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CAN I TRUST *the* BIBLE?

R.C. SPROUL



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Can I Trust the Bible?

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Foreword

The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy was a California-based organization from 1977 to 1987. Its purpose was the defense and application of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy as an essential element for the authority of the church. It was created to counter the drift from this important doctrinal foundation by significant segments of evangelicalism and the outright denial of it by other church movements.

In October 1978, the council held a summit meeting in Chicago. At that time, it issued a statement on biblical inerrancy that included a Preamble, a Short Statement, Nineteen Articles of Affirmation and Denial, and a more ample Exposition. Materials submitted at the meeting had been prepared by Drs. Edmund P. Clowney, James I.

Packer, and R. C. Sproul. These were discussed in a number of ways by groups of delegates from the Advisory Board and in various partial and plenary sessions at the summit. Furthermore, written comments were solicited and received in considerable numbers. A Draft Committee composed of Drs. Clowney, Packer, Sproul, Norman L. Geisler, Harold W. Hoehner, Donald E. Hoke, Roger R. Nicole, and Earl D. Radmacher labored very hard around the clock to prepare a statement that might receive the approval of a great majority of the participants. Very special attention was devoted to the Nineteen Articles of Affirmation and Denial. (The Preamble and the Short Statement were also subjected to editorial revisions. The Exposition was left largely as received.) After considerable discussion, the Draft Committee's submission received a very substantial endorsement by the participants: 240 (out of a total of 268) affixed their signatures to the Nineteen Articles.

It was indicated that the Draft Committee would meet within the year to review and, if necessary, revise the statement. That meeting took place in the fall of 1979, with Drs. Geisler, Hoehner, Nicole, and Radmacher in attendance. It was the consensus of those present that we should not undertake to modify a statement that so many people had signed, both at the summit meeting and afterward. But

in order to ward off misunderstandings and to provide an exposition of the position advocated by the ICBI, it was thought desirable to provide a commentary on each of the articles. A draft commentary was prepared by Dr. Sproul and was submitted to the members of the Draft Committee. A number of editorial changes were made, and the final result is what is contained in this booklet.

Dr. Sproul is well qualified to write such a commentary. He had prepared the first draft of the Nineteen Articles, and although they underwent considerable change in the editing process, Dr. Sproul was closely involved in all discussions conducted by the Draft Committee. The present text makes clear exactly what the Council affirmed and denied. Obviously, those who signed the articles do not necessarily concur in every interpretation advocated by the commentary. Not even the members of the Draft Committee are bound by this, and perhaps not even Dr. Sproul, since his text underwent certain editorial revisions. However, this commentary represents an effort at making clear the precise position of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy as a whole.

In the editing process, we strove to take account of the comments that were forwarded to us. In some cases, we could not concur with those who made comments,

and therefore the changes solicited could not be made. In other cases, matters were brought to our notice that in our judgment deserved consideration. We trust that the commentary removes ambiguities and deals effectively with possible misunderstandings.

There is a remarkable unity of views among the members of the Council and the Board, and this should be reflected not only in the articles in their original form but also in the present publication. It was not the aim of those who gathered at Chicago to break relations with those who do not share our convictions concerning the doctrine of Scripture. Rather, the aim was and continues to be to bear witness to what we are convinced is the biblical doctrine on the great subject of the inspiration of Scripture. In making this confession and presenting this commentary, we hope to dispel misunderstandings with which the doctrine of inerrancy has so frequently been burdened and to present with winsomeness and clarity this great tenet in witness to which we are gladly uniting.

—*Roger R. Nicole*

Preface

In the 1970s, Harold Lindsell published a book titled *The Battle for the Bible*. In that little book, Lindsell addressed what had become a huge matter of controversy—the truthfulness and reliability of the Scriptures. In the face of myriad arguments against the inspiration, infallibility, and inerrancy of the Bible, Lindsell took a stand and declared that the Bible remains trustworthy.

It was this same desire to stand against the persistent questioning of the Bible's integrity that brought together more than 250 evangelical leaders in Chicago, Illinois, in October 1978. That summit meeting, convened by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, sought to draw a line in the sand, affirming the historic Protestant position on the Scriptures. The result was the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.

