

CONTRIBUTIONS OF SPEECH ACT THEORY TO THE DEFENSE OF BIBLICAL INERRANCY

David Fredrickson, Ph.D.

Western Seminary Sacramento

Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics

September 2009

Introduction to the Problem of Claiming Inerrancy for Non-assertive Utterances

1. True or false: The University of Alabama football program boasts at least one ardent fan in Pennsylvania.
2. True or false: How old is the University of Alabama football program?
3. True or false: You are to root for Alabama this Saturday.

A growing number of conservative evangelicals hold that while the first utterance represents a truth claim, and can be properly characterized as true or false, the second and third are not truth claims and thus cannot be characterized as either true or false, at least in the normal sense.¹ The following two utterances share the latter's property—they also are not truth claims. As with the third utterance above they are instructions, i.e. statements of *preference* rather than statements of *fact* – they do not reference an existent “state of affairs”:

1. “Curse God and die!” (Job 2:9b)²
2. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart” (Mat 22:37b)

This understanding of a truth claim as a text that can properly be designated true or false, has complicated the defense of biblical inerrancy for many of its adherents. Many have explicitly or implicitly accepted the above two-fold division of texts into assertions, the

¹ A correspondence meaning of truth is assumed here, which characterizes a “proposition (sentence, belief) as true just in case it corresponds to reality, when what it asserts to be the case is the case” (J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* [Downers Grove: IVP, 2003], 135). Moreland and Craig offer a strong argument for the Bible's commitment to a correspondence meaning of truth, over and against a coherence theory of truth and a pragmatic theory of truth (ibid., 130–53). They cite Scriptures such as Rom 1:25, “they exchanged the truth of God for a lie” and Ex 20:16, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”

Speech act theory likewise presumes a correspondence meaning of truth. It is committed to linking propositions to “states of affairs” (J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed, eds. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa [Cambridge: Harvard University, 1962], 3; John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* [London: Cambridge University, 1969], 50–53; *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* [New York: Cambridge University, 1979], 3).

² All Scripture quotations are from NASB95. Apart from quotations, every mention of *Bible* or *Scripture* refers to the autographs.

texts that state fact, and non-assertions, those texts with a primary purpose of accomplishing something beyond stating fact, as with the task of pressing the speaker's preference upon the hearer that is seen at work in the two biblical commands above. Second, these adherents generally hold that the quality of inerrancy and the quality of factual truthfulness are one and the same—texts without error are those texts which state the truth, and *vice versa*.³

Many defenders of biblical inerrancy have gone on to state therefore, that the quality of inerrancy is properly attributable only to texts in the Bible that are assertions. For example M. Erickson states in his systematic theology,

The question arises, does inerrancy have any application to moods other than the indicative? The Bible contains questions, wishes, and commands as well as assertions. These, however, are not ordinarily susceptible to being judged either true or false. Thus inerrancy seems not to apply to them.⁴

The fourth item of the Summary Statement in “The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy” reads, “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 and 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 (emphasis mine). Article XI adds, “We deny that it is possible for the Bible to be at the same time infallible and errant *in its assertions*” (emphasis mine).⁶ The Exposition section states, “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*”⁷ (second emphasis mine). Kevin Vanhoozer states, “God's Word invariably accomplishes its purpose (infallibility); and when this purpose is assertion, the proposition of the speech act is true (inerrancy).”⁸

³ Three writers who link inerrancy with a correspondence meaning of truth, or “fact,” are Charles Ryrie (“The Importance of Inerrancy,” *BibSac* 120, no. 478 [Spring 1963]: 142), John S. Feinberg (“Noncognitivism: Wittgenstein,” in *Biblical Errancy: An Analysis of Its Philosophical Roots*, ed. Norman L. Geisler [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981], 166), and Paul D. Feinberg (“The Meaning of Inerrancy,” in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980], 280–96). Article VI of “The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics” agrees: “WE AFFIRM that the Bible expresses God's truth in propositional statements, and we declare that Biblical truth is both objective and absolute. We further affirm that a statement is true if it represents matters as they actually are but is an error if it misrepresents the facts” (*JETS* 25, no. 4 [December 1982]: 398). It would seem that anyone who argues for the inerrancy of scientific and historical content in Scripture because it corresponds with fact is presuming a correspondence meaning of truth.

⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 234.

⁵ “The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy,” *JETS* 21, no. 4 (December 1978): 290.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 291. It is true that Article XII states that “We affirm that Scripture *in its entirety* is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit” (emphasis mine, 291–92). However, here fields of knowledge, not kinds of sentences, are in view—the argument is being made that the Bible's teaching regarding history and science are not to be excluded from the list of inerrant “fields” touched upon in the Bible.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 295.

⁸ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “The Semantics of Biblical Literature,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, eds. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 95.

While their distinction between biblical assertions and non-assertions or *performatives* may vary in clarity, all the above writers touch upon the preference for linking both truth and inerrancy with assertions. If one seeks to portray this position in a more negative light, raising the specter of partial inerrancy, one might summarize it thusly: “Whatever proportion of the biblical texts is assertions, is the proportion of the Bible susceptible to the quality of inerrancy.” If one seeks to portray the position in a more positive light, suggesting “plenary inerrancy,” one might summarize it: “Everything in the Bible that can be inerrant is—the Bible is without error.”⁹

There is a different defense of biblical inerrancy that is at the same time eminently successful in attaching inerrancy to every kind of text, yet unsatisfactorily shallow in terms of the authority it gains for the text. This defense hinges upon, first, recognizing that any utterance quoted in Scripture can properly be characterized as Scripture’s factual *report* of an utterance, irrespective of whether the utterance proper asserts fact, and then, second, upon attaching inerrancy to the scriptural report of the utterance. In the case of Job’s wife’s dubious instruction listed above, one can by this approach attach inerrancy to that text by speaking of the Bible’s inerrant report of her words.

