of Job records the misguided speeches of Job's friends. The Bible is still inerrant in that it presents those speeches accurately as examples of bad theology.

The term *inerrancy* is not found in the Bible. You won't find a verse that says *all Scripture is inerrant*. But we do know that the Bible is inspired (2 Tim. 3:16). Inerrancy is the logical outworking of verbal, plenary inspiration.

ASK: What would we have to conclude about God if the Bible was both inspired and filled with errors and false claims? (Q3) *Either that God didn't care if the Scriptures were completely true, that He was incapable of inspiring the Scriptures in an inerrant manner, or that God was less than perfect.*

READ: Titus 1:2; John 17:17. **ASK:** What truths about God point to the fact that His Word must be free from error? (Q4) *He cannot lie; His Word is truth.*

Proverbs 30:5 says that *every word of God is pure*. The word *pure* has the idea of being refined and found to be pure. When God's words are *heated up* and *melted down*, not one drop of *impurity* comes to the surface. There is nothing to skim off the top. All God's words are absolutely true, including those recorded in the Bible.

B. Infallibility

It was impossible for the writers to record an error of any kind as they penned the Scriptures since they were under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. That impossibility of error is what is meant by the word *infallible*. The Bible is inerrant because it is infallible, and it is infallible because it is inspired. To say the Bible is neither inerrant nor infallible is to flatly deny it is inspired by God.

We should note that during the course of the transmission of Scripture from the originals, minor scribal errors were made in the copies. As a result, there are textual variants in the manuscripts we have today. Studying the manuscripts and comparing them helps us sort out the variations and complete highly accurate texts in their original languages. Such a study also shows that the variations are rather inconsequential, affecting not one foundational doctrine. These textual variations are not proofs against the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture. The terms *inerrant* and *infallible* apply to the original manuscripts. Since those originals were perfect, we can have the utmost confidence in our Bibles today. The Bible is the Word of God.

II. Importance

A. Inerrancy and authority

If the Bible is not inerrant, then there has to be an authority over the Bible to tell us which parts of it are true and which parts are not. The only authority over the Bible is God. So no matter to whom or to what we might appeal to establish what is true in the Bible, we would be consulting a source that is extremely inadequate and ultimately unauthoritative. No amount of scholarship could ever rise to the level of having authority over the Bible. God is the Bible's ultimate authority, and He has spoken quite plainly in His Word about its truthfulness and reliability.

READ: Psalm 19:12. **ASK:** Why is every human unqualified to stand as a judge over the Bible? (Q5) *No one is even qualified to judge and fully understand his own faults, much less any supposed faults in the Bible.*

B. Inerrancy and interpretation

The inerrancy of Scripture gives us confidence as we interpret it. We know that it is true and therefore its meaning and subsequent application will affect our lives (Ps. 19:7–11). Reading the Bible with doubt about its veracity robs the believer of the Bible's benefits. Inerrancy is vital to sustained spiritual growth in a believer (John 17:17).

III. Debate

Those who deny the inerrancy of Scripture tend to spend their time defending their theses and questioning the Scripture. To get caught up in that debate is to short-circuit the Bible's effectiveness. Nevertheless, it is important for us to understand some of the arguments for doubting the Bible's inerrancy so we are prepared to answer them and don't fall prey to them.

A. Arguments for qualified inerrancy

1. Based on language

Some theologians argue that the Bible cannot be inerrant because it contains imprecise language. They demand the Bible must be exact in all that it reports and describes in order for it to be unqualifiedly inerrant. For example, they would list round numbers, non-scientific descriptions (e.g., saying the sun *rises* and *sets*), symbolic language, and generalizations (e.g., using *all* instead of *almost all*) as qualifications to inerrancy of Scripture. But Biblical inerrancy does not demand that the Bible be as precise and accurate as possible in all that it reports and claims. We all use imprecise language as part of our normal speech. Such language is not considered a lie in any context. Telling someone you are twenty-nine years old when you are actually twenty-nine years and three days old is not a lie. Likewise, saying the sun rose in the morning is accurate in that the sun appears from an earthly perspective to rise and travel across the sky. Inerrancy allows for imprecision and generalization. When the Bible doesn't *claim* to be precise, we should accept the imprecision or generalization as part of God's inerrant Word.

READ: Matthew 14:13–21. **ASK:** List five details that this account does not include for us. (Q6) *The exact time of day, the exact number of men, the exact number of women and children, the size of the loaves and fish, the size of the baskets used to pick up the fragments.*

ASK: What would the Bible be like if it had to be as accurate and precise as possible in every single subject it touched and event it recorded? (Q7)
It would be overflowing with so many meaningless details that it would be nearly impossible to read. The points of the passages would be lost in all the unnecessary details.

The Bible doesn't set a standard for itself that demands absolute preciseness in everything it reports. But it does use precise language when it communicates precise doctrines. For example, doctrines such as the holiness of God (Isa. 6:3; Rev. 4:8), the way of salvation (John 11:25, 26), and the deity of Christ (John 1:1, 2) are readily apparent in the Bible. There is no mincing of words when it comes to establishing such doctrines.