The issue is crucial. It is via the Scriptures that the church historically has claimed to understand matters of faith and life, from God's creation of all things from nothing to the significance of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ to the ultimate consummation of all things toward which history is moving. If the Bible is unreliable in what it teaches about these things, the church is left to speculate and has nothing of value to speak to the world.

In the thirty-plus years since the summit meeting, the battle for the Bible has not abated. It is more crucial than ever that believers understand what the Bible is and why they can trust it wholeheartedly.

This booklet is a brief commentary on the affirmations and denials of the Chicago Statement. While it may seem technical at times, I trust it makes a solid case that the Bible is inerrant in its whole extent.

Ultimately, we believe the Bible to be inerrant because it comes from God Himself. It is unthinkable to contemplate that God might be capable of error. Therefore, His Word cannot possibly contain errors. This is our faith—we can trust the Bible because we can trust God.

—*R. C. Sproul*

THE CHICAGO STATEMENT ON BIBLICAL INERRANCY

The authority of Scripture is a key issue for the Christian church in this and every age. Those who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are called to show the reality of their discipleship by humbly and faithfully obeying God's written Word. To stray from Scripture in faith or conduct is disloyalty to our Master. Recognition of the total truth and trustworthiness of Holy Scripture is essential to a full grasp and adequate confession of its authority.

The following statement affirms this inerrancy of Scripture afresh, making clear our understanding of it and warning against its denial. We are persuaded that to deny it is to set aside the witness of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit and to refuse that submission to the claims of God's own Word that marks true Christian faith. We see it as our timely duty to make this

affirmation in the face of current lapses from the truth of inerrancy among our fellow Christians and misunderstanding of this doctrine in the world at large.

This statement consists of three parts: a Summary Statement, Articles of Affirmation and Denial, and an accompanying Exposition. It has been prepared in the course of a three-day consultation in Chicago. Those who have signed the Summary Statement and the Articles wish to affirm their own conviction as to the inerrancy of Scripture and to encourage and challenge one another and all Christians to growing appreciation and understanding of this doctrine. We acknowledge the limitations of a document prepared in a brief, intensive conference and do not propose that this statement be given creedal weight. Yet we rejoice in the deepening of our own convictions through our discussions together, and we pray that the statement we have signed may be used to the glory of our God toward a new reformation of the church in its faith, life, and mission.

We offer this statement in a spirit, not of contention, but of humility and love, which we purpose by God's grace to maintain in any future dialogue arising out of what we have said. We gladly acknowledge that many who deny the inerrancy of Scripture do not display the consequences of this denial in the rest of their belief and behavior, and we are conscious that we who confess this doctrine often deny it in life by failing to bring our thoughts and deeds, our traditions and habits, into true subjection to the divine Word.

We invite response to this statement from any who see reason to amend its affirmations about Scripture by the light of Scripture itself, under whose infallible authority we stand as we speak. We claim no personal infallibility for the witness we bear, and for any help that enables us to strengthen this testimony to God's Word we shall be grateful.

A SHORT STATEMENT

1. God, who is Himself truth and speaks truth only, has inspired Holy Scripture in order thereby to reveal Himself to lost mankind through Jesus Christ as Creator and Lord, Redeemer and Judge. Holy Scripture is God's witness to Himself.
2. Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: it is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it affirms; obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God's pledge, in all that it promises.
3. The Holy Spirit, Scripture's divine author, both authenticates it to us by His inward witness and opens our minds to understand its meaning.
4. Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God's acts in creation, about the events of world history, and

about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God's saving grace in individual lives.

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

ARTICLES OF AFFIRMATION AND DENIAL

Article I

We affirm that the Holy Scriptures are to be received as the authoritative Word of God. **We deny** that the Scriptures receive their authority from the church, tradition, or any other human source.

Article II

We affirm that the Scriptures are the supreme written norm by which God binds the conscience, and that the authority of the church is subordinate to that of Scripture. **We deny** that church creeds, councils, or declarations have authority greater than or equal to the authority of the Bible.

Article III

We affirm that the written Word in its entirety is revelation given by God. **We deny** that the Bible is merely a witness to revelation, or only becomes revelation in encounter, or depends on the responses of men for its validity.

