

The Inspiration of Scripture

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We must begin this study in Christian doctrine by saying a word or two about the use of the mind in religion and by emphasizing the importance of applying rigorous Christian thought to every area of our Christian lives. We aren't called simply to enjoy some particular experience. We are called upon to think through all the implications of our faith, girding up the loins of our minds (1 Peter 1:13) and presenting our bodies to God in what Paul calls 'reasonable', or even 'logical', service (Romans 12:1). This means that we have to apply Christian thought to evangelism, to worship, to church government and even, of course, to our own personal witness. But it surely implies above all that we apply Christian thought to the question of what it is we believe, and why it is we believe it.

There are three main reasons why it is important to apply our minds to Christian doctrine.

First, because of the demands of personal witness. We can testify to our faith only if we know first of all what we believe. Supposing we were challenged, can we tell what our view of God is, or our view of the world in which we live? Can we tell men what we mean when we say, 'You must be born again'? Can we answer the question, 'How do I become a Christian?' We can never bear effective personal witness unless we know what the gospel actually is.

Secondly, we need to know why we believe what we believe. Can we, as Peter urges us, give a reason for the hope that is in us (1 Peter 3:15)? It isn't enough to know what we believe. We must know the grounds for our beliefs. That is especially important today when our fellow-men are so skeptical and so cynical. They want to know the logic of our particular position. If we are to answer them we must know the Biblical reasons for believing in the deity of Christ, life after death and so on. We must also, of course, know how to answer common objections to those doctrines.

The third reason for studying Christian doctrine is its importance for our personal religion. For the sake of our own souls we must know the full content of the Word of God. I say that because it seems to me that many of our most pressing problems in areas of personal faith are due simply to ignorance. Problems of assurance, problems with depression and problems in coping with such traumas as bereavement often stem either from ignorance of Christian doctrine, or from a failure to apply it. The same is true of the church itself. Many of its problems are really problems in relationships, and these are often the result of a defective Christology. We simply fail to live our lives in the light of the fact that in Christ God shows Himself as the One whose nature it is to put the interests of others before His own.

The importance of knowing Christian doctrine being clear, we must now embark on the study of the first of the topics before us, the inspiration of scripture. There are two chapters on the Bible both because of its fundamental importance, and because there are two distinct emphases to make. There is, first, the emphasis on God's own activity in

relation to His Word. But there is also a second side: the human side, or the input of the character and personality of the men through whom the Bible came.

First, the divine side, the inspiration of the Bible. I want to begin by looking briefly at the Bible's own claims, and in particular at three New Testament passages which speak of Holy Scripture in the most exalted terms.

2 Timothy 3:16

Verse 16 is particularly important, but I want to look at the whole context from verse 15 downwards. It reminds us of the function performed by the Bible. It is able, we are told, to make us wise unto salvation (2 Timothy 3:15); and it makes the man of God perfect (2 Timothy 3:17). Taken together, these statements mean that scripture gives us a saving knowledge of God and fully equips us for the life of discipleship.

But how is it able to do so? Because it is inspired by God. In the Greek there is simply one word, *theopneustos*, made up of the word *theos* for God and the word *pneuma* for breath. The literal meaning is that all scripture is breathed out by God, or Godbreathed. There are three points worth noting with regard to this proposition.

First of all, the word *theopneustos* points not so much to *inspiration* as to *expiration*. The meaning is not that God breathed into the Bible. It is that God breathes out the Bible. It is the breath of God. The word *inspiration* is a Latin word, borrowed from the Vulgate, not from the Greek New Testament. It has its own value, but the idea here is certainly not one of God breathing into the Bible but of God breathing out the Bible. According to this, the subject of inspiration is not the human author, but the book itself: the *scripture* is breathed out by God. We are familiar today with the idea of inspired men: for example, poets, composers of music and great orators. These men are said to be inspired and to give inspired performances. But the Bible doesn't speak in this way. It speaks of the quality of *theopneustos*, of God-breathedness, as a quality of the actual book itself.

Secondly, the Bible has this quality invariably and inalienably. Inspiration is completely independent of our feelings with regard to the Book. The Bible won't allow the idea that somehow when you enjoy this book, or when this book moves you, or when this book comes at you, then it is inspired. The Bible's position is that even when this book is, so far as our experience goes, as dead as dead can be and as dry as dry can be (and that can sometimes happen) it is still *theopneustos*. It is still the breath of God. That does not depend on our human emotions at all, and it does not vary with our human emotions. The Bible does not *become* God's word when it encounters us 'existentially'. The Bible is always God's Word.

