CHRISTIAN STANCES ON INERRANCY

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**mainline Protestants and evangelicals**

Protestants are usually divided into “mainline Protestants” and “evangelicals.” The latter usually include fundamentalists and charismatics.

Among the mainline Protestants are (largest to smallest): (“Mainline Protestant”)

United Methodist Church (2018: 6.7 million US)

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (2018: 3.4 million)

African Methodist Episcopal Church (2.5 million)

Episcopal Church (2016: 1.9 million)

African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (1.4 million)

Presbyterian Church (USA) (2019: 1.3 million)

American Baptist Churches USA (2017: 1.1 million)

Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (858,670)

United Church of Christ (2018: 820,000)

Reformed Church in America (2010: 246,024)

Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) (380,000)

Religious Society of Friends (350,000)

Unitarian Universalist Association (211,000)

Church of the Brethren (125,964)

Mennonite Church USA (100,000)

International Council of Community Churches (2009: 69,276)

National Association of Congregational Christian Churches (2002:65,392)

Alliance of Baptists (65,000)

Moravian Church in North America (60,000)

Among the evangelicals are: (“Appendix B”)

Southern Baptist Convention

Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod

Lutheran Church-Wisconsin Synod

Church of the Nazarene

Wesleyan Church

Free Methodist Church

Christian and Missionary Alliance

Church of Christ

Presbyterian Church in America

Assemblies of God

Church of God (Cleveland, Tenn.)

Church of God (Anderson, Ind.)

Christian Reformed Church

Mainline Protestants were 63% of the US population in 1970; by 2012, they were 48%. In 2014, Pew Research Center said mainline Protestants were 14.7% of US adults, while evangelicals were 25.4%. (In addition, Catholics were 20.8%.) “Evidence from the General Social Survey indicates that higher fertility and earlier childbearing among women from conservative denominations explains 76% of the observed trend . . .” (“Mainline Protestant”)

In 2008, 21% of mainline Protestants earned $100,000 or more per year, versus 13% of evangelicals did. (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2008)

**total and limited inerrancy**

One of the principal distinctions between mainline Protestants and evangelicals concerns the Bible’s inerrancy (its being “without error”). Generally speaking, mainline Protestants, like Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, admit “limited inerrancy”: there are errors in the Bible except concerning faith and morals. Evangelicals admit “absolute inerrancy”: there are no errors in the Bible, including on matters of science and history.

In support of limited inerrancy, here is a list of contradictions in the pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible). The list includes internal contradictions; it does not include external contradictions (between the Bible and science or history).

