

THE BIOLOGOS FORUM

SCIENCE AND FAITH IN DIALOGUE

Science, Faith, and The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy

by Peter Enns



“Science and the Sacred” frequently features essays from The BioLogos Foundation’s leaders and Senior Fellows. [Pete Enns](#) is Senior Fellow of Biblical Studies for The BioLogos Foundation and author of several books and commentaries, including the popular [Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament](#), which looks at three questions raised by biblical scholars that seem to threaten traditional views of Scripture.

In order to remove obstacles from the science and faith discussion, Enns carefully examines in this 14-part blog series both The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (CSBI) and The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics (CSBH), two documents that were developed by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy. The CSBI and CSBH were produced during two three-day summits in 1978 and 1982, respectively, to which approximately 300 theologians from the Evangelical community came in an effort to defend and define biblical inerrancy. Despite their best efforts, there are still hermeneutical and theological shortcomings in the statements that pose roadblocks to the progression of the science and faith discussion. Throughout the series, Enns looks at three main problems with the content of these declarations: inadequate genre recognition, a failure to appreciate how the New Testament’s use of the Old Testament complicates various Articles, and a failure to appreciate narrative developments within the Bible.

Science, Faith, and the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy

Part 1
June 17, 2011

Introduction

Today, I am beginning a new series in which I take a look in detail at two influential Evangelical statements on Scripture: The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy ([CSBI](#)) and The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics ([CSBH](#)).

These statements were composed by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, founded in 1977 to articulate and defend inerrancy. This group eventually composed three statements: CSBI in 1978, CSBH in 1982 and a third statement that for our purposes adds little, The Chicago Statement on Biblical Application in 1986.

These statements were written at a time when numerous influential Evangelical leaders were growing concerned that the church's doctrine of inerrancy (at least how they understood it) was coming under increasing attack both from within and from outside of Evangelicalism. In many respects, these papers were a galvanizing moment in the Evangelical tradition and for many they still represent the best of Evangelical thinking on Scripture. Also, the three-day summits that produced these documents boasted roughly 300 participants from various Evangelical traditions, and so represent somewhat of a cross-section of the evangelical community.

Over the past thirty years, CSBI and CSBH have been both praised for their lucidity and balance and strongly criticized for their obscurity and theological parochialism. My series is not intended to join that fray, but I do want to focus on the impact of these statements on the science/faith discussion—and as I see it, for that discussion, the impact has been largely counterproductive.

The two statements are organized as a series of articles, meaning a theological statement comprised of an affirmation and a corresponding denial ("We affirm ..." followed by "We deny ..."). Of these two statements, only two articles, both in CSBH, speak directly to the science/faith discussion (Articles XXI and XXII), and we will look at them in due course. What are of interest for us here, however, are not only direct statements about science and Scripture, but statements about Scripture and principles of interpretation that can directly or indirectly impede progress in the science/faith discussion for Evangelicals. That is a more subtle point, but still crucial for our purposes.

My aim, therefore, is to engage these two statements sympathetically yet also critically so as to move beyond the obstacles to the science/faith discussion that those statements have placed in the path for some Evangelicals.

Like most documents of this nature, CSBI and CSBH are declarative statements as well as consensus documents aimed at bringing along as many people of reasonably like mind as possible. Maintaining balance between these two purposes can sometimes lead to favoring open-ended statements and imprecise language.

I respect the delicacy and subtlety needed in crafting such statements, but nevertheless I find three persistent areas where these statements fall short of offering necessary hermeneutical subtlety and depth for facing not only the question of science and faith but other issues of theological and hermeneutical interest as well. As we go through these statements, I will point out where these shortcomings appear, but let me first simply mention the three general areas:

- 1) Inadequate genre recognition, especially in the Old Testament;
- 2) Failure to appreciate how the New Testament's use of the Old complicates various Articles in crucial ways; and
- 3) Failure to fully appreciate narrative trajectories and developments within the Christian Bible.

These are three major areas that adversely affect, in some way, how one addresses the science/faith discussion.

We will begin here by looking at CSBI.

Structure of CSBI

CSBI begins with a brief preface followed by a brief five-point Summary Statement, nineteen Articles of Affirmation and Denial, and a section called Exposition. This final section fleshes out the theological basis upon which the articles are based by devoting several brief paragraphs to each of the following subtopics:

- Creation, Revelation, and Inspiration
- Authority: Christ and the Bible
- Infallibility, Inerrancy, and Interpretation
- Skepticism and Criticism
- Transmission and Translation
- Inerrancy and Authority

At various points, the Exposition section clarifies or at least expands a bit on the briefer Articles of Affirmation and Denial. At relevant points, I will bring this section into the discussion when trying to clarify the articles.

Preface

The Preface is five brief paragraphs long and, as one can well guess, introduces the statement as a whole. The Preface makes several claims that help orient the reader for what follows:

1. The authority of Scripture is a key issue for each generation of believers and in every age. To stray from Scripture is to stray from Christ himself, and inerrancy guards against that.
2. In fact, inerrancy is Jesus' own view of the Bible, and so to set aside inerrancy is to set aside "the witness of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit."
3. The writers do not claim that this statement is the final word, that it should be given "creedal weight," or that the writers are personally infallible. They do, however, hope that their efforts will bring on a "new reformation of the Church in its faith, life and mission."
4. The statement is offered in "humility and love" and in a spirit of dialogue, acknowledging that those who deny inerrancy do not necessarily "display the consequences of this denial in the rest of their belief and behavior" and that those who uphold inerrancy do not always reflect that faith in their lives.

It is clear that, among other things, the summit participants feel a certain degree of gravitas in their work to craft a statement that will "challenge all Christians to growing appreciation and understanding" of inerrancy. Much is at stake in maintaining this doctrine—including obedience to Christ himself. One begins the Articles section, therefore, anticipating that each of these articles is a crucial link in the inerrancy chain and so each bears much weight.

On one level, one can appreciate the sense of urgency, but the tone set here at the outset does not encourage theological and hermeneutical dialogue despite the disclaimers above.

A further point of reflection here at the outset is that the Preface essentially seems to equate the notion of biblical authority and its "total truth and trustworthiness" with inerrancy, as these framers understood it. Others, however, will not be as quick to link authority, truth, and trustworthiness of Scripture to a particular understanding of inerrancy.

In other words, there may be different ways of crafting notions of biblical authority and trustworthiness that are utterly respectful of Scripture but that do not adhere to the language and concepts promulgated in these two statements. Insisting on only one path forward may stifle much needed discussion of the nature of Scripture *vis-à-vis* science.

In my next post we will move to consider the five-point Summary Statement. Like the Preface, the Summary prepares readers for the Articles, although with more specificity.

“God is ‘Truth’”: The First Summary Statement of CSBI

Part 2
June 21, 2011

After the Preface, which we looked at in my last post, [The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy](#) (CSBI) begins with a five-point Summary Statement. This summary encapsulates the theological grounding for the nineteen Articles of Affirmation and Denial to follow.

It is important to look carefully at this summary, for it will alert us to what the framers of CSBI felt to be of prime theological importance. At each of these five points, views are expressed that most would quickly recognize as common among Evangelicals, and so not at all surprising or consequential. But there are also various directions being announced here that, perhaps unwittingly, restrict the science/faith discussion unnecessarily.

To provide the fullest context possible, I will reproduce each of these five points in turn and offer my own theological and hermeneutical thoughts in response while bearing in mind the science/faith discussion. I put in bold type those words and phrases that are particularly important to point out. We begin today with the first summary point.

1. *God, who is Himself **Truth and speaks truth only**, has inspired Holy Scripture in order thereby to reveal Himself to lost mankind through Jesus Christ as Creator and Lord, Redeemer and Judge. Holy Scripture is God’s witness to Himself.*

A central Christian, let alone Evangelical, conviction is that Scripture is ultimately a book that reveals Christ. Now, in various Christian theologies, this general conviction can be expressed in different ways. For example, some might argue that Christ is actually the conscious topic of the Old Testament writers whereas others might put it differently: that the Bible is a grand narrative and Christ is more the final word that sums up and completes the biblical story.

Either way, the conviction expressed here is sound and fully expected: Christ is the ultimate topic of Scripture and, in revealing Christ to us, God is bearing witness to himself (note the final sentence in point one). One could quibble that failure to make explicit the Spirit’s work here at the outset misses an opportunity to begin CSBI with clearly Trinitarian theology, but that is neither here nor there at the end of the day. (The Spirit is the topic of the second summary point.)

What is a bit more thought provoking is how “truth” is so quickly highlighted as the first quality of God to be mentioned. Of course, no one would object as if God is “Falsehood” or that he “speaks falsehood.” There is nothing incorrect about designating God in this way.

My concern is that “truth” is an ambiguous idea. No Christian would disagree with the idea in general, but the devil is in the details, so to speak. I think other portions of CSBI and CSBH will bear this out, but it seems to me that already here the framers are operating with an already worked out but unstated notion of what “truth” means for them and then expecting Scripture to follow suit.

