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# Inerrancy Is Not a Strong or Classical Foundationalism

— Mark Boone —

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*Mark Boone is assistant professor in the Department of Religion and Philosophy at Hong Kong Baptist University.*

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**Abstract:** The general idea of strong foundationalism is that knowledge is founded on well warranted beliefs that do not derive any warrant from other beliefs and that all our other beliefs depend on these foundational ones for their warrant. Although inerrancy posits Scripture as a solid foundation for theology, the idea that the doctrine of biblical inerrancy involves a strong foundationalist epistemology is deeply problematic. In fact, inerrancy does not require any particular view of the structure of knowledge, and notable sources on inerrancy tout it in ways inconsistent with most forms of strong foundationalism.

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Discussions of biblical authority and hermeneutics have long considered epistemology, that branch of philosophy that studies the nature, origins, and structure of knowledge. Stanley Grenz and John Franke have said that inerrantist theology is linked to a particular view of the structure of knowledge, *classical foundationalism* or *strong foundationalism* (hereafter the latter).<sup>1</sup> The general idea of strong foundationalism is that knowledge has a foundation in well warranted beliefs that do not derive any warrant from other beliefs and that, moreover, all our other beliefs depend on these foundational ones for their warrant. Alvin Plantinga further posits as an essential trait of strong foundationalism its unduly restrictive criterion for a foundational belief—that it be self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The major sources include Stanley Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000); John R. Franke, “Recasting Inerrancy: The Bible as Witness to Missional Plurality,” in *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy*, ed. J. Merrick and Stephen M. Garrett (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 259–85; and Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Among other sources, Alvin Plantinga, “Is Belief in God Properly Basic?” *Noûs* 15.1 (March 1981): 41–51; and “Reason and Belief in God,” in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 60.

Grenz's and Franke's view is no stranger to criticism.<sup>3</sup> However, it appears that a criticism emerging from a careful study of the structure of knowledge has not yet been made. The doctrine of inerrancy has almost nothing to do with strong foundationalism. Inerrancy does not require any view of the structure of knowledge, and notable sources including the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (hereafter CSBI) tout inerrancy in ways inconsistent with most forms of strong foundationalism. There are three types of warrant—what I call inferential, coherential, and foundational warrants. Different views of the structure of knowledge are different accounts of how these types of warrant are arranged. Strong foundationalism has it that knowledge has a foundation in beliefs warranted by foundational warrant alone. If inerrancy is a strong foundationalism, then the doctrine itself must be alleged to be warranted in this manner, or else built on beliefs that are. Critics seem to not fully appreciate this point, not explaining the relation of inerrancy to basic beliefs and instead observing that inerrantists build on Scripture as a foundation.

The biggest problem with tying inerrancy to strong foundationalism is that more than one variety of warrant is said to support the doctrine. Notable sources point to warrant of the foundational variety, derived from the Holy Spirit's testimony about the Bible, and also to inferential warrant, often said to derive from the authority of Christ; coherential warrant is also a factor. This would render inerrancy incompatible with most forms of strong foundationalism, although I can think of one interesting exception (on which more in good time). There are smaller problems. Inerrancy does not necessarily entail *any* view of the structure of knowledge; in particular, the inference from the authority of Christ need not rely on any particular view of the structure of knowledge, or may rely on strong or weak foundationalism or neither. Moreover, by Plantinga's definition any inerrantist appeal to the Holy Spirit as directly warranting inerrancy clashes with strong foundationalism's criterion for a belief's having foundational warrant.

In short, that inerrancy resembles strong foundationalism is correct only to the extent that inerrancy posits Scripture as a solid foundation for theology. The structure of the doctrine does not commit it to any such epistemology, and some proponents employ epistemologies incompatible with most forms of strong foundationalism.

In what follows I shall first explain the building blocks of knowledge and some major views of the structure of knowledge. Then I shall consider the charge that inerrancy is a strong foundationalism. Then I shall review some justifications for biblical inerrancy and explain why inerrancy is not a strong foundationalism. I will close with some remarks on the prospects for a strongly foundationalist inerrancy.

### *1. The Structure of Knowledge*

Knowledge is a system of beliefs; it has a structure, an arrangement. Knowledge is always true belief; I can only know what I believe, and if I believe something false my belief is error rather than knowledge. Plato explains that we need a third thing to tie belief down to the truth (*Meno* 96d–98b). That thing, as

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<sup>3</sup> For critiques concerning truth, objectivity, evangelism, and the viability of weak foundationalism see Robert C. Kurka, "Before 'Foundationalism': A More Biblical Alternative to the Grenz-Franke Proposal for Doing Theology," *JETS* 50 (2007): 145–65; Albert J. Mohler, "Response to John R. Franke," in *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy*, ed. J. Merrick and Stephen M. Garrett (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 288; and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Response to John R. Franke," in *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy*, ed. J. Merrick and Stephen M. Garrett (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 304.

Plantinga puts it, is *warrant*, that “quality or quantity enough of which, together with truth and belief, is sufficient for knowledge.”<sup>4</sup> Warrant frequently involves evidence or justification; a belief is justified by other beliefs. But justification does not spontaneously arise; those justified beliefs had to get their warrant from somewhere; the process of justification needs a beginning.

Thus, epistemologists have discovered two other varieties of warrant. After explaining these, I shall explain why a good view of the structure of knowledge requires taking all three into consideration, and this at all levels of that structure. Coherentism and most forms of strong foundationalism are failures, while two other views (foundherentism and weak foundationalism) are at least viable. (I have explained this material in more detail elsewhere, and it is recommended for the reader with a particular interest in epistemology.<sup>5</sup>)

### 1.1. Three Varieties of Warrant

*Inferential* warrant is easily understood. A belief often has evidentiary support from other beliefs. When a belief or a set of beliefs is warranted and provides good enough support for another belief, at least some of that warrant is extended to the supported belief.

Inferential warrant is derivative; a belief gets it from other warranted beliefs, whose own warrant must either be inferential, or not. If it is inferential, it too comes from other warranted beliefs. This process cannot go on into infinity, since we do not have an infinite number of beliefs. So inferential warrant must be rooted in some other variety of warrant.

Hence a *foundational* warrant is one that is *not* derivative. A belief has it without getting it *from* anywhere. Beliefs arising directly from sensory experience (“I see something blue,” “I feel pain”), truths of reason (“2 and 2 make 4,” “If all men are mortal and Socrates is a man then Socrates is mortal”), and other common-sense beliefs (“The evidence of the senses can be trusted,” “The world outside my mind exists”) are examples of beliefs with foundational warrant. I know them, but not by inference from other beliefs.

There is a third way a warranted belief can be connected to the system of knowledge. If a belief is consistent with a system of warranted belief, especially one which concerns the topic of the belief, it is (all else being equal) more likely to be true than one not thus consistent. Accordingly, this consistency confers another variety of warrant on a belief: *coherential* warrant.

### 1.2. All Three Varieties Are Necessary

All three of these types of warrant are necessary, and an accurate and thorough theory of the structure of knowledge must account for all three and acknowledge that beliefs with foundational warrant have the other kinds.

To deny that inferential warrant is a part of the structure of knowledge is to deny that we know anything based on evidence. So obviously inferential warrant is necessary.