Article IV

We affirm that God who made mankind in His image has used language as a means of revelation. **We deny** that human language is so limited by our creatureliness that it is rendered inadequate as a vehicle for divine revelation. We further deny that the corruption of human culture and language through sin has thwarted God's work of inspiration.

Article V

We affirm that God's revelation within the Holy Scriptures was progressive. **We deny** that later revelation, which may fulfill earlier revelation, ever corrects or contradicts it. We further deny that any normative revelation has been given since the completion of the New Testament writings.

Article VI

We affirm that the whole of Scripture and all its parts, down to the very words of the original, were given by divine inspiration. **We deny** that the inspiration of Scripture can rightly be affirmed of the whole without the parts, or of some parts but not the whole.

Article VII

We affirm that inspiration was the work in which God by His Spirit, through human writers, gave us His Word. The origin of Scripture is divine. The mode of divine inspiration remains largely a mystery to us. **We deny** that inspiration can be reduced to human insight, or to heightened states of consciousness of any kind.

Article VIII

We affirm that God in His work of inspiration utilized the distinctive personalities and literary styles of the writers whom He had chosen and prepared. **We deny** that God, in causing these writers to use the very words that He chose, overrode their personalities.

Article IX

We affirm that inspiration, though not conferring omniscience, guaranteed true and trustworthy utterance on all matters of which the biblical authors were moved to speak and write. **We deny** that the finitude or fallenness of these writers, by necessity or otherwise, introduced distortion or falsehood into God's Word.

Article X

We affirm that inspiration, strictly speaking, applies only to the autographic text of Scripture, which in the providence of God can be ascertained from available manuscripts with great accuracy. We further affirm that copies and translations of Scripture are the Word of God to the extent that they faithfully represent the original. **We deny** that any essential element of the Christian faith is affected by the absence of the autographs. We further deny that this absence renders the assertion of biblical inerrancy invalid or irrelevant.

Article XI

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

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

Article XII

We affirm that Scripture in its entirety is innerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit. **We deny** that biblical infallibility and innerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious, or redemptive themes, exclusive of assertions in the fields of history and science. We further deny that scientific hypotheses about earth history may properly be used to overturn the teaching of Scripture on creation and the flood.

Article XIII

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

Article XIV

We affirm the unity and internal consistency of Scripture.

We deny that alleged errors and discrepancies that have not yet been resolved vitiate the truth claims of the Bible.

Article XV

We affirm that the doctrine of inerrancy is grounded in the teaching of the Bible about inspiration. **We deny** that Jesus' teaching about Scripture may be dismissed by appeals to accommodation or to any natural limitation of His humanity.

Article XVI

We affirm that the doctrine of inerrancy has been integral to the church's faith throughout its history. **We deny** that inerrancy is a doctrine invented by scholastic Protestantism, or is a reactionary position postulated in response to negative higher criticism.

Article XVII

We affirm that the Holy Spirit bears witness to the Scriptures, assuring believers of the truthfulness of God's written Word. **We deny** that this witness of the Holy Spirit operates in isolation from or against Scripture.

Article XVIII

We affirm that the text of Scripture is to be interpreted by grammatico-historical exegesis, taking account of its literary forms and devices, and that Scripture is to interpret Scripture. **We deny** the legitimacy of any treatment of the text or quest for sources lying behind it that leads to relativizing, dehistoricizing, or discounting its teaching, or rejecting its claims to authorship.

Article XIX

We affirm that a confession of the full authority, infallibility, and inerrancy of Scripture is vital to a sound understanding of the whole of the Christian faith. We further affirm that such confession should lead to increasing conformity to the image of Christ. **We deny** that such confession is necessary for salvation. However, we further deny that inerrancy can be rejected without grave consequences, both to the individual and to the church.

EXPOSITION

Our understanding of the doctrine of inerrancy must be set in the context of the broader teachings of Scripture concerning itself. This exposition gives an account of the outline of doctrine from which our summary statement and articles are drawn.

