The certainty summit

In 1978, a who’s who of conservative evangelical leaders met in Chicago to draft a statement on biblical inerrancy. It would change the course of church and state.

by Liz Charlotte Grant in the April 2025 issue
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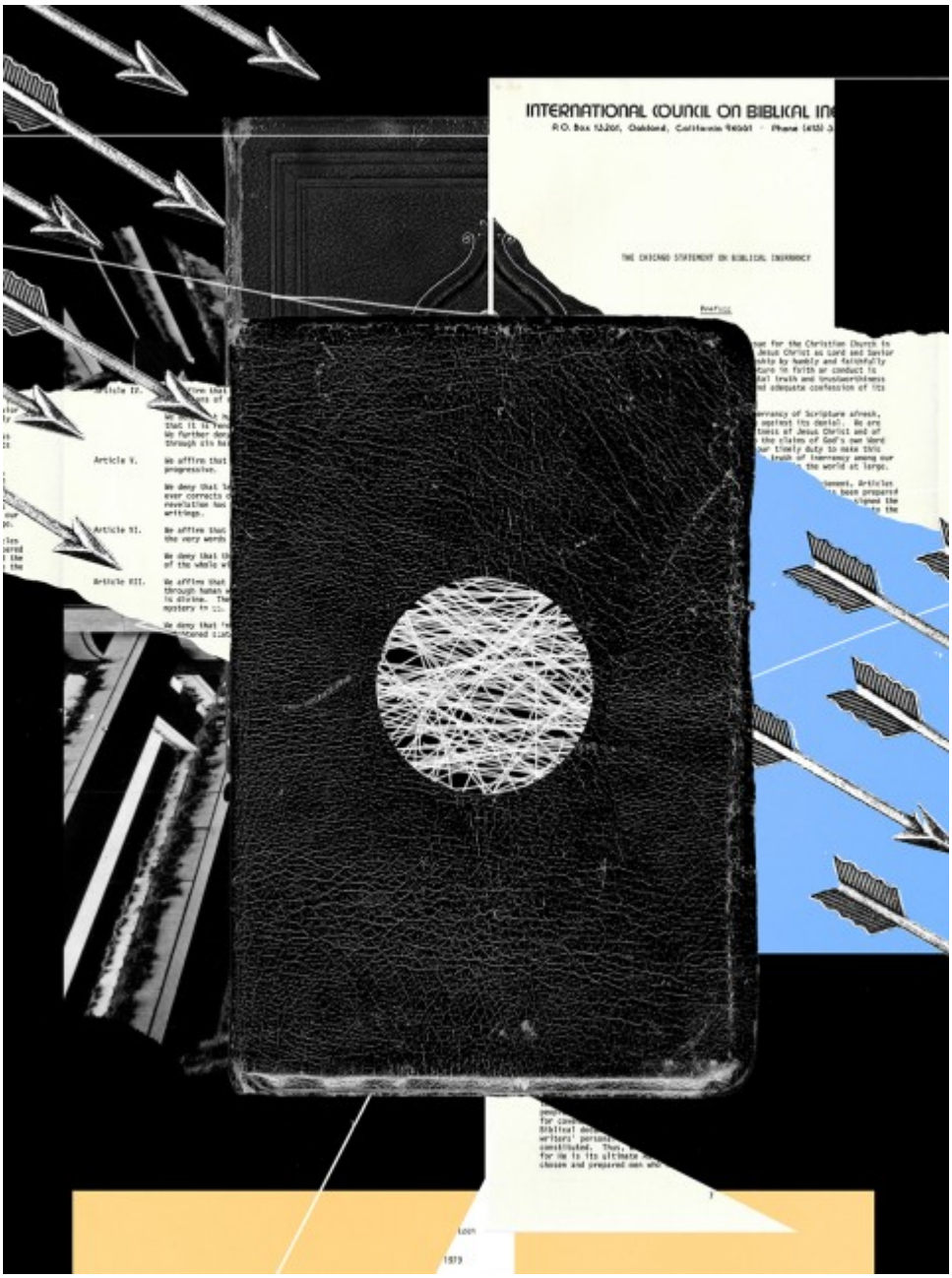