Inferential and coherential warrants are both derivatives, and they must have something from which to derive—namely, foundational warrant. The beliefs of a person in the Matrix, or of the philosopher’s famed brain-in-a-vat, may have as much inference and coherence as my beliefs or yours. But his beliefs

<sup>4</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), v.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Boone, “Inferential, Coherential, and Foundational Warrant: An Eclectic Account of the Sources of Warrant,” *Logos & Episteme* 5 (2014): 377–98.

do not track reality; their warrant is illusory, and he lacks knowledge. Our beliefs, which *do* track reality, are different from his mainly in having foundational warrant.

Coherential warrant is also important. A system of beliefs could hardly be *knowledge* if it had a high degree of inconsistency. Even beliefs with foundational warrant need coherential warrant. Say I look out the window and my perceptual faculties, generally reliable and functioning properly at the time, lead me to believe that there is an animal in the yard. Plantinga would say (rightly, I think) that such a belief has foundational warrant. Say, furthermore, that the belief I form is “There is a sparrow outside my window.” Say that on another occasion the same thing happens for the belief “There is a tyrannosaurus rex outside my window.” This belief is less warranted than the other because of the coherential warrant the former enjoys—since my beliefs tell me that, although sparrows are a common animal around here, dinosaurs, sadly, are not.

### 1.3. Coherentism and Strong Foundationalism

Since all three varieties of warrant are part of the structure of knowledge, the correct account of its structure must include them. Classical coherentism intentionally leaves out foundational warrant, positing that the warranting process never actually *begins* anywhere.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, coherentism is mistaken.<sup>7</sup>

Strong foundationalism is likewise mistaken, or at least most versions of it are. Let us first take a closer look at the relevant terms. *Foundationalism* is the theory that there are such things as *properly basic beliefs*, beliefs with enough foundational warrant to be known on its strength alone.<sup>8</sup>

It can be difficult to nail down just one definition of *strong foundationalism*, although by most definitions Descartes’s foundationalism will be the strongest. The strength of a foundationalism comes in degrees, and in fact a foundationalism may be strong in at least three senses. Plantinga’s approach suggests the first—the fewer beliefs, or varieties of belief, recognized as properly basic, the stronger the foundationalism. Second, the more certain the basic beliefs are, the stronger the foundationalism; indeed, the special epistemic status attributed to basic beliefs is sometimes treated as the essence of strong foundationalism.<sup>9</sup> Third, the *less often* a foundationalism recognizes beliefs which have foundational warrant but not enough to be known without some other kind of warrant, or basic beliefs which also have coherential or inferential warrant, the *stronger* it is.<sup>10</sup>

Strong foundationalism thus implies that a belief may be warranted by foundational warrant alone; inferential and coherential warrants lend no support to basic beliefs. Strong foundationalisms are

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<sup>6</sup> Laurence Bonjour’s earlier work is a fine example of coherentism: *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985); and “Can Empirical Knowledge Have a Foundation?,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15 (1978): 1–13.

<sup>7</sup> For more on this see Boone, “Inferential, Coherential, and Foundational Warrant,” 388–97.

<sup>8</sup> I discuss this and two alternative definitions of foundationalism in Boone, “Inferential, Coherential, and Foundational Warrant,” 390–92.

<sup>9</sup> For example, Ted Poston, “Foundationalism,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 4.a.i, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/found-ep/>; however, note that Poston turns to the third sense when defining *weak* foundationalism (4.a.iii).

<sup>10</sup> For an alternative definition of classical foundationalism, see Richard Fumerton’s working definition as “foundationalism committed to *internalism*” (“Classical Foundationalism,” in *Resurrecting Old-Fashioned Foundationalism*, ed. Michael DePaul [Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000], 4).

typically wrong because our beliefs with foundational warrant often *do* have inferential or coherential warrant, and often *need* it. The other forms of warrant work closely with foundational warrant. Susan Haack has done some good work explaining this,<sup>11</sup> and John Zeis has applied her work to religious epistemology.<sup>12</sup> Zeis uses a convenient illustration, which I here modify to fit my own life: I remember some years ago running into my friend John at the Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport. Plantinga would correctly say that my belief here has foundational warrant; however, it matters to its warrant that I know, independently of the memory, of such a place as the D-FW airport and of such a person as John. I also know that some years ago I flew through D-FW on American Airlines on the way to San Francisco for a meeting of the Evangelical Philosophical Society, where I delivered a paper on Plantinga's epistemology. I also remember that John and I were in the same graduate school program. I have a vague memory that he read a paper at the same conference. In the absence of all this I would probably write off my memory as some confused dream. My belief derives from that particular memory alone insufficient warrant for knowledge or rational belief, but the strong coherential warrant derived from all these other beliefs makes a big difference in favor of the belief. Typical strong foundationalisms, denying this, are accordingly mistaken.

Recall Plantinga's more restrictive definition of strong foundationalism: the view that only beliefs self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses can have foundational warrant—a too-short list of properly basic beliefs. Plantinga's critique is not on the grounds that strong foundationalism has the wrong account of the structure of knowledge. The problem is with how beliefs in the structure's *foundation* are warranted. Plantinga gives various reasons this view is mistaken.<sup>13</sup> Here is another, borrowed from the history of philosophy. Hume observed that knowledge gained from experience requires some principle or principles *by which* we gain knowledge from experience—for example induction or the uniformity of nature.<sup>14</sup> These are not evident to the senses (being themselves the knowledge we bring *to* the senses in order to learn from them), nor incorrigible (being dubitable), nor self-evident like “Two and two make four” is self-evident (and were not evident to Hume, though he recommended believing them).

Before going on, we need to take a look at one promising account, Timothy McGrew's “classical foundationalism” in *The Foundations of Knowledge*.<sup>15</sup> McGrew argues that knowledge is rooted in incorrigible beliefs about our mental states, and he employs in his chapter 7 an interesting probabilistic argument that these mental states can ground knowledge of the world outside the mind. If I understand it rightly, his account is not subject to my major objection to strong foundationalism, at least as concerns basic beliefs, for the basic beliefs he identifies concern awareness of our mental states, which does not require inferential or coherential warrant, although these would still be necessary for beliefs just a few levels up. (Indeed, I think McGrew might well agree with me on that much; I take it that his account of mutual support among beliefs would preclude a foundationalism strong in the third sense from applying

<sup>11</sup> Susan Haack, “Double-Aspect Foundherentism: A New Theory of Empirical Justification,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 53 (1993): 113–28; “Précis of ‘Evidence and Inquiry: Towards Reconstruction in Epistemology,’” *Synthese* 112 (1997): 7–11; “Reply to BonJour,” *Synthese* 112 (1997): 25–35.

<sup>12</sup> John Zeis, “A Foundherentist Conception of the Justification of Religious Belief,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 58 (2005): 133–60.

<sup>13</sup> Plantinga, “Is Belief in God Properly Basic?” and “Reason and Belief in God.” See also James Beilby, *Epistemology as Theology: An Evaluation of Alvin Plantinga's Religious Epistemology* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 47.

<sup>14</sup> David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Edinburgh: Kincaid, 1760).

