

Church – Biblical Inerrancy

http://65.175.91.69/Reformation_net/Pages/ICBI_Background.htm

How the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy Began

By Dr. Jay Grimstead

We see the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI) Statement on Inerrancy as being a landmark church document, which was created in 1978 by the then largest, broadest, group of evangelical protestant scholars that ever came together to create a common, theological document in the 20th century. It is probably the first systematically comprehensive, broadly based, scholarly, creed-like statement on the inspiration and authority of Scripture in the history of the church.

Modernism Challenges the Historic View on Inerrancy

Just as the church's understanding of the full deity of Christ and the Trinity awaited the Arian controversy and the Council of Nicea in 325 AD; and just as the full understanding of Justification by Faith and the Priesthood of every Believer awaited the 1500s when it was clarified by Luther and Calvin, so the doctrine of the Inspiration of Scripture awaited the 20th century for its full debate and delineation. Up until the 20th century, all branches of Christianity worldwide accepted the basic inerrancy view of inspiration except for the secular philosophers and the liberal theologians, so a full-scale debate was unnecessary until then.

But, at the end of the liberal-fundamentalist doctrinal battles of the 20s and 30s, large portions of the previously sound major denominations were infected with a liberal view of the Bible. The evangelicals and fundamentalists within those denominations generally pulled out and started their own new denominations, seminaries, and mission societies and stood firm on the historical view of the Bible taught by Moses, Jesus, Paul and the heros of the faith the past 2000 years. By that time, almost all the theological schools and theologians of Europe had gone liberal. America and Canada, which are usually from 25 to 100 years behind Europe in their philosophical disintegration, were just starting to "catch up" with Europe theologically.

As Francis Schaeffer stated so eloquently, courage for confrontation over matters of truth and righteousness in the hearts of Christian leaders in North America was replaced by a kind of "knee-jerk" response committed to accommodation and "peace at any price" which sadly still reigns supreme within most evangelical circles today. This is one major reason things have disintegrated so far and so fast. At the same time, the relativistic view of truth and a dichotomy worldview (that segregates the spiritual world from the material world into two separate air-tight

compartments) that came from philosophers such as Hume, Kant, and Hegel had all but completely captured the university intellectuals of the entire world.

Neo-Orthodoxy infects the Evangelical Ranks

This was the kind of academic atmosphere that prevailed during the 20 years from 1947 to 1967 when many evangelical seminaries and colleges sent their bright young scholars to European universities to get their doctorates. A large percentage of these young scholars were infected with liberal and neo-orthodox views of the Bible; and then they returned to their evangelical schools to teach a [neo-orthodox](#) view of the Bible (what they sincerely believed were the "latest, most scholarly" views) to their students.

These partially "corrupted" young professors did not openly challenge their denomination's or institution's historic view of inspiration of the Bible. It was more subtle than that and less obvious than the open battle over the Bible of the 1920s and 1930s. Most of these young professors were infected with neo-orthodoxy; the then fashionable "reformed" liberalism of Swiss theologian Karl Barth. Neo-orthodoxy claims that the human words of the Bible are not the very words of God, but rather are a fallible human "witness" to the words of God and are therefore in a sense, the "Word" of God to man. In some cases they claim that the words of the Bible "become" the Word of God to man at a particular existential moment when that man senses God speaking to him. Others have spoken of the Bible "containing" the Word of God.

Neo-Orthodoxy Undermines the Reliability of Scripture

Since most neo-orthodox theologians attempt to honor God's word in some sense, their presentation to their students of their existential and relativistic re-interpretation of the Bible does not appear to be, nor is it intended to be, an attack upon the Bible. But, since most neo-orthodox men accept most of the higher critical theories of theological liberalism and since they usually believe (with Kant and Barth) that human language is incapable of communicating absolute, unchanging, and inerrant truth from God to man, therefore they are essentially liberals in their view of scripture.

In addition, most neo-orthodox "evangelicals" believe they cannot count on the Bible being absolutely true in matters of time and space, science and history, or ethics and anthropology (that is, areas that are open to scientific verification or falsification), but they do comfort themselves by saying they believe the Bible may be capable of communicating undistorted truth in "spiritual" matters such as eternity and heaven, faith and salvation, or piety and theology (areas that are not open to objective empirical verification). Thus they ask us to subjectively believe the Bible in those areas of "faith and practice" that we cannot, by the nature of the case, "prove" and then expect us to understand that the Bible is not totally reliable in matters of history and science.