However, while one might think that the above approach to defending biblical inerrancy skirts the division of biblical texts into assertions and performatives, it in fact supports the distinction. The approach asks the reader to expand the bounds of the text beyond the utterance proper until, in this case, it is the *report* of the unfortunate instruction from Job’s wife that is in view: “Then his wife said to him, ‘Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die!’” The instruction from Job’s wife, itself *not* an assertion, has been “reframed” as a portion of a larger text that *is* an assertion, the assertion that Job’s wife said “such and such.” Thus in fact, this inerrancy defense involves reframing every non-assertive utterance as a part of a larger assertion in order to make the text amenable to a characterization of inerrancy, precisely as the assertion/performative distinction requires.

The greatest shortcoming to this approach for defending the inerrancy of non-assertions in Scripture is that the truth value of the utterance proper has been moved out of the discussion—the actual content of the utterance proper has been degraded to simply the moniker “such and such” for the sake of this inerrancy defense. For the great majority of Scripture of course, to which the reader is called to give great value, this is a sub-biblical measure of the truthfulness and authority of Scripture. For example, when the Psalmist states “All Your commandments are true\dependable . . .” (Ps 119:86, writer’s translation), no astute interpreter imagines that the Psalmist is simply celebrating that all of God’s commands were enscripturated correctly, with no thought for the value of the commands themselves. Nor are most defenders of inerrancy going to be satisfied

⁹ The first position may involve the presumption that any biblical texts that cannot be characterized as true or false, regardless of the reason, cannot or should not be characterized as inerrant. The second position may involve the opposite presumption, that any biblical texts that cannot be characterized as true or false are inerrant, since they are without error. D. A. Carson takes the latter stance: “. . . it rather misses the point to say that ‘inerrant’ is a term inappropriate to commands and parables. Inerrancy does not mean that every conceivable sequence of linguistic data in the Bible must be susceptible to the term ‘inerrant,’ only that no errant *assertion* occurs” (emphasis added). D.A. Carson, “Recent Developments in the Doctrine of Scripture,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, 31.

with giving the instruction to curse God and die, and Jesus' command to love God with all one's heart, a status of inerrancy that is meant in the same way.

This paper will argue that there is a more robust defense of the inerrancy of scriptural non-assertions to be made, which takes seriously the Bible's own claims that many scriptural non-assertions should be characterized as "true," not merely "truly reported."¹⁰ Second, this paper will argue that this defense surfaces when applying speech act theory to Scripture. Third, this paper will suggest that applying speech act theory to Scripture generally becomes problematic when students of the Bible emphasize a single element of the "speech act" at the expense of the other two.

An Overview of Speech act Theory

Richard Young is an evangelical who has written about the benefits of speech act theory for Greek exegesis. For him and others, interest in the theory has arisen from a desire to give due attention to the authorial intent that is encoded within the text:

"There needs to be more attention given to a speaker's intent when interpreting what any utterance means. Both the propositional content of what is said and how the speaker uses the words have direct bearing on the proper understanding of an utterance. If a hearer simply decodes the propositional content in the question "Can you pass the salt?" he might respond with an affirmative answer rather than the desired action. He would not have understood what was said because he did not consider the intent of the speaker. . . . If the fellow picking daisies on the other side of the fence recognized only the propositional meaning of "There is a bull in the field," he would probably end up being gored. He may have been able to parse every word and to look up the meanings in a lexicon, but he would have failed to understand because he missed the intent."¹¹

Young provides a concise summary of the theory:

Two pioneers of speech act theory are J. L. Austin¹² and John R. Searle.¹³ Their basic thesis is that people actually perform acts by using speech patterns. Austin begins by saying that there are a number of utterances that are not reports about reality and therefore not subject to being true or false. Instead, these utterances are actions (e.g., "I name this ship Queen Elizabeth," or "I bet you a dollar it will rain tomorrow"). By making the utterance the speaker is actually performing the action.

¹⁰ Here a correspondence meaning of truth is being maintained even though non-assertions are in view. D. A. Carson would likely reject this requirement for a correspondence meaning of truth to hold in the case of non-assertions, as unnecessarily stringent: "For instance, I might say 'My wife is my true friend'—even though I do hold to a correspondence theory of truth. My sample sentence merely demonstrates that the semantic range of "true" and its cognates cannot be reduced to usages congenial to the correspondence theory of truth. Opponents would have to show either that the Hebrew and Greek words for truth never take on the correspondence meaning, or at least that they never have such force when they refer to Scripture" ("Recent Developments in the Doctrine of Scripture," 26).

¹¹ Richard A. Young, "A Classification of Conditional Sentences Based on Speech Act Theory," *Grace Theological Journal* 10 (Spring 1989): 34, 39.

¹² Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*.

¹³ Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*.