<sup>15</sup> Timothy McGrew, *The Foundations of Knowledge* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995).

anywhere except to basic beliefs.<sup>16</sup>) McGrew's is a promising account, assuming the chapter 7 argument is solid, although this is not the place to put that argument to the test. (We will return to McGrew's account in relation to inerrancy later.)

#### 1.4. Foundherentism or Weak Foundationalism

Two major theories on the structure of knowledge are viable. Roughly, foundherentism is the theory that some beliefs have foundational warrant, but none have *enough* of it to be *known* without some help from the other varieties of warrant.<sup>17</sup> On a viable model of *weak* foundationalism, at least *some* beliefs with foundational warrant have *enough* of it to be known; but *some* beliefs with foundational warrant, including the ones that *can* be known on its strength alone, can *also* be warranted by inferential or coherentist warrant.

Foundherentism and weak foundationalism, then, agree that all three varieties of warrant matter, and that even beliefs with foundational warrant can enjoy other varieties. Their only salient disagreement is whether *some* beliefs with foundational warrant sometimes have *enough* of it to be known on its strength alone. One of these theories is likelier to be true than coherentism or most forms of strong foundationalism.

And what is the connection of all this to biblical inerrancy? Let's find out.

### 2. Does Inerrancy Entail a Strong Foundationalism?

The charge that inerrancy is a strong foundationalism is ambiguous. On the one hand, it may mean that inerrantists have had a strong foundationalist epistemology, perhaps treating inerrancy as a properly basic belief or trying to base it on other properly basic beliefs. How inerrantists are supposed to have attempted this is not entirely clear. On the other hand, the charge may be simply that inerrantists attempt to build their theology on the foundation of the Bible much as a strong foundationalist would attempt to build knowledge on the solid foundation of basic beliefs. If this is the case, inerrancy may have nothing to do with foundationalism beyond this point of comparison, and why exactly that particular point of comparison would be a problem is unclear. Inerrancy, if true, guarantees that the Bible is a solid foundation for theology. But this does not make inerrantists into strong foundationalists; whether they are depends on why they accept the Bible's authority.

In *Renewing the Center*, Grenz gives us a fair description of strong foundationalism, often referring to it simply as "foundationalism." He notes that it is motivated by the desire to escape from uncertainty, and rightly associates it with Enlightenment figureheads Locke and Descartes.<sup>18</sup> He states that according to foundationalism "reasoning moves in only one direction—from the bottom up, that is, from basic beliefs or first-principles to resultant conclusions."<sup>19</sup> This is actually Haack's definition of foundationalism, and a fine definition of *strong* foundationalism as I use the term.<sup>20</sup> As Grenz tells the

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<sup>16</sup> McGrew, "How Foundationalists Do Crossword Puzzles," *Philosophical Studies* 96 (1999): 333–50.

<sup>17</sup> For more detailed presentations of foundherentism, see the aforementioned articles by Haack, Zeis, and Boone.

<sup>18</sup> Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 194–95.

<sup>19</sup> Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 194.

<sup>20</sup> Boone, "Inferential, Coherentist, and Foundational Warrant," 390–97.

tale, Enlightenment theology followed Enlightenment foundationalism, tending towards deism.<sup>21</sup> Then Enlightenment theology was abandoned, by some in favor of blind Christian faith and by others in favor of a “skeptical rationalism.”<sup>22</sup> A new theological perspective emerged in the 1800s.<sup>23</sup> This was a theology aimed at satisfying the demands of strong foundationalism and employing the Bible as the foundation. The doctrine that every proposition in the Bible is true was used as the foundation for all knowledge. Thus began what we now think of as fundamentalism or inerrantist evangelicalism. So contemporary inerrancy was infected with strong foundationalism from its beginning and, indeed, developed precisely because of the presumption of strong foundationalism.

But this is ambiguous. Is the charge that inerrantists actually *are* strong foundationalists? Or is it that they do theology in the same manner in which a strong foundationalist like Descartes does philosophy, using the doctrine of inerrancy as a foundation? These are very different claims. If the charge is that inerrantists really *are* strong foundationalists, it follows that the inerrantist accepts the doctrine of inerrancy itself on strongly foundationalist grounds. However, on the latter charge, inerrantists may or may not be strong foundationalists, depending on why they accept the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. If the doctrine of inerrancy is accepted without regard to the standards of strong foundationalism, then the inerrantist is not a strong foundationalist at all. He is simply an inerrantist; inerrancy entails that the Bible is a solid foundation for theology, and it is not clear what is the point of making the comparison to strong foundationalism.

Grenz writes as if he has the latter idea in mind when he says these theologians “were confident that they could deduce from Scripture the great theological truths that lay within its pages.”<sup>24</sup> The former, however, is suggested by Grenz’s description of this theology as treating “the veracity” of the Bible as “unimpeachable when measured by the canons of human reason.”<sup>25</sup> Instead of specifying on what strongly foundationalist grounds inerrancy was justified, Grenz returns to the latter alternative, saying that inerrancy treats the Bible as “an incontrovertible foundation.”<sup>26</sup> If the canons of reason establish biblical inerrancy, then inerrancy rests on a foundation of some sort and cannot itself *be* such a foundation. If, however, the charge is that the inerrantist uses the Bible as a foundation in the manner of a foundationalist, this has nothing to do with inerrancy *being* a foundationalism. In this case there is a resemblance between the inerrantist’s use of the Bible and Descartes’s use of the proposition “I exist”: Both serve as a solid basis for other knowledge. But the resemblance is superficial if the inerrantist thinks he has some evidence for inerrancy, and why we should care about the resemblance is a mystery.

Franke, in his contribution to *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy*, makes some similar claims, albeit with kind words for inerrantists and some appreciation for the doctrine.<sup>27</sup> Franke writes,

As a whole, the Chicago Statement is reflective of a particular form of epistemology known as classic or strong foundationalism. This approach to knowledge seeks to

<sup>21</sup> Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 195–98.

<sup>22</sup> Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 197.

<sup>23</sup> Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 197.

<sup>24</sup> Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 198.

<sup>25</sup> Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 198.

<sup>26</sup> Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 298.

<sup>27</sup> Franke, “Recasting Inerrancy,” 259–87.

overcome the uncertainty generated by the tendency of fallible human beings to error, by discovering a universal and indubitable basis for human knowledge.<sup>28</sup>

Citing Grenz, he correctly points to Enlightenment philosophy as the origins of this epistemology.<sup>29</sup> But why should we think that the CSBI reflects this Enlightenment perspective? Franke explains that according to it “Scripture is the true and sole basis for knowledge on all matters which it touches,” and he adds that inerrantists display strong foundationalist presumptions about knowledge whenever they claim that any error in Scripture would render the whole of Scripture suspect.<sup>30</sup>

This is a little puzzling. To begin with, it is doubtful that any inerrantist ever thought the Bible is the *sole* source of knowledge on any matter it touches. The Bible tells us to expect to die (Heb 9:27), but inerrantists are well aware that this can also be learned from experience.

More importantly, what does Franke mean by claiming that inerrantists are thinking like strong foundationalists? He suggests they “view Scripture as a foundation for human knowledge.”<sup>31</sup> He may mean that inerrantists regard the Bible’s truthfulness as a properly basic belief like Descartes regards “I exist”—as having absolute certainty which is entirely underived from any other known beliefs.<sup>32</sup> But Franke does not cite any inerrantists claiming this, and indeed the CSBI and other sources justify inerrancy on various grounds, which precludes the Bible’s being *this* sort of foundation.