Thirdly, according to this statement *theopneustos* belongs to the whole of scripture: to the Bible in its entirety. *Every* scripture, we are told, is breathed out by God. *Pasa graphe*: every single scripture! Whatever is scripture has the quality of *theopneustos*. Now that does not mean that every part of God's Word is equally interesting, or that every part of God's Word is equally stimulating, or

equally elevated, or equally moving. The Gospel of John, for example, is far more elevated than the book of Esther. But the Gospel of John is not more inspired than the book of Esther. The book of Esther, the Epistle to the Romans and the Gospel of John all share equally in this quality of divine expiration. God has breathed them all out. If you can say of something, 'It is written', then you mean, 'It is God-breathed'. The inspiration defined here -the expiration-belongs to every single entity that qualifies for the designation 'scripture': to Old Testament and New Testament, to doctrine and history, to theology and precept, to experience and ethics. Every chapter and every verse have the quality of *theopneustos*.

2 Peter 1: 20-21

The second passage I want to look at is 2 Peter, chapter one, from verse 20 downwards. Here the Apostle is discussing prophecy. He begins with a negative point: prophecy is not a matter of 'private interpretation' (2 Peter 1:20). These men were not simply giving their own opinions: not even their own *expert* opinions. Nor did prophecy come 'by the will of man' (2 Peter 1:21). It wasn't a case of a man saying, 'I'm going to prophesy.' The initiative did not lie with man at all. You see that so often with regard to such figures as Moses and Jeremiah and Jonah. We can almost say of them that they were dragged kicking into this particular ministry. It wasn't their own choice. And when they spoke, the message they proclaimed wasn't from themselves at all.

But then there follows the great positive statement: men spoke as they were carried by the Holy Spirit. The emphasis in this sentence falls firmly on the word *men*: 'carried by the Holy Spirit spoke from God *men*.' We'll come back to this emphasis on the human side of scripture in the next chapter. But for the moment the concern is this: these men spoke from God, and they spoke as men carried by the Spirit of God.

Both points are important. They spoke from God. The prophet was the spokesman of God. He had had an audience with God. The very word *prophet* means to *speak forth*. These men were taken into God's audience chamber, they were told God's secrets and they came forth as God's spokesmen. There is an interesting illustration of that in the story of Moses and Aaron, when Moses protests, 'Lord, I'm not eloquent.' Among other things God says to him, 'In that case, Aaron can be your *prophet*' (Exodus 4:16). In other words, 'Aaron can be your spokesman. You just tell him what to say.' That was the prophet's function. He spoke from God and he spoke for God: 'I will put my words in his mouth' (Deuteronomy 18:18).

But then there's also this marvelous picture: they spoke as men *carried* by the Spirit. We could almost say they were *ferried* by the Spirit. Now when you're carried, you aren't led and you aren't prompted. There's a degree of passivity here: an emphasis on the controlling influence of the agent doing the carrying. In the production of scripture God superintended and supervised the whole process, so that as the human agents thought and spoke and wrote, and as they used their sources, He was in control, setting them down at His own chosen destination and ensuring that they spoke exactly what He intended them to speak.

John 10:35

We have, then, two pictures so far. We have *theopneustos*, the word of God *ex Aired*; and we have these great prophets literally carried by God himself.

We turn now to the Gospel of John and the tenth chapter, from verse 34 downwards. Here we find the Lord's own view of scripture. He has been challenged because He's been making astonishing claims on His own behalf, claiming in effect to be God (*theos*). Not surprisingly, the Jews accuse Him of blasphemy. Jesus, in reply, uses a very interesting argument. 'Look,' He says, 'it cannot always be wrong to apply the word *god* to a man, because in your own scriptures, in the book of Psalms, the word *god* is applied to your own rulers.' That's the Lord's argument: 'Is it not written in your law, "I said, Ye are gods?"' (Psalm 82:6). Now, He says, 'You can't accuse me of saying something that is always blasphemous when in your own scriptures your rulers are addressed as gods by God himself.' What I'm interested in for the moment is this: the Lord adds, 'Scripture cannot be broken' (John 10:35). This is a great statement about the Bible itself: scripture cannot be violated. The word which occurs here is the word used for breaking a commandment. The Bible, in the judgment of Jesus, has the authority of law: absolute and infallible authority. It can't be wrong. It can't be false. It can't mislead. It can't deceive. It can't be violated. That is the Lord's own testimony.