Such use of language is termed “performative.” Thus, Austin theorizes, language may be used either to say something about reality (constative utterance) or to do something (performative utterance).¹⁴

Kevin Vanhoozer explains, “Austin distinguished three components of the total speech act: (a) the *locutionary act* ‘is roughly equivalent to “meaning” in the traditional sense,’ (b) the *illocutionary act* is what we do *in* saying something, and (c) the *perlocutionary act* is ‘what we bring about or achieve *by* saying something, such as convincing, persuading.’”¹⁵ Vanhoozer is perhaps clearer when he describes the locution of a speech act as its “propositional content.”¹⁶ Greg Allison is helpful in differentiating the locution and illocution by laying out a schema of five utterances capturing a single locution but five illocutions:

1. Jesus Christ has come again.
2. Jesus Christ, come again! (God speaking)
3. I, Jesus Christ, will come again.
4. Oh! Jesus Christ has come again!
5. Jesus Christ hereby comes again. (God speaking; at this utterance, Jesus Christ returns).¹⁷

The illocutions represented above in order are: an assertion, a command, a promise, an “expressive,” and a declaration. Young is helpful in differentiating the illocution and the perlocution:

“Performatives can carry a certain *force* (rebuke, warning, etc) or can achieve a certain *effect* (conviction, persuasion, etc). The first is called an *illocutionary act* (e.g., “He urged me to shoot her”) and the second is called a *perlocutionary act* (e.g., “He persuaded me to shoot her”). If an illocutionary act fulfills all its

¹⁴ Young, “A Classification of Conditional Sentences Based on Speech Act Theory,” 35. Young goes on to say that “Austin himself came to reject this distinction since even statements about reality can be expressed using a performative verb, ‘I hereby state that X.’ Thus all utterances are performatives.” Young continues, “However, it is Searle’s classification of speech act types which is more commonly accepted today, but even his scheme is not without opponents. According to Searle (*Expression and Meaning* [New York: Cambridge University, 1979] 1–29) there are five types of utterances: (1) assertives, which commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition (e.g., assert, conclude, affirm); (2) directives by which the speaker attempts to get the hearer to do something (e.g., request, question); (3) commissives, which commit the speaker to some future course of action (e.g., promise, offer); (4) expressives, which express a psychological state (e.g., thanking, apologizing); and (5) declarations, which affect immediate changes in the state of affairs (e.g., declaring war, christening, excommunicating). B. Fraser (‘Hedged Performatives’ in Cole and Morgan, *Speech Acts*, 187–210) groups speech acts into eight categories based on speaker’s intent.”

¹⁵ Vanhoozer, “The Semantics of Biblical Literature,” 86. Both internal quotations are from Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 109, emphasis his.

¹⁶ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 208, 218.

¹⁷ Gregg R. Allison, “Speech Act Theory and Its Implications for the Doctrine of the Inerrancy/Infallibility of Scripture,” presented at the 45th Annual Conference of ETS (Nov 1993), 9, and *Philosophia Christi* 18 (Spring 1995): 7.

necessary conditions, it will produce in the hearer a recognition of the intent of the utterance (emphasis added).”¹⁸

An example from biblical hermeneutics, of the descriptive power of speech act theory: Instructors recognize that for students to properly interpret the Psalm 2:1 text “Why are the nations in an uproar And the peoples devising a vain thing?” they must recognize that while the locution suggests a question, the illocution is that of a stern assertion, or expressive perhaps. In keeping with the tenets of speech act theory, instructors hold that the authorial intent for Psalm 2:1 has not been captured until both locution *and* illocution have been properly identified (whether or not they use such terminology). This is so much clearer an explanation than speaking of rhetorical questions as “questions that aren’t really questions,” etc. As well, speech act theory’s requirement to identify the text’s perlocution, here perhaps a repentance from self-rule, combats the tendency of both hermeneutics instructor and student to hurry past the application discussion.

Speech Act Theory and the Inerrancy of Performatives

A significant contribution to the cogent defense of the inerrancy of biblical *non-assertions* has been provided for by Gregg Allison, using speech act theory.¹⁹ For the purpose of his analysis Allison uses the five-fold division from speech act theorist John R. Searle to categorize scriptural utterances according to illocution type.²⁰ The available categories are:

1. Assertive (to assert, believe, affirm, report, propose, etc.)
2. Directive (to command, beg, request, dare, recommend, pray, etc.)
3. Commissive (to promise, purpose, bet, agree to, guarantee, etc.)
4. Expressive (to think, congratulate, praise, apologize, deplore, etc.)
5. Declaration (as in “I resign,” “I christen this ship,” “War is hereby declared,” etc.)

Allison argues that speech act theory brings to the fore the reality that every utterance, assertive or not, necessarily incorporates a propositional component, the elements of which either do or do not correspond to reality. This component is labeled the *locution* of the utterance, and it consists of two elements, the *reference expression* or

¹⁸ Young, “A Classification of Conditional Sentences Based on Speech Act Theory,” 36. As noted in footnote 13, for later Austin and for Young, “performative” describes all texts including assertions.

¹⁹ Allison, “Speech Act Theory and Its Implications for the Doctrine of the Inerrancy/Infallibility of Scripture.”

