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I spent yesterday at a conservative evangelical apologetics conference outside of Chicago and, as you might imagine, I was the odd person out. But I was very well received, people were overwhelmingly gracious and receptive and openly grateful that I had come. There were jokes about being thrown into the lions' den, but it didn't really feel like it. It felt like I was speaking to a crowd that wanted to hear, respected what I said, and simply fundamentally disagreed. In particular there was a group of current Moody Bible Institute students there; really interesting, interested, and good humored, and we had a great time together.

What I was most interested in was how Christian apologetics – the intelligent “defense” of the claims of the faith – has changed in the many years since I was involved in the movement, shifted in ways I never would have imagined, very much away from our old fundamentalist assumptions and assertions into a far more reasonable and intellectually sustainable form of discourse that requires actual research and knowledge rather than hard-core theological assertion based on completely dubious premises.

I'll say something about that in a minute. The other speakers you can look up: one I didn't know before, Rob Bowman, whose life has been devoted to exposing Christian “cults” (as he calls them: Mormons; Jehovah's Witnesses; and so on, and who co-authored [Faith Has Its Reasons](#)); another has become a leading voice in Christian apologetics, Mike Licona (the author of [Why Are There Differences in the Gospels](#) and [The Resurrection of Jesus](#)), whom I've publicly debated a number of times and consider a friend; the other is a very learned professor of NT at Asbury Seminary, Craig Keener (the author of [Christobiography: Memory, History, and the Reliability of the Gospels](#)), whom I've also known for years and whom I refer people to when they want to accuse me of being a workaholic: “Me??? Look at *Keener*!!!”

I heartily disagree with all three, of course, on fundamental issues. But it's on very friendly terms. The issue at the conference were the “Contradictions” in the New Testament. How does one deal with apparent or real contradictions and still remain committed to an evangelical view of Scripture as inspired by God and in some sense “inerrant”? I stress “in some sense” because, as it turns out, it is not at all clear what “inerrant” means, and the three of them actually have different nuanced understandings of it.

And they have internal disputes among themselves about both what the term should mean and, most interesting for me, how one is to deal with what looks like a contradiction. The discussions yesterday (well, most of them) were at a much, much higher academic/intellectual level than ones I've had, say, during a recent debate on the blog. I think some of the positions staked out yesterday were utterly, demonstrably, mind-bogglingly simply WRONG. But they were advanced with the kind of learning and historical knowledge that we simply didn't see back in my apologetics days in the mid-1970s.

Roughly speaking I was hearing two positions, neither of them ones we were taught and advanced in the day (in my circles). One of the two strikes me as completely tenable, though again, only in a sense.

Our old position, back then, was that any contradiction in the New Testament Gospels (or the Bible, for that matter; but yesterday we were talking only about the Gospels) can in fact be reconciled if you look closely and deeply enough at the matter. ANY contradiction. To be sure, there may be places where you aren't sure HOW to reconcile them, but in principle they are all reconcilable in one way or another.

And, as a corollary, everything the Bible says is literally true. There are no mistakes, of any kind, whatsoever, in the Bible.

That was our view, and that's what we called inerrancy. It still strikes me as, well, the "common sense" understanding of what the term means: "no errors." Any error of any kind is an error. And so if there are any errors, the book is not inerrant.

None of the three speakers yesterday has that view, even though they call the Bible inerrant and affirm that it is completely reliable. Their views strike me as odd - that they can admit there are, technically speaking, incorrect statements in the Bible but that it is still without error. But they consider my old view (no mistakes of any kind whatsoever) as a dated kind of fundamentalism that is simply not held by thinking Christians any more, and, even more interesting, that my objections to their views are rooted in fundamentalist views that I myself don't accept but that I'm assuming in order to attack their alternative views. In other words, they think I'm kicking a dead horse.

Interesting.

They do know that fundamentalist Christians do continue to hold to these views. But they are heartily opposed to them and do not think they advance the Christian cause. At least as I understand what they're saying.

Roughly speaking - at least as I'm getting this as an outsider to their internal discussions, disagreements - as I said, there appear to be two approaches to texts that appear to be contradictions:

One is indeed to "reconcile" them as best as possible; or, the term they appear to prefer, "harmonize" them: that is take the two texts that appear to contradict each other and show how they actually fit together, possibly in a complicated way, into a harmonized whole so that they round out and complement each other, rather than stand at odds with one another.

OK, we used to do that. But the current view seems to be much more open to the possibility that there are places that we simply can't figure it out, places that do appear to be contradictory. And here is the KICKER. When they (the evangelicals who take this view) admit there are apparent contradictions, then they say that the details are not important. What matters is the major message. The ultimate point. The big picture. The gist. The gist of what a passage is trying to teach is what is inspired and inerrant. Not the picayune details.

That is to say - a phrase you hear a lot in these circles - "the Bible is inerrant in what it affirms." That is, it makes no mistakes in what what it is trying to teach.

So you might have a story in which Jesus heals someone, found, say, in both Matthew and Luke. There may be small contradictory details: in one he heals the person before he does this other thing, in the other he heals the person after he does the other thing. Small discrepancy. But the story is not trying to teach *when* Jesus did the miracle. It's trying to

teach that he did the miracle. And it is inerrant about that. He **did** do the miracle.

We never ever would have allowed that back in my days at Moody Bible Institute. But it's becoming a thinking-person's view among evangelicals who believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, apparently.

But the other change - the second position - strikes me as even more significant, a real step toward traditional scholarship, which tries to explain WHY there are contradictions, and then goes on to say that since we know why they are there, they are not really contradictions.

It will take a bit to explain this view. It's the one really catching on. I think it is completely right that we can explain why there are contradictions. My problem is that just because you know why you have a problem does not mean you don't have a problem. I'll explain more about that in my next post.



[A New Way of Explaining Contradictions in an "Inerrant" Bible
But the Women Who Did **NOT** Doubt the Resurrection](#)