A key theological and hermeneutical issue is already surfacing here—not only for the science/faith discussion but also for many other topics of theological interest. At stake in any Evangelical discussion of the nature of Scripture is not *whether* God speaks truth but what is the *nature* of truth that God speaks. Frankly, that is the *whole* point, and a failure to engage the matter on that hermeneutical and theological level is to misdirect the discussion at the outset.

Having said that, it is entirely unfair to pass judgment on CSBI based on the first summary point—the first subordinate clause, no less. I am conscious of the damage that can occur by uncharitable and strong readings of texts. But what the framers chose to bring to the surface at the very outset is revealing: they are concerned with “truth.” But so is everyone. The question is what does “truth” mean when speaking of Scripture?

In that respect, it is worth remarking on what is missing, not only in this first point, but throughout the Summary Statement and, in my opinion, in the Articles to follow. The kind of truth one expects to see in Scripture is greatly affected by how one understands the nature of Scripture. CSBI does a very good job of impressing upon its readers the revelatory nature of Scripture, which demands that we take Scripture as “truth.”

But the manner in which God speaks truth is through the idioms, attitudes, assumptions, and general worldviews of the ancient authors. “Truth” is not a neutral philosophical concept to be downloaded into Scripture from the outside. Rather, it is expressed in Scripture through the energetic interplay of the Spirit of God working in and through human authors. So the question is, “What is truth in view of the fact that God is not speaking in philosophical, or even modern, terms, but to ancient peoples?” Do not the historical settings of Scripture affect how we understand the nature of the truth that the Spirit is revealing?

The implications of all of this will be seen more clearly as we continue with the Summary Statement and the Articles, but let me get to the point here. Elsewhere, CSBI will either argue or imply that *since* Scripture is divine revelation, and *since* God is Truth and can only speak truth, *therefore* that revelation cannot be “untrue” in, say, the creation story or in how biblical authors describe historical events.

To put it another way, this opening summary statement appears to be steering the discussion in a direction that will curtail the necessary hermeneutical and theological subtlety needed to engage the science/faith discussion. To be clear, I do not mean to imply that this is intentionally strategic or deceptive. Rather, it appears to be more unconscious.

But for that reason, it behooves us to pay close attention to the words in order to see the assumptions that the framers may be bringing into the discussion.

We will continue in the next post with the second summary statement.

Imprecise Language about the Bible's Authority: The Second Summary Statement of CSBI

Part 3
June 24, 2011

Today, we are looking at the second of five summary statements that introduce the Articles of Affirmation and Denial of The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (CSBI). These five statements explain the theological underpinnings of inerrancy that are developed in the Articles. In my last post, we looked at how "truth" is not a neutral concept to be applied to Scripture, but a concept that must be handled with hermeneutical and theological reflection.

The second summary statement focuses on the notion of biblical authority, which is a central concern of CSBI: inerrancy and biblical authority are two sides of the same coin. Since Scripture is the work of the Holy Spirit, it is authoritative, and it follows that it must be inerrant. And the reverse: since Scripture is the work of the Holy Spirit, it is inerrant, and it follows that it must be authoritative.

In other words, authoritative Scripture must be inerrant; an inerrant Scripture must be authoritative. In a nutshell, this is what CSBI as a whole sets out to explain and defend.

The second summary statement begins to flesh out a bit more the scope of biblical authority.

2. *Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: It is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it affirms; obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God's pledge, in all that it promises.*

This second summary statement is sweeping in scope. Of course, summaries tend to be broad and sweeping by nature, and so perhaps leave themselves open to unfair, easy criticism, which is to be avoided in all discourse. Nevertheless, there are several issues used here that are begging for more clarification.

The first sentence makes the expected claim that Scripture is a product of the Spirit's superintendence, guiding its human authors who had been prepared for the task. "Superintended" however can be somewhat of a buzzword, suggesting that the Spirit's superintendence produced not simply an inerrant Bible, but inerrant in the way as that is understood by the framers of CSBI (which as we will, in upcoming posts, see includes historical and scientific matters).

But claiming wholeheartedly the Spirit's superintendence tells us nothing about the end product that the Spirit is superintending. It is possible that the Spirit is not leading the biblical writers to produce a text that the framers of CBSI have in mind. We are running up here against the same problem we saw in my last post: terminology—like “superintendence” or “truth”—loaded with assumed meanings without first conferring whether Scripture is designed to shoulder those meanings. As I said in my last post, this is one of the more persistent obstacles of CBSI.

Another example of vague language is that Scripture speaks with divine authority “in all matters upon which it touches.” This is seen as a natural extension of the Spirit's superintendence. But what does this mean for Scripture to “touch” upon something?

“Touches” is too vague a word to be of much guidance, for Scripture “touches” on a lot of things, and it is by no means a foregone conclusion that at each “touch point” it speaks authoritatively—especially since the nature of that authority is likewise left vague. Scripture “touches” upon the issue of servitude in the Old Testament, but few today would argue that these passages speak “authoritatively” for practice today.

To raise a relevant example for BioLogos, in Genesis 1, Scripture certainly “touches” on the issue of the creation of the cosmos. But the question quickly becomes, “Touches, but in what way? Authoritative, but exactly how?” In other words, how Scripture is “authoritative” on a subject that it “touches” invariably involves us in a hermeneutical and theological discussion.

It should not be presumed that Scripture's authority in touching on the matter of creation demands a literal reading of Genesis 1. Put differently, it is not at all clear that the Spirit's superintendence of the biblical writers means that historical and scientific accuracy is now required of a faithful reading of Genesis 1 simply because Scripture is “authoritative” and “touches” on the issue of creation. The Spirit's superintendence might have led the ancient biblical writers to “touch” on the matter of creation according to ancient ways of understanding Scripture, not beholden to our current notions. In that case, just what we mean by biblical authority with respect to Genesis 1 becomes a far more complicated matter than CSBI lets on.

The same criticism holds for other vague terms in summary statement 2. To say that Scripture is to be believed as divine “instruction” in all it “affirms” begs the question of what “affirms” means and what form of “instruction” is in view. Does not Genesis 1 “affirm” creation in six days, with morning and evening? Of course. But does the fact that Scripture “affirms” such a scenario tell us what it means to accept it as “instruction”? No, it does not.

Could it not be that “believing” the creation story means reading it as an ancient form of communication, where standards of “affirmation” and “instruction” are to be understood according to ancient categories, not modern ones? Will not such notions as “affirmation” and “instruction” have to be filled in for us by a close reading of Scripture in context rather than meaning we assign to those words?

Likewise, statement two tells us that Scripture is to be obeyed “in all it requires” and “embraced ... in all its promises.” On the surface, few would quibble, but again, unless we determine what “require” and “embrace” mean, we are left grasping at straws. Does Genesis 1 “require” that the text be “obeyed” as literal, or does it require some other type of obedience?

In summary, the difficulty with statement 2 is that claims are made about Scripture that have significant hermeneutical and theological implications, but without having done the necessary and involved hermeneutical and theological work to justify those claims. Any movement forward, especially in the science/faith discussion, will require more careful reflection.

The Scope of the Bible's Authority: CSBI Summary Statements 3 and 4

Part 4
July 1, 2011

Today, we look at summary statements 3 and 4 of The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (CSBI). The fourth statement is directly relevant for the science/faith discussion, but we begin with statement 3, which is relatively uncontroversial for our purposes.

3. *The Holy Spirit, Scripture's divine Author, both authenticates it to us by His inward witness and opens our minds to understand its meaning.*

This statement is well within classic Christian orthodoxy and poses little to discuss with respect to the science/faith dialogue. It is common to think of Scripture as a product of dual authorship, meaning the "divine Author," the Spirit, guides the human authors, a process typically referred to as inspiration.

By saying that the Spirit "authenticates" Scripture to us, the framers mean that the Spirit brings Christians to trust Scripture as God's by bearing witness to Scripture's trustworthiness in their hearts. Of course, this is no place for framers to go into the subtleties—for example, whether this authentication is private or communal, constant or intermittent, or whether Christian growth normally bring about periods of struggling with Scripture's trustworthiness. The general principle is that trusting God's Word is the work of the Spirit.

We read that the Spirit also opens the minds of its readers to understand its meaning. Here, too, this is a relatively uncontroversial point, though it may be wise to take a small step back for a moment. Along with such a confession, one must also call to mind the common experience of Christians that (1) Christians led by the same Spirit regularly disagree, and (2) many who have done much work in aiding our understanding of Scripture do not profess to be Christians.

If the framers have in mind here something more along the line of spiritual or devotional meaning of Scripture, there is less of a problem with their claim. If, however, they are suggesting that proper biblical interpretation in general is limited to Spirit-led Christians who will necessarily agree with each other, common experience dictates a very different conclusion.

All that being said, this is a relatively uncontroversial statement, though it could seriously hamper any sort of theological discussion, not to mention the science/faith discussion, if the framers intend a more restrictive understanding of the Spirit-led biblical interpretation. If statement 4 is any indication, it seems that a more restrictive understanding is in view.