There is nothing I can say which is more important than this. Let me put it to you this way. We evangelicals are often accused of what's called 'bibliolatry', that is, the worship of a book. 'Ah, you worship the book, this dead book,' they say. 'You have a paper Pope. You are bibliolaters.' Well, I say, It's not bibliolatry. It's Christolatry! It's the worship of Christ. Christ has said this Book is infallible. He has attested it as the unbreakable Word of God, and it is because of His testimony, given through the apostles and given in His own words before us here, that I personally believe in the full, final, infallible authority of scripture. I cannot see how one can be loyal to Christ and yet defy him on something as fundamental as His view of the status of the Bible.

It isn't only here that the Lord makes this kind of claim. He reminds us in the Sermon on the Mount that He came to fulfil the law and then adds, 'One jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled' (Matthew 5:18). Similarly, He rebukes the multitude by saying, 'You do err, not knowing the scriptures' (Matthew 22:29). And He fights the devil with the same weapon, 'It is written' (Matthew 4:4). Equally significantly, there is no record of His ever finding fault with the Bible.

Now the point, surely, is this. We're told often that in the Old Testament in particular there are deficiencies of theology and even deficiencies of morality. We're told that it contains sub-Christian teaching. Well, I can only say, If that's the case, Jesus Christ didn't see it. In fact, He said, 'Scripture cannot be broken.' For me, belief in the God-giveness of the Bible is simply an aspect of devotion to Christ. I believe in inspiration not because I can prove the Bible to be inerrant, but because the Lord and His apostles attest it as being inspired, as coming to us through men carried by God, and as having an infallible authority. It is on this self-attestation of God's Word that we rest our doctrine of scripture.

Alternative views of scripture

Our view of the Bible is not the only one on offer, as all of you know. I don't want to waste your time by going into other views in detail, but there are at least three which are widely current and deserve a brief notice.

First, there is what may be called the *liberal* view. The better term, I suppose, is *modernist*. This view minimizes the divine element in scripture and sees the Bible as an essentially human document. It would say that at best the biblical authors were only experts in their own fields, and their authority only the authority of genius. In its extreme form (in the teaching of, for example, Rudolf Bultmann) the gospels are regarded as in their entirety works of the free creative imagination, with not even a historical core. All is mythology unless proved otherwise. Such an approach may seem very alien to us, but it is the assumption behind much of the RE taught in Scottish schools today. Our children are told from a very early age that the Bible is 'just a human book'.

Then there is the Barthian view, now going out of fashion, but still prevalent in some quarters. The essence of this view is that the Bible *becomes* the Word of God. This idea reflects the existential philosophy which lay behind Barth's theology. Sometimes you had a living, transformational encounter with scripture and in that moment it became the Word of God. This is why Barth's early theology was known as the theology of paradox. The Bible was deemed to be full of errors and contradictions, full of bad theology and even full of bad ethics and bad morality. The paradox was that God could take this very human thing, with all its errors, and work wonders. This meant that Barth had a vested interest in maximising the defects of the Bible; and that's why, although in Barth there are many evangelical notes, his whole view of scripture was so destructive. He accepted the most extreme critical views, because the more defective the Bible was, the more glorious the paradox. It's just as if we were to argue that the greater a sinner a preacher is, the more glorious it is that God should use him. To me, this is a fundamentally unbiblical approach to the Word of God and so, although I can follow Barth in some things, I can't follow him at all in his doctrine of scripture.

Thirdly, there is the neo-evangelical view, which is becoming increasingly popular and influential even in high academic circles. It is called *neo-evangelical* because it no longer stands four-square on the idea of plenary or full inspiration, preferring instead a theory of partial inspiration. Those who hold this position say, 'We have a high view of scripture, but we don't regard it as infallible and we don't think it is inerrant. It is inspired only in certain areas.' Unfortunately, it isn't always easy to know in what areas! The general position is that it's inspired in its doctrine, but not in its historical statements; or inspired in what the authors intended to say, but not in the assumptions which they made.

The evangelical doctrine

Over against these views, I'm driven (not by obscurantism, I hope, but by Christolatry) to the historic evangelical doctrine which was assumed by the church for centuries, and crystallized in the magnificent work of