Creation, Revelation, and Inspiration

The triune God, who formed all things by His creative utterances and governs all things by His word of decree, made mankind in His own image for a life of communion with Himself, on the model of the eternal fellowship of loving communication within the Godhead. As God's image-bearer, man was to hear God's Word addressed to him and to respond in the joy of adoring obedience. Over and above God's self-disclosure in the created order and the sequence of events within it, human beings from Adam on have received verbal messages from Him, either directly, as stated in Scripture, or indirectly in the form of part or all of Scripture itself.

When Adam fell, the Creator did not abandon mankind to final judgment but promised salvation and began to reveal Himself as Redeemer in a sequence of historical events centering on Abraham's family and culminating in the life, death, resurrection, present heavenly ministry, and promised return of Jesus Christ. Within this frame God has from time to time spoken specific words of judgment and mercy, promise and command, to sinful human beings, so drawing them into a covenant relation of mutual commitment between Him and them in which He blesses them with gifts of grace and they bless Him in responsive adoration. Moses, whom God used as mediator to carry His words to His people at the time of the Exodus, stands at the head of a long line of prophets in whose mouths and writings God put His words for delivery to Israel. God's purpose in this succession of messages was to maintain His covenant by causing His people to know His name—that is, His nature—and His will both of precept and purpose in the present and for the future. This line of prophetic spokesmen from God came to completion in Jesus Christ, God's incarnate Word, who was Himself a prophet—more than a prophet, but not less—and in the apostles and prophets of the first Christian generation. When God's final and climactic message, His Word to the world concerning Jesus Christ, had been spoken and elucidated by those in the apostolic circle, the sequence of revealed messages ceased. Henceforth, the church was to live and know God by what He had already said, and said for all time.

At Sinai, God wrote the terms of His covenant on tables of stone, as His enduring witness and for lasting accessibility, and throughout the period of prophetic and apostolic revelation He prompted men to write the messages given to and through them, along with celebratory records of His dealings with His people, plus moral reflections on covenant life and forms of praise and prayer for covenant mercy. The theological reality of inspiration in the producing of biblical documents corresponds to that of spoken prophecies: although the human writers' personalities were expressed in what they wrote, the words were divinely constituted. Thus, what Scripture says, God says; its authority is His authority, for He is its ultimate Author, having given it through the minds and words of chosen and prepared men who in freedom and faithfulness "spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). Holy Scripture must be acknowledged as the Word of God by virtue of its divine origin.

Authority: Christ and the Bible

Jesus Christ, the Son of God who is the Word made flesh, our Prophet, Priest, and King, is the ultimate Mediator of God's communication to man, as He is of all God's gifts of grace. The revelation He gave was more than verbal; He revealed the Father by His presence and His deeds as well. Yet His words were crucially important; for He was God, He spoke from the Father, and His words will judge all men at the last day.

As the prophesied Messiah, Jesus Christ is the central theme

of Scripture. The Old Testament looked ahead to Him; the New Testament looks back to His first coming and on to His second. Canonical Scripture is the divinely inspired and therefore normative witness to Christ. No hermeneutic, therefore, of which the historical Christ is not the focal point is acceptable. Holy Scripture must be treated as what it essentially is—the witness of the Father to the incarnate Son.

It appears that the Old Testament canon had been fixed by the time of Jesus. The New Testament canon is likewise now closed inasmuch as no new apostolic witness to the historical Christ can now be borne. No new revelation (as distinct from Spirit-given understanding of existing revelation) will be given until Christ comes again. The canon was created in principle by divine inspiration. The church's part was to discern the canon that God had created, not to devise one of its own.

The word canon, signifying a rule or standard, is a pointer to authority, which means the right to rule and control. Authority in Christianity belongs to God in His revelation, which means, on the one hand, Jesus Christ, the living Word, and, on the other hand, Holy Scripture, the written Word. The authority of Christ and that of Scripture are one. As our Prophet, Christ testified that Scripture cannot be broken. As our Priest and King, He devoted His earthly life to fulfilling the Law and the Prophets, even dying in obedience to the words of messianic prophecy. Thus, as He saw Scripture attesting Him and His authority, so by His own submission to Scripture He attested its authority. As He bowed to

His Father's instruction given in His Bible (our Old Testament), so He requires His disciples to do—not, however, in isolation but in conjunction with the apostolic witness to Himself which He undertook to inspire by His gift of the Holy Spirit. So Christians show themselves faithful servants of their Lord by bowing to the divine instruction given in the prophetic and apostolic writings that together make up our Bible.