²⁰ Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, 1–29. Young characterizes the categories thusly: “These match the five illocutions categorized by Searle and explained by Young: (1) assertives, which commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition (e.g., assert, conclude, affirm); (2) directives, by which the speaker attempts to get the hearer to do something (e.g., request, question); (3) commissives, which commit the speaker to some future course of action (e.g., promise, offer); (4) expressives, which express a psychological state (e.g., thanking, apologizing); and (5) declarations, which affect immediate changes in the state of affairs (e.g., declaring war, christening, excommunicating)” (Young, 35).

subject (e.g. “Jesus Christ”) and the *predicate expression* or predicate (e.g. “coming again”). Both elements are amenable to an examination of truth or falsity. Whether or not the author’s *intent* (illocution) is to state truth, propositional content (the locution) susceptible to an inerrancy characterization is always present in the text.

Based on this approach, Allison argues that scriptural, Divine assertives, expressives, and declarations (illocution categories 1, 4, 5 above) are straightforwardly defensible as inerrant, even in terms of a correspondence theory of truth, by way of speech act theory. In each of these cases, the locution can be evaluated straightforwardly as corresponding or not corresponding to reality. Thus it is not illogical, or a category mistake, to refer to Scriptures of praise or to divine pronouncements, for example, as “true” and inerrant, apart from and in addition to the fact that they have been inerrantly reported in Scripture.

Allison argues that speech act theory enables a cogent defense of the inerrancy of divine commissives (promises, predictions, etc.) as well, though not quite as directly. divinely spoken promises and predictions are *infallible*, or *successful* in speech act terminology, because the *necessary preconditions* (a technical label in speech act theory) are satisfied: the promise or prophecy commits the divine speaker to some future course of action, the speaker intends to fulfill the promise or prophecy, and the locution (propositional content) references a future act of the speaker. As with the other illocutions, evaluating the *inerrancy* of the divine commissive entails examining its locution for correspondence to reality. In this case the locution presents content that *will* correspond to reality in the future. Allison states,

In the case of commissives, the verification is in the future; the verification criterion is whether the course of action comes to pass. The verification procedure is to observe if in the future a state of affairs corresponding to the propositional content of the commissive does obtain . . . If there is a correspondence between the world and words, the commissive is true; if not, it is false. We maintain that all divine speech acts which are commissives are both infallible and inerrant, in that their speakers infallibly commit themselves to some future course of action which they intend to carry out and which they are able to achieve, and these future states of affairs do indeed inerrantly come to pass.²¹

Thus for Allison, speech act theory provides an adequate defense for the inerrancy of divine prophecy—he does not feel it necessary, for example, to speak of divine commissives as infallible utterances that *will prove to be* inerrant.

Allison holds that providing a cogent defense for the inerrancy of divine directives (instructions, etc.) is yet more difficult than that of commissives, employing speech act theory.²² He notes that directives are in the same genus as commissives, in the sense that they both incorporate the speaker’s desire that the locution (e.g., “Love the

²¹ Allison, “Speech Act Theory and Its Implications for the Doctrine of the Inerrancy/Infallibility of Scripture,” *Philosophia Christi*, 13–14.

²² This is not to imply that Allison is here equivocating on plenary inerrancy, rather he is equivocating on the utility of one descriptive tool, speech act theory, for defending plenary inerrancy. The difficulty of the defense pertains when 1) inerrancy always demands a correspondence meaning of truth, and 2) speech act theory, which always (at least for Searle and Allison) demands a correspondence meaning of truth in regards to locutions, is the descriptive tool employed.

Lord your God with all your heart,” “Jesus Christ will return”) correspond to reality at a point in the future. Allison adds that there is, however, a problematic difference between commissives and directives for the purposes of an inerrancy defense, if inerrancy continues to be tied to a time/space correspondence meaning of truth. The problem lies in a significant difference between commissives and directives in regards to the relationship of the speaker to the future correspondence with reality of the locution. The inerrancy (the future correspondence of locution to reality) of a divine promise is dependant upon the actions and abilities of the divine *speaker*, such that the future correspondence of promise to reality is assured. On the other hand, the inerrancy (the future correspondence of locution to reality) of divine instructions is dependant upon the reactions of the *hearer*, such that the future correspondence is not assured. Speech act theory, in keeping it seems with common sense, argues that an evaluation of the quality of any utterance should end with the hearer’s comprehension of the speaker’s desired response (i.e., the perlocution), and should not be expanded to the hearer’s actual reaction which lies outside the speech act.²³ Given that the future correspondence of the locution to reality in the case of directives is dependant upon the hearer, Allison’s conclusion concerning a defense of the inerrancy of divine directives using speech act theory is that “the proposed paths of the labyrinth seem illusory at this point.”²⁴

Building on Allison’s Work in Regards to Divine Commissives (Promises, Predictions)

Speech act theory in the hands of Gregg Allison has provided defenders of biblical inerrancy a tool for explaining with some precision and clarity an ascription of inerrancy to most divine non-assertives, without the defender being vulnerable to the accusation of a category mistake in linking the two. While Vanhoozer has focused on the speech act illocution leading to a defense of the infallibility of every divine utterance²⁵, Allison has focused on the speech act locution leading to a defense of the inerrancy of most divine utterances.

It appears that the key to extending the precision and clarity of the “speech act inerrancy defense” more fully to divine commissives entails extending the direction of Allison’s work. In the same way that Allison moved the focus of evangelical, speech act discussions from the illocution to the logically-prior locution in order to successfully defend the inerrancy of most non-assertions, it is profitable to move the focus from the locution to the to logically-prior *preparatory conditions* for the successful speech act²⁶ for an inerrancy defense of divine commissives.

