

Inerrancy, Part 1: Can Evangelical Christians Unite on One View of Scripture?

Dr. John Ankerberg, Dr. Jack Rogers, Dr. John Woodbridge

[Editor's note: This interview was taped in 1982.]

Dr. John Ankerberg: Tonight we have a very important program. We're going to be talking about, "Is the Bible the inspired, inerrant Word of God?" Where do we stand on that?

Gentlemen, I'm going to come right to you tonight. We have very distinguished men with us and one of them is from Fuller Theological Seminary. Dr. Jack Rogers has written a book that has challenged the beliefs of evangelicals in America. Maybe, Dr. Rogers, you might start off with a "hello" as well as some primal definitions of inspiration, what you hold; authority; and so on? Would you do that for us?

Dr. Jack Rogers: Thank you. It's a good opportunity to be here and especially with friends and to have a chance to carry on the kind of discussion that we've been having personally and to get a chance to interact with the audience, too.

My view is that when we say "authority," that means that the Bible, for a Christian, is the bottom line, is the final word. When, as a Christian, I know what the Bible means to say to me, I am obligated to believe it and to obey it.

Ankerberg: The book, Dr. Rogers, that you wrote, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible—An Historical Approach*, in 1979 was voted book of the year by *Eternity Magazine*.

In that book you made some statements, and I'd like to read just a few of those so we can acquaint our audience with that. You said, "Few have dared to challenge the Princeton Theology's Post-Reformation Scholastic Theory." Sounds great. What does that mean? That namely, "the Bible is infallible. It extends to all the words of the Bible; and specifically, only those in the original autographs of the Bible, that they are inerrant." That's that view. You've said nobody has challenged that view, or few have challenged that view, but you are going to. And you hold that those that do hold this view, namely that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God in all matters, that those folks are the ones who have the novel approach. Is that correct?

Rogers: Yes. I'm glad that you point out that it's the *theory* of Princeton that I'm challenging, not the Bible itself, but their particular way of talking about it.

Ankerberg: Alright. And secondly you've also said that you view the Bible, ... or the central purpose of God's written communication, is to reveal salvation truth about Christ and not to present infallible data about aspects of human history, geography, and science. Is that correct?

Rogers: Yes.

Ankerberg: Alright. And then you went on to say that it's your belief that your view, which we just stated, reflects really the authentic, historic position of the church, and that those who hold to a biblical view of inerrancy really are innovative.

Rogers: That's correct.

Ankerberg: Now, before we have the man that challenged you in that in a book review, I'd like to ask you about one pivotal idea that you had in your book, and that is, this idea or concept of "accommodation". What is that? We need to know what that is before we start in tonight.

Rogers: I think Don McKim, my co-author, who teaches at the Dubuque Seminary in Iowa, and I, I think felt that the most important thing we learned in our research was the idea of accommodation. And really forget the word "accommodation" and think of the word "incarnation." It refers to the way in which God communicates His Divine Word through human words and thought forms.

I've tried to explain it to people by saying, "Think of a parent talking to children." I have three boys. They are four years apart, each of them, and I naturally talk differently to the 11-year-old than I talk to the 19-year-old, and about some different things. I never lie to them. I never tell them what's untrue, but my vocabulary and style and manner of approach changes. God does that in the Scriptures as well: adapting, incarnating His message into ordinary human language and thoughts.

Ankerberg: All right, Dr. Woodbridge, you wrote a 74-page book review. You know, most people write 2 paragraphs for a book review. I've never read a 74-page book review. That's like a book itself.

Woodbridge: I'd never written one before.

Ankerberg: But you wrote it in the *Trinity Journal*, which I am holding in my hand. And in this you're saying about the view that we've just talked about with Dr. Jack Rogers, that there are a few things that you disagreed with. First, is that you said, "There was an arbitrary selection of the documentation in his book to support the view that he's espousing," namely that his view reflects the authoritative, historic position of the church. Secondly, you're saying that he has made what you call a series of "historical disjunctions." What in the world is a historical disjunction?