By authenticating each other's authority, Christ and Scripture coalesce into a single fount of authority. The biblically interpreted Christ and the Christ-centered, Christ-proclaiming Bible are from this standpoint one. As from the fact of inspiration we infer that what Scripture says, God says, so from the revealed relation between Jesus Christ and Scripture we may equally declare that what Scripture says, Christ says.

Infallibility, Inerrancy, Interpretation

Holy Scripture, as the inspired Word of God witnessing authoritatively to Jesus Christ, may properly be called infallible and inerrant. These negative terms have a special value, for they explicitly safeguard crucial positive truths.

Infallible signifies the quality of neither misleading nor being misled, and so safeguards in categorical terms the truth that Holy Scripture is a sure, safe, and reliable rule and guide in all matters.

Similarly, inerrant signifies the quality of being free from all falsehood or mistake, and so safeguards the truth that Holy Scripture is entirely true and trustworthy in all its assertions.

We affirm that canonical Scripture should always be interpreted on the basis that it is infallible and inerrant. However, in determining what the God-taught writer is asserting in each passage, we must pay the most careful attention to its claims and character as a human production. In inspiration, God utilized the culture and conventions of His penman's milieu, a milieu that God controls in His sovereign providence; it is misinterpretation to imagine otherwise.

So history must be treated as history, poetry as poetry, hyperbole and metaphor as hyperbole and metaphor, generalization and approximation as what they are, and so forth. Differences between literary conventions in Bible times and in ours must also be observed: since, for instance, nonchronological narration and imprecise citation were conventional and acceptable and violated no expectations in those days, we must not regard these things as faults when we find them in Bible writers. When total precision of a particular kind was not expected nor aimed at, it is no error not to have achieved it. Scripture is inerrant, not in the sense of being absolutely precise by modern standards, but in the sense of making good its claims and achieving that measure of focused truth at which its authors aimed.

The truthfulness of Scripture is not negated by the appearance in it of irregularities of grammar or spelling, phenomenal descriptions of nature, reports of false statements (e.g., the lies of Satan), or seeming discrepancies between one passage and another. It is not right to set the so-called "phenomena" of Scripture against the

teaching of Scripture about itself. Apparent inconsistencies should not be ignored. Solution of them, where this can be convincingly achieved, will encourage our faith, and where for the present no convincing solution is at hand we shall significantly honor God by trusting His assurance that His Word is true despite these appearances, and by maintaining our confidence that one day they will be seen to have been illusions.

Inasmuch as all Scripture is the product of a single divine mind, interpretation must stay within the bounds of the analogy of Scripture and eschew hypotheses that would correct one biblical passage by another, whether in the name of progressive revelation or of the imperfect enlightenment of the inspired writer's mind.

Although Holy Scripture is nowhere culture-bound in the sense that its teaching lacks universal validity, it is sometimes culturally conditioned by the customs and conventional views of a particular period, so that the application of its principles today calls for a different sort of action.

Skepticism and Criticism

Since the Renaissance, and more particularly since the Enlightenment, worldviews have been developed that involve skepticism about basic Christian tenets. Such are the agnosticism that denies God is knowable, the rationalism that denies He is incomprehensible, the idealism that denies He is transcendent, and the existentialism that denies rationality in His relationships with us.

When these un- and antibiblical principles seep into men's theologies at a presuppositional level, as today they frequently do, faithful interpretation of Holy Scripture becomes impossible.

Transmission and Translation

Since God has nowhere promised an inerrant transmission of Scripture, it is necessary to affirm that only the autographic text of the original documents was inspired and to maintain the need of textual criticism as a means of detecting any slips that may have crept into the text in the course of its transmission. The verdict of this science, however, is that the Hebrew and Greek text appear to be amazingly well preserved, so that we are amply justified in affirming, with the Westminster Confession, a singular providence of God in this matter and in declaring that the authority of Scripture is in no way jeopardized by the fact that the copies we possess are not entirely error free.