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On October 25, 1978, about 250 White men strode across the orange carpet of the Chicago Hyatt Regency O'Hare's lobby with a ten-dollar theological word on their minds: *inerrancy*. The weekend conference was invite only, a closed-door event organized by 39-year-old R. C. Sproul of Ligonier Ministries and backed by a grant, officially anonymous, from the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.

Two of the men on the planning committee of Sproul's new International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, executive director Jay Grimstead and chairman James Boice, described the conference's goal as assembling "a theological 'army' of scholars" to "offer a reasoned defense of the highest possible view of Scripture." They hoped to fortify Christianity against the triple threats of cultural relativism, liberal scholarship, and the squishy, neoorthodox position of "limited" inerrancy.

Organizers had handpicked invitees according to their influence. It was a who's who of conservative evangelicalism: best-selling authors and speakers; professors and manuscript translators; founders of parachurch ministries, denominations, and megachurches. One by one, Grimstead called them with a simple pitch: In one weekend, they would compose a landmark statement to define, once and for all and in the clearest terms, exactly what a Christian's relationship to the Bible must be. Did they want to play a part in history?

Enthusiastic RSVPs rolled in, including from Wayne Grudem, then a junior professor at Bethel College in Minnesota, and his wife, Margaret, who drove six hours from Minneapolis to Chicago for the event. Grudem would go on to be the president of the Evangelical Theological Society, to oversee the English Standard Version translation of the Bible, and to write *Systematic Theology*, which has sold more than 700,000 copies and is the most widely used systematics text in evangelical seminaries. He is also a founder of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, which promotes a complementarian view of gender issues.

But he was not yet a recognized scholar. He secured an invitation through his connection to Edmund Clowney, one of the event's organizers and the president of Westminster Theological Seminary, Grudem's alma mater. Clowney also arranged a scholarship that covered lodging and food, turning the conference into a vacation for a couple living on a junior professor's salary. "Just staying in the Regency felt exciting," Grudem told me in an interview.

Conference organizers picked the Regency O’Hare for its central location near an airport but also, one suspects, for its iconic status. The luxury hotel was a bulwark of mid-century brutalism and a masterpiece of American architect John Portman. Its open-air concrete walkways crisscrossed a multistory atrium lobby crowned with skylights and hanging greenery, a glass elevator floating in the center. Whatever happened there was bound to be important. They hoped the supernatural would manifest as their collaborative position paper, which would become the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.

This statement—split into a preface, summary, articles of affirmation and denial, and exposition—would spark a revolution within thousands of American churches and parachurch organizations, a revolution that included a purge within the existing institutional structures of evangelicalism. Its influence continues to this day. The Evangelical Theological Society—which staffs every evangelical seminary and theological undergraduate program, along with many conservative churches—still requires its members to assent to the Chicago Statement.

Grudem explained the urgency he and others felt at that moment. “It wasn’t a trivial controversy [to us]. The denial of the complete truthfulness of scripture in all that it affirms was a significant undermining of the authority of scripture in our lives . . . challenging the authority of God himself.” For Grudem and his colleagues, God was either trustworthy and sovereign, or God was a liar—there was no middle option. These leaders—with their intimate access to institutional authority, donors, and volunteers—were determined to sway evangelicalism toward biblical inerrancy.

The Chicago Statement had a broader impact as well. Its signatories fed the emerging New Right, which would elect Ronald Reagan in 1980. They established a religious parallel to the constitutional originalism that would come to dominate the Supreme Court. And they primed evangelicals for the utilitarian groupthink required for Christian nationalism to thrive. In the end, the importance of this weekend in 1978 would exceed any of its organizer’s loftiest expectations.