4. *Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God's acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God's saving grace in individual lives.*

Statement 4 is the first reference in CSBI to the science/faith discussion. I appreciate the clarity and forthrightness of the statement, though it seems to suggest a point of view that reaches too far and, in doing so, cuts the legs out from under it.

The framers begin this statement by claiming that Scripture is “wholly and verbally” given by God. This phrasing raises several questions that have occupied discussions over inspiration for centuries, for example, whether the Spirit directs every syllable of the biblical writer (as in dictation) or whether the Spirit guides writers in all truth but without overseeing how that truth is expressed word for word. Still, the phrasing is hardly out-of-the-ordinary in Evangelicalism. What is more pertinent to us—and this brings us back to what we have seen in previous posts—is what is assumed by the framers that a verbally God-given text requires.

The framers are quite open that a verbally God-given text will be “without error or fault” (it is not immediately clear what distinguishes the two) in four specific ways. In their view, a verbally God-given, Spirit-led, without-error or -fault Bible is a Bible that makes no errors in all its teaching concerning **creation, history, origins of biblical books, and God's saving grace**.

In addition to the ambiguity of what “teaching” means (see my previous post for other examples of ambiguous concepts), there is much to unpack here.

First, note that the fourth item on the list is indeed not like the others. A statement about salvation is more a matter of spiritual application than the other items, which are open to and regularly the topic of scholarly discussion. An unfortunate and wrong conclusion that could easily be drawn from this statement is that the truth of the last item goes hand-in-hand with how one treats the previous three, as if to say, “If the teaching of Scripture on creation, history, and authorship questions is wrong, then we are only one small step away from Scripture likewise being wrong matters pertaining to salvation. Hence, we must remain firm in those other areas.”

I do not think I am creating a problem out of thin air, for many of us involved in the science/faith dialogue hear quite regularly, “If the biblical teaching on creation is not literalistically true, then we have no grounds for trusting Scripture when it comes to matters of salvation.” CSBI, in my opinion, unfortunately perpetuates this line of thinking.

The question before us is not whether Scripture's teaching on creation is to be trusted; the question is what exactly it is the Bible teaches about creation. CSBI perpetuates, albeit subtly, the notion that a text inspired by God will not mislead God's people, *which means* that the Bible must behave according to standards that the framers assume to be applicable

to Scripture as God's word—namely, a literalistic hermeneutic. We will see elsewhere in these documents (CSBI and the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics [CSBH]), in one or two places, a slightly greater degree of nuance on this notion, but the literalistic hermeneutic is the foundation of these statements throughout.

Finally, it should not escape our notice that the first three items correspond to three discrete, yet interconnected, points of contention in the early years of the rise of Fundamentalism in the nineteenth century. Scientific advances in geology and biology led to evolutionary theory, which posed a threat to a literalistic reading of the **creation** story, and therefore its **historical** value. Many other aspects of biblical scholarship in the nineteenth century, namely European higher criticism and biblical archaeology, further challenged the Bible's **historical** veracity as well as traditional notions of the **literary origins** of many biblical books (e.g., Wellhausen's Documentary Hypothesis of the Pentateuch).

It is fair to conclude that statement 4 intends to call to mind the contentious history of the Fundamentalist and Evangelical movements by raising the specter of evolution, higher criticism, and biblical archeology. Failure to hold one's ground on these matters will have implications for whether Christians can trust Scripture on any matter, including salvation.

Here, too, there is much to unpack, but for the science/faith dialogue, one point rises to the surface: failure to take a strong line on this historical veracity of the creation narrative jeopardizes any trust in Scripture and leads to an erosion on one's assurance of salvation. Such a linkage, if taken to heart, can threaten to end the science/faith discussion before it even begins—or at least assures that it will be a point of contention rather than dialogue.

Debatable Assumptions: CSBI and Summary Statement 5

**Part 5
July 5, 2011**

As we have seen in the previous three posts, the Summary Statement of The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (CSBI) comprises five declarations that summarize the content and general disposition of the Articles of Affirmation and Denial that follow. In brief, they set up an understanding of inerrancy that the framers consider axiomatic for their more detailed thoughts to follow.

Thus far we have seen that, as worded, these statements reveal certain debatable assumptions regarding the nature of Scripture, what inspiration necessarily entails, and the implications of a non-literal reading of creation and other issues for matters of salvation. We have also seen that some of the language used (particularly in statement 2) is ambiguous, but seems to be invested with meaning that distracts from constructive dialogue between science and faith.

I want to remind our readers that my purpose in this series is not to evaluate the CSBI in general, but to see how this statement can affect the science/faith dialogue, particularly since it has been an influential statement of Evangelical theology for over 30 years. Toward that end, my point of view is that CSBI does not encourage such discussion but hinders it significantly—not because it maintains a high view of Scripture that is antithetical to science, but because it promotes a view of Scripture that lacks necessary nuance and subtlety on many key points.

As I engage CSBI, I am also well aware that the nature of the science/faith dialogue has shifted significantly in recent years, and we cannot complain that CSBI fails to take those developments into account. All theological statements, including CSBI, need to be understood in the context of the historical moment out of which they arose—a courtesy we extend to Scripture as well!

All of our theological iterations are “works in progress,” ever open to adjustment, change, and, if need be, abandonment. The CSBI statement is no different. In fact, the true Protestant Evangelical spirit out of which this statement grew demands critical self-reflection, and it is in that spirit that I offer my comments here.

The fifth and final summary statement lays out more clearly the framers’ understanding of the implications of failing to assent to their view of inerrancy.

5. *The authority of Scripture is inescapably impaired if this total divine inerrancy is in any way limited or disregarded, or made relative to a view of truth contrary to the Bible's own; and such lapses bring serious loss to both the individual and the Church.*

If we read statement 5 in view of statements 1-4, we will see that the conclusion reached here is virtually inevitable. Given all that has gone before, there is really no choice but to conclude that the authority of Scripture will be compromised to serious individual and corporate detriment if Scripture is not inerrant in all that it “touches” or “affirms” (etc.), which, as we have seen, includes for the framers matters of creation and history.

The problem, of course, is that the conclusion is convincing only if the premise is granted—namely that without inerrancy, as the framers understand it, the Bible ceases having any meaningful authority. The question really is what *kind* of authority we are to expect from the Bible and *how* one is to make that determination. To ask these questions is to question the premise of CBSI, which is precisely what is needed to move the science/faith dialogue forward in an Evangelical setting.

In others words, as is mentioned in earlier posts and bears repeating, this entire matter is an inescapably theological and hermeneutical one, not simply of appealing to what the Bible “clearly” says on matters of creation (see statement 4) and then proceeding on that basis to dialogue with science. If that is the case, the entire dialogue, so sorely needed in our world, is over before it begins.

What is missing in CSBI, and summarized so clearly here in statement 5, is hermeneutical self-consciousness, which is to say, an awareness that “what the Bible says” is itself the subject of careful, deep, nuanced, theological and hermeneutical reflection, which from the early church on has been part and parcel of the Christian task.

It may be presumed by the framers (and I strongly suspect that it is) that the CSBI view of Scripture is that of the historic church throughout the ages. That claim, however, would need to be established rather than assumed, and those efforts would, in my opinion, bear little fruit. The way that the inerrancy issue is framed in CSBI is in direct response to factors that were largely unknown for about the first 1700 years of the church’s existence.

CSBI certainly sees itself as applying the church’s historically unanimous view of Scripture from the past to pressing matters of the present, but the framers’ own understanding of the past is no doubt colored by their own present intentions, namely to defend and explicate their doctrine of Scripture in our day and age. CSBI is hardly unique in that regard, for reading one’s present into the past is a universal theological tendency. Careful theology, however, is ever vigilant to account for that factor and proceed accordingly.

This is precisely what I aim to do in the post that follows, where we will look at the Articles of Affirmation and Denial.

What Does It Mean to “Receive” the Bible as Authoritative? CSBI Article I

**Part 6
July 11, 2011**

In the past several posts, we have looked at the Preface and Summary Statements of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. These introduce the theological assumptions that inform the heart of the document, which is the nineteen “Articles of Affirmation and Denial.”

Listing one’s beliefs in the form of what is affirmed and correspondingly denied is a helpful, and quite common, way of expressing a set of beliefs. (For example, Answers in Genesis has a statement [“Affirmations and Denials Essential to a Christian \(Biblical\) Worldview”](#).) Denials are essentially clarifications of the affirmations, though from another angle. Hypothetically, for example, one can affirm that “We believe that God is the creator of the heavens and the earth.” This, however, leaves a lot of leeway to fill in information that the authors may not have intended. One could follow this affirmation by saying, “We deny that God created through an evolutionary process.” Or, one could say, “We deny that ‘creation’ conforms to modern scientific notions, but rather profess that it is to be understood by ancient standards of ‘ordering the cosmos.’” Either way, the affirmation is clarified by the denial.

Denials flesh out what is being affirmed, and typically, though not always, CSBI’s Articles make their point clearly enough.

