

INERRANCY AND INFALLIBILITY

The relationship between inerrancy and infallibility is closer than two sides of the same coin—they're fundamentally interconnected, though theologians distinguish them with technical precision.

Inerrancy describes Scripture as being in a “condition of being free from error,” while infallibility means the Bible is incapable of erring.¹ The distinction matters conceptually: one addresses the actual state of the text, the other its capacity. Yet while inerrancy means the Bible does not error, infallibility means it cannot error—the text contains no error and is impossible for it to contain error.²

However, this distinction doesn't create separation. It is impossible for the Bible to be simultaneously infallible and errant, and while infallibility and inerrancy may be distinguished, they cannot be separated.¹ If Scripture is God-authored, what is authored is naturally and necessarily free from error (inerrant) and incapable of failing in its divinely-ordained purpose (infallible).³

The practical disagreement arises when some theologians attempt to hold infallibility while rejecting complete inerrancy. Some evangelical theologians prefer to speak of the Bible as infallible but not inerrant, meaning while the Bible is truthful in matters of faith and practice, there may be errors regarding history, geography, or science.⁴ Yet the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy affirmed that Scripture is infallible and reliable in all matters it addresses, denying that the Bible

can be simultaneously infallible and errant, since infallibility and inerrancy may be distinguished but not separated.⁴

So while the terms describe different aspects—one focusing on capability, the other on actuality—they function as mutually dependent truths. You cannot coherently maintain one without the other.

1

Julia B. Higgins, *Empowered & Equipped: Bible Exposition for Women Who Teach the Scriptures* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2022), 22.

2

Matthew Barrett, “Inspiration, Inerrancy, and the Trustworthiness of God,” *Credo: The Living Word* (October) (Credo Magazine, 2011), 1:1:19.

3

Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Scripture, God, and Angels* (Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009), 88.

4

Daryl Aaron, *Christian Theology for People in a Hurry* (Bethany House, 2019). [See [here](#), [here](#).]

The distinction between infallibility and inerrancy operates on two different levels, and understanding this reveals why the debate persists among serious theologians.

The fundamental difference is one of potential versus actuality: infallibility concerns ability—what cannot make mistakes—while inerrancy describes what, in fact, does not err.¹ Infallibility safeguards that Scripture is a sure, safe, and reliable rule in all matters, while inerrancy safeguards that Scripture is entirely true and trustworthy in all its assertions.² These aren't synonymous; they're complementary but address different concerns.

The real tension emerges in application. Infallibility functions as a general principle—a rule or guide we expect won't lead us astray, concerning our trust in Scripture as the ultimate standard.² Inerrancy, by contrast, extends to particular facts and details, claiming all statements are free from falsehood.² This creates a practical problem: defending inerrancy means the Bible got Methuselah's age right when it says 969 years.²

Many modern theologians exploit this distinction to maintain infallibility while rejecting complete inerrancy. They define infallibility as making no false statements on faith and practice, while allowing errors in history, geography, genealogy, and cosmology.³ But this creates philosophical problems. If accepting some of Scripture's teaching commits us to error, can it truly be considered reliable? And can we coherently affirm infallibility while denying the biblical writers are vehicles of revelatory truth in non-salvific matters?⁴

If Scripture is God-authored, then what is authored is naturally and necessarily free from error (inerrant) and incapable of failing in its divinely-ordained purpose (infallible).⁵ The logical tension suggests that attempting to separate them—maintaining one while rejecting the other—ultimately destabilizes both concepts.

1

R. C. Sproul, Can I Trust the Bible?, The Crucial Questions Series (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust: A Division of Ligonier Ministries, 2017), 2:27.

2

Paul Wells, Taking the Bible at Its Word (Scotland, UK: Christian Focus, 2013). [See [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#).]

3

Gregg R. Allison, Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 116.

4

Carl F. H. Henry, God, Revelation, and Authority (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), 4:170.

5

Rolland McCune, A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Scripture, God, and Angels (Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009), 88.

Chicago Statement of 1978 (Summary)

In October 1978, the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy convened a conference where several hundred evangelical Christians from forty-one churches and thirty-eight denominations gathered to deliberate on Scripture's inerrancy.¹ The resulting document was signed by over 300 evangelicals, including prominent figures like John MacArthur, J.I. Packer, Francis Schaeffer, and R.C. Sproul.¹

The Chicago Statement comprises a preface, a summary statement, and nineteen articles that each affirm a position while denying a corresponding falsehood regarding inerrancy.¹ The articles address divine inspiration working through human writers, progressive revelation, manuscript transmission, infallibility, scriptural unity, the Spirit's witness to Scripture, and the centrality of biblical authority to Christian faith and transformation.¹