In a nutshell, a liberal and neo-orthodox view of Scripture considers the original Greek and Hebrew manuscripts of the Bible to be part true and part false and that their theological experts must help us to determine what parts of the Bible are true and what parts of it are false. That is the essence of theological liberalism under whatever name it travels even if it goes by the name of "evangelicalism." Thus, a professor infected with a neo-orthodox view of Scripture will tend

to not believe that Moses wrote all five books of the Pentateuch; that Isaiah wrote the whole book of Isaiah; that Daniel was written in Daniel's time; that the flood of Noah was a universal flood covering the whole earth; that all of present mankind came from Noah's family; etc., etc. They will also tend to teach students that neither Jesus nor the Church Fathers believed the inerrancy of view of Scripture that was taught by the Jesus, Paul, Augustine, Calvin, Wesley, Spurgeon, Hodge, Warfield, Machen, and Schaeffer. They teach that the inerrancy view is a late development in church history.

Neo-Orthodoxy Entrenches Itself in Evangelical Institutions

Since the 1960s, many evangelical seminaries and colleges, denominations and organizations have been infected by the prevailing fog of neo-orthodoxy. Many sincere evangelicals, including many pastors and professors, are neo-orthodox liberals in regard to Scripture and don't even know there is anything wrong with their view. In light of all this, we felt we had to launch the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy in 1977.

By 1976, a neo-orthodox and liberal view of Scripture and therefore a relativistic view of doctrine and morals had permeated all levels of evangelicalism in every denomination and organization. The prevailing mood among educated people was openness to the liberalized view of scripture and a general fear of being labeled a "narrow inerrantist" who still believed the old, "unscholarly and medieval" view of Scripture. If a Christian in many evangelical circles really believed in the inerrancy of the Bible, they tended to remain "in the closet."

Furthermore, we, who felt God wanted us to stand up for the traditional, inerrancy view of Scripture and call our churches and organizations to be consistent with the statement on scripture in that organization's founding documents, were often attacked as troublemakers and told to be quiet or to go away. Almost no one wanted to face up to an honest, open evaluation of how far a church or organization had slid down the slippery slope towards increasing liberalization. Christian leaders then, who believed in the inerrancy of the Bible, found themselves becoming lonely warriors who were misunderstood, feared, and sometimes gently persecuted. And almost no one seemed to be willing to make it a national Christian issue and get it settled if it meant losing friends or a position in their organization.

The Battle for the Bible Explodes

In 1976, Dr. Harold Lindsell came out with his bombshell book, *The Battle for the Bible*, which exposed the massive infiltration of liberalism and neo-orthodoxy into nearly every denomination and seminary that considered itself evangelical. Lindsell's book was very accurate in exposing the deterioration and it was scholarly in its presentation. As far as we can tell, none of Lindsell's charges were ever refuted in any substantive manner by the institutions in question. The accused schools merely fumed and spoke harsh things against Dr. Lindsell. At that time, few leaders beside Dr. Lindsell, Francis Schaeffer, and Bill Gothard were attempting to make the inerrancy of the Bible an issue, though many were still faithfully teaching inerrancy.

The general response to *The Battle for the Bible* among the evangelical leadership of America was that it was "divisive" and that Lindsell was too "harsh" and "unloving" in exposing the

factual situation within evangelical institutions. Thus, the church was not at all ready nor willing to go to battle over the watershed issue of inerrancy. Many of the inerrantists were in the "closet" and the anti-inerrantist, neo-orthodox theologians were having a field day making fun of the old-fashioned view in the various evangelical periodicals and journals. (I want to make it clear at this point that the Fundamentalists and most Pentecostals stood firmly for inerrancy during this period). It was in this context that the ICBI was born. The following is a short explanation of how several of us gave birth to the ICBI.

A Call to Unite and Plan Strategies for the Battle

In 1976, God was leading me to create a night school and training center for laymen in the San Francisco Bay Area called the Reformation Study Center. R.C. Sproul suggested to our little staff that it would be wise to launch the study center with a conference. We took Sproul's advice and organized a conference on the Authority of Scripture at Mt. Hermon, California for February 1977. Our five speakers were to be R.C. Sproul, J.I. Packer, Norman Geisler, John Gerstner, and Greg Bahnsen, each dealing with two major topics on the authority of Scripture.