The drafters believed the Bible was under threat from the liberal academy. They also saw another threat looming, this one from inside the evangelical church.

The night before the conference, R. C. Sproul pulled an all-nighter to finalize the first draft of the statement’s affirmations and denials, finally emerging bleary-eyed and jittery to welcome guests to the Chicago Regency with the position paper that would

demand the attendees' full attention. (According to Stephen Nichols's biography of Sproul, the person originally assigned to write the first draft had dropped the ball, a problem that went unnoticed until the night before attendees arrived.)

To supplement the main event—drafting the statement—Sproul and his team had planned three days of lectures. Scholars and pastors presented papers with titles such as "Legitimate Hermeneutics" and "Alleged Errors and Discrepancies in the Original Manuscripts of the Bible." British theologian J. I. Packer delivered a plenary address called "The Adequacy of Human Language."

During free moments, guests refilled their coffee mugs and surveyed their compatriots. Grudem remembers feeling starstruck. Packer was at one end of the room; L'Abri founder Francis Schaeffer was at the other. Theologians Sproul, D. A. Carson, Robert D. Preus, John Gerstner, Carl F. H. Henry, Kenneth Kantzer, John Warwick Montgomery, Roger Nicole, Earl Radmacher, and John Wenham milled around, conversing with peers who had recently completed the New American Standard translation of the Bible.

Others present had developed novel fields of Christian academic study, like the contingent of young earth creationists led by Norman Geisler, Henry Morris, and John Whitcomb. Or they had founded evangelistic organizations, like Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ and Audrey Wetherell Johnson of Bible Study Fellowship (one of the few female-led organizations represented at the summit). Also in attendance were best-selling authors Hal Lindsey (*The Late Great Planet Earth*), Josh McDowell (*Evidence That Demands a Verdict* and *More Than a Carpenter*), and Bruce Wilkinson (*Walk Thru the Old Testament* and, much later, *The Prayer of Jabez*). The founders of Jews for Jesus, the National Association of Evangelicals (formerly United Action Among Evangelicals), the Association of Christian Schools International, and the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals mingled with seminary presidents, denominational leaders, radio preachers, and editors from *Christianity Today*, *Moody Monthly*, Moody Press, and Zondervan.

Amid the small talk, suits, and whiffs of aftershave, each attendee seemed to understand the gravity of the weekend, and each hoped to participate meaningfully in drafting the statement. They met in circles of 10 to 12 to carefully parse each word and phrase of the statement, making edits to submit for review to the top drafting committee. Then the entire group gathered to discuss and strategize.

It was during this discussion that Grudem made his mark on the historic document. He recounts leaning over to Clowney, a theological cessationist amid a crowd of cessationists, to suggest tempering a clause that stated that God's revelation had ended after the apostles wrote and collected the New Testament. "Don't we want charismatics to sign this?" Grudem asked Clowney. His mentor agreed and suggested they qualify "God's revelation" with the word *normative*, a suggestion reflected in the final version of the statement.

"So, the word *normative* was my contribution," Grudem said, smiling. "Everybody had a sense of participating. . . . There was an excitement in the lobbies and hallways and meetings . . . at being part of a team that was doing something to stop the erosion of confidence in scripture. We had a sense that God had brought us together."

Like their turn-of-the-century fundamentalist forerunners the Reformed Princeton theologians, these drafters believed that the Bible—and therefore, the trustworthiness of God—was under threat from the liberal academy, with its reliance on outside data and historical criticism. For example, writing decades later to document the origins of the Chicago Statement, Grimstead repeatedly disparaged any hermeneutic informed by either historical criticism or the scientific revolution as a "threat," a "danger," an "infection," a "corruption," a "defection," an "infiltration," a "deterioration," a slide down "the slippery slope towards . . . liberalization," and a "prevailing . . . theological 'smog.'"

