

Limited Inerrancy

Problems with Limited Inerrancy

Limited inerrancy is the belief that the Bible is without error in matters of faith and practice but may contain errors in historical or scientific details. Proponents argue that the purpose of Scripture is to convey spiritual truths rather than to provide a flawless record of history or science. However, several significant problems arise with this view:

1. Undermining Biblical Authority:

- **Erosion of Trust:** If the Bible contains errors in historical or scientific details, it becomes difficult to determine where the Bible can be fully trusted. This uncertainty can erode overall confidence in the Scriptures.
- **Subjectivity:** Determining what parts of the Bible are inerrant and what parts are not becomes a subjective exercise. This leads to individuals or groups selectively deciding which passages to accept as true, potentially based on personal biases or external pressures.

2. Theological Inconsistency:

- **Jesus' View of Scripture:** Jesus and the New Testament writers treated the Old Testament as fully authoritative and accurate in all aspects, including historical details. Limited inerrancy appears inconsistent with this view. For example, Jesus references historical events like Noah's flood (Matthew 24:37-39) and Jonah's ordeal (Matthew 12:39-41) as factual.
- **Inspiration and Truth:** 2 Timothy 3:16 states that "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." If God is perfect and cannot lie (Titus 1:2), then His word should be entirely true, not partially.

3. Impact on Doctrine:

- **Doctrinal Uncertainty:** Doctrines often rely on the historical reliability of the biblical text. For instance, the doctrine of the resurrection is intertwined with historical claims about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. If historical details are deemed errant, foundational doctrines could be questioned.
- **Moral Teachings:** The Bible's moral teachings are often rooted in historical contexts and examples. Questioning the accuracy of these historical accounts could undermine the basis for these moral instructions.

4. Historical and Archaeological Support:

- **Archaeological Confirmation:** Many historical details in the Bible have been confirmed by archaeology and external historical sources. Accepting limited

inerrancy disregards the substantial evidence supporting the Bible's historical accuracy.

- **Historical Continuity:** The Bible presents a continuous narrative from creation to the early Christian church, with historical events playing a critical role in the unfolding of God's plan. Viewing parts of this narrative as errant disrupts the continuity and coherence of the biblical story.

5. **Philosophical Implications:**

- **Nature of Revelation:** If God chose to reveal Himself through Scripture, it is reasonable to expect that this revelation would be clear, accurate, and reliable in all aspects. Limited inerrancy implies that God's revelation is flawed or partially unclear, which is inconsistent with the nature of a perfect God.
- **Epistemological Issues:** Limited inerrancy raises epistemological questions about how we know what is true in the Bible. It can lead to skepticism and relativism, where the truth of biblical statements is seen as variable rather than absolute.

6. **Practical Consequences:**

- **Preaching and Teaching:** If parts of the Bible are considered errant, preachers and teachers may struggle with how to present and interpret Scripture authoritatively. This can lead to confusion among congregations and weaken the church's witness.
- **Evangelism and Apologetics:** Defending the faith becomes more challenging if the Bible is seen as partially flawed. Critics can exploit perceived errors to discredit the entire message of Christianity, making it harder to present a coherent and compelling case for the gospel.

Conclusion

Limited inerrancy creates significant theological, philosophical, and practical problems. It undermines the authority and trustworthiness of Scripture, introduces subjectivity and inconsistency, impacts doctrinal integrity, disregards historical and archaeological support, and complicates preaching, teaching, and evangelism. In contrast, a commitment to full inerrancy upholds the Bible as entirely reliable, providing a solid foundation for faith and practice.

Definition of Limited Inerrancy:

Limited inerrancy is a theological viewpoint within Christianity that posits the Bible is without error in matters of faith and practice, specifically concerning salvation, moral guidance, and religious doctrine. However, it acknowledges that the Bible may contain historical, scientific, or cultural inaccuracies. Proponents of limited inerrancy argue that the primary purpose of the Bible is to convey spiritual truths rather than to serve as a precise historical or scientific textbook.