The statement's theological foundation rests on divine authorship. The drafters affirmed that Scripture's authority derives from God's inspiration, and it is precisely because the Bible originates from God that it remains free from error.¹ The statement emphasizes that God communicated through human language, and this language proves adequate for divine revelation.¹

Significantly, the Chicago Statement directly addressed the infallibility-inerrancy relationship that had become contested. It affirmed that Scripture, divinely inspired, is infallible and reliable in all matters it addresses, and explicitly denied that the Bible can be simultaneously infallible and errant, stating that "infallibility and inerrancy may be distinguished, but not separated."² The statement rejected limited inerrancy views that restrict biblical truthfulness to spiritual matters alone, insisting instead that Scripture's accuracy extends to historical and scientific assertions.²

The statement emerged from evangelical concern about defections from belief in Scripture's complete truthfulness, with signatories viewing denial of inerrancy as setting aside the witness of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.²

1

Got Questions Ministries, Got Questions? Bible Questions Answered (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2014–2021). [See [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#).]

2

Gregg R. Allison, Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 117.

The Chicago Statement emerged in response to challenges posed by the Enlightenment, which demanded rational verification for all claims, and the subsequent rise of theological modernism that employed higher criticism to treat the Bible as merely human documents.¹ The statement sought to strike a balance that retained divine inspiration and inerrancy while acknowledging Scripture’s genuinely human features¹—a middle path between modernist reductionism and fundamentalist overemphasis on the divine at the expense of the human.

The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy functioned as a coalition of conservative scholars who, over ten years, sponsored conferences and publications to vindicate Scripture’s full truth and trustworthiness, countering both liberal Protestant opinion and revisionist advocacy of “limited inerrancy” within evangelical ranks.² ICBI argued that methodological and epistemological coherence in theology depends on treating all canonical Scripture as trustworthy instruction from God—a view grounded in how New Testament writers and Jesus himself approached the Old Testament.²

The statement’s substantive content addressed three critical tensions. First, it linked inspiration directly to inerrancy, affirming that inspiration

guaranteed true utterance on all matters the biblical authors addressed while denying that the writers' finitude or fallenness introduced distortion or falsehood.³ Second, it explicitly rejected limited inerrancy by denying that biblical infallibility and inerrancy apply only to spiritual or redemptive themes, and further denied that scientific hypotheses about earth history could overturn Scripture's teaching on creation and the flood.³ Third, it affirmed progressive revelation while denying that later revelation ever corrects or contradicts earlier revelation.⁴

The statement was defensive rather than innovative, clarifying consensus through three parts: a summary of ICBI's view, nineteen articles of affirmation and denial, and extended exposition.² It emphasized the Bible's divine origin and full humanness, Christ-centeredness, total reliability as both informational and imperative guide, the Holy Spirit's role as inspirer and interpreter, and Scripture's final authority for the church.²

1

Justin S. Holcomb, *Know the Creeds and Councils*, Know Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 154.

2

J. I. Packer, "Chicago Statement," in *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic*, ed. Martin Davie et al. (London; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press; InterVarsity Press, 2016), 164.

3

Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 117–118.

4

Todd S. Beall, “Evangelicalism, Inerrancy, and Current Old Testament Scholarship,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* (2013), 18:68.

CHICAGO STATEMENT (1978) (Summary)

“The authority of Scripture is a key issue for the Christian church in this and every age. Those who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are called to show the reality of their discipleship by humbly and faithfully obeying God’s written Word. To stray from Scripture in faith or conduct is disloyalty to our Master. Recognition of the total truth and trustworthiness of Holy Scripture is essential to a full grasp and adequate confession of its authority.”¹

“The following statement affirms this inerrancy of Scripture afresh, making clear our understanding of it and warning against its denial. We are persuaded that to deny it is to set aside the witness of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit and to refuse that submission to the claims of God’s own Word that marks true Christian faith. We see it as our timely duty to make this affirmation in the face of current lapses from the truth of inerrancy among our fellow Christians and misunderstanding of this doctrine in the world at large.”¹

Structure and Scope

The statement consists of three parts: a Summary Statement, Articles of Affirmation and Denial, and an accompanying Exposition.¹ “Yet we rejoice in the deepening of our own convictions through our discussions together, and we pray that the statement we have signed may be used to the glory

of our God toward a new reformation of the church in its faith, life, and mission.”¹

For the complete text with all nineteen articles of affirmation and denial, the full text of the statement is available at www.wikipedia.org², or you can search Logos directly for the complete Chicago Statement document.

1

R. C. Sproul, Can I Trust the Bible?, The Crucial Questions Series (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2009), 2:xiii–xiv.

2

Robert L. Plummer, 40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible, ed. Benjamin L. Merkle, 40 Questions Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2021), 53.