But they also saw another threat looming, this one from inside the evangelical church. Pastors and theologians in the doctrinal middle had been charged as neoorthodox sympathizers. Harold Lindsell, the editor-in-chief of *Christianity Today* from 1968 to 1978, had blasted them in his 1976 book *The Battle for the Bible* for their sheepish belief in "limited" biblical infallibility in mimicry of the heretics Karl Barth, Reinhold Neibuhr, and Paul Tillich. Worse, while the fundamentalist-modernist controversy of the 1920s and '30s had played out in plain view, these neoorthodox defectors had somehow snuck into institutions once deemed evangelical safe spaces. Some of them even dared to call themselves evangelicals. Though the writers of the Chicago Statement understood that a single document would not cure the backslide, it could offer a foothold for the resistance.

It would also vindicate scholars who were sick of being laughed out of the academy for their beliefs about Christianity's most revered texts. As Grimstead wrote, the

position paper of this conference could finally reverse this trend: “Now liberal evangelicals [will] have to hide in the closet and the inerrantists, the world over, [will] be able to lift their heads high and proudly proclaim they believed in the full inerrancy of the Bible.” Biblical inerrancy would reign supreme as the only acceptable evangelical position, and the fundamentalists would rule both the evangelical academy and the church. This, Grimstead and the others believed, was as it should be. This was true Christianity.

The ICBI weekend concluded with a signing ceremony. After a rousing chorus of “A Mighty Fortress,” organizers invited attendees to scrawl their signatures on the document they had collectively written. (Karen C. Hoyt, Grimstead’s executive assistant and the conference’s organizer, had typed up their notes into a single document on her typewriter early that morning.) One by one, men in flared suits and thick glasses approached the table where the papers lay, raised a pen, and made their mark before exiting to join the buffet line.

In the months after, organizers added other names to their document, 333 prominent evangelicals in total. These signatories had ties to 16 nations worldwide, though most remained male and of Western European descent. I went over all 333 names carefully, and I was able to track down the associations of 280 of them. I found that only 13 women attended the event, and only two received invitations to participate in the composition of the statement (as opposed to being silent witnesses). Eight non-White leaders participated. And no woman or person of color ever held a microphone during the summit.

The large majority of signatories were professors and pastors. Some of their names have become infamous among former evangelicals like me, while others should be better known. D. A. Carson cofounded the *Gospel Coalition*, a publication that has become known for its Reformed, patriarchal takes on current events. John MacArthur Jr., longtime pastor of Grace Community Church in the San Fernando Valley, famously said, from the stage of a 2019 conference, that Beth Moore should “go home,” dismissing her decades of faithful service to the Southern Baptist Convention as a Bible study teacher. Paige Patterson helped orchestrate the conservative takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1980s and was later fired for covering up allegations of sexual abuse at the denomination’s seminary. Jay E. Adams, one of the founders of “biblical counseling,” published books criticizing secular psychology. And W. A. Criswell, the SBC president who publicly criticized *Brown v. Board of Education*, advocated a return to segregation. These men each

attended the event and signed their names to the Chicago Statement.

But not every signatory achieved infamy. Kenneth Barker, a Dallas Theological Seminary professor, organized the translation teams for multiple Bible translations between 1965 and 2011. His decades-long career as a translator was marked by a notable ecumenism and intellectual openness, despite unfounded criticisms of his work from leaders of the religious right, many of whom also signed the Chicago Statement. Barker told me in an interview that he signed the statement but did not buy the urgency: “I believe in true evangelical ecumenism. To me, a person does not have to believe there are no errors [in the Bible] to be saved . . . the most important thing is [belief in] Christ.”

James Earl Massey, a Church of God pastor who hosted the *Christian Brotherhood Hour* and stood shoulder to shoulder with Martin Luther King Jr. and Howard Thurman in their civil rights activism, was the only Black person to sign the statement. Biblical scholar Angela Parker suggested to me that many Black pastors would have signed the statement if they’d been invited to do so, as an assumption of biblical inerrancy undergirds much theology among African American evangelicals, but I could find no evidence that the organizers either sought to include these leaders or that they declined to participate.