In September 1976, prior to the Mt. Hermon conference, I wrote to Sproul and to Harold Lindsell suggesting somebody should attempt to organize a national theological conference to deal with this battle for the inerrancy of the Bible and to expose the fallacies of the neo-orthodox false assumptions believed by so many evangelicals at that time. What I visualized was something of a theological "army" of scholars who would take this thing into battle as a united team.

I invited the five speakers, plus Miss Weatheral Johnson (of Bible Study Fellowship), Karen Hoyt and a few others to come early to the conference so we could pray in our living room about what to do regarding the inerrancy battle in the church. We had that prayer meeting then launched the conference and our little study center that February evening in Mt. Hermon with about 300 people in attendance. During the weekend conference, I gathered the speakers, Miss Johnson, and a few others together to discuss what strategy we might use to organize a frontal attack on this problem of a Barthian/liberal view of Scripture having infiltrated most of evangelicalism in North America and beyond.

The Vision for a United "Army" Unfolds

By the end of the Mt. Hermon conference, on Sunday afternoon, we had decided that God was leading us to launch a new organization, what we would later call ICBI, to do the following three things:

1. Create together a list of world famous or nationally recognized inerrancy theologians, Bible scholars, and Christian leaders who would be asked to form a theological "army" to clarify the theological issues involved and attempt to turn the situation around so the liberal evangelicals would have to hide in the closet and the inerrantists, the world over, would be able to lift their heads high and proudly proclaim they believed in the full inerrancy of the Bible.
2. Come to agreement on a list of theological sub-topics on which our scholar team would have to write white papers dealing with all the sub-points involved in a comprehensive

attack on this problem. (Philosophically there are some 14 separate debates that must be faced when dealing with the matter of inerrancy.)

3. Launch a major national conference on inerrancy for 200 to 300 biblical scholars and Christian leaders and sound forth the trumpet call that it was time to face the issue and turn the situation around. At that conference we would also work through and release a set of affirmations and denials on the inerrancy of Scripture and claim that there is no real biblical authority without biblical inerrancy and that the church was bound to deteriorate to the degree it rejected the inerrancy of the Bible.

With Jeffersonian language of dignity offered by J.I. Packer, we created a short statement of purpose for our new movement then set a date for the following month to meet at Pittsburgh airport and spend a full day making a list of fellow warriors and launching our strategy in earnest. I was asked to serve as the Executive Director and keep this process going until it was well launched. I asked Karen Hoyt to handle the details as my Executive Secretary which she did very efficiently and eventually set up our ICBI office in Oakland.

By the end of that series of meetings at Mt. Hermon, every one of the theologians and myself were positively excited about our prospects for a new inerrancy movement and we all felt a sense of release and a lifted burden of sorrow, loneliness and frustration we had carried over the theological deterioration of evangelicalism. I had felt this prophetic, Jeremiah type burden over the church the previous five years as an actual pain and heaviness within my stomach almost constantly. From that conference on it was gone. What we sensed is that, having decided together with like-minded, courageous, fellow warriors that we should indeed attack this problem together, whatever the cost, our mutual sense of loneliness (within all our various circles) and our near hopelessness over the situation was exchanged for camaraderie in battle and great optimism. It was a great breakthrough for all of us and we were grateful to be together.

The Vision Gives Birth to the ICBI

In March 1977, we met in Pittsburgh and created a list of some 50 theologians and Christian leaders to invite onto the new ICBI Council and Advisory Board. We set a date for a Council/Board meeting for September at the Chicago O'Hare airport and decided to ask James Boice to join us and function as chairman of the Council. I was asked to call most of the 50 men and explain the vision to them and recruit them onto our team. Nearly every one I called was quite enthusiastic, ready to join immediately and was grateful that we were going to form an "army" to attack this problem since they too had been frustrated and grieved to see the shift away from inerrancy in their own circles.

In September 1977, at the O'Hare Hilton, Boice and I led the meeting of enthusiastic Christian theologians and leaders and worked our game plan. We would together first create a book to answer, chapter for chapter, the neo-orthodox oriented book edited by Jack Rogers of Fuller Seminary, *Biblical Authority*, that gave the basic neo-orthodox arguments against inerrancy (the major point expressed was that the church could have biblical authority without an inerrant Bible). We made the chapter assignments with plans to have the book ready to be sold at our launching conference to be held October 1978 at the Hyatt Regency near O'Hare airport. We also made assignments for the scholarly white papers which were to be written and distributed to

those attending the conference. These white papers formed the scholarly foundation for our work the following 10 years as well as the foundation for the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*, which was created by the ICBI in 1978.