The Articles also show some sort of progression of thought that moves from #1 to #19, from more basic points of theology to more hermeneutically complex points (though not consistently so). It will also be obvious that all the statements are equally open to criticism—especially for us, if they have no real bearing on the science/faith question. Others are more pertinent. Still, in order to get the whole picture, we will cover all nineteen articles but not belabor less central issues that arise, however interesting they might be in other contexts. (So, some posts will look at several of the Articles, not just one.)

We will begin today by looking at the first Article.

Article I

We affirm that the Holy Scriptures are to be received as the authoritative Word of God.

We deny that the Scriptures receive their authority from the Church, tradition, or any other human source.

The first article simply says that the authority of Scripture is dependent on no outside source but is “internal,” so to speak. Some speak of Scripture as “self-attesting.” Of course, this is a matter of faith for Christians, as it should be. Scripture’s authority cannot be adjudicated by any outside source, but must simply be accepted, or “received” as such as this article puts it.

But we must follow the logic of this first article, for receiving Scripture as authoritative does not constitute proof that it is. All religions have an authority that serves as a fundamentally unquestioned base from which to proceed theologically. This is why others add that receiving Scripture as authoritative is a gift of the Spirit: if any other ground is given, the “self-attesting” nature of Scripture would be undercut.

I would add, though, that confessing Scripture’s authority as a starting point does not address the way in which Scripture functions authoritatively. We have seen this repeatedly in my previous posts. In other words, we are still left with hammering out the theological and hermeneutical details.

For example, are there portions of Scripture that functioned authoritatively in ancient contexts but not in later times? Are there portions of the Old Testament—no less God’s word—that cease having authoritative status in light of the gospel (e.g., Jesus’ discontinuation of dietary laws in Mark 7:19)? Does Jesus’ injunction to turn the other cheek have authority in *all* situations, personal and national?

These and many other similar questions are perennial ones that Christians invariably address in hammering out *how* (not *whether*) Scripture functions authoritatively in the life of the church.

So, by speaking of Scripture as the received authority of the church, this should not be read to imply that reading Scripture will easily settle our theological questions—as if a glance at Genesis 1 and 2 settles the question of human origins. The diverse opinions on many theological issues held by the church throughout history attest to the invariably complex nature of the theological and hermeneutical discussion.

“Authority” really means that, in their theological and hermeneutical deliberations, Christians will recognize that Scripture is always there, front and center, as that to which one must give serious and respectful account. To “give account” reflects the church’s unending privilege in working out where and in what way Scripture speaks.

My main concern in Article I, though, is that it continues in the vein that we have already seen in the Preface and Summary Statements: it uses vocabulary invested with potentially theologically charged meaning. To put it another way, the *entire debate* is all about *how to define* words like *authority*, *inerrancy*, what the Bible *teaches*, *affirms*, etc.

Failure to address the theological and hermeneutical issues surrounding those definitions will certainly prevent a meaningful dialogue between faith and science from getting off the ground. Yet this is precisely what is needed.

Promoting this needed dialogue is not meant to “make room” artificially for evolution, to sneak it in through the back door of irrelevant debate and scholar-speak, but to do what the church has always had to do: *think* about what Scripture means and how it is to be applied in concrete circumstances. That is part of the Christian calling. To require such depth of thought in the evolution discussion is not a faithless accommodation to evolution, but a thoughtful application of the church’s perennial theological task.

The Bible Binds and Barth is Bad: CSBI Articles II and III

Part 7
July 15, 2011

Today we continue our series on The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (CSBI) by looking at Articles II and III and their effect on the science/faith discussion.

Article II

We affirm that the Scriptures are the supreme written norm by which God binds the conscience, and that the authority of the Church is subordinate to that of Scripture.

We deny that Church creeds, councils, or declarations have authority greater than or equal to the authority of the Bible.

What we see here in Article II is nothing less than the heart of the Protestant faith: Scripture is the final authority and no human authority will be over it. As CSBI puts it, Scripture alone is the norm that has the authority to “bind the conscience.” This phrase has behind it a history of spirited Protestant discussion over the authority of Scripture. Basically, the writers here are saying that only Scripture has the right to tell the believer what to believe and how to act in matters pertaining to faith and life.

The very practical problem, though, is that what Scripture says on any given topic is not always clear, which is why Protestantism has had a rather robust history of writing statements like CSBI in an effort to clarify how and in what instances Scripture plays its “binding” role. Further, and ironically, such statements, including CSBI, often wind up being *de facto* lower-order “binding” statements because they are adopted by communities of faith (or at least by some speaking for the group). As such, these statements act as community boundary markers, which in effect perform a binding function.

It is ironic, therefore, that despite the Protestant tone of Scripture’s supremacy set by this Article, the framers wrote CSBI to set clear parameters of what is “in” and “out” in an Evangelical doctrine of Scripture, and the document has most certainly been used throughout its brief history in just this way to adjudicate theological differences. I have certainly seen this often in Evangelical contexts where faith/science matters are discussed as well as many other topics concerning biblical studies in general.

Having said all this, however, it is certainly good and proper to say plainly at the outset, “We intend to listen to Scripture first and foremost.” What is missing here, as I have been saying in previous posts, is an expression of theological and hermeneutical subtlety in working out how Scripture actually functions in the life of the church.

In other words, what we see here in Article II is a well-stated *general* principle, but without further elaboration, it is hard to know how this would actually function. So, to bring this back to the evolution issue, we can ask the following question: Scripture may be the sole written norm of the church, which alone can bind conscience, and to which every thought is to be subject. But what does it mean to read Genesis 1-3, or Romans 5:12-21 (where Adam is mentioned), or any other creation text (Psalms 74:13-14; 104:7) well? What do these texts “bind” us to?

Declaring *that* the Bible has a central authoritative role in the church does not settle *how* these texts should be handled. A reading of the Preface and Summary Statements, however, suggests the “how” question is already being implicitly answered by the framers—in a literalistic direction. For the science/faith conversation to proceed well, hermeneutical and theological positions will need to be addressed more deliberately.

Article III

We affirm that the written Word in its entirety is revelation given by God.

We deny that the Bible is merely a witness to revelation, or only becomes revelation in encounter, or depends on the responses of men for its validity.

Article III is focused on the perceived dangers of a theological movement of the twentieth century known as Neo-Orthodoxy and of Karl Barth, its first and chief proponent.

This is one of those issues in CSBI that deserves attention, but that, if discussed in any length, would take us far from the science/faith discussion. So, to be brief, a major concern some have had with Barth was his view that Scripture “becomes” the word of God for us in our encounter with God, and so seems to ignore what Scripture “is,” regardless of whether one reads it or not. In other words, what many felt Barth’s theology sacrificed, to great peril, was the *objective* nature of Scripture as God’s word, in favor of the *subjective* appropriation of Scripture by the believer.

It is safe to say that precisely what Barth thought of Scripture has been the subject of much debate throughout the twentieth and still now into the twenty-first centuries, and competent experts on Barth’s theology write whole books on the subject and come to different conclusions. CSBI has in mind one particular interpretation of Barth (deeply called into question by some Barth scholars) as denying that Scripture is revelation from God and only becomes revelation to us when read, albeit guided by the Spirit.

When CSBI was written, Barth’s influence (“Barthianism”) was still a major bone of contention in Evangelicalism, particularly among conservative Reformed (i.e., Calvinist) Evangelicals (e.g., one of the framers of CSBI was R. C. Sproul, the famous conservative Reformed apologist). So, in Article III, CSBI is simply putting its stake in the ground by saying, “Barth is wrong. Scripture is worthy of our careful attention because of what it *is*, the word of God, not by what it *becomes*.”

Given the theological climate of the late 70s and early 80s, the question of Neo-Orthodoxy was important enough of an issue for the framers to mention it early on in the Articles. How one settles the Barth question, however, will not determine how one settles the science/faith question. Confessing that Scripture is objectively God's word does not settle how that objective word of God is to be understood in Genesis 1-3 and other key passages surrounding the evolution discussion.

In other words, successfully opposing Neo-Orthodoxy does not vindicate a literalistic reading of Scripture. And conversely, accepting evolution is not evidence of the erroneous influence of a Barthian view of Scripture (as the framers understood Barth). The hermeneutical and theological issues remain and still need to be addressed.

Does Human Language Limit God? CSBI Article IV

Part 8
July 19, 2011

Article IV

We affirm that God who made mankind in His image has used language as a means of revelation.

We deny that human language is so limited by our creatureliness that it is rendered inadequate as a vehicle for divine revelation. We further deny that the corruption of human culture and language through sin has thwarted God's work of inspiration.

Scripture has a built-in problem that theologians and philosophers have long remarked on. Language is a product of the development of human cultures and so is subject to ambiguities, interpretive difficulties, and various limitations. Yet, the Bible is written in three of those languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. How then does the Bible escape the limitations inherent in all other forms of language-based communication? Can God actually communicate accurately in a written text of any kind?

We can see the depth of the dilemma when we keep in mind that the biblical languages were products of centuries of linguistic development (just as English has evolved from Shakespearian times to today). The biblical languages were not special languages created by God to bear his revelation. Rather, God used the languages of the times.