Alternatively, Franke may simply mean that inerrantists *act as if* the Bible were absolutely certain by believing everything it says. But what sort of a charge against inerrancy is that? If inerrantists really believe that the Bible is always correct, should they *not* believe all things it teaches? In any case, this does not make inerrancy a strong foundationalism unless it is *itself* accepted without any evidence.

Perhaps Franke only wants inerrantists to humbly recognize the possibility that they got it wrong—that maybe inerrancy is mistaken or their interpretation of the Bible on some point is wrong. Well and good. But epistemic humility is fully compatible with biblical inerrancy.<sup>33</sup>

Franke, noting that inerrantists now tend to style themselves as weak foundationalists, says, “In the framework of weak foundationalism, inerrancy could be mistaken and should be subject to critical scrutiny.”<sup>34</sup> Is this not the attitude of the authors of the CSBI, who “invite response to this statement from any who see reason to amend its affirmations about Scripture by the light of Scripture”?<sup>35</sup> Franke asks, “What might the doctrine of inerrancy look like in a fallibilist perspective?”<sup>36</sup> I think it would look much

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<sup>28</sup> Franke, “Recasting Inerrancy,” 261.

<sup>29</sup> Franke, “Recasting Inerrancy,” 261.

<sup>30</sup> Franke, “Recasting Inerrancy,” 262.

<sup>31</sup> Franke, “Recasting Inerrancy,” 264.

<sup>32</sup> Vanhoozer reads Franke as critiquing a largely Cartesian perspective (“Response to John R. Franke,” 303).

<sup>33</sup> Noted by Vanhoozer, “Response to John R. Franke,” 305–6. See also Mark Boone, “Ancient-Future Hermeneutics: Postmodern, Biblical Inerrancy, and the Rule of Faith,” *CTR* 14 (2016): 35–52.

<sup>34</sup> Franke, “Recasting Inerrancy,” 263.

<sup>35</sup> CSBI, Preface.

<sup>36</sup> Franke, “Recasting Inerrancy,” 263.



like the CSBI. Or, contrary to his suspicion that CSBI inerrancy employs concepts foreign to church fathers,<sup>37</sup> a fallibilist inerrancy might look rather like Augustine!<sup>38</sup>

Grenz and Franke join forces in *Beyond Foundationalism*, claiming that inerrantists have treated the Bible as an “invulnerable foundation.”<sup>39</sup> This might be interpreted to mean simply that inerrantists have thought they could trust whatever the Bible says; this, once again, is just what inerrancy means. Alternatively, it might mean that inerrantists have had 100% confidence in their theology, in which they might be said to have erred, although it is unclear how this weighs against their theology. (If I have 100% certainty that Tolkien is a better writer than Lewis, I am overconfident, but that is no evidence that I am *mistaken*.) They also claim that *some*, but not all, inerrantists try to justify the doctrine “by appeal to rational argument,”<sup>40</sup> but at most this applies only to some inerrantists, not to inerrancy itself, and in any case the link to strong foundationalism remains unclear.

Brian McLaren, following Grenz and Franke, suggests that conservatives and liberals have the same roots in Enlightenment theology.<sup>41</sup> Yet the convergence of evangelical conservatism with foundationalism is in its conception of “an error-free Bible as the incontrovertible foundation of their theology.”<sup>42</sup> He does not explain why we should not treat the Bible as an incontrovertible foundation if indeed we take it to be without error, nor why he thinks evangelicals who have thus taken it did so on strong foundationalist grounds.

Others have found this critique a bit confusing. Peter Leithart notes that it is difficult fully to understand; he observes Franke has professed inerrancy in the past, that inerrancy might well be compatible with some non-foundationalist epistemology, and that much depends on how these technical terms are defined.<sup>43</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer suggests that Franke errs in thinking inerrancy is necessarily linked to a theory of knowledge. Inerrancy is a theory in *theology* allowing us to treat the Bible as theologically foundational, but that does not mean that people who do so have any particular theory in epistemology.<sup>44</sup>

We should consider these charges more systematically. We may distinguish three.

First, there is the charge that, in seeking knowledge built on Scripture as a foundation, the structure of inerrantist thought resembles that of strong foundationalist thought. This is correct. It is also irrelevant. The very *meaning* of the doctrine of inerrancy entails that we can build on Scripture as a solid foundation for knowledge. Should we *not* act as if we believe our theology just because in doing so we might happen to resemble Descartes in some respect? Whence comes this rule for doing theology?

<sup>37</sup> Franke, “Recasting Inerrancy,” 260–61.

<sup>38</sup> Boone, “Ancient-Future Hermeneutics,” 35–52.

<sup>39</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 34.

<sup>40</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 34.

<sup>41</sup> Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I Am A Missional, Evangelical, Post/Protestant, Liberal/Conservative, Mystical/Poetic, Biblical, Charismatic/Contemplative, Fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, Green, Incarnational, Depressed-Yet-Hopeful, Emergent, Unfinished Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 10–11.

<sup>42</sup> McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 11.

<sup>43</sup> Peter Leithart, “Foundationalism and Inerrancy,” *Patheos*, 29 December 2005, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/leithart/2005/12/foundationalism-and-inerrancy/>.

<sup>44</sup> Vanhoozer, “Response to John R. Franke,” 304.

Perhaps the critic simply thinks that treating the Bible as a solid foundation for knowledge is *incorrect*. But this is no more than to say that *inerrancy* is incorrect. An argument against inerrancy and relying on this as a premise is fallaciously circular. As a counter-assertion, it is interesting but not an argument.

Second, there is the charge that inerrancy is part of a strongly foundationalist epistemology. If the idea here is that inerrancy *necessarily* is such, the charge is simply false. Inerrancy can only be part of a strong foundationalism if the doctrine is considered *either* to be a properly basic belief with no warrant derived from other beliefs at all, *or* to be derived from such beliefs. However, inerrancy may be supported with arguments, and these arguments may or may not conform to any particular epistemological outlook. If some inerrantist happens to accept the doctrine using a bad epistemology, perhaps that is his problem rather than inerrancy's. In any case, inerrancy is commonly supported in ways inconsistent with strong foundationalism—on which more anon.

Third, there is the charge that inerrancy is not epistemically humble—that it trusts too much in the human ability to gain certainty. This objection seems to miss the point that inerrancy looks to the *divine* aspect of the Bible, thinking only *God* can give us any infallible knowledge. One major reason inerrancy matters is that we humans *lack* the ability to reach certain knowledge of God. Moreover, the inerrantist has plenty of room for humility about what he thinks the Bible means. He can even admit that he might be wrong about inerrancy!