The initial set of ICBI white papers now appear in the ICBI book, *Inerrancy*, edited by Norman Geisler and published by Zondervan Press. Another ICBI book, *The Foundation for Biblical Authority*, edited by James Boice and also published by Zondervan, answered the Roger's book and is an excellent survey for the pastor and academic layperson to come to a solid understanding of the debate and the historical arguments of the church for the Bible's inerrancy. Many Christian colleges now use *The Foundation for Biblical Authority* along with Roger's *Biblical Authority* to show the contrast within evangelicalism between the historic, orthodox inerrancy view and the neo-orthodox view (sometimes disingenuously called the "enlightened evangelical view" by liberal-oriented evangelical professors). We also made other assignments for books on hermeneutics, short booklets explaining the problem, and what came to be Gleason Archer's monumental work, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Difficulties*.

The ICBI Launches its Theological "D-Day"

Prior to the October 1978 conference, I wrote to Billy Graham and asked him to contribute to our cause. The Billy Graham Evangelism Association then donated \$10,000 to help launch the ICBI. With this start-up money Karen Hoyt and I started on salary, so we could proceed with our plans.

Just prior to Reformation Sunday in October 1978, we staged our first ICBI conference for about 300 Christian leaders, theologians and pastors at the O'Hare Hyatt Regency to launch the movement publicly. During that conference, amidst much intense discussion and several all-night editorial sessions, we created together 19 articles on Biblical Inerrancy based upon a consensus agreement on the scholarly points made in the many white papers our team had written. These 19 articles were published as the historic [*Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*](#).

The ICBI Wins a Decisive Victory

And it worked! The net result was that there was an immediate reversal of who was in the "closet." Even though not many liberal evangelical scholars really changed their position theologically, they knew that under this new theological climate we had created they would not be able to be as bold about their departure from inerrancy. The week prior to our 1978 conference there were many articles in major Christian magazines belittling the inerrancy viewpoint. From that conference on, with a few exceptions, there was deathly silence from the liberal side for several years. Inerrancy was once again popular and respected as the historic, orthodox, and scholarly viewpoint.

Because of the visibility and success of the ICBI in its united and scholarly defense of inerrancy, many schools, churches, mission organizations, and some denominations began rethinking their doctrinal statements on Scripture. They realized that, because of the prevailing liberal theological "smog" most of their members had been breathing and because of the great confusion that reigned and the deliberate efforts of the liberalized evangelicals within most ranks, they had to

tighten up on their official statements on Scripture and require adherence to the orthodox view by their leadership and members.

With the wealth of new scholarship that was produced by the ICBI to buttress the doctrine of inerrancy, many evangelical colleges and seminaries were compelled to engage in intramural discussions and debates within their faculty over the issue of inerrancy. With the united front of the ICBI behind them, adherents of inerrancy came out of the "closet" and more often than not saw that they were in the majority. Thus, the tide of accommodation to neo-orthodox views of scripture, which had seemed unstoppable in the 1960s and 1970s, was turned back at many evangelical colleges and seminaries.

But the War Isn't Over

The proponents of inerrancy have not always been victorious against the proponents of neo-orthodox. At Fuller Seminary, a primary target of Lindsell's *Battle for the Bible*, the professors and scholars of the School of World Mission faculty signed the ICBI Statement enthusiastically and then sent it across the hall and invited the Fuller School of Theology professors to sign it also. The Fuller Theology professors rejected it outright and, as far as we know, it remains unsigned by those Fuller theology professors to this day.

Alas, the battle for for the Bible is far from over. In the years since the ICBI, the neo-orthodox liberals have developed new tactics and have made new inroads into evangelical institutions. The biblical doctrine of Inerrancy remains a crucial watershed issue for the church today. May God raise up a new generation of gifted theologians and scholars to carry on the good fight.

- See [more comments on the ICBI](#) by Dr. Grimstead.
- For a short explanation of the ICBI & COR history, [click here](#).

Editors note: The ICBI was formally disbanded in September 1987 and the historic ICBI documents were turned over to the Dallas Theological Seminary archives. Biblical inerrancy is one of the theological issues that is being dealt with by the [International Church Council](#), which is in many respects the spiritual successor to the now defunct ICBI.