Woodbridge: Well, an historical disjunction is this. It is to say that the Bible has as its chief purpose to teach us salvation; and then to think that if a person advocates that, they don't believe in complete biblical infallibility or inerrancy. One of the themes in Jack's book is this; that there were people throughout the history of the church who said that the Bible teaches salvation truth, but they didn't hold to infallibility, or complete biblical infallibility. So I went through his documentation and I found that they did. And I found that they held what I guess you and I would call the doctrine of inerrancy; that is, that the Bible tells the truth, not just for salvation, faith and practice matters, but it also tells the truth when it talks about history and when it talks about science. So, if you'd care to, sometime, we'll go through and take a look at a few of these people.

Ankerberg: Okay. Let's go on, though. You say, though, something else that bothered you is, you have this habit of checking footnotes...

Woodbridge: I do.

Ankerberg: Solid professor! And you said that when you checked the footnotes that it didn't support that which was up above. In other words, the paragraphs up above didn't jibe with the

documentation down below.

Woodbridge: On occasions. Many occasions.

Ankerberg: Because of that, you are saying that the conclusions that Dr. Rogers reached are inaccurate?

Woodbridge: I would have to say that flat out.

Ankerberg: All right, so let's take a period. You and Jack have ripped through 2,000 years of church history, both claiming that your view is supported by those in church history.

Woodbridge: Yes.

Ankerberg: And what we want to find out... Let's take the first area, the Patristic Period, alright? And, Jack, if I can come back to you, let's take Augustine. We could have taken Clement of Rome, Justin Martyr, Origen, or somebody else. Let's take Augustine. Most people know St. Augustine, and let me give you a few quotes here and let's see what you're saying.

First of all, you're saying that he did not believe the Bible was completely infallible or inerrant. But here's Augustine's statement. He says (this is quoting Augustine), "It seems to me that the most disastrous consequences must follow upon our believing that anything false is found in the Sacred Book. If you once admit into such a high sanctuary [or authority] one false statement there will not be left a single statement of these books."

Or else take another statement here, "The authority of the Divine Scriptures becomes unsettled if it once be admitted that the men by whom these things have been delivered unto us could, in their writings, state some things which were not true."

Or finally here, "I have learned to yield with respect and honor only to the canonical books of Scripture. Of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error."

In light of those statements from Augustine, how can you say that he didn't believe in the infallibility of the entire Bible?

Rogers: Well, I think if I were sitting out in the audience now and heard these things back and forth, I would have to conclude that there must be something wrong with one or both of these guys if they can both read the same stuff and come to such widely different conclusions.

And I think *that* is the key issue that really is before the house. It's not a question of the particular text; it's a question of how we understand history, and how we go about interpreting them.

Both you and John [Woodbridge] have attributed to me things that I do not hold, you see. I have never... that book... this is the book that we're talking about here. It's got 480 pages in it and it has nearly 2,000 quotations from other sources, you see.

Now, obviously my colleague and I are not infallible and never claimed to be and we can have made mistakes but...

Ankerberg: But can I ask you this? Do you believe then, that if what we've just said, if you're saying that what we're accusing you of writing is not true, what are you saying that Augustine actually said?

Rogers: I believe that all of the major biblical people believed in what John [Woodbridge] calls "the complete infallibility of the Bible." They thought it was authoritative.

Woodbridge: That's right.

Rogers: And I've never said anything other than that.

Ankerberg: But how about...

Rogers: However, when I use the word “inerrancy,” I apparently mean something very different by it than John [Woodbridge]. Because I mean that Augustine’s mentality, as he approached things, was not the same a 19th century or a 20th century mentality. That seems to me just to be obvious. People at different periods in history, because of their historical context, look at things differently.

Ankerberg: Okay, Dr. Woodbridge.

Woodbridge: That’s very interesting, but I’d like to suggest that the same exegetical problems that Augustine deals with, and deals with them as being errors, or potential errors, and he tries to reconcile the issues, are the same ones that Luther deals with, the same ones that you deal with, the same ones that Charles Hodge dealt with. Such that I think that you’re overstating the case to say that, somehow, these people were in a different time frame than ourselves. They reckon on the same sort of biblical problems that we do.

Ankerberg: Can I interrupt you there, because you quote from Bruce Vawter in your book to support your view. And this is what Bruce also says in his book that Dr. Woodbridge brings out in his review. Vawter says, “It would be pointless to call into question that biblical inerrancy in a rather absolute form was a common persuasion from the beginning of Christian times and from Jewish times before that. For both the Fathers and the Rabbis generally the ascription of any error to the Bible was unthinkable. If the Word was God, it must be true, regardless of whether it made known a mystery of divine revelation or commented on a datum of natural science; whether it derived from human observation or chronicled an event of history.”