The other people of color who signed the Chicago Statement included Emilio Antonio Núñez, a Salvadoran who pioneered the Central American Theological Seminary and became one of the foremost biblical scholars in Latin America, writing a best-selling tome that criticized liberation theology. Malaysian pastor Luis L. Pantoja Jr. led an SBC megachurch in the Philippines that established 15 satellites around the globe. At his death, SBC leader Richard Land called him “one of the most important leaders of Evangelicalism in all of Asia.” Luis Palau Jr. was Billy Graham’s Argentine mentee and successor who, according to *Outreach* magazine, “spoke in person to more than 1 billion people.” Assemblies of God Argentine pastor Juan Carlos Ortiz spoke at the 1974 International Congress on World Evangelization in Lausanne, Switzerland, and became famous for his evocative metaphor of Christian unity as a mashed potato, which launched him into international ministry. Jeevaratnam Buraga founded the Bharat Bible College in India, a fundamentalist seminary dedicated to training Indigenous Christian youth in evangelism and church planting across India. And Edwin M. Yamauchi is one of the most prolific Bible and archaeology scholars in the United States and was the first Japanese American to be elected president of the Evangelical Theological Society.

The few women who attended the conference either were associated with a man who had been invited—like Dorothy Patterson, Margaret Grudem, and Martha L. Johnston—or received invitations because they advocated for patriarchal gender roles within recognized groups, such as the women connected to Bible Study Fellowship or *Moody Monthly* magazine.

I asked Grudem about this lack of diversity in the signatory list. “When you’re dealing with the teachings of the Bible,” he responded, “my guess is, no matter how many diverse groups are represented in the production of such a statement, they’re going to come out saying the same thing. Because it’s summarizing what the Bible says. There is an objective truth to what the Bible teaches about the deity of Christ, the atonement, the nature of justification, et cetera.”

Asked the same question, Angela Parker fervently disagreed with Grudem. The statement “would be completely different,” she told me. She suggested that a diverse group of writers would have written a statement acknowledging the uncertainty of interpreting an ancient book for our contemporary culture, while addressing the cultural perspectives that readers and interpreters bring into their hermeneutics. For example, a minority reader can illuminate tensions within Bible interpretation that White American Christians may overlook, such as when the ancestors of enslaved Africans must reckon with the Bible’s teachings about slavery, which have so often been weaponized against African Americans.

“No one is devoid of any kind of cultural connection,” Parker said. And the statement writers’ cultural ignorance likely made them more vulnerable to being led by the worst aspects of their own culture. “The patriotism and American nationalism and Whiteness crept in unbeknownst to them,” she said, “and [the statement] has propelled [American evangelicals] into the way of Whiteness more than the way of Jesus.”

The Chicago summit was apolitical, according to its organizers. Yet that does not mean that inerrancy has not affected American politics—nor that the attendees themselves did not engage deeply with partisan politics. In 1978, evangelical Christianity’s political influence was on the rise, and many of the statement’s signatories held direct lines to powerful politicians.

One academic who presented at the summit, Greg Bahnsen, was a fervent advocate of Christian reconstruction and theonomy—meaning he wanted to reorganize

America's legal system according to Mosaic law, including imprisoning those who disagreed with his particular theological interpretations. Other signatories included members of the National Association of Evangelicals, a Washington, DC, lobbying group representing a range of conservative denominations and positions. In the coming decades, the NAE would spend considerable energy and money defending its idea of religious liberty—and politicians would listen. In earlier years, President Eisenhower had invited the group to the White House, and President Ford attended the NAE convention in 1976, the year that *Newsweek* declared "The Year of the Evangelical."

