

## History of Canonicity and Inerrancy:

This has really involved 2 questions over the course of church history:

- 1) the number of books included in the canon
- 2) the quality of the books included in the canon

During the earliest years of the church, no one questioned the authority or the accuracy of the apostles' writings, so the above 2 questions were not an issue.

During the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD, heresies began to develop within the church, particularly about the nature of God and the Person of Jesus Christ. Some of these heresies chose to reject the authority of certain NT letters that were not in agreement with their heretical beliefs. Thus, to battle these false beliefs, the church at large gathered together and created lists and collections of authoritative books. The 39 books of the Jewish OT were accepted without question.

The NT, however, took a little more time to settle. The earliest lists we have found, dating from the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century, indicate clearly that the church had collectively declared nearly all of the NT letters we have to be scripture of equal authority as the OT. These are called the "undisputed books" and include the 4 gospels and all of Paul. Yet there were disagreements over the authority of certain books such as 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation. Also, there were a few books not in our NT that some people wanted to treat like scripture, such as the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermes. Since each church exercised a great deal of freedom, it took a couple hundred years to gradually resolve these disagreements and finalize on our modern canon of scripture. But here are a couple important things to remember:

- no one doubted the authority of our NT books until heresies began to attack the church
- immediately, the 4 gospels, the letters of Paul, and the book of Acts were accepted as Scripture equal in authority to the OT
- it took a while to work out the "disputed books," but note that there was no book left out of our NT that was undisputed scripture
- By the late 300's AD (Council of Carthage), our exact NT with no additional books was authoritatively declared as "Scripture"
- During all of this debate NO ONE questioned the complete accuracy & authority of whatever books were "scripture"

So, by the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the question of what books are "scripture" was resolved for the NT (there were lingering issues about the OT apocrypha). Throughout the Medieval Ages and the Reformation, no one questioned the total accuracy and authority of these books.

Then, in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, the Enlightenment caught fire throughout the Western world and led learned men and women to reject any authority outside of themselves. Enlightenment philosophy taught that authority should be found within each of us – that as humans, we're really pretty great after all, so we ought to be able to decide for ourselves what is true and what is false.

This led to:

- (1) a rejection of any claims that Scripture is actually the "words of God"
- (2) a logical conclusion that, therefore, Scripture can be fallible, and certainly is whenever it says anything that contradicts science or human reason.
- (3) The creation of "Liberal Christianity" which continues in full swing today

How did the church respond? Some embraced liberalism, but others stood their ground and created doctrinal statements that affirmed their belief in Scripture's accuracy and authority. As these doctrinal statements developed and as the church was further attacked by liberalism, faithful Christians had to clarify exactly what they believed about the nature of Scripture, and so they chose the word...

“inerrant” – without error in the original manuscripts

This word was actually first advanced by conservative theologians Archibald Hodge and B.B. Warfield who argued in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that because God cannot lie, the Bible, in its original manuscripts must be without error. Notice that while the word “inerrant” was new, the concept was not. Every Christian believed the Bible was inerrant before the Enlightenment period. But since no one questioned that belief, there was no need to write up doctrinal statements using big words like “inerrancy!”

“Inerrancy” according to Paul Feinberg means that “when all facts are known, the Scriptures in their original autographs and properly interpreted will be shown to be wholly true in everything that they affirm, whether that has to do with doctrine or morality or with social, physical, or life sciences.”