Now, what he’s getting at here is the fact that you’re using him on the other side of the fence, but a few paragraphs down he says that about this patristic era.

Rogers: Okay, now let’s go back to the thing about accommodation that we talked about right at the beginning. When I talk to my 11-year-old differently than I talk to my 19-year-old, I am not committing an error. When Augustine talks about the Scripture, he does not talk about it the same as a 19th century person named B. B. Warfield. Both of them believed the Bible’s authoritative, but Warfield believed, for example that the Bible predicted 19th century science. Augustine said, “Don’t talk to people from the Bible about science, because that’s not the purpose of the Bible. The purpose of the Bible is to bring people to salvation and to let them live the life of faith.”

Ankerberg: Dr. Woodbridge, would you like to comment?

Woodbridge: Yes, I would to. This is what Augustine says, “Whatever they, the men of physical science, can demonstrate to be true of physical nature, we must show to be capable of reconciliation with our Scriptures. And whatever they assert in their treatises to be contrary to these Scriptures of ours, that is, the Catholic faith, we must either prove it as well as we can to be entirely false; or at all events we must without the smallest hesitation believe it to be so.”

What I’m suggesting to you is this, that Augustine didn’t put the area of science beyond the purview of biblical infallibility. I’m not here to defend B. B. Warfield, but what I am suggesting to you is this, that the history of the doctrine of inspiration and of infallibility has included science and history within its purview. Consequently, I do not think that Augustine is a live person to suggest as one who excludes those two areas.

Ankerberg: Alright, we want to go to the Reformation. You can, Dr. Rogers, can comment on what Dr. Woodbridge just said there. I’d like to just have a comment on what you believe Luther’s view of Scripture actually was. A lot of people claim Luther, all different persuasions.

What do you think he was actually saying?

Rogers: I want to go back to John's comment about science because I think that's a good illustration of the difference between us. When I say "science," and when I say the Bible does not address science, I'm talking about something that is distinctly a modern phenomenon. When I say "science" I mean something that began in the 17th century and that came to fruition in the 20th century. I mean a contemporary technological way of looking at nature. Sure, people in the Bible observed nature like you and I did in an ordinary way, but that's not science. So that's what I'm talking about. And I would say that Luther, Calvin, the reformers are still pre-scientific people.

Ankerberg: But Jack, to the extent that they did know about science and the world, aren't they saying that the Bible agrees with that?

Rogers: They don't know anything about what you and I mean by "science."

Ankerberg: All right, the question that would come back, it would be something like this, if there was something that they *did* know, would they have held biblical authority over that?

Rogers: The whole point that I'm trying to make is that one need not deny biblical authority to admit that people in different periods of history have different understandings of what authority is. Luther is one of the slipperiest guys in the whole world. For him authority was that the Bible showed him how to find a gracious God. And I don't think he'd like to be put any box narrower than that.

Ankerberg: All right, can I have a little comment from Luther? "It's impossible that Scripture should contradict itself. It only appears so to senseless and obstinate hypocrites." I just didn't bring that up, Jack. I'm just simply saying that's what he said.

Rogers: And I would agree with him 100%.

Ankerberg: Dr. Woodbridge?

Woodbridge: First of all, there was science before the 17th century. This is a book by Neugebauer; it's called *The Exact Sciences in Antiquity*. It's hard for me to believe that we actually think there was not science in the Middle Ages, or that there was no connection between the science or the science that takes place a little bit later.

But to talking about Luther, Luther says even some stronger things too, like you quoted, John, goes like this; "But everyone indeed knows that they, at times [the fathers], have erred as men will. Therefore, I am ready to trust them only when they prove their opinions from Scripture which has never erred."

But listen to this, "Whoever is so bold that he ventures to accuse God of fraud and deception in a single word, and does so willfully again and again after he has been warned and instructed once or twice, will likewise certainly venture to accuse God of fraud and deception in all of His words. Therefore, it is true, absolutely and without exception, that everything is believed or nothing is believed."