Other signatories included political actors like Harold O. J. Brown, a bioethicist and theologian, who cofounded the Christian Action Council (now Care Net) with former surgeon general C. Everett Koop in 1975, kickstarting the antiabortion movement. D. James Kennedy, the Presbyterian evangelist who founded Evangelism Explosion, sat on the Moral Majority's board of directors as a founding member alongside Jerry Falwell. When he died, the George W. Bush White House issued a statement of condolence. Paul Pressler, described as "the Steve Bannon of the Southern Baptist Convention" by the publisher of Baptist News Global, entered Texas politics as a state legislator and then an appeals court judge, where Republicans like Ted Cruz courted his endorsement—that is, until credible accounts surfaced of serial rape and sexual misconduct against younger men he had mentored throughout his religious and political career.

A few years after the conference, ICBI invited President Ronald Reagan to speak in support of biblical inerrancy at its first lay congress, held in San Diego in 1982. Scholar Jason Hentschel discovered this in the Dallas Theological Seminary archives while researching his dissertation. Reagan declined, never adding his signature to the group's statements. However, in response to Bill Bright's lobbying he did sign a proclamation that made 1983 the "Year of the Bible."

The Chicago summit went on to influence the government in other ways as well. Inerrancy's emphasis on textual purity mirrors the rise of constitutional originalism within the American justice system. In fact, adherents of originalism borrow the methods of biblical inerrantists in a fundamentalist mode of interpretation that favors the intentions of the Constitution's authors over the progressive rewriting of American law and culture over time. A 2011 *Columbia Law Review* study found that "evangelicals, frequent churchgoers, and those who believe in the literal truth of the Bible" make up a "large share of [constitutional] originalists." And according to

Gallup, our Supreme Court is now composed of both the highest number of originalist judges (four) and the highest number of self-identified Christian judges in its history.

Since the Chicago Statement, debates over inerrancy have come to be less about the authority of scripture and more about who belongs in the church.

I believe that what the authors of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy ultimately sought was certainty. I, too, live in an unstable era of history. In the 21st century we have witnessed rapid technological advancements, economic inflations and depressions, social activism, and divisive politics. We have experienced a profound division between the ideology of children and that of their parents. The younger generations' ideas of progress, safety, and the good life have altered so dramatically that parents no longer understand their adult children, let alone their grandchildren.

Americans in the '60s and '70s experienced violent and radical clashes between proponents of traditional and progressive ideologies. These decades included dramatic protests: second-wave feminists threw away their bras, got divorced, and embraced abortion access; Black, Brown, gay, and disabled Americans fought for visibility, safety, and equal rights; the Vietnam War provoked a generational crisis of both morals and mental health. Add to these destabilizing factors a growing awareness of environmental crises, a crashing economy due to inflation and oil embargoes abroad, dramatic shifts in technology, the assassination of trusted leaders like John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., and mistrust of government after President Nixon's scandal and resignation, and it's no wonder that younger generations felt that traditional beliefs and institutions had failed them. The fractiousness of 1970s evangelicalism matched the fractious culture of its time.

However, the 1960s and '70s also included evangelical action and theology that balanced the conservative movement, such as the founding of *Sojourners* magazine. These evangelicals, influenced both by the civil rights movement and antiwar activism, called on Christians to be peacemakers in a contentious time. In 1973 they wrote their own document, the Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern, which confessed evangelicals' failure to engage American militarism, economic inequality, racism, and sexism and called Christians to embody and advocate for social alternatives. They embraced culture head on.

But at the Hyatt Regency O'Hare in 1978, the drafters of the Chicago Statement rejected the changing tide of culture. They would not concede, accommodate, or make peace; theirs was no time for moderation. It's no wonder that so many of these same leaders joined the reactionary New Right movement that emerged to defend traditional institutions and conservative values in the late 1970s and 1980s—including, in some cases, seeking a return to segregated schools, decreasing support for government social programs, and renewing an emphasis on "law and order" as a panacea to violent protests.