Similarly, no translation is or can be perfect, and all translations are an additional step away from the autographa. Yet the verdict of linguistic science is that English-speaking Christians, at least, are exceedingly well served in these days with a host of excellent translations and have no cause for hesitating to conclude that the true Word of God is within their reach. Indeed, in view of the frequent repetition in Scripture of the main matters with which it deals and also of the Holy Spirit's constant witness to and through the Word, no serious translation of Holy Scripture will so destroy its meaning as to render it unable to

make its reader “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15).

Inerrancy and Authority

In our affirmation of the authority of Scripture as involving its total truth, we are consciously standing with Christ and His apostles, indeed with the whole Bible and with the mainstream of church history from the first days until very recently. We are concerned at the casual, inadvertent, and seemingly thoughtless way in which a belief of such far-reaching importance has been given up by so many in our day.

We are conscious, too, that great and grave confusion results from ceasing to maintain the total truth of the Bible whose authority one professes to acknowledge. The result of taking this step is that the Bible that God gave loses its authority, and what has authority instead is a Bible reduced in content according to the demands of one's critical reasonings and in principle reducible still further once one has started. This means that at bottom, independent reason now has authority, as opposed to scriptural teaching. If this is not seen and if for the time being basic evangelical doctrines are still held, persons denying the full truth of Scripture may claim an evangelical identity while methodologically they have moved away from the evangelical principle of knowledge to an unstable subjectivism, and will find it hard not to move farther.

We affirm that what Scripture says, God says. May He be glorified. Amen and Amen.



THE BIBLE AND AUTHORITY

The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy rightly affirms that “the authority of Scripture is a key issue for the Christian church in this and every age.” But authority cannot stand in isolation, as the statement shows. The authority of the Bible is based on the fact that it is the written Word of God. Because the Bible is the Word of God and because the God of the Bible is truth and speaks truthfully, the Bible’s authority is linked to inerrancy. If the Bible is the Word of God and if God is a God of truth, then the

Bible *must* be inerrant—not merely in some of its parts, as some modern theologians are saying, but totally, as the church for the most part has said down through the ages of its history.

Some of the terms used in the debate about the authority and inerrancy of the Bible are technical ones. Some show up in the Chicago Statement, but they are not difficult to come to understand. They can be mastered (and the doctrine of inerrancy more fully understood) by a little reading and study. This commentary on the Chicago Statement attempts to provide such material in reference to the Nineteen Articles of Affirmation and Denial, which form the heart of the document. The full text of the statement appears as an appendix.

ARTICLE I: Authority

We affirm that the Holy Scriptures are to be received as the authoritative Word of God. We deny that the Scriptures receive their authority from the church, tradition, or any other human source.

The initial article of the Chicago Statement is designed to establish the degree of authority that is to be attributed to

the Bible. This article, as well as Article II, makes the statement clearly a Protestant one. Though the Roman Catholic Church consistently and historically has maintained a high view of the inspiration of Holy Scripture, there remains the unresolved problem of the uniqueness and sufficiency of biblical authority for the church.

Rome has placed the traditions of the church alongside Scripture as a supplement to Scripture and, consequently, a source of special revelation beyond the scope of Scripture.

The Roman Catholic Church has asserted continuously that since the church established the extent and scope of the New Testament and Old Testament canon, there is a certain sense in which the authority of the Bible is subordinate to and dependent on the church's approval. These issues of the relationship of church and canon and of the question of multiple sources of special revelation are particularly in view in Articles I and II.

In early drafts of Article I, the extent of the canon was spelled out to include the sixty-six canonical books that are found and embraced within the context of most Protestant-sanctioned editions of the Bible. In discussions among the participants at the summit and because of requests to the Draft Committee, there was considerable sentiment for striking the words "sixty-six canonical books" from the early

drafts. This was due to some variance within Christendom as to the exact number of books that are to be recognized within the canon. For example, the Ethiopic Church has included more books in the canon than sixty-six. The final draft affirms simply that the Holy Scriptures are to be received as the authoritative Word of God. For the vast majority of Protestants, the designation “Holy Scripture” has clear reference to the sixty-six canonical books, but it leaves room for those who differ on the canon question to participate in the confession of the nature of Scripture. The specific question of the number of books contained in that canon is left open in this statement.