The characterization above of Allison’s inerrancy defense of divine commissives (prophecy,²⁷ promises, etc.) as less-than-full reflects the reality that the defense gains a

²³ Ibid., 14.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Vanhoozer, “The Semantics of Biblical Literature,” 95.

²⁶ Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, 5–6; Austin, *How To Do Things with Words*, 10.

²⁷ Actually, Allison holds that prophecy is a subset of the assertive illocution, not a subset of the commissive illocution. This is because, “In a prophetic assertion, the prophetic content is given in

status of only *prospective* or *temporally contingent* inerrancy for divine prophecies and promises that are yet unfulfilled. It seems the inerrancy defender²⁸ unsatisfied with simply speaking of inerrant *reports* of divine commissives is forced to speak of fulfilled, divine commissives as inerrant, and unfulfilled, divine commissives as “certain to be proven inerrant someday.”

It appears however that the defense of an unqualified inerrancy of commissives may become available, when the defender recognizes that the standard *preparatory conditions* according to speech act theory that must exist for a successful commissive fail to capture the unique preparatory conditions offered by a speaker that is divine. What if, in addition to the standard preparatory conditions for commissive speakers—their existence, their sincerity and the absence of duplicity behind their commissive, their ability to bring about the future state of affairs described therein—a speaker as well exercises exhaustive foreknowledge of all real and possible futures, is omnipotent, is eternal, is immutable, exercises unlimited authority over all of time and the universe, including the “laws” of nature, and has a multiple-millennia record of fulfilled promises and predictions without exception?²⁹ As the nature of the preparatory conditions moves along a continuum away from the standard list towards the expanded list descriptive of a divine commissive speaker—one can imagine the number of preparatory conditions engendered by a very powerful, human dictator to be in the middle of this continuum, for example—the real distinction between a present *versus* predicted state of affairs in terms of likelihood, and thus the distinction between a prospective *versus* unqualified inerrancy in terms of the correspondence of commissive locution to reality, progressively shrinks. It would seem that for the absolutely divine speaker creating the one-of-a-kind preparatory conditions ascribed in Scripture to the God of the Bible, the distinction between a prospective inerrancy of unfulfilled, divine promises and predictions and an unqualified inerrancy of these promises and predictions has been erased, excepting only the time-bound perception of the human observer.

conformity with some future reality (words-to-world fit), whereas in a commissive, a state of affairs will be brought into correspondence with the promise (world-to-words fit)” (“Speech Act Theory and Its Implications for the Doctrine of the Inerrancy/Infallibility of Scripture,” 20, n. 51, emphasis mine). But this perspective of prophetic content seems to assume a corresponding future state of affairs to be a certainty now, which to the biblical inerrancy skeptic must surely look like begging the question.

For the most robust inerrancy defense it seems more profitable to work from the perspective that unfulfilled, biblical prophecy entails words uttered in the past to which a future reality must conform, so that prophecy should be viewed, like promises, as entailing a world-to-words fit—the words of both the promise and the prophecy are brought into existence first, and then later the corresponding state of affairs arises if the utterances are inerrant. This latter perspective does put the burden of proof on the inerrancy defender for defending commissives, whether promises or prophecy, as unqualifiedly inerrant now rather than prospectively inerrant now. One of course could redefine inerrancy such that it speaks of Scripture “proving to be true/inerrant” with the passing of time. This writer will argue instead that speech-act theory makes this redefinition unnecessary.

²⁸ I.e., when working under the limitations of speech act theory and the correspondence meaning of truth and of errorlessness that it requires.

²⁹ Perhaps an argument from logic that minimizes the employment of a faith position regarding the nature of God, could limit this list of characteristics of the divine commissive speaker to the final item. In that case only additional, humanly-observable states of affairs have been imported into the preparatory conditions for the divine commissive.

To put it another way: for the divine speaker of commissives, the only element of contingency to the inerrancy of those commissives involves the passing of time, nothing else. But time is absolutely guaranteed to pass. And, even this temporal contingency is a perceptual one, shared only by time-bound observers. To put it yet another way: the reason one may refer to *fulfilled* divine commissives as inerrant according to Allison is because they “cannot not be fulfilled.” And yet, once the unique preparatory conditions dictated by the nature of the divine speaker are properly noted, *unfulfilled* divine commissives also “cannot not be fulfilled.” In terms of propositional logic, the existence of a speaker with the divine attributes described above is a sufficient condition for the fulfillment of all commissives uttered by Him, and therefore a sufficient condition for ascribing unqualified inerrancy to His unfulfilled commissives. The relationship of the present point in time to fulfillment, that is, whether the fulfillment is past, present, or future, is inconsequential, a non-condition for the divine commissive’s status of unqualifiedly true/inerrant. The only relevance of a divine commissive’s current status as fulfilled or unfulfilled is in terms of inerrancy *verification*, and even then for the time-bound observer only. The massive limitations inherent to the human condition relative to God makes the current fulfillment status of divine commissives relevant in terms of inerrancy verification by humans, but not relevant in terms of inerrancy *identification*.³⁰

It may be said therefore that the inability of speech act theory to offer more than a prospective inerrancy defense for divine commissives is due to a defect in the theory, which however is repairable. The defect is that the standard preparatory conditions specifically itemized within the theory for commissives fail to account for the possibility of a divine speaker, for whom there is no distinction between a present *versus* predicted state of affairs in terms of likelihood of fulfillment. Once the preparatory conditions are remediated to take into account the possibility of a divine speaker with the attributes the Bible ascribes to God, it becomes possible to defend all divine commissives as currently, unqualifiedly inerrant. To this end, using speech act theory, one can isolate the commissive’s locution and measure the text’s correspondence to reality as required by speech act theory and by many defenders of biblical inerrancy.