Those who put a demand on the Bible that it doesn't put on itself are merely creating an excuse for discrediting and dismissing the Bible altogether.

2. Based on content

Peter Enns is one of the leading proponents of the view that some portions of the Scripture are infused with myths. In defense of his view, he has written *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* and *The Bible Tells Me So: Why Defending the Bible Has Made Us Unable to Read It*.

Qualified inerrancy within evangelicalism is applied most notably to the Pentateuch. However, there are some theologians who also see the Gospels as written for theological purposes without much regard to communicating actual historical accounts.

They suggest that the writers added to their Gospel accounts in order to make more important theological points.

Ancient near eastern cultures, such the Sumerians, Babylonians, Egyptians, Canaanites, Grecians, and Romans, wrote stories about nature, humanity, and deities. Modern scholars call these stories *myths* and generally regard them as fictional. Some of these myths seem to have similarities with accounts in the Pentateuch. Based on these similarities, some evangelical theologians conclude that the Bible's account of creation and other events must either be based on or borrowed from the myths. Those theologians don't go so far as to deny the Bible is inerrant, but they do qualify their definition of inerrancy. They argue that the Pentateuch was based on the cultural understanding of history at that time. Since the cultures around the unidentified writers of the Pentateuch believed in the myths about origins, the writers incorporated those stories into the Pentateuch naively. The writers thought they were writing in accordance with actual accounts when in fact they were basing their writings on fictional myths. The theologians who hold to this view of inerrancy believe that God, knowing full well that the stories were myths, overrode the human writers' ineptness and immature understanding to communicate His divine purpose through the myths. The theologians conclude that the result is a conglomeration of stories that are the product of both human myths and divine inspiration. The scholars say that the divine purpose that God infused into the myths was to teach the children of Israel that they were to worship Him alone. So even though the Biblical text was based on made up stories, God sovereignly preserved His theological intent in the Pentateuch. The Pentateuch, the theologians say, has value today because of what it communicates about theology rather than what it says about history. The theologians who deny the historicity of the Pentateuch believe that later in Israel's history the methods of keeping track of actual historical events matured so that the monarchical history of Israel does indeed reflect historical events rather than myths.

The proponents of the qualified view of inerrancy point to Christ as an example of a mix of perfect deity and imperfect humanity. They say that Christ's human side was limited, meaning He didn't necessarily excel at things such as math or carpentry. Also they suggest that the simple fact that Christ had a human body meant He must have been physically less than perfect. His humanity had flaws

that limited Him and caused Him to make mistakes. Yet He was perfectly God and completely holy. The proponents of the qualified inerrancy compare Christ's mix of flawed humanity and perfect deity to Scriptures. They say that since the Bible was written by sinful humans, it inherently has evidence of human flaws. But since the Bible was also inspired by God, we can consider it inerrant. The proponents of a qualified inerrancy use this analogy to make room for the inclusions of *myths* and other supposed *imperfections* in the Bible. According to them, the Bible is inerrant in that it fulfills God's purpose. It is God's theological purposes then that should be the theologian's focus. And, according to those who qualify the inerrancy of Scripture, determining which parts of the Bible were subjected to human limits and understanding is an exercise for the scholar.

RESOURCE: Display resource 3 to review the difference between an unqualified and a qualified inerrancy.

B. Answers to qualified inerrancy advocates

A qualified inerrancy is obviously quite different than a Biblical view of inerrancy. The redefinition of inerrancy and selective qualifications of certain Scriptures as myths or mistakes, while intended to answer questions and build faith, actually do little to bolster one's confidence in the Bible. For how could anyone be absolutely sure that what he was reading was actually true? And how might he know for certain that he was indeed smart enough to be able to ascertain God's theological points from the stories he supposed were myths?

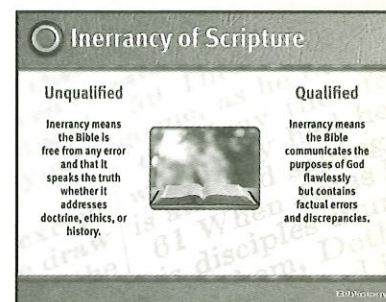
So how do we answer this seemingly intellectual attack on inerrancy from inside evangelicalism? First, we must trust what the Bible says about itself. No one can speak as authoritatively as the Bible's own record because the Scriptures are God's very words. The Bible is actually very clear that it is not based on myth and that myths (fables) are not a reliable source for truth.

READ: 2 Peter 1:16. **ASK:** What did Peter say about the Biblical accounts of the power and coming of the Lord Jesus Christ? (Q8) *That they didn't follow contrived myths but were eyewitnesses of Christ.*

READ: 2 Timothy 4:1–5. **ASK:** What did the apostle Paul instruct pastors concerning the Word of God and fables? (Q9) *They were to preach the Word and hold to sound doctrine, anticipating a time when people would prefer to hear fables instead.*

Paul taught pastor Timothy to reject any sources that people wanted to add to the Bible as authoritative (1 Tim. 1:4; 4:7). If the books of the Pentateuch are merely myths with a theological message, then Paul would essentially be telling Timothy to reject the Pentateuch.