There was a time in biblical studies, however, in the nineteenth century, when scholars thought that the Greek of the New Testament was a special language of the Spirit designed specifically to be the vessel of revelation. This was thought because the Greek style of the New Testament (actually, *styles*, as New Testament Greek students know only too well) was not that of the Greek literature known at the time (e.g., philosophy, great plays, and other literary works).

The work of archaeologists beginning in the nineteenth century, however, unearthed various documents from everyday Greek life—e.g., letters, business transactions—that displayed a style like what we find in the New Testament. This Greek style came to be called “*koine*,” Greek for “common.” For some, these discoveries made the linguistic issue in the Bible more pressing, for the New Testament is written in a common, colloquial, style, not a refined and precise style as of the great Greek philosophers.

Likewise, biblical Hebrew and Aramaic are part of a “tree” of ancient Semitic languages—actually, very small branches on that tree. There is nothing at all special about these

languages, and they are beset with all the ambiguities and unknowns that accompany any language.

Beyond the Bible itself, linguists and non-linguists alike can easily attest to the limitations of any sort of verbal/written communication. We do not always understand well what others are saying among our own contemporaries, verbally or in writing. How commonly do we misunderstand the intentions of authors in our own language, time, and place?

This inevitability is multiplied many times over when we introduce ancient languages into the mix. As any Bible translator will tell us, it is sometimes very difficult to understand what the original languages are getting across—we are between two and three millennia removed from the time, and their cultural assumptions are either foreign to us or sometimes utterly unknown. (We have difficulty enough grasping *contemporary* cultural differences let alone ancient ones.)

So, as seminarians like to quip, “The Bible loses something in the original.” What seems so clear in English translations is sometimes a false clarity due to translators’ needing to make decisions in order to finish their task. (Very often difficulties are decided upon based on a committee vote, wishing to be consistent with other portions of Scripture, theological expectations of the target audience, smoothness of style, and other issues.)

The point of this explanation of language and translations is that The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (CSBI) is wise indeed to have it be the subject of an Article early on in the document. The fact that God speaks in human language raises immediate and well-known philosophical, theological, and hermeneutical concerns about the adequacy of any language to bear that responsibility, and this needs to be addressed.

With this in mind, CSBI puts the matter well, in my opinion: human language is *adequate* for bearing God’s revelation. In other words, language may not be crystal clear, and there will always be interpretive challenges when dealing with the Bible. But Scripture adequately conveys true information about God in human language.

What is not stated here, however, is that the human languages in which God chose to communicate are *ancient* languages that no doubt reflect *ancient* ways of *thinking*. There is no neutral notion of “language” in world history: languages operate in certain ways, according to certain rules, in particular contexts.

I think that the science/faith discussion could have been aided significantly had the framers embraced intentionally the cultural issues concerning language. Specifically, an “incarnational principle” might have helped the discussion along. Ancient languages are most certainly adequate for bearing God’s revelation in the same way that humanity is adequate for bearing the divine image—neither is “perfect” or “flawless” but both are adequate and vessels of God’s choosing. Even in the incarnation, God willingly participates in human drama by accepting human limitations.

Such an approach helps keep us from thinking of the language problem in Scripture as a “problem.” One gathers from Article IV that the framers are making a concession by saying “language is limited but is *nevertheless* adequate.” Instead, I would suggest that the limitations of human language, just as with the limitation of the human form or the “limitation” of the incarnation, are precisely *how God chooses to speak*. This is a problem only if we presume it is “beneath” God to take on the forms of human cultures when he speaks.

Let me summarize this way: what the framers seem to recognize well about the language issue should be transferred to *other problems of cultural setting* that affect the science/faith dialogue, namely the Mesopotamian context of Israel’s creation stories, and a myriad of other issues of a historical nature.

In other words, Scripture is not God’s word *despite* its cultural limitations—i.e., once we get above and beyond the cultural factors we can see God’s word more purely. Rather, it is precisely through the cultural limitations that God chooses to speak.

The limitations of language is *one instance* of the general principle of God condescending to human cultures. So just as ancient language is adequate to convey God’s truth, the cultural trappings in which those truths are clothed are likewise adequate. Once this is grasped, some of the obstacles Evangelicals perceive about evolution, how to read Genesis or Paul, and the science/faith discussion will be seen in a new light. (I treat this general issue at greater length [here](#).)

What Kind of “Progress” Does Scripture Make?

CSBI Article V

Part 9
July 22, 2011

Article V

We affirm that God’s revelation in the Holy Scriptures was progressive.

We deny that later revelation, which may fulfill earlier revelation, ever corrects or contradicts it. We further deny that any normative revelation has been given since the completion of the New Testament writings.

As with a number of other Articles, the view expressed here is on one level wholly unproblematic. We read here that Scripture is progressive, but (1) such progress does not extend beyond the Bible, namely past the completion of the New Testament, and (2) at no point in the progress of revelation does later revelation contradict or neutralize earlier revelation.

On the first point, the progress of revelation ceases with the closing of the New Testament canon, meaning the subsequent writings (like the Gospel of Thomas, for example), however interesting they may otherwise be, add nothing of revelatory content to the biblical message. On the second point, the framers mean that the parts of Scripture are not at odds with each other, a point that deserves further elaboration and that we will return to in a moment (and when we discuss Article VI in the next post.)

But generally speaking, by referring to revelation as progressive, the framers wisely acknowledge that Scripture is not a “flat” text but has movement. Although the framers do not use this analogy, the Bible behaves like a grand novel, with complex and diverse pieces, and the further along one reads, the more clarity one has in where the story is going. Then with the climax, the story is resolved and the pieces come together.

It is quite common for Christians to think of the Bible as a work of progressive revelation. The Bible is a grand narrative that has a basic plot that begins with Israel’s story and moves forward toward a climax—which is the death and resurrection of Christ and the formation of the church by the power of the Spirit.

But even the apparently straightforward assertions made in Article V are not without their problems, which comes down to this: any meaningful notion of progress—by its very definition—implies a “going beyond” quality. In fact, the gospel *requires* a going beyond—and even leaving behind—dimension.

What is the gospel, after all, if not the new wine that the old wineskins (the Israelite/Jewish tradition) cannot hold (Matthew 9:17 and parallels)? One need only think of things like Jesus nullifying Israel's dietary laws (Mark 7:19), or the inclusion of Gentiles into the family of God rather than requiring that they first become Jews by circumcision (Galatians 3:26-29), or Jesus telling the crowd not to stone the adulteress even though the Old Testament penalty is clear (John 8), or Jesus claiming to replace the need for the temple (John 2).

Progressive revelation is an authentic and vital component of Scripture, but we do a disservice to its very progressiveness if we say that later revelation does not "correct" earlier revelation. I realize, of course, that speaking of parts of Scripture correcting other parts is problematic. But here the source of the problem is the words the framers chose to express themselves on this matter.

It may be better to say that progress in revelation clearly includes some sort of "change" or "movement" from old to new, which, according to the examples above, includes moving in wholly different directions. Otherwise, there is no progress. One would be hard pressed to think of any type of progress that does not necessarily entail truly leaving behind something of the old.

One can debate the language used, whether the new "corrects or contradicts" the old, or "moves past" and "nullifies" the old. But the point remains: the gospel requires that Israel's story in the Old Testament be transformed in light of Christ. Otherwise we are left with a gospel that is merely the easy continuation of Israel's story, which it clearly is not (given the views on law, sacrifice, and many other things articulated by the New Testament authors.)

Put another way, progressive revelation implies that one should not expect the whole of Christian doctrine to reside at one point in that grand narrative—especially in the Old Testament, and even more especially in the opening chapters of Genesis.

There are many reasons for drawing this out, but let's stay focused on the science/faith issue. One possible application of Article V is to insist that Paul's view of Adam (in Romans 5 and I Corinthians 15) must necessarily be fully in line with what we read in Genesis 2-3. Now, it *may* be that the two are to be completely aligned, but that must be decided on exegetical grounds.

It could just as easily be the case that Paul's Adam has a "going beyond" quality to it—for example, Genesis speaks of Adam as part of Israel's origins, not the origins of humanity; or Adam in Genesis is "everyman," a symbol of the universal tendency to reject God's wisdom and follow one's own path.

So, the question to be asked is whether the notion of progressive revelation articulated in Article V allows in principle these sorts of exegetical possibilities, or if it precludes any such possibilities on the basis of later revelation not correcting or contradicting earlier

revelation. These sort of issues need to be addressed on an exegetical level. Theological and hermeneutical pre-commitments that close off that discussion are unfortunate.

Another possible misapplication of Article V is to marginalize extra-biblical evidence (science and archaeology) with respect to interpreting Scripture. The grounds for this would be the notion that, for extra-biblical evidence to *determine* how Scripture is interpreted, one would have to accord such evidence a quasi-revelatory role.

Putting the issue this way may seem a bit extreme, but think about it. If for the first 1800 years of its existence the church has understood Adam as the first human being, created directly by God, but now scientific and archaeological evidence comes to the surface to challenge that, *and if one allows such evidence to affect how one interprets Scripture*, that evidence is being given a tremendous amount of weight—almost *more* weight than Scripture itself.