I would suggest to you that, indeed, Christ is the great authoritative figure for Luther, gives authority to the Word of God, but Luther also holds that the Bible is without error. And thus I think he is definitely in line with those of us who would say that the Bible is completely infallible.

Ankerberg: Would you agree with that, Jack?

Rogers: If you listen carefully to what Luther says, that makes my point, I think. Namely, that he says, "You can never accuse the Bible of fraud and deceit." Error, biblically defined and defined as the early church fathers and reformers defined it, means "deliberately telling what is

untrue.” The biblical writers never do that. The theologians do not allege that they do. What I’m talking about is people who, because the Bible talks in an ancient middle eastern way, say, “Well, that has to be an error. We have to prove that that isn’t an error.” That has nothing to do with error, that’s just a different way of talking due to their cultural period.

I think that it’s unhelpful to confuse deliberate, moral error from different kinds of ways of describing things in different periods of history.

Ankerberg: Last comment, Dr. Woodbridge?

Woodbridge: Jack, you’re just wrong. That’s all I can say. That is to say, you’re basing your analysis on some correspondence between Augustine and Jerome. Augustine says to Jerome, “Look, Jerome, you don’t want your writings to be treated as Bible,” that is to say without error. Then he goes on to say to Jerome, “Look, Jerome, you have never had any deceits in your writings.” Now if he had been using only deceits as definition of error then he would have been saying to Jerome, “Look, Jerome, your just a deceitful person. You have errors, etc.” No, he says flat out in his correspondence at 405, “Jerome, you don’t want to see your writings to be like the Bible. And the Bible is free from error.” I think you’ve badly misunderstood what the concept of error is in the Patristic Age.

Final Word

Dr. Ankerberg: How should we define error?

Dr. Woodbridge believes that Christians throughout church history have held that the Bible tells the truth in all matters.

Dr. Rogers believes that the biblical authors wrote falsely only if they *deliberately* intended to deceive: “Now if a biblical writer made a factual mistake,” he says, “but did so unintentionally, that material is still ‘without error.’”

Dr. Rogers claims Augustine and Luther viewed the Bible this way. Rogers writes, “Error for Augustine had to do with deliberate and deceitful telling of that which the author knew to be untrue.” Rogers goes on to say further, “Augustine did not apply the concept of error to problems that arose from the human limitations of knowledge, various perspectives in reporting events, or historical or cultural conditioning of the writers.”

But did Augustine actually hold to this definition of error? Dr. Rogers cites Augustine’s letter #82 to Jerome as proof that he did. I think that it proves just the opposite. Let’s take a look at the evidence.

First, Augustine writes to Jerome, “Knowing as I do your life and conversation, I do not believe in regard to you that you have spoken of anything with an intention of deceit.” Notice, Augustine believed Jerome did not intend to deceive, but he goes on to say that he still made errors.

Second, Augustine reminds Jerome, “I do not need to say that I do not suppose you wish your books to be read like those of prophets or of apostles, concerning which it would be wrong to doubt that they are free from error.”

Notice here that Augustine believed only the biblical writers were free from unintentional errors. This is proved by Augustine’s further word in the same letter when he says, “I confess that I have learned to yield this respect and honor only to the canonical books of Scripture. Of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error.”

Finally, in his *Harmony of the Gospels* Augustine writes, “The evangelist could be guilty of no

kind of falsehood, whether it was of the type designed intentionally to deceive or was simply the result of forgetfulness.”

Now it seems evident that Augustine and Jerome agreed that the Bible is free from all intentional and unintentional errors.

Dr. Jack Rogers—[at the time of this taping was] Professor of Philosophical Theology at Fuller Theological Seminary and a member of the General Assembly’s Taskforce on Biblical Authority and Interpretation of the United Presbyterian Church of the U.S.A. He has challenged several well-entrenched beliefs among American evangelicals in his book, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible—An Historical Approach*. Dr. Rogers received his Ph.D from the University of Amsterdam.

Dr. John Woodbridge—[at the time of this taping was] Professor of Church History at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He argues that the Bible is the inspired, infallible Word of God in all matters and that this accurately depicts the historic position of the church and the view that Jesus and the Apostles taught. Dr. Woodbridge received his Ph.D from the University of Toulouse, France.