Building on Allison’s Work in Regards to Divine Directives (Commands, Requests)

As summarized two sections prior, it was Allison’s conclusion that speech act theory may not be able to defend the inerrancy, or reality correspondence, of divine directives—commands, warnings, requests, etc. It is true that directives, like commissives, seek to create a future correspondence between words and world, between locution and reality, by moving the future reality into line with the current or past

³⁰ The same defense of unfulfilled, divine prophecies as being true/inerrant can be made apart from speech act theory by connecting the correspondence meaning of truth of the utterance not to any future state of affairs, but instead to God’s nature. It would seem however that for the purposes of engaging those rejecting inerrancy on logical grounds it will be more productive to accept the narrower, traditional understanding of a correspondence meaning of truth, as involving a humanly observable, corresponding state of affairs rather than involving a faith position regarding God. Speech act theory maintains this requirement.

words.³¹ The problematic difference between commissive and directive in regards to inerrancy however is that while the achievement of inerrancy for the commissive (the bringing of future reality into correspondence with the promise or prediction) remains with the speaker, the achievement of inerrancy for the directive (the bringing of future reality into correspondence with the instruction) hinges upon the obedient response of the hearer. Thus, outside of a fully-deterministic reality, the correspondence of current directive to future space/time reality seems not able to be assured regardless of the nature of the speaker.

However, a survey of Scripture narratives surrounding some apparent, divine speech act directives indicates that for God the issuing of an apparent directive involves something quite different than the ignorant, hopeful anticipation of obedience that typifies the human directive-maker within speech act theory. In some cases God or His spokesperson will follow the apparent divine directive by predicting the hearer's response, even a disobedient one, plus the states of affairs that will result (Deut 4; Josh 23; Isa 6).³² These and other evidences of God's exhaustive foreknowledge indicate that every divine instruction is inextricably linked to an inerrant prediction of the response plus all ensuing states of affairs, whether verbalized or not. In addition, foreknown disobedience does not vitiate the instruction in the mind of God, leading Him to "save His breath" and withdraw the instruction. Clearly, God has purposes for issuing instructions beyond securing a positive response. Third, the predicted subsequent states of affairs do not focus primarily upon the instruction-giver but upon the recipients, as if the instructions are primarily for the benefit of the recipient and not the divine issuer.

These significant differences between God and other directive speakers, underlining the absence of hopeful anticipation for obedience on the part of the divine instruction speaker, suggest that in the case of divine instructions the illocution involved is at least more complex than a simple attempt to change the future. In addition, it will be a nonsensical strategy to defend divine instructions as being inerrant using the strategy offered above for inerrant, divine commissives. Contrary to the case of divine commissives, divine instructions will not always lead to a correspondence of the future world with the current words. God has uttered apparent directives knowing full well that they would not be obeyed and would not bring the future reality into correspondence with those words.

Though Searle's comments on directives are brief and overlook the possibility of a divine speaker, they support the contention that the essence of the divine instruction and the essence of the speech act directive are too different to represent the same illocution.

³¹ Again, this contrasts to the assertion for example, which gains inerrancy when the words are successfully moved into line with reality.

³² Perhaps the most familiar example of a divine command followed by a predicted, negative response is the following interaction between Jesus and Peter: "'A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.' . . . 'Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, *when once you have turned again*, strengthen your brothers.' But he said to Him, 'Lord, *with You I am ready to go both to prison and to death!*'" (Jn 13:34–35 and Lk 22:31–33; emphasis mine.)

For Searle the primary preparatory condition for any illocution is the *essential condition*, the successful achievement of which is most crucial for achieving the intended illocution.³³ For directive speech acts, the essential condition “has to do with the fact that the speaker intends the utterance as an attempt to get the hearer to do the act.”³⁴

Shortcomings related to this condition will disqualify a particular speech act as being a directive, meaning it is either a “defective” directive (Searle), or perhaps a different kind of speech act altogether (this writer). In regards to defective directives, Searle states: “There is, e.g., no point in telling somebody to do something if it is completely obvious that he is going to do it anyhow.”³⁵ Presumably, Searle would agree that a directive is also defective if it is uttered even when failure is foreknown, such as when a verbal command is uttered outside of the line of sight of a deaf person. In this case there is a motive for the utterance, perhaps humiliation of the supposed recipient, or perhaps the proving to a third party that the recipient is indeed deaf. But clearly the illocution or utterer’s intent for that utterance is something other than that of the speech act directive.

If Searle were presented with the yet-stranger case of a speaker uttering many texts with apparent directive syntax, but yet for whom every response to the apparent directives is completely obvious to the speaker prior to the directive utterance in every case, and by whom the apparent directives are not withdrawn in the face of foreknown disobedience, it seems that Searle would respond that such are likewise not proper directives. Thus it seems Searle would support the contention that the God of Scripture does not in fact utter directives, as speech act theorists understand that term. The differences between apparent divine directives and speech act directives seem to mean that speech acts theory’s category of *directive* does not apply to God.