Packer and the other writers of the Chicago Statement hoped that their certainty might stabilize a Western church in flux. As Packer wrote in the foreword to Norman Geisler and William Roach's *Defending Inerrancy*, "belief in inerrancy determines the basic attitudes and procedures of exegetes as they do their detailed work, and so exercises a formative and stabilizing influence on the faith of the church." Francis Rue Steele described 1970s evangelicalism's search for theological stability in the Bible in a review of Harold Lindsell's book *The Battle for the Bible*: "If the Bible is not totally trustworthy in 'all that it affirms,' no one or no group is competent to determine what parts are true, and therefore certainty in religious faith is impossible."

Jason Hentschel described the internal conflict of these leaders to me in an interview: "J. I. Packer writes in the '50s that we know in our bones that we are made for certainty because we're adrift without it. So, the Bible grounds us . . . we can lean on this. The problem is, we can't just read the Bible straight off the page because of hermeneutical problems, because the authority is in God and not the page."

The writers of the Chicago Statement hoped to settle themselves, their families, their churches, and their institutions within the ancient, unchanging text written by God himself. What could be more stable?

Randall Balmer—a historian, an Episcopal priest, and a former inerrantist—believes the quest to prove an inerrant Bible rests on its adherents' need for certainty: "You don't have a hierarchy [in evangelicalism] that provides a sense of authority, you don't have creeds or confession, you don't have liturgical rubrics, you don't have tradition, so you have to search almost desperately for some sort of epistemological certainty. . . . This quest for biblical inerrancy in the original manuscripts, which we don't have, is an assertion of a platonic ideal that [evangelical scholars] can appeal

to. . . . And [in that way], inerrancy has become their battering ram."

What's hardest for the men who wrote the statement to admit, even now, is that they were motivated not only by their love of God but also by their fear of change. Their demands for unity and stability within evangelicalism turned a once creative, independent, and freethinking culture into an entity known for groupthink. Evangelical leaders sought the authority of God in the Bible yet ended up indulging their own authoritarian readings of the text. They turned God's words into weapons.

Pete Enns—cohost of the popular podcast *The Bible for Normal People* and former professor at Westminster Theological Seminary, where many of the Chicago Statement signatories started their careers—says that the debate about inerrancy "has hindered dialogue, the kinds of dialogue that historically evangelicals were willing to have. Even 100 years ago, [evangelical theologians] knew . . . that the Bible doesn't do everything that they might want it to do. But now, the whole system is polarized so that they feel if the Bible says something, I have to believe it and I have to vote a certain way, and if other people disagree with me, they're committing heresy."

In the decades that followed the writing of the Chicago Statement, a stark line appeared for many between evangelicals—the only true Christians, or what the authors of the statement would have called "confessing" or "born again" Christians—and outsiders. Deploying the code word *inerrancy* marks you as part of the in-group. The debate is less about the authority of scripture than it is about defining who belongs in the church.

I suspect many evangelicals would be surprised to learn that inerrancy has only been widely accepted since the 1980s. Like Barker, the biblical translator, the doctrine has never seemed notable to me—perhaps because to a child of 1980s evangelicalism, inerrancy never seemed to be up for debate. I grew up within the in-group.

At the same time, my childhood church was of the big-box, nondenominational variety, modeled after Willow Creek in the Chicago suburbs. Like Billy Graham, who three times declined to attend the biblical inerrancy summits and never signed the Chicago Statement, Bill Hybels–style churches like the one I grew up within resisted the word *inerrant*. The word is radioactive, divisive, not seeker-sensitive. As Graham put it in a letter to Grimstead stamped "private and confidential," "My work as an

international evangelist . . . [means] I must work with all kinds of Christians that hold varying positions, and [I] certainly would not break fellowship with a fellow believer on the basis of inerrancy.”

Perhaps this is why, in the years since the Chicago Statement was drafted and widely adopted, doubt has not vanished from the evangelical church. Biblical inerrancy is not what makes us Christian. Jesus is.