Some could read Article V as rendering null and void any such quasi-revelatory function to extra-biblical evidence for “progressing” the church’s understanding of Scripture. The problem with this way of thinking, however, is that it fails to embrace how the utterances of Scripture are revelatory, *but are so in their ancient historical contexts*. Extra-biblical evidence does not necessarily get in the way of biblical interpretation; it may actually help us gain clearer knowledge of how the Bible is to be handled.

Of course, all of this would need to be discussed at length on a case-by-case basis. My concern here is whether Article V prematurely renders out of bounds elements of that discussion.

How Much of the Bible Is Actually Inspired? CSBI Article VI

Part 10
July 26, 2011

Article VI

We affirm that the whole of Scripture and all its parts, down to the very words of the original, were given by divine inspiration.

We deny that the inspiration of Scripture can rightly be affirmed of the whole without the parts, or of some parts but not the whole.

As is well known, the modern study of Scripture has challenged some traditional views of Scripture. As a result, non-traditional theories of inspiration have arisen to try to account for these challenges. In Article VI, the framers of The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (CSBI) seek to address one such theory they consider threatening to a traditional Evangelical model of inspiration: the Bible is inspired in part, not in whole, and largely on the level of concepts, not words.

To understand what the framers are getting at, we have to take a step back and be reminded of the three general areas of modern biblical studies that have proven difficult for some traditional views of inspiration of Scripture.

The first is textual criticism. The diverse manuscript evidence, as early as two centuries before Christ, has greatly affected the confidence with which we can claim that the Bible we have is the Bible as it was originally written. Article X engages this issue a bit more directly (the “original autographs” of Scripture), so we won’t get into all of that here.

Suffice it to say that textual criticism is driven by the fact that the earliest textual witnesses we have are diverse, not uniform. This makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to reconstruct the actual *wording* of what the original biblical text looked like. So, in the mind of many, the existence of textual variants calls into question at least God’s interest in preserving the exact wording of the original. So, if God is not that interested, maybe inspiration on the word level is not something worth getting worked up about. Maybe to God, the ideas carried by the words are the heart of inspiration. Textual criticism drives this question.

Second is biblical criticism in general, which raised questions about how books of the Bible were not written at one time, but over lengthy periods. (The Pentateuch is the parade example of this in biblical scholarship.) As the biblical books grew, earlier portions were edited and adjusted to reflect the concerns of later times. In other words, as the argument goes, the canonical form of the biblical books is the end product that reflects how *later*

communities of faith *reshaped the original*. If inspired early versions of biblical texts underwent changes, likewise under inspiration, this too suggests that preserving exact wording is not foremost on God's mind.

The third development in biblical studies is archaeological findings that cast doubt on the historical nature of parts of the Old Testament, the most important of which for us at BioLogos is the creation stories in Genesis 1-3. This raised a different kind of issue concerning inspiration: perhaps those parts of the Bible that have historical or scientific problems are somehow "less inspired" than, say, the Law of Moses or the praises of the Psalms.

So, let's tie all this in to Article VI. This three-fold pressure from biblical studies gave rise to ways of thinking about inspiration that are not bound to the words as much as to the ideas. To put it another way, perhaps the Spirit's superintendence of the composition of Scripture was not on the word level, but on level of the ideas behind the words.

Especially with respect to textual criticism, one can see why such a view would be attractive. Textual criticism is not an exact science, and we have no way of knowing for certain when we have reconstructed the original text. In fact, the more evidence that comes to light—this is especially true since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947—the more complicated a picture we have.

It used to be thought that the diverse textual witnesses are *late* corruptions of an originally uncorrupted text. The Dead Sea Scroll evidence, however, shows that, already in the century or two before Christ, textual diversity was in full swing. So, it is with great relief that some posit that inspiration is not on the level of words, but ideas.

Biblical criticism and archaeology are more the focus of the denial portion of this Article, and the issue is this: Many/most biblical scholars interpret portions of Scripture as reflecting erroneous historical or scientific information (again, the creation stories are front and center here). Some also argue that portions of the Bible are morally problematic, e.g., the so-called "genocide" passages, mass human killing in the flood, the Egyptian army in the Red Sea, etc.

These factors contributed a view of inspiration that said, "Maybe not all of the Bible is inspired, just the parts that get it right are."

These are the general tendencies addressed in Article VI. The framers of CSBI assert that all of the Bible is inspired, not just parts of it, and that inspiration is at the word level, not simply ideas. To put it plainly, despite the challenges of modern biblical criticism, every word of the Bible is superintended by God (though without running roughshod over the personalities of the biblical writers; see Article VIII).

The task before us, however, is how to flesh out—rather than simply assert—God's detailed superintendence of the words of the Bible in view of the very real textual, compositional,

and historical issues glanced at above. Some way forward would need to be found between two extremes: (1) simply dismiss the challenges to maintain one's theology, and (2) assume that the challenges mentioned are incompatible with inspiration.

These extremes are not helpful. The first requires us to isolate our Christian convictions from important currents in modern thought. The second presumes that God would never superintend a process that is riddled with such challenges.

Here again, as we have seen elsewhere in this series, the overriding question should not be *whether* the Bible is inspired in view of these challenges, but *how* those challenges affect our articulation of how Scripture is inspired.

And here, too, we come back to the science/faith dialogue. Coming to the conclusion, as some Christians do, that the creation stories are minimally historical (if at all), does not in any way imply that they belong to the non-inspired parts of the Bible. Rather, they may be inspired—even down to the last word—to “do something” other than give historical or scientific information.

Everything seems to hinge on what one expects an inspiring God to do and what the resulting inspired text should look like. These are questions that have occupied the great minds of the church since the beginning, and Evangelicals must be careful not to bring that discussion to a premature close.

What “Happens” in Inspiration? CSBI Articles VII and VIII

Part 11
July 29, 2011

A perennial theological problem with Scripture is articulating the nature of inspiration, namely how a book can be inspired by the Spirit of God and yet be written by human beings. Simply put this is to ask: What is inspiration? How does it work? What “happened” to the biblical writers as they were writing?

Articles VII and VIII address this issue by saying:

- 1) The Holy Spirit is ultimately responsible;
- 2) We don’t really know how inspiration works, but;
- 3) The Spirit willingly speaks through the personalities of the human authors.

This last point, which is the topic of Article VIII, is where the discussion can get a bit tricky.

Article VII

We affirm that inspiration was the work in which God by His Spirit, through human writers, gave us His Word. The origin of Scripture is divine. The mode of divine inspiration remains largely a mystery to us.

We deny that inspiration can be reduced to human insight, or to heightened states of consciousness of any kind.

Article VIII

We affirm that God in His Work of inspiration utilized the distinctive personalities and literary styles of the writers whom He had chosen and prepared.

We deny that God, in causing these writers to use the very words that He chose, overrode their personalities.

Inspiration, by definition, is a “top-down” phenomenon, and so the denial portion of Article VII is actually a bit of an understatement. If one “reduces” inspiration to human insight or a heightened state of consciousness, by definition one has left the notion of inspiration and moved onto something else.

Now, it is true that inspired writers actually do display a greater degree of insight and heightened consciousness—one could say that the whole point of inspiration is to move biblical writers to a higher plane than they would otherwise occupy if left to their own

experience. But Article VII is saying that the heightened consciousness is the result of the Spirit's work, and so not the product of human instigation.

How inspiration works, the "mode" as the framers put it, is a mystery, however. Do biblical writers hear a voice and dictate what they hear? Do they feel more of a tug of the heart or sense God's presence? Or do they feel nothing in particular—they just write, wholly unaware of how the Spirit is working at that moment, or whether the words they are writing will have any abiding value, let alone be included in a body of literature that will be revered for millennia?

I suspect any could be at work in principle, depending on what one is reading (although "dictation" is loaded with problems that we won't get into here). When the Law of Moses or the words of the prophets were being recorded, one can well imagine that at least a strong sense of posterity was in view. But can we say the same of, say, the Song of Songs? Was this writer aware that his piece of literature would become part of a canon of religious authority?

The answer is, "We don't know," which is to respect the mystery of the mode of inspiration. It is certainly plausible to suggest that biblical writers may not have been conscious of being vessels of the Spirit as they wrote, and it makes little difference at the end, as the framers of The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (CSBI) remind us.

Having said this, we are now touching on an issue that affects the evolution discussion. If we are to take seriously (as we should) the mystery of inspiration, one must also be willing to grant to the Spirit any latitude he wishes in how he uses human authors. The framers touch upon this in Article VIII, if also in a restricted fashion.

It is common in Evangelical theology to acknowledge, correctly, that the Spirit's role in inspiration does not override the personalities of the biblical writers. Actually, such a conclusion is inescapable simply by comparing any two biblical writers—one quickly sees that each has his own temperament, range-of-life experiences, means of written expression, point of view, etc. These sorts of factors are so obvious that any credible notion of inspiration simply must take them into account, as Article VIII does.