Additional examination of the intent behind the apparent divine directive makes the *directive* category still more suspect for the divine speaker. As indicated by Searle above, inherent to the speech act directive is the attempted imposition of the speaker’s preference and agenda upon the hearer. But what if a directive speaker’s preference and agenda consistently and without exception gives equal weight to the ultimate welfare of the hearer, as in the case of God as speaker? What if “I want you to *x*” and “You should do *x*” mean without exception, “You and the universe will ultimately be better off if you do *x*,” as in the case of God? What if everything commanded by the apparent directive speaker is something the hearer would have already chosen to do, if she knew all the facts as God does? Searle also supports this concern—directives are driven by “the authority of S[peaker] over H[earer],” not by the known benefits to be experienced by the hearer.³⁶ In view of this issue of primary motive for the utterance, the descriptive *speech act directive* seems to further lose its efficacy in regards to divine instructions.

The absence of contingency in the case of the divine instruction, because the response of the hearer and all related outcomes are known to the Speaker, the lack of cruciality of an obedient response to the speech act’s illocution and Speaker’s intent, because the Speaker continues with the instruction even when a non-response is

³³ Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, 69.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

foreknown, and the absence of self-centered agendas, because the Speaker has no agenda contrary to the ultimate benefit of the hearer, begs for a re-understanding or at least a recalibration of the speech act category *directive* for the divine speaker.

It seems that *advice* may be a good candidate for replacing the *directive* illocution in the case of divine instructions. As with divine instructions, genuine advice seeks to incorporate prescience of future outcomes. As with divine instructions, genuine advice is reasonably offered even when it is known or believed that the hearer will not respond positively.³⁷ As with divine instructions, genuine advice emanates from the speaker's desire for the hearer's ultimate benefit.³⁸

There is a strategic benefit as well for recognizing the divine instruction as in essence a piece of advice. The generic *advice speech act* "You will be better off if you do action *a*" is in actuality a conditional prediction or conditional promise. But if the divine instruction is in essence a piece of advice, and if pieces of advice are actually conditional predictions or promises, then a divine instruction is actually a conditional prediction or promise. In that case, the divine instruction is nothing other than a subset of the divine commissive, already argued to be unqualifiedly inerrant in the prior section.

Stepping away from speech act theory terminology momentarily, one may argue that the divine instruction is in actuality a form of divine promise, once the implicit context is properly recognized to include divine foreknowledge of actual responses plus ensuing outcomes, plus the welfare of the hearer as the central motivation for the instruction/promise to begin with. For example, the instruction "Love the Lord your God with all your heart" can properly be understood, given the divine attributes of the speaker, as the promise-complex: "[I want/advise you to] Love the Lord your God with all your heart [and if you do, you and all creation will ultimately be better off, whereas, if you do not, you and all creation will ultimately be worse off; and, I foreknow in every case your actual response plus the actual ensuing states of affairs]." Because of God's exhaustive foreknowledge, and the cohesiveness of all His instructions from uniformly seeking the ultimate benefit to the speaker and his universe, the divine instruction is in actuality a piece of advice wrapped in a conditional, often-implicit prophecy-complex that inerrantly captures all future states of affairs ensuing from the hearer's foreknown response.

Every divine *instruction* is actually a piece of advice because it always has the hearer's ultimate benefit in mind, as well as perfect foreknowledge of all states of affairs ensuing from both obedience and disobedience—divine instructions are made with a series of related predictions in God's mind. A clear, biblical example of divine instructions that include both implicit and explicit promises is represented by the Ten Commandments. Only the fifth, the honoring of parents, makes explicit the related promise. But the remainder all have implicit promises (and curses) linked to them as well, as the larger context of the whole Mosaic Covenant makes clear.

Likewise, every divine *commissive* is a piece of advice because there is always a related application for the hearer in God's mind, whether implicit or explicit—divine commissives are made with related instructions/advice in mind. A clear, biblical example

³⁷ Such is not the case with the directive speech act, for which a foreknown non-response would appear to make the speech act defective.

³⁸ Such is not the case with the directive speech act, which has as its primary motivating core the belief of the speaker that he has authority over the hearer.

of a prediction with an implied instruction, such that a full “piece of advice” is actually entailed, is found in the preaching of Jonah. The explicit, divine threat was properly understood by the hearers as a “piece of advice” complete with implicit instructions. It seems the divine commissive and the divine instruction actually incorporate the same elements, with the only difference being which elements must be explicitly stated.

See the proposed schema below:

1. The future state of affairs x will happen.³⁹
2. You are to do action a .
3. The result of you doing action a is that you and the universe will ultimately be better off.
4. The result of you not doing action a is that you and the universe will ultimately be worse off.
5. I know your future response to the instruction in element 2, plus all ensuing states of affairs.

It seems that what Bible interpreters characterize as divine promises and prophecies have all five elements as part of the divine speaker’s mental context, given what Scripture reveals of the nature of God, but only the first element must be explicitly stated in Scripture for the utterance to earn the characterization *promise* or *prophecy*. It seems that what Bible interpreters characterize as divine instructions have all five elements as part of the divine speaker’s mental context, but only the second element must be explicitly stated for the utterance to earn the characterization *instruction*.