### ***3. What View of Knowledge Does Inerrancy Involve?***

Several kinds of evidence are given for biblical inerrancy. The argument from the authority of Jesus Christ is significant. There is also a claim—not a giving of evidence *as such*—that the Holy Spirit tells us that the Bible is God's holy word. Sometimes there is an appeal to the effect of Scripture on our lives or to the Bible's consistency with currently available human knowledge. I will not thoroughly survey the scholarship in defense of inerrancy, for it is legion. Instead, I will consider the salient logical features of some significant justifications of inerrancy offered in the CSBI and by three of its signers—William E. Bell, J. I. Packer, and Kenneth Kantzer. We will see that inerrancy need not have anything to do with strong foundationalism. Moreover, by Plantinga's definition strong foundationalism limits the criterion for proper basicity to a belief's being incorrigible, self-evident, or evident to the senses, which would rule out the Holy Spirit's testimony as a source of warrant. Most importantly, these appeals from the CSBI tradition are to inferential, foundational, *and* coherential warrants on behalf of the doctrine, and this rules out most strong foundationalisms.

In what follows I shall look at the Christological argument for inerrancy, the appeal to the testimony of the Holy Spirit, and coherential warrant for inerrancy; then, finally, I shall explain more directly why inerrancy is not a strong foundationalism, although it is consistent with at least one form of it.

#### **3.1. The Christological Argument: Inferential Warrant**

An important argument for inerrancy is the Christological one. Roughly, it goes like this: What Jesus teaches we must accept, Jesus teaches that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, and so we must accept that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. A supplementary argument might be offered for Jesus's infallibility, or, as some do, we may simply point out that people who acknowledge Jesus as Lord must accept what he teaches. A supplementary argument that Jesus teaches that the Bible is the inspired Word of God must be made in two parts, one for each Testament. Roughly, the first part would present

New Testament evidence that Jesus accepted a doctrine of Old Testament inerrancy (cf. his citations of the Old Testament as authoritative in John 5:39; 10:35; Luke 24:44; Matt 5:17–18; 7:12; 22:31; 23:2–3). The second part would present New Testament evidence that Jesus gave his authority to the apostles for the teaching and settling of doctrine and gave the Holy Spirit to make sure they got it right; passages such as Matthew 16:19, Matthew 18:18, and John 14:26 might be cited along with the record of the Holy Spirit’s coming in Acts 1–2, and perhaps also an analysis of the origins of New Testament scripture in the authoritative apostolic testimony. (We might even posit a coextension of apostolic preaching, the Gospel, oral tradition, and written Scripture—a coextension leading naturally to written canonization.<sup>45</sup>) Given that the apostles bore the authority of the risen Messiah, the holy status of the resulting writings would be taken as an extension of Jesus’s authority.

William Bell’s main argument for inerrancy is a fine example, and I shall look at it in some detail, showing that it says nothing about the structure of knowledge and is consistent with several views on the subject.<sup>46</sup> Then I shall more briefly consider Packer and Kantzer. Then I shall show that the Christological argument is in the CSBI itself. Then I shall review how this argument appeals to inferential warrant on behalf of inerrancy.

Despite having “no published works to speak of,” Bell’s “influence has been extensive and profound.”<sup>47</sup> As a signer of the CSBI, he meticulously expounded inerrancy for his students. His lectures are available online.<sup>48</sup> His case for inerrancy is found in the “Doctrine of Scripture” lectures numbers 4–7; lectures 5–6 concern “The Christological Argument.” Bell begins on historical and inductive grounds, making a secular case for the historical reliability of the Gospels, appealing to Gottschalk’s criteria for the historical reliability of ancient testimony. This, by itself, would not be a very strong case for the inerrancy of the Gospels. Such a methodology might be used to establish the historical reliability of non-inerrant texts from Herodotus, Josephus, or Aristotle. More generally, this sort of inductive evidence can only guarantee some finite degree of historical reliability. Inerrancy is a universal denial of *any* errors in the original biblical text, a claim of *total* reliability which cannot be guaranteed by such an argument.

Fortunately, Bell makes no such case. His goal is to establish on secular, historical standards a few claims which fit them—historical ones. He argues that the Gospels show that Jesus accepted the Hebrew Scriptures—our Old Testament—as the inerrant Word of God, and that he pre-authenticated the New Testament Scriptures, stamping them with his own authority. Thus, Bell argues, the Bible has inerrant authority because Jesus, with his own inerrant authority, treats it as such. Bell acknowledges that his argument is useless without Jesus’s authority; he is arguing against those who acknowledge Jesus’s authority but *not* the Bible’s; “and for Christians,” says Bell, “he is the Lord of glory,” and we must not deny his teaching.

We must note some salient features of Bell’s argument. First, note that biblical inerrancy is established by premises able to establish it. Only an infallible source of knowledge is sufficient to guarantee by its testimony that some source of knowledge is infallible. An argument from an infallible authority can

<sup>45</sup> A helpful book on this way of thinking is Michael J. Kruger, *The Question of Canon: Challenging the Status Quo in the New Testament Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013).

<sup>46</sup> Bell’s teaching on inerrancy and other theological topics is available at “William E. Bell,” *Discipleship Library*, [http://www.discipleshiplibrary.com/dr\\_bell.php](http://www.discipleshiplibrary.com/dr_bell.php).

<sup>47</sup> Michael R. Gilstrap, “Dispensationalism’s Achilles’ Heel: Part One,” *Dispensationalism in Transition* 2.2 (February 1989), 1, [https://www.garynorth.com/freebooks/docs/a\\_pdfs/newslet/dt/8902.pdf](https://www.garynorth.com/freebooks/docs/a_pdfs/newslet/dt/8902.pdf).

<sup>48</sup> [http://www.discipleshiplibrary.com/dr\\_bell.php](http://www.discipleshiplibrary.com/dr_bell.php).

guarantee any conclusion, given the truth of the premises.<sup>49</sup> If Christ be infallible, what he teaches is true, and he may teach us anything he likes.

Second, note that the argument is not circular, a danger Bell carefully avoids. The argument *would* be circular if it relied on inerrancy, but it only relies on the historical reliability of the Gospels and then proves their inerrancy on other grounds—Jesus’s authority. Inerrancy is not in the premises of Bell’s argument, as in the flawed argument *The Bible is inerrant, and it teaches that Jesus teaches inerrancy, and therefore inerrancy is true*. The historical reliability of the Gospels, if well established, is enough to establish that Jesus said something. If what he says happens to concern the same documents, no problem. An argument may establish whatever conclusion its premises support, and an infallible authority may tell us what he may.

Bell’s conclusion of inerrancy does entail his premise of the Gospels’ reliability, but this only goes to show that an argument’s conclusion may occasionally have some support for its premise. Say I find evidence that Smith knows economics based on his understanding of the principle of comparative advantage and other insights in economics with which I am familiar. Once Smith’s economic authority is established, it so happens that his testimony in favor of comparative advantage—an economic principle the truth of which was a premise in my reasoning to Smith’s authority—also counts in its favor. Similarly, if Jesus is infallible, he can teach us what he wants, even about the same texts through which we know about *him*. The Gospels’ historical reliability is a matter for the standards of history to establish. If they work for, say, Herodotus and if the Gospels satisfy the same standards well enough, then the historical premises of Bell’s argument are established.

In short, Bell’s argument is very well constructed; by relying on secular historical standards, it avoids circular reasoning. It depends on inductive evidence of a sort quite sufficient to get its own job done—to establish the historical facts about what Jesus said. Yet, and second, it also uses a premise powerful enough to establish the inerrant authority of the Bible—the inerrant authority of Jesus Christ.