1. God creates light and darkness, and day and night (Gen 1:4-5). *But*: only later does God create sun, moon, and stars (Gen 1:14-16).
2. God creates plants and later creates humans (Gen 1:11, 26-27). *Or*: God creates a human and only later creates plants (Gen 2:4-9).
3. God creates animals and later creates humans (Gen 1:24-25, 26-27). *Or*: God creates a human and only later creates animals (Gen 2:4-7, 18-20).
4. God creates male and female humans simultaneously (Gen 1:26-27). *Or*: God creates a man and only later creates a woman (Gen 2:7, 21-22).
5. God tells Noah to take one pair of each kind of animal (Gen 6:19-20). *Or*: he tells Noah to take seven pairs of each clean animal and one pair of each unclean animal (7:2-3).
6. The flood lasts 40 days (Gen 7:4, 12). *Or*: the flood lasts 150 days (Gen 7:11, 24; 8:2).
7. The waters recede below the mountaintops (8:5). *Or*: later they are still above the mountaintops (8:9).
8. Beersheba was so named to commemorate a cov­en­ant between Abraham and Abimelech (Gen 21:31). *Or*: it was named from an incident concerning Isaac and Abimelech (Gen 26:31).
9. Jacob named Bethel on his journey to Paddan-aram (Gen 28:19). *Or*: he named it on his return many years later (Gen 35:14-15).
10. Jacob was nicknamed “Israel” at Peniel (Gen 32:28). *Or*: he was nicknamed “Israel” at Bethel (Gen 35:10).
11. Judah proposed to his brothers that they sell Joseph to some Ishmael­ites (Gen 37:27). *Or*: Midianites kidnapped Joseph without the brothers knowing (Gen 37:28-30).
12. God is known to the patriarchs as “Yahweh” (Gen 4:26, “At that time [birth of Adam’s third son] people began to invoke the name of the Lord [Hebrew *Yahweh*]”; see also Gen 4:1; 15:2, 7-8; 16:2; 18:14; 19:13; 24:31; 28:13). *But*: centuries later God says, “I ap­peared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty [Hebrew *el Shaddai*], but by my name ‘the Lord’ I did not make myself known to them” (Exod 6:3).
13. All plants in Egypt die in plague 4 (Exod 8:24), *Or*: flax and barley die in plague 7 (Exod 9:31), and locusts kill plants in plague 8 (Exod 10:15).
14. All cattle in Egypt die in plague 5 (Exod 9:6). *Or*: cattle still die in plague 7 (Exod 9:19).
15. A Hebrew male slave must be released after six years, whereas a He­brew female slave is not entitled to release (Exod 21:2-11). *Or*: the female slave, like the male, must be re­leased after six years (Deut 15:12).
16. One who accidentally kills another may seek sanctuary at the altar (Exod 21:12 ff.). *Or*: such a person may seek sanctu­ary in any of several cities (Deut 19:1-13, Num 35:9-24; Deut 19 says 3 sanctu­ary cities must be designated, while Num 35 says 6).
17. Sacrifice may be offered at altars to be set up in every place (Exod 20:24). *Or*: sacrifice may be offered at only one sanctu­ary (Deut 12:14).
18. Only descendants of Aaron may offer sac­ri­fices (Exod 28:1). *Or*: any of the descendants of Levi can offer sacri­fices (Deut 18:7).
19. The feast of booths lasts 8 days (Lev 23:36). *Or*: it lasts 7 days (Deut 16:15).
20. The tabernacle is (a) simple, (b) outside the camp, and (c) cared for by Joshua a­lone (Exod 33:7-11; Num 11:16 ff., 12:4 ff.). *Or*: it is (a) elaborate, (b) always at the center of the Israelites, and (c) cared for by more than 8000 Levites (Exod 25-31, 35-40; Num 1:49-53; 3-4).
21. The Israelites set up twelve stones from the Jordan River at Gilgal (Josh 4:8). *Or*: they set up the stones in the middle of the river (Josh 4:9).
22. The Israelites are to shout when rams’ horns blast (Josh 6:5). *Or*: The Israelites are to shout when Joshua commands them to (Josh 6:10).
23. Joshua sends 30,000 men at night to lie in ambush west of Ai (Josh 8:3, 9). *Or*: he sends 5,000 men the next morning (Josh 8:12).

One may ask, “But the bigger question is, if the Bible’s historical facts are inaccurate, how can we know that the spiritual messages are true?”

The same way we know any truth: we compare what is asserted with reality. I am willing to accept what the Bible asserts doctrinally because I judge that Christianity coheres with reality. (This is after teaching world religions for 20 years, so I have compared the other religions with reality as well.) Those who disagree with me (three-fourths of humanity) accept that another religion or no religion more accurately coheres with reality.

All of us, of course, are influenced in our judgments by loyalty to our communities and our cultural traditions. That loyalty often predominates among factors that determine religious adherence. However, that our judgments in religion are susceptible to influences other than purely rational considerations does not mean that such judgments cannot be made; such influences affect all judgments. Judgments about religious natters must be made: they are unavoidable. Everyone (including the atheist and agnostic) has a stance on the fundamental questions of life (God, the meaning of life, morality, evil, the afterlife, etc.).

So my suggestion is: relax. Let go of the belief that the Bible is without error. You will not only join the majority of Christians, but you will no longer have to leave your intellect at the church door.

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Scripture quotations, except quotations from others, are from the New Revised Standard Version,

unless indicated otherwise.

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