Primary Proponents:

1. **Karl Barth** - A prominent Swiss Reformed theologian known for his emphasis on the Bible as a witness to the Word of God rather than a directly dictated text.
2. **Paul Tillich** - An influential German-American theologian who advocated for interpreting the Bible in the context of existential questions and modern thought.
3. **David Hubbard** - A scholar who contributed to discussions on the nature of biblical inspiration and inerrancy, highlighting the human aspects of scriptural authorship.
4. **G. C. Berkouwer** - A Dutch Reformed theologian who wrote extensively on the doctrine of Scripture, emphasizing the divine and human dimensions of the Bible.
5. **C.S. Lewis** - An English writer and lay theologian who believed that while the Bible is divinely inspired, it also contains mythic and poetic elements that should be understood in their historical and literary contexts.
6. **Michael Licona** - A contemporary New Testament scholar who argues for the reliability of the Bible's core theological messages while acknowledging possible errors in peripheral details.
7. **N.T. Wright** - A prominent New Testament scholar who emphasizes the historical context of the Bible and the importance of understanding its message in light of that context, rather than insisting on inerrancy in all aspects.
8. **Peter Enns** - A biblical scholar who advocates for understanding the Bible as a product of its time, with a focus on its theological truths rather than its historical or scientific accuracy.
9. **John Walton** - An Old Testament scholar known for his work on the cultural context of the Bible, arguing that understanding the ancient Near Eastern background is crucial for interpreting scripture.

Best Possible Argument for Limited Inerrancy:

1. **Purpose of Scripture:** The primary purpose of the Bible is to convey theological and moral truths that guide believers in their relationship with God and each other. These truths are deemed infallible and inerrant. However, the Bible was not intended as a comprehensive scientific or historical record. Limited inerrancy acknowledges this distinction, focusing on the Bible's spiritual authority rather than its literal precision in all areas.
2. **Historical Context:** The Bible was written over many centuries by various authors in different cultural and historical contexts. These contexts influenced the way certain events and facts were recorded. Limited inerrancy allows for the recognition of these influences without undermining the core message of the scriptures. For instance, the cosmological views reflected in Genesis align with ancient Near Eastern thought rather than modern scientific understanding, but this does not detract from its theological significance.

3. **Human Authorship:** While Christians believe that the Bible is divinely inspired, it was also written by human authors. These authors were subject to the limitations of their time and knowledge. Limited inerrancy embraces the human element of scripture, acknowledging that errors in minor details do not compromise the overall truth and divine inspiration of the Bible.
4. **Accommodation Theory:** This theory suggests that God communicated through the cultural and intellectual limitations of the people at the time the scriptures were written. Just as a teacher simplifies complex concepts for students, God adapted His message to the understanding of the biblical authors and their audiences. Thus, the presence of ancient cosmological views or historical inaccuracies reflects God's accommodation to human limitations without detracting from the Bible's theological truths.
5. **Consistency with Observations:** The acceptance of limited inerrancy aligns with observed discrepancies in the Bible without necessitating strained harmonizations. For example, differences in genealogical records or variations in the accounts of Jesus' resurrection appearances can be understood as natural results of diverse human perspectives and sources. Recognizing these discrepancies allows believers to focus on the essential unity and reliability of the biblical message concerning faith and practice.
6. **Theological Integrity:** Emphasizing limited inerrancy preserves the integrity of theological doctrines. It avoids the pitfalls of literalism, which can lead to conflicts with scientific discoveries and historical evidence. By focusing on the Bible's infallibility in spiritual and moral teachings, limited inerrancy maintains the credibility of the Christian faith in an intellectually honest and culturally relevant manner.
7. **Literary and Genre Sensitivity:** The Bible contains various literary genres, including poetry, parables, historical narrative, prophecy, and apocalyptic literature. Each genre should be interpreted according to its literary conventions. For example, the poetic language of the Psalms or the symbolic imagery of Revelation should not be read with the same literal expectations as historical narrative. Limited inerrancy allows for a more nuanced understanding of these genres, respecting the intended message of the text.
8. **C.S. Lewis's Perspective:** C.S. Lewis argued that the Bible contains mythic elements that convey deep truths, akin to how great literature communicates profound insights through story and symbolism. He believed that God used the literary forms and cultural understandings of the time to reveal divine truths, making the Bible's message accessible and relatable to its original audience and to us today.
9. **Michael Licona's Argument:** Michael Licona, in his defense of the resurrection of Jesus, acknowledges that the Gospel accounts contain variations and minor discrepancies. He argues that these do not undermine the historical reliability of the central event of the resurrection, which is well-attested and supported by strong historical evidence. Licona's approach exemplifies limited inerrancy by focusing on the reliability of core theological claims while allowing for human error in peripheral details.

In summary, the best argument for limited inerrancy centers on the belief that the Bible's primary function is to communicate divine truths pertinent to faith and practice, and these truths remain inerrant despite possible errors in historical or scientific details. This view respects the divine inspiration of scripture while acknowledging the human element in its composition, allowing for a more nuanced and credible understanding of the Bible.