The premise that Christ really *has* this authority is the argument’s vulnerability. Here is a third salient feature of Bell’s argument: *There is no sub-argument for the crucial premise concerning Jesus’s authority*. What are we to make of this premise? We might accept it as an article of pure unreasoning faith, or we might suggest that we know directly that Jesus Christ is Lord and Messiah, perhaps explaining things Plantinga’s way by saying that we have a God-given faculty for knowing the truths of Christianity.<sup>50</sup> We might argue for Christ’s authority on the basis of the authority of the Church; this authority in turn, as Zeis suggests in his epistemology, might be recognized as a sort of (rational) leap of faith,<sup>51</sup> or explained in Plantingian fashion. Alternatively, we might find some other evidence for the authority of Jesus, perhaps by expanding Bell’s argument from the historical reliability of the Bible and taking the Resurrection and other miracles of Jesus as evidence for his authority. In this case, some leap would remain from the inductive evidence for these events to the total commitment to Christ’s authority which the events warrant. (We might argue that this leap is rational much like a young man’s leap from his inductive evidence that *Miss S. R. is the woman who should be my wife* to his total commitment to Miss S. R. in marriage.)

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<sup>49</sup> On this aspect of arguments from infallible authority, see Frances and Daniel Howard-Snyder and Ryan Wasserman, *The Power of Logic*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008), ch. 10, section 2.

<sup>50</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>51</sup> See Zeis, “A Foundherentist Conception,” 154–55.

If we take this last approach we would likely end up using some form of weak foundationalism. The fundamental premises of the study of history would be foundational. What these premises actually *are* would be a question for another study, but they would surely include the existence of the past, the reality of minds other than ourselves, and the fact that their testimony is a source of knowledge. This works well enough in a weak foundationalism. Taking such beliefs as properly basic automatically rules out strong foundationalism on Plantinga's definition.<sup>52</sup> Alternatively, we might follow Haack and Zeis and treat historical evidence as warranted along foundherentist lines. Or we might treat these properly basic beliefs as deriving no warrant from other beliefs and thus expand Bell's arguments along the lines of a *strong* foundationalism.

Thus, Bell's approach is consistent with foundherentism, weak foundationalism, and strong foundationalism (by my looser definition, although not by Plantinga's). In short, Bell's main argument—bracketing the whole question of how we know that Jesus is infallible—*implies nothing at all about the structure of knowledge*. More importantly for our purposes, Bell here uses inferential warrant, to the significance of which we will soon return.

Bell is not unique. Packer's little book *"Fundamentalism" and the Word of God* presents the case for biblical inerrancy in chapter 3, and his argument is much like Bell's.<sup>53</sup> Packer likewise does not present a case for the authority of Jesus, presumably because he is also addressing those who accept the authority of Christ but not Scripture: "If we accept Christ's claims, therefore, we commit ourselves to believe all that He taught—on His authority."<sup>54</sup> There is also Kantzer, who notes that Jesus "placed his imprimatur upon the Old Testament canon of the Jews."<sup>55</sup> Moreover, "The processes involved in the formation and reception of the New Testament duplicate those he approved in the Old Testament."<sup>56</sup> And Jesus commands that we recognize the authority of the Bible: "The real Jesus, the only Jesus for whom we have any evidence whatever, believed that the Bible was true and that it was the very word of God. He commanded his disciples to believe it and obey it."<sup>57</sup> The fundamental issue is whether we are willing to submit to Christ.<sup>58</sup>

The Christological argument is also in the CSBI, which comments on the importance of Christ as incarnate God, as mediator, as Messiah, and as "the central theme of Scripture."<sup>59</sup> It observes that "Christ testifies that Scripture cannot be broken"; Christ submitted to its authority, and requires the

<sup>52</sup> Plantinga makes this point with respect to memory beliefs in "Reason and Belief in God," 60.

<sup>53</sup> J. I. Packer, *"Fundamentalism" and the Word of God: Some Evangelical Principles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 54–64.

<sup>54</sup> Packer, *"Fundamentalism" and the Word of God*, 59.

<sup>55</sup> Kenneth Kantzer, "Parameters of Biblical Inerrancy," in *The Proceedings of the Conference on Biblical Inerrancy 1987* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987), 112.

<sup>56</sup> Kantzer, "Parameters of Biblical Inerrancy," 112.

<sup>57</sup> Kantzer, "Parameters of Biblical Inerrancy," 118.

<sup>58</sup> Kantzer, "Parameters of Biblical Inerrancy," 118–19. Kantzer, much like Bell, states that those who doubt inerrancy should first answer the question of "the Lordship of Jesus Christ," which is a separate question; Kantzer, "Parameters," n. 39, p. 125.

<sup>59</sup> The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy with Exposition" (Chicago, 1978), Exposition, Authority: Christ and the Bible. Although some say that the Statement does not include the Exposition, I follow the Draft Committee's Preface in including it.

same of us.<sup>60</sup> By recognizing the Old Testament canon as authoritative and as defining his own mission, he testified to its authority; and the New Testament is “the apostolic witness to Himself which He undertook to inspire by His gift of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>61</sup>

There are other sources for the Christological argument, including John Wenham and Alec Motyer.<sup>62</sup> However, we are not aiming at a scholarly survey so much as a study of the logic of the inerrantist position, which plainly has a notable tradition of appealing to the authority of Christ.

As we have seen, this argument by itself is compatible with several views on the structure of knowledge. More crucial for our purposes, the Christological argument employs inferential warrant on behalf of inerrancy. For, quite simply, it is an *argument*—from a premise concerning the authority of Christ and some premises (themselves having sub-arguments) about what Christ taught to the conclusion that what he taught is true. *Any* argument for *any* proposition is a use of inferential warrant—from premises to conclusion. The same points could just as easily be made regarding any justifications of inerrancy based on other arguments, such as arguments from the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture<sup>63</sup> or Albert Mohler’s “cumulative argument.”<sup>64</sup>

### 3.2. The Testimony of the Holy Spirit: Foundational Warrant

The Christological argument, as noted, may be developed so as to point to foundational warrant in one way or another. More importantly for our purposes is the fact that *the doctrine of inerrancy itself* is said to have foundational warrant. We may note influential sources including Augustine, Calvin, and Plantinga; more important for our purposes, the CSBI is quite clear on this, along with Packer and Kantzer.

The CSBI’s introduction states, “The Holy Spirit, Scripture’s divine Author, both authenticates it to us by His inward witness and opens our minds to understand its meaning.”<sup>65</sup> Again, in the Articles of Affirmation and Denial: “WE AFFIRM that the Holy Spirit bears witness to the Scriptures, assuring believers of the truthfulness of God’s written Word.”<sup>66</sup> We know of the Bible’s truth through the Holy Spirit who informs us of it.

The appeal to the testimony of the Holy Spirit parallels Plantinga’s critique of strong foundationalism on the grounds that it improperly restricts the criteria for a belief with foundational warrant. By Plantinga’s definition, any inerrantist source pointing to the Holy Spirit’s testimony on inerrancy is inconsistent with strong foundationalism, for it posits as a source of foundational warrant the testimony of the Holy Spirit, not a noetic faculty recognized by strong foundationalism—neither self-evident nor

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<sup>60</sup> CSBI, Exposition, Authority: Christ and the Bible.