Using the *advice* illocution: All of God’s commissives are pieces of infallible advice, because each has linked to it, explicitly or implicitly, a recommended reaction that will always be to the ultimate benefit of the recipient and the universe. All of God’s instructions are also pieces of infallible advice, because each has linked to it, explicitly or implicitly, a predicted outcome that will always be to the ultimate benefit of the recipient and the universe.

If the above five-part schema holds for divine instructions as well as divine commissives, the problem of assessing the inerrancy of divine instructions becomes subsumed within the problem of assessing the inerrancy of divine commissives—in the case of God both have the same, *advice* illocution. But the unqualified inerrancy of divine, speech act commissives has already been defended above by adjusting the preparatory conditions for commissives to allow for the possibility of a divine speaker.

To wit: the apparent contingency within the apparent divine directive disappears when one recognizes that the divine instruction is actually a piece of advice *versus* a speech act directive, since among other things the hearer’s actual response as well as all ensuing outcomes are fully known. The divine instruction, while not qualifying as a speech act *directive*, does qualify as a speech act *commissive*. More precisely, this commissive entails a conditional prediction, with the hearer’s recommended response as one of the conditions, all couched within a complex of (often implicit) inerrant

³⁹ This predicted, future state of affairs may or may not involve pre-conditions, implicit or explicit, and any pre-conditions may or may not include the actualization of action a (element 2). In any case, the presence of any conditions, their final status as fulfilled or unfulfilled, and all ensuing states of affairs including event x , are fully known beforehand to the divine speaker.

predictions that take into account the known, future response of the hearer plus all ensuing states of affairs.

Once all the elements (often implicit) surrounding the divine instruction are taken into account, there is no contingency to be resolved except, as in the case of all other commissives, within the perception of the time-bound observer. All divine advice, whether labeled as prophecy, promise, or instruction, incorporate the future state of affairs within their contexts, such that the words of the advice fully correspond to the actual, future state of affairs. All divine advice—promises, prophecies, and instructions—are true in terms of the correspondence meaning of truth, and are inerrant.⁴⁰

One can successfully argue from Scripture that God utters only *infallible* instructions. That is, God's instructions will always prove to be morally consistent with His perfect nature, and will always lead to the ultimate benefit of the hearer and the universe when obeyed. One can also successfully argue from Scripture, with the aid of speech act theory and Allison's defense of the inerrancy of divine commissives, that God utters only *inerrant* instructions, even in terms of the correspondence meaning of truth. One will not be limited to arguing simply for the inerrant *report* of divine instructions by Scripture. This is the case, because speech act theory disqualifies divine instructions as being speech act directives. Ironically, the establishment of this "defect" within apparent divine directives in terms of speech act theory is precisely what is needed to defend the inerrancy of divine instructions.

Comments Regarding Emphasizing One Element of the Speech Act Over the Others

To this writer, the greatest benefit of Kevin Vanhoozer's application of speech act theory to Scripture has been the resulting ability to describe in much greater precision than before how an author's intention can be encoded within a text, rather than residing only in the author's mind and thus being lost to the ages. Speech act theory holds that the author's intention is encoded within every text, specifically within the illocution that is present in every utterance. Vanhoozer's long-term focus on the role of the illocution in utterances has thus been of inestimable value to conservative, biblical hermeneutics.

That same focus on the illocution however has not served well for defending the inerrancy of biblical utterances. Leaving aside the reality that Scripture inerrantly reports all its utterances, only one of the five illocutions, the assertion, has as its *primary* purpose the stating of truth, the matching of words to a current state of affairs. The focus needs to move to the locution, where the propositional content of the speech act resides, when the presence or absence of error is being assessed. Speech act theory is helpful here because it demands an unswerving commitment to the correspondence meaning of truth. When the locution of the speech act is the focus, this writer has argued that the inerrancy of every biblical utterance, whether an assertion of truth or not, can be cogently defended and explained in terms of the correspondence meaning of truth.

Speech act theory has served equally poorly when the perlocution only is the focus. Some have observed that at least some with postmodern leanings have latched on to speech act theory as a tool, because of the concept it puts forth of the perlocution, the

⁴⁰ The problems of verification of divine instructions by the time-bound observer are identical to those regarding the inerrant, divine commissive, already discussed above.

desired effect upon the hearer on the part of the author.⁴¹ The argument is made by these that the supposed inability to link biblical utterances with absolute truth, plus the supposed inability to identify the Divine originator's intent, plus the supposed irrelevance of the human author's intent, is not fatal to the Bible's authority, because the biblical utterances continue to have the positive effects the authors would have desired upon the lives of its hearers and readers. Unquestionably then, speech act theory is as vulnerable to misuse as any descriptive tool has ever been when in the hands of the Bible interpreter.

⁴¹ Examples are Robertson McQuilkin and Bradford Mullen, "The Impact of Postmodern Thinking on Evangelical Hermeneutics," *JETS* 40, no. 1 (March 1997): 71; Scott A. Blue, "Meaning, Intention, and Application: Speech Act Theory in the Hermeneutics of Francis Watson and Kevin J. Vanhoozer," *Trinity Journal* 23, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 167-71; Gordon R. Lewis, "Propositional Revelation Essential to Evangelical Spiritual Formation?," *JETS* 46, no. 2 (June 2003): 281.