Second, we must recognize the integral part history plays in God's revelation of Himself. The historical record is an essential part of Scripture; it is the vehicle through which God reveals truth about Himself and His relationship with humanity. We cannot know God as He intends if we relegate the Bible's history to fictional myths collected because of human naivety.



John N. Oswalt, in his book called *The Bible among the Myths*, makes a strong case for seeing the Bible's historical records as essential to understanding the message of the Bible.

RBP's Truth for Living course called *Who I Am: God's Self-revelation* shows how God used historical events to reveal Himself to the children of Israel. The course is available at RegularBaptistPress.org.

Pages 45 and 46 of John N. Oswalt's *The Bible among the Myths* (2009, Zondervan) has a thorough definition of *myth*.

READ: Luke 24:13–27. **ASK:** For what did Jesus use the history found in the Old Testament? (Q10) *To teach truths about God, Himself, and God's plan.*

READ: Luke 24:28–35. **ASK:** What was the result? (Q11) *The men recognized how Jesus fit into the unfolding of the historical records of the Old Testament.*

Third, a true definition of *myth* shows that the Old Testament could in no way be myth or even be based on myths of other cultures. Oswalt carefully defined myths by demonstrating that ancient myths were born out of the belief that all things are continuous, which means nature, humans, and the divine all share a real oneness. That means both nature and divine have human qualities that can be reflected by the characters in the myths. The myths, then, are expressions of the continuities of the human, natural, and divine realms. For the ancient pagan societies, the myths became the means of bringing the order of the ideal divine realm into the chaotic human realm to give it stability and victory over chaos. For all humans realize that though nature has cycles and some stability, it can also be chaotic and randomly destructive. When the ancient myths about the ideal are retold, the positive, desirable results of those stories are brought into the chaotic now so that the ideal might be realized.

When the worldview behind the ancient pagan myths is considered, the idea that the Bible was written based on those myths becomes absurd. Are these pagan myths the best God could do in conveying Scripture? Was He at the mercy of the limitations of naïve human writers? Most certainly not.

READ: Job 42:1, 2; Psalm 115:3; Proverbs 21:1. **ASK:** What limits are there on what God can do? (Q12) *None. He is sovereign over all and is not in any way handcuffed by human naivety.*

So, why would anyone try to redefine inerrancy? Why go through such pains to prove the Bible is not all that conservative fundamentalists believe it is?

C. Ambitions of qualified inerrancy advocates

For as long as God's Word has been known, there have been those who have tried to discredit it, redefine it, or outright deny it. Starting with Satan in the Garden of Eden and ending with Satan (Gen. 3:1–5) near the end of the millennial Kingdom of Christ (Rev. 20:7–10), the attack on God's Word has never ceased and will continue until it is all fulfilled. We shouldn't be surprised when some from within evangelicalism also attack God's Word. The sin nature wants to discredit what God says is true. It wants to at the very least limit God in some way. For a limited God appears to be less authoritative. And when people limit God, they grab some of His authority for themselves. If God's Word is not fully inerrant, then they believe they have the right to define its limits.

God's Word demands that people approach it humbly and submissively. There is no place for pride when it comes to understanding the Bible.

READ: James 4:6. **ASK:** What is God's response to those who approach Him with pride? (Q13) *God resists them.*

Pride prohibits people from truly understanding God's Word. It drives them to remold it and shape it in ways that make them appear intellectually superior to others. Humility takes God at His word.

MAKING IT PERSONAL

I Believe . . .

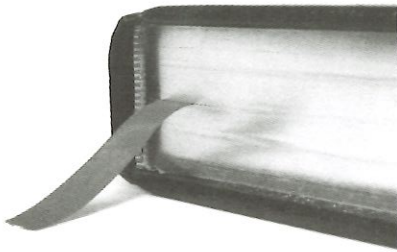
ASK: How has your perspective on the importance of inerrancy changed as a result of this lesson? (Q14)

ASK: Write out a statement describing your beliefs concerning the inerrancy of Scripture. (Q15)

I Submit

ASK: Write out a statement of submission to the authority of Scripture. (Q16)

ASK: What will submission to the authority of Scripture look like in your life? (Q17)



Canonicity of Scripture

Topic

Canonicity

Theme

God made it obvious which books were inspired Scriptures and therefore were canonical.

Desired Learner Response

The learner will be able to defend the truth that the sixty-six books of the Bible are the complete Word of God.

Materials

- Resource 4
- Various lengths of string
- Rulers

Scripture Focus

Luke 11:51; Acts 17:11, 12; Gal. 1:6, 7, 11, 12; 1 Thess. 2:13; Heb. 4:12; 2 Pet. 1:21

Summary

This lesson explains canonicity and lays out the process early Christians used for identifying the books that should be part of the canon of Scriptures.

Outline

I. Definition of Canonicity

II. Five Tests of Canonicity

- A. Authority
- B. Writer
- C. Authenticity
- D. Power
- E. Reception

III. Importance of Canonicity

Memory Verse

"But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ" (Galatians 1:11, 12).