<sup>61</sup> CSBI, Exposition, Authority: Christ and the Bible.

<sup>62</sup> See John Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, 3d ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), esp. 11–15; Alec Motyer, *Look to the Rock: An Old Testament Background to Our Understanding of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), 21–22. Motyer is remarkably similar to Bell save that he apparently takes the last approach I suggested above for establishing the authority of *Christ* (*Look to the Rock*, 21).

<sup>63</sup> A justification found in CSBI, A Short Statement.

<sup>64</sup> Albert Mohler, “When the Bible Speaks, God Speaks: The Classical Doctrine of Biblical Inerrancy,” in *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy*, ed. J. Merrick and Stephen M. Garrett (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 36–43.

<sup>65</sup> CSBI, A Short Statement.

<sup>66</sup> CSBI, Articles of Affirmation and Denial, Article XVI.

evident to the five senses nor incorrigible. Plantinga himself goes over the rudiments of this idea.<sup>67</sup> The interplay of faith, the Holy Spirit's work, and the Bible produces warrant independent of inference—foundational warrant. He suggests one way this might work: “the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts that this book is indeed from God,” and goes on to explain several other ways the Holy Spirit might warrant our belief in biblical authority.<sup>68</sup>

The idea that God directly informs us of the truth of the Bible is very old. Augustine prays, “You told me with strong voice in the ear of Your servant's spirit, breaking through my deafness and crying: ‘O man, what my Scripture says, I say....’”<sup>69</sup> Similarly, Calvin says that the Bible “owes the full conviction with which we ought to receive it to the testimony of the Spirit.”<sup>70</sup> Following and citing Calvin as well as the Westminster Confession and other sources, Packer emphatically concurs.<sup>71</sup> Kantzer also speaks of the Holy Spirit working in us to show that the Bible is the Word of God.<sup>72</sup>

We have already noted the inconsistency with strong foundationalism according to Plantinga's definition. Regarding strong foundationalism as I define it, we need only reiterate that the appeal to the testimony of the Holy Spirit is an appeal to foundational warrant for the doctrine of inerrancy itself, or else to the doctrine which immediately justifies it, that the Bible is the Word of God.

### 3.3. Coherential Warrant

Inerrantists also appeal to coherential warrant on behalf of inerrancy. This may be seen primarily in the claim that the Bible is consistent with other relevant areas of human knowledge. There is also a strong coherential aspect of the doctrine as articulated in the CSBI.

Bell is again a convenient illustration. After making the Christological argument he briefly reviews some other evidences for inerrancy.<sup>73</sup> For example, he notes the remarkable consistency of the teachings of so large a document composed over so long a period of time. He notes the considerable degree of confirmation from archaeology for claims made in the Bible. He also comments on the Bible's consistency with the observable facts of life concerning death and depravity and notes the positive effects the Bible has made in people's lives. Bell recognizes that “these are supplemental arguments” less binding than the authority of Christ. He follows it up with two more lectures on “Dealing with Biblical Difficulties,”<sup>74</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 374.

<sup>68</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 380. Several of these involve inferential warrant for that belief, but all involve foundational warrant by the proper functioning of our spiritual noetic faculties; Plantinga notes that we need not choose just one. That knowledge of the Bible's authority might have inferential as well as foundational warrant is more evidence that Plantinga's epistemology is a weak foundationalism. For more on Plantinga as a weak foundationalist see Mark Boone, “Proper Function and the Conditions for Warrant: What Plantinga's Notion of Warrant Shows about Different Kinds of Knowledge,” *Philosophia Christi* 14 (2012): 373–86. Note that Plantinga is not explicit on biblical “inerrancy” here—only on biblical *authority*.

<sup>69</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. F. J. Sheed, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), 13.29.44. Note the similarity to the final words of the CSBI: “We affirm that what Scripture says, God says.”

<sup>70</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.7.5.

<sup>71</sup> Packer, “*Fundamentalism*” and *the Word of God*, 118.

<sup>72</sup> Kenneth Kantzer, “Inerrancy and the Humanity and Divinity of the Bible,” in *The Proceedings of the Conference on Biblical Inerrancy 1987* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 157–58.

<sup>73</sup> Bell, “Doctrine of Scripture,” lecture 7.

<sup>74</sup> Bell, “Doctrine of Scripture,” lectures 8–9.

aimed to show how we can confirm that the Bible, at various points where it has been critiqued, is consistent with itself and with human knowledge generally. The general idea is that inerrancy so far appears consistent with itself and such other areas of knowledge and experience as are relevant to it. This is no positive proof, but it matters; in other words, it is coherential warrant.

Packer also delves into the coherential warrant for inerrancy.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, Greg Bahnsen, following Van Til, explains that the confirmation of Bible from history and science matters a great deal; even the believer who presupposes inerrancy seeks to confirm his theology inductively from other areas of human knowledge.<sup>76</sup> More generally, find any inerrantist who thinks it *matters* whether the tendency of human knowledge from science, psychology, archaeology, or whatever else is to cohere with Scripture, and you will find an inerrantist appealing to coherential warrant; and any such case is incompatible with most forms of strong foundationalism.

Finally, we can find in the inerrantist tradition an interesting coherential notion in the claim that the authority of Christ and of the Bible mutually confirm each other. In the same passage inferring the authority of Scripture from that of Christ, the CSBI tells us that the inference goes the other way as well. The Bible testifies to the authority of Christ, and so the Statement says, “the authority of Christ and that of Scripture are one.”<sup>77</sup> The inference is symmetrical: “By authenticating each other’s authority, Christ and Scripture coalesce into a single fount of authority.”<sup>78</sup> This is an aspect of coherentism—the mutual confirmation of beliefs. It is not, strictly speaking, what I am calling coherential warrant, although it is not typical of strong foundationalism. (This bi-directionality of warrant is inconsistent with *all* foundationalisms as defined by Haack.)

Of course, if this were all the CSBI could say on behalf of inerrancy, it would be a poorly defended doctrine indeed. It would rest on a sample of purified circular reasoning, which also turns out to be the problem with pure coherentism.<sup>79</sup> Yet, as we have seen, there is in the CSBI an appeal to foundational warrant. So the CSBI is not in fact touting circular reasoning. The mutual confirmation of these authorities is a matter of spreading warrant around, not conjuring it out of nowhere. To paraphrase what Barack Obama said to Joe the plumber, when you spread the warrant around, it’s good for every belief.<sup>80</sup> But, of course, before it can be spread around it has to *come from* somewhere, and it comes from foundational warrant, such as that imparted by the Holy Spirit’s testimony for the doctrine or in the form of other evidence for the authority of Christ or Scripture such as inerrantists may provide.

Let us review these facts and tie them all together.

### 3.4. Inerrancy Is Not a Strong Foundationalism

Strong foundationalism is a theory on the structure of knowledge, namely that knowledge has a foundation in beliefs warranted by foundational warrant and not needing additional warrant of the

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<sup>75</sup> J. I. Packer, “Problem Areas Related to Biblical Inerrancy,” in *The Proceedings of the Conference on Biblical Inerrancy 1987* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987), 205–13.