However, does CSBI go far enough in embracing the mystery of inspiration and the degree to which the Spirit "allows" the human writers to be who they are? To cut to the chase—and here is where the relevance for the evolution discussion comes in:

In addition to not overriding the biblical writers' personalities, should we not also say that the Spirit does not override the biblical writers' *worldviews*, particularly with respect to the question of origins—of the cosmos, the earth, and life on it?

The tension in what CSBI is saying is this: the Spirit is granted latitude in "using" the human authors as they are as vehicles of inspiration *as far as their personalities are concerned*. But

why stop there? Could not the Spirit also use the human writers as they are in terms of their larger “cultural personalities,” if I may put it that way?

It seems to me that the reason CSBI is reluctant to take this added step is that doing so could violate their presupposition that Scripture does not err in any matter that it “touches” (as we have seen in previous posts). To admit that the biblical writers not only bore the effects of personality but also of culture may be too big a step if one is determined to protect a particular view of inerrancy, where no historical or scientific “error” can be admitted.

In my opinion, to sustain this dichotomy, the framers of CSBI would need to lay out why the Spirit can accommodate to personalities but not cultures. They would also need to articulate how accommodating to personalities is not also a threat to inerrancy, since, as we know from common experience, our particular vantage points and temperaments—biases, if you will—are forever skewing what we perceive.

One might quickly add that the Spirit would allow the writers’ personalities to remain intact while also guarding them from error in their writing. This may be, but why can the same thing not be said about the Spirit’s accommodating to the writers’ cultural contexts? Why can the framers not simply say that the Spirit accommodated to the ancient writers’ cultural assumptions, and in doing so kept them free from error—which would mean that wherever we see such ancient culture reflected in the biblical text, be it Genesis 1 or 2, by definition such accommodation would not be “error” but simply the Spirit at work, busy speaking through personalities *and* culture?

The framers raise the excellent point that the mode of inspiration is mysterious. Just how mysterious may be more than they at present allow. And, in my estimation, the challenge of evolution is an impetus for us to continue to investigate that mystery more deeply.

Can I Have Your Autograph? CSBI Articles IX and X

Part 12
August 4, 2011

The two Articles we will look at today deal with falsehood in Scripture and the autographs. The first is an issue that The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (CSBI) returns to repeatedly, and so we will not spend much time there. The second issue, the well-known assertion that inspiration is only the property of the autographs, is key for CSBI and we will look at that more closely.

Article IX

We affirm that inspiration, though not conferring omniscience, guaranteed true and trustworthy utterance on all matters of which the Biblical authors were moved to speak and write.

We deny that the finitude or fallenness of these writers, by necessity or otherwise, introduced distortion or falsehood into God's Word.

Article X

We affirm that inspiration, strictly speaking, applies only to the autographic text of Scripture, which in the providence of God can be ascertained from available manuscripts with great accuracy. We further affirm that copies and translations of Scripture are the Word of God to the extent that they faithfully represent the original.

We deny that any essential element of the Christian faith is affected by the absence of the autographs. We further deny that this absence renders the assertion of Biblical inerrancy invalid or irrelevant.

CSBI is correct, of course, that inspiration does not guarantee omniscience on the part of the human writers, nor does human limitation ("finitude or fallenness") imply "distortion or falsehood." But, here again, everything depends on how these terms are defined, and, based on previous Articles, it seems that CSBI is frontloading these terms with weight they cannot—and should not—bear.

Scripture can be trustworthy and free from falsehood *and* speak in ancient idioms whose utterances do not correspond to contemporary standards of truth and falsehood—which CSBI presumes to be universally binding. So, saying the cosmos was created in six days is an ancient idiom and does not correspond to scientific or historical reality. But that does not mean that Genesis 1 is therefore false or distorted. It is simply ancient. But this is ground we do not need to cover again.

The question of the autographs is worthy of greater attention. We touched on this issue in a previous post, but here we need to probe a bit deeper.

The fact that CSBI limits inspiration to the autographs is a necessary concession. We know that the biblical text suffers from corruptions that have been introduced during the process of copying and transmitting manuscripts (as is the case with any ancient literature). Since, as the framers see it, such corruption is considered incompatible with divine inspiration, logic dictates that inspiration must have taken place at only a prior stage.

At first glance, this seems rational, but there are a number of difficulties with the autograph theory that have been brought to light over the years.

- 1) The study of textual criticism (working backward from the copies to the hypothetical original text) has shown that an “original” is an elusive entity. In brief, we don’t know what the originals looked like and we most likely never will. In fact, the more manuscripts have been unearthed, the more complicated the entire matter has become. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 helped us see just how complex textual transmission is for the Old Testament, and alerted us to the diverse versions of biblical books that already existed before the time of Christ. As far back in time as we can see, there is more manuscript diversity, not less, and it is common among textual critics to have abandoned the prospect of uncovering the original altogether. In fact, the quest for an original is generally considered naïve.
- 2) Many question the theological logic of putting so much weight on the autographs when the Holy Spirit, who inspired them, has not seen fit to preserve them. What does this tell us about how important the autographs are to God? Are those who put such stress on the autographs truly exhibiting a high view of Scripture?
- 3) The earliest translation of the Hebrew Bible was into Greek. This process began in the decades following the conquests of Alexander the Great (332 BC), which naturally lead to a linguistic change in ancient Palestine: Greek came to be the main language. This is also why the New Testament, the historical record of the rise of Christianity—a movement that sprung from Judaism—was written in Greek, not Hebrew or Aramaic.

The earliest known Greek manuscripts of the Old Testament date to the 2nd century BC. The term for the Greek translation, “Septuagint,” reflects the legend that the translation of the Hebrew took place in *seventy* days by *seventy-two* Jewish translators (six from each of the twelve tribes). The fact, however, is that the Greek versions of the Hebrew Bible grew up at various places and in various times and that process was only streamlined after the time of Christ.

The point is that during the time in which the New Testament was written, the Old Testament of these writers was in Greek, not Hebrew (although at least some New Testament writers, like Paul, knew Hebrew). This is significant for two reasons:

- 1) The form of the Greek text was not yet finalized or stable. There was almost certainly no “one” Septuagint in existence during the time of Christ.
- 2) The Septuagint is a translation, and, like all translations, it is far from perfect. Sometimes the Greek translators make mistakes in translating the Hebrew, other times they paraphrase and lose something of the impact that way. Still at other times the Greek translators are working off a Hebrew “parent” text that does not match the Hebrew text that lies behind our English Bibles—i.e., they had a different Bible than we do.

It is striking that at the climax of redemptive history, the coming of Christ, that the Bible available to the New Testament writers, guided by the Holy Spirit, was a translation that didn’t quite get it right. This raises rather significant theological questions that cast serious doubt on the importance given to the autographs.

To be direct, one wonders whether God is as concerned about the autographs as the framers of CSBI are. The fact is that Greek was the language of international discourse. For the Gospel to spread, Greek was the language that had to be used. The Old Testament already existed in Greek, and so the spread of the Gospel fell on ears already prepared to hear it. God, in other words, seems less concerned about “preserving” the autographs than he does reaching people where they are.

The final point is more pastoral. By limiting inspiration to the autograph (which no longer exists), people will begin to wonder whether they have any right to refer to the English Bibles in their hands as “inspired.” This raises a perennial question that we can’t explore fully here: whether inspiration should be limited to original writings or whether even, in the translational process, the Spirit is active—despite the problems inherent in *any* translation. These are just questions at this point, but the main point is clear: Little is gained by limiting inspiration to a text no one has access to.

The issue of the autograph is a particularly telling example of how Scripture is called upon by CSBI in a manner that the evidence may not allow. It is possible to ask too much of Scripture, or at least to ask of it the wrong questions. In the evolution discussion, these are frequent obstacles with which evangelicals have to contend.

Is the Bible Historically and Scientifically Infallible and Inerrant?

CSBI Articles XI and XII

Part 13
August 9, 2011

Article XI

We affirm that Scripture, having been given by divine inspiration, is infallible, so that, far from misleading us, it is true and reliable in all the matters it addresses.

We deny that it is possible for the Bible to be at the same time infallible and errant in its assertions. Infallibility and inerrancy may be distinguished, but not separated.

Article XII

We affirm that Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from falsehood, fraud, or deceit.

We deny that Biblical infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious, or redemptive themes, exclusive of assertions in the fields of history and science. We further deny that scientific hypotheses about earth history may properly be used to overturn the teaching of Scripture on creation and the flood.

In a nutshell, the argument posed in these two Articles is as follows.

(A.) Since Scripture is **inspired by God**, it therefore, \Rightarrow (B.) is not misleading, false, fraudulent, or deceitful, but true, reliable, and inerrant. \Rightarrow (C.) These properties extend to the entirety of Scripture, \Rightarrow (D.) not just to spiritual matters but to matters of **history and science**. \Rightarrow (E.) This applies specifically to the **creation and flood stories**.