The question of the scope of the canon, or the list of books that make up our Bible, may confuse many people, particularly those who are accustomed to a number of books clearly defined by their particular church confessions. Some have argued that if one questions a particular book’s canonicity, the implication is that one does not believe in a divinely inspired Bible. Perhaps the clearest illustration of this in history comes from the life of Martin Luther, who, at one point in his ministry, had strong reservations about including the book of James in the New Testament canon. Though it is abundantly clear that Luther believed in an inspired Bible, he had questions about whether a

particular book should be included in that inspired Bible. Several scholars have tried to use Luther's questioning of the book of James to deny that he believed in inspiration. It is very important to see the difference between the question of the scope of the canon and the question of the inspiration of the books that are recognized as included in the canon. In other words, the nature of Scripture and the extent of Scripture are different questions that must not be confused.

A key word in the affirmation section of Article I is *received*. The initial draft mentioned that the Scriptures are to be received by the church. The phrase "by the church" was deleted because it is clear that the Word of God in Holy Scripture is to be received not only by the church but by everyone. The word *received* has historical significance. In the church councils that considered the canon question, the Latin word *recipimus* ("we receive") was used; the councils were saying "we receive" various books to be included in the canon. By that usage of the word *receive*, the church made clear that it was not declaring certain books to be authoritative by its own authority, but that it was simply acknowledging the Word of God to be the Word of God. By using the word *receive*, the church fathers displayed their willingness to submit to what they regarded

to be already the Word of God. Consequently, any notion that the church creates the Bible or is superior to the Bible is denied by those who spelled out the canon.

If any ambiguity about the relationship of Scripture to the church remains in the affirmation, it is removed in the subsequent denial: The Scriptures receive their authority from God, not from the church or from any other human source.

ARTICLE II: Scripture and Tradition

We affirm that the Scriptures are the supreme written norm by which God binds the conscience, and that the authority of the church is subordinate to that of Scripture. We deny that church creeds, councils, or declarations have authority greater than or equal to the authority of the Bible.

Article II of the Chicago Statement reinforces Article I and goes into more detail concerning the matters it addresses. Article II has in view the classical Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*, which speaks of the unique authority of the Bible to bind the consciences of men. The affirmation of Article II speaks of the Scriptures as “the supreme written norm.”

At the summit, there was lengthy discussion concerning the word *supreme*; alternative words, such as *ultimate* and *only*, were suggested and subsequently eliminated from the text. The question had to do with the fact that other written documents are important to the life of the church. For example, church creeds and confessions form the basis of subscription and unity of faith in many different Christian denominations and communities. Such creeds and confessions have a kind of normative authority within a given Christian body and have the effect of binding consciences within that particular context. However, it is a classic tenet of Protestants to recognize that all such creeds and confessions are fallible and cannot fully and finally bind the conscience of an individual believer. Only the Word of God has the kind of authority that can bind the consciences of men forever. So while the articles acknowledge that there are other written norms recognized by different bodies of Christians, insofar as they are true, those written norms are derived from and are subordinate to the supreme written norm that is Holy Scripture.

The denial clearly spells out that no church creed, council, or declaration has authority greater than or equal to that of the Bible. Again, any idea that tradition or church officers have authority equal to Scripture is repudiated by

this statement. The question of a Christian's obedience to authority structures apart from Scripture was a matter of great discussion with regard to this article. For example, the Bible itself exhorts us to obey the civil magistrates. We are certainly willing to subject ourselves to our own church confessions and to the authority structures of our ecclesiastical bodies. But the thrust of this article is to indicate that whatever lesser authorities may exist, they never carry the authority of God Himself. There is a sense in which all authority in this world is derived from and dependent on the authority of God. God and God alone has intrinsic authority. That intrinsic authority is given to the Bible, since it is God's Word.

Various Christian bodies have defined the extent of civil authority and ecclesiastical authority in different ways. For example, in Reformed churches, the authority of the church is viewed as ministerial and declarative rather than ultimate and intrinsic. God and God alone has the absolute right to bind the consciences of men. Our consciences are justly bound to lesser authorities only when they are in conformity to the Word of God.