<sup>76</sup> Greg Bahnsen, “Inductivism, Inerrancy, and Presuppositionalism,” *JETS* 20 (1977): 292–93.

<sup>77</sup> CSBI, Exposition, Authority: Christ and the Bible.

<sup>78</sup> CSBI, Exposition, Authority: Christ and the Bible.

<sup>79</sup> See the explanation in Boone, “Inferential, Coherential, and Foundational Warrant,” 388–90.

<sup>80</sup> For a proper account of the mutual support of beliefs, I suggest McGrew, “How Foundationalists Do Cross-word Puzzles,” 333–50.



other varieties. Typically, such a theory is false because it ignores the fact that a belief, even a basic belief, may have not only foundational warrant but also inferential or coherential warrant, or both. If inerrancy is a strong foundationalism, then it must be the case either that it is warranted (or is said by its proponents to be warranted) by foundational warrant alone, or else that it is based (or is said by its proponents to be based) on beliefs that are. Despite what some critics allege, neither of these is the case.

We have noted a number of difficulties in treating inerrancy as a strong foundationalism. Employing Plantinga's definition, strong foundationalism only recognizes as having foundational warrant those beliefs which are self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses; and yet inerrantists have often claimed that the Holy Spirit is a source of warrant for inerrancy. Another, more universal difficulty is that inerrancy is a piece of theology, and *not* a theory on the structure of knowledge.

What I regard as the most crucial difficulty is that, given strong foundationalism, a theory possessing foundational warrant cannot or at least need not possess the other varieties. However, as we have seen, notable sources on inerrancy plainly treat that doctrine as being warranted foundationally but also inferentially, coherentially, or both. Bell treats inerrancy as warranted *inferentially* and *coherentially*. Kantzer and the CSBI treat it as warranted *inferentially* and *foundationally*. Packer treats it as warranted in *all three ways*. This precludes inerrancy being a basic belief in a strongly foundationalist epistemology. Nor must inerrancy be based on beliefs warranted only foundationally. One may base inerrancy on the Messiah's testimony concerning Scripture and not even explain the basis of our knowledge of *his* authority. Thus Bell, Packer, and Kantzer, for whom beginning with the authority of Christ is enough.

Now I do not claim that *no* inerrantist has ever been a strong foundationalist. Rather, I say that nothing in the doctrine entails strong foundationalism, and that the CSBI and some of its signers do not tie inerrancy to strong foundationalism, and indeed have theology inconsistent with most strong foundationalisms.

What *would* a strongly foundationalist inerrancy look like? I can think of three forms it might take, two of which are not particularly good epistemologies.

First, the Bible might be treated as the sole foundation of knowledge, whose truth is beyond reasonable doubt and is not warranted by any external evidence. The warrant for inerrancy would be considered *purely* foundational; presumably the explanation for how this works would claim that the Holy Spirit so warrants inerrancy that on this basis alone we know it to be true with such certainty that doubting it on the basis of any conceivable evidence is about as difficult as my finding evidence that I do not exist! (Bear in mind that an inerrantist with such a strong view of the testimony of the Holy Spirit to the authority of the Bible would have to think *not* that the Bible is inconsistent with human knowledge generally so much as that such consistency is not *important*.) I cannot confirm whether any inerrantist has held this view, although at least one source is suggestive of such a theory.<sup>81</sup>

Second, the inerrantist might claim that the authority of the Bible rests solely on the authority of Christ (not at all on the testimony of the Holy Spirit); that Christ's authority is known from his miracles and in particular the Resurrection; that these are historical events known by the usual methods of gaining historical knowledge, and that the whole thing rests on certain common-sense beliefs, such as that testimony is a source of knowledge. The inerrantist furthermore would need to consider this whole chain of evidence to be so strong that corroboration from human knowledge generally is not only unnecessary but downright irrelevant.

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<sup>81</sup> Terry Young, "The Relationship Between Biblical Inerrancy and Biblical Authority," in *The Proceedings of the Conference on Biblical Inerrancy 1987* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987), 391–409.

To be fair to Grenz, Franke, and others, it may well be that inerrantists have sometimes fallen into strong foundationalism or strayed near it, perhaps in this very manner. Indeed, luminaries no less than B. B. Warfield and Carl Henry may have had something like a strong foundationalist inerrancy if one scholar's reading of them is correct,<sup>82</sup> and, to read Bahnsen at least, it seems that Daniel Fuller and Clark Pinnock (in an early stage) may have aimed to establish the truth of inerrancy on an inductive model of strong foundationalism.<sup>83</sup> More generally, I do not dispute that evangelical inerrantists have been known to stray into unbiblical or unchristian modes of Enlightenment thinking, as Robert Kurka concedes.<sup>84</sup>

A third account merging inerrantist theology with strong foundationalism is more promising. I think McGrew's account suggests the best convergence with inerrancy. Briefly, here is how I think it might account for the testimony of the Holy Spirit as well as the Christological argument. The latter would be established in ways already suggested, but elaborated in terms of McGrew's strong foundationalism. From the certain foundation of our knowledge of our own beliefs, we reason inductively to knowledge of the world outside the mind; from there we can justify history and, from history, the whole evidence chain from miracles via Christ's authority to the authority of the Bible. As for the Holy Spirit, we could follow Plantinga in explaining his testimony as a source of foundational warrant, but with a twist fitting McGrew's epistemology. Roughly, I have certain knowledge that it seems to me that the Bible is the holy Word of God; I reason, using an argument modeled after the one in chapter 7 of McGrew's book, that this is probably a perception matching reality. The reliability of this spiritual perception would be explained by an appeal to the Holy Spirit. Thus, inerrancy is warranted by the testimony of the Holy Spirit *and* by Christ's authority, but all this warrant begins with absolutely certain beliefs about my own thoughts.<sup>85</sup>

So I do not claim that inerrancy has never been linked to a strong foundationalism or cannot be. Rather, I have shown that inerrancy is not by its nature a strong foundationalism, and that some notable sources in the CSBI tradition have promoted the doctrine in ways incompatible with most forms of strong foundationalism and employing the very sort of eclectic account of the sources of warrant for ignoring which strong foundationalism has often been criticized. The ongoing discussion of inerrancy and epistemology would benefit from keeping in mind the reasoning offered by these theologians and these considerations of the structure of knowledge.

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<sup>82</sup> Jeffrey Steven Oldfield argues that Warfield and Henry are foundationalists in "The Word Became Text and Dwells Among Us?: An Examination of the Doctrine of Inerrancy" (PhD thesis, The University of St. Andrews, 2008), 84–102. An evaluation of Oldfield's interpretation is well outside the scope of this paper.

<sup>83</sup> Bahnsen. An evaluation of this interpretation of Fuller and early Pinnock is, likewise, outside the scope of this paper.

<sup>84</sup> Kurka, "Before 'Foundationalism,'" 147–48. This included at times "A quest for unshakeable foundations;" Kurka, "Before 'Foundationalism,'" 148.

<sup>85</sup> I doubt whether this account is true to the phenomenology of belief. I tend to follow Plantinga in thinking that the basic beliefs from which we reason concern extra-mental reality, not our perceptions of it; even so, McGrew's account may succeed in describing a possible, and valuable, source of warrant in absolutely certain beliefs.