We see here what we have seen throughout The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (CSBI) thus far. According to the framers, inspiration *requires* the Bible to behave in certain ways. To make such a far-reaching claim, it must already be *presumed* what inspiration *necessarily* entails. One would never move from “inspiration” (A) to “scientifically and historically accurate creation and flood stories” (D and E), as these Articles do, unless one’s prior definition of inspiration required it.

So, once again, we are up against a familiar problem. Much of what burdens CSBI can be summed up as failing to reflect adequately on the nature of inspiration. The irony is clear. In their efforts to protect biblical authority, the framers define inspiration in a way that does not account well for how the Bible actually behaves.

This results in the need to defend the Bible in statements such as CSBI. The problem, however, may not be the Bible as much as false expectations of what the Bible can deliver. And nothing hampers the science/faith discussion more quickly than false expectations of Genesis 1-3 and other relevant texts.

The logical flow of the assertions in these Articles, as outlined above, shows us how the framers move from the inspiration of Scripture to a historically and scientifically error-free record of creation and the flood as a necessary consequence of inspiration.

Note that inspiration implies that Scripture does not mislead, deceive, etc., but rather is truthful and inerrant (B). These are relatively innocent claims that an Evangelical audience would readily agree to, though already at this point we are seeing the recurring problem of (1) using emotionally loaded terms like “fraud” and “deceive,” and (2) frontloading important terms like “truth” and “inerrant” with meanings that have not been discussed or defined. At this point an observant reader might put on the brakes and ask, “Okay. I agree that inspiration implies that God will be truthful and free from error when he speaks, but don’t we need to talk about what truth and error mean?”

Asking this question is crucial, for it is clear the framers wish to lead us to a certain logical conclusion (A eventually *must* lead to D and E). The next chain in the framers’ logic is to assert that inerrancy extends to all of Scripture, not just part of it (C). Once again, few Evangelicals would blink at reading this. However, a rhetorical trap of sorts is about to be sprung moving from C to D and E. Readers have been led along and are now “logically committed” to seeing *all* of Scripture as *inerrant* because Scripture is inspired and cannot mislead.

But what crucial piece of information is missing? We do not yet know *the manner in which* Scripture does not “mislead” or is “truthful” and “inerrant.” I know I sound like a broken record, but we are back to the recurring problem of defining our terms. The framers seem to want to paint us into a hermeneutical corner by claiming that inspiration means that error-free *historical and scientific truth* will be found there (D and E), since this is what is required of an inspired text (as A through C have shown).

But this *tour de force* carries little weight until we are clear on how these crucial terms are defined. For example, it is an indisputable literary fact that the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life differ rather significantly. Does the premise that God does not “mislead” or “deceive” mean that such differences of fact are actually *not there*? Or, do we need to account for how the Bible actually behaves *in order to define* what “mislead” might mean with respect to Gospel differences—or, indeed, whether the term is even significant? If the latter is correct (as I argue), then the logical chain of A through E will have to be rethought.

The same hold for scientific issues. Does the premise that God does not mislead or deceive but only speaks truthfully and free from error mean that Genesis 1-3, therefore, *must* be compatible with modern scientific and historical standards? CSBI seems to make the case for this very point in these two Articles.

Or can Genesis 1-3 speak truthfully, etc., in the idiom of ancient creation stories, where “history” and “science” (at least as we define these terms today) are irrelevant categories—in other words, by letting biblical categories determine *how* Scripture is truthful, etc.? In my estimation, CSBI is not persistent enough in allowing Scripture to define its own categories.

CSBI does not address these sorts of questions of definition, but these are the very questions that *must* be addressed with care and energy, not only for the benefit of the science/faith discussion but many others matters of biblical interpretation.

The chain of logic seen in these Articles seems persuasive until the underlying problems of definition are exposed. That which is assumed by the framers is the very thing that needs to be under serious discussion: What do *mislead*, *deceive*, *truth*, *error*, etc., mean and how does all of this apply to pressing matters of contemporary interpretation?

But as it stands, these Articles paint well-meaning readers into a corner, where they are logically bound to dismiss scientific evidence concerning cosmology and geology in order to retain a high view of Scripture. This is a false dilemma and should not be perpetuated.

What Inerrancy Isn't: CSBI Article XIII

Part 14
August 17, 2011

Article XIII

We affirm the propriety of using inerrancy as a theological term with reference to the complete truthfulness of Scripture.

We deny that it is proper to evaluate Scripture according to standards of truth and error that are alien to its usage or purpose. We further deny that inerrancy is negated by Biblical phenomena such as a lack of modern technical precision, irregularities of grammar or spelling, observational descriptions of nature, the reporting of falsehoods, the use of hyperbole and round numbers, the topical arrangement of material, variant selections of material in parallel accounts, or the use of free citations.

The framers here assert that inerrancy is a proper theological term for describing the “complete truthfulness of Scripture.” The denial portion of this article fleshes out a bit what the framers mean by “truthfulness,” or better, what they do not mean by it. All in all, I think these are very reasonable qualifications.

A common caricature of an Evangelical view of inerrancy is that the slightest discrepancy sinks the entire ship (a claim we might hear from New Atheists). The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (CSBI) asserts that the extent to which biblical inerrancy works can only be judged by standards Scripture itself recognizes, standards of truth and error that are not “alien to its usage or purpose.”

In other words, the framers assert that if different biblical authors—or even the same author—spell the same word two different ways, that does not mean there is an error, since the presence of this sort of difference is clearly something the Holy Spirit is not concerned about. The same holds for the other things listed here, like the use of round numbers or free citations of other biblical material.

As I said, these sorts of qualifications are important to make, but two issues arise. First, on what basis do we make the determination of what standards of truth or error are or are not “alien” to biblical usage? It seems to me that the criterion being used here is observing how the Bible behaves and making judgments on that basis.

So, the fact that some biblical authors clearly use imprecise numbers, or that Joshua says that the sun stood still (Joshua 10:12-13), indicates that inerrancy does not require precision or abandonment of earthbound ways of talking about the trek of the sun. (This line of argumentation presumes inerrancy at the outset, but for the purposes of engaging

CSBI we need to accept this starting point. CSBI is an in-house Evangelical document, not an explication of inerrancy to outsiders.)

But using biblical phenomena as the standard for judging what inerrancy does and does not mean can be a two-edged sword. If we read closely the list of qualifications in this article, most of them are fairly uncontroversial—grammatical issues, hyperbole, etc. But why not also extend this principle to things like ancient cosmology, human origins, or creative interpretation of history to the list. These, too, are clearly documented in the Bible. I actually think a statement such as the following would help the framers' case in defending inerrancy: "For ancient biblical authors to describe creation and historical events according to ancient standards is not 'error' but fully expected, just as one might expect ancient authors to employ hyperbole, round numbers, etc."

In other words, the list of biblical phenomena that do not affect inerrancy is too limited in that it avoids the true points of contention.

The second issue that arises from this Article concerns two of the qualifications. I do not mean to be nitpicky, but there are two phrases here that betray thinking that I do not find helpful in the long run: "observational descriptions of nature" and "variant selections of material in parallel accounts."

I am not certain what the first phrase refers to, but likely it is referring to things like those mentioned in Joshua 10:12-13 above, where the sun is said to move. The sun looks like it moves (to ancients as well as moderns), but the fact that the earth revolves around the sun is not an argument that the biblical author erroneously made here. I agree that these sorts of things are irrelevant to the inerrancy discussion, but the question remains why the same courtesy is not extended by the framers of CSBI to include Genesis 1-3. Why must ancient observations about cosmic and human origins be of a different category than other sorts of ancient observations (as we see in Article XII)?

The second phrase is not immediately relevant to the science/faith discussion. But I want to point out that the differences between parallel accounts in the Bible (e.g., the two creation accounts in Genesis 1-3, the Chronicler's history of Israel *vis-à-vis* that found in Samuel/Kings, the four Gospels, etc.) are more pervasive than simply a result of "variant selections of material."

What the framers mean is that variant accounts in Scripture exist because some authors decided to use some larger deposit of older material (written or oral, perhaps) while other authors used different material. The problem here is that the different accounts in these parallels stem from different vantage points.

The framers are recognizing the reality of the Synoptic problem, but the explanation given is inadequate at best, if not simply wrong. The reason that this explanation is given is that, if the parallel accounts in Scripture resulted from biblical authors living in different times and places, the framers' arguments for inerrancy would be significantly undercut.

Having said this, Article XIII is an attempt to bring inerrancy into conversation with numerous factors that the framers understand to be a challenge to inerrancy. They are right to address them, even if their assertions lead to further probing. I can see some New Atheists jumping on things like hyperbole and lack of modern precision as evidence against inerrancy, and perhaps Article XIII is a fine parry to that thrust.

Knowledgeable arguments against CSBI, however, would not dwell on such matters but would want to address more pressing matters like science and history—topics that I am afraid CSBI brushes over too quickly.

Let me say in closing that, for its day, CSBI was a helpful step forward in addressing inerrancy and its challenges. But for the present state of the science/faith discussion, which has moved far beyond where things lay in the late '70s and early '80s, issues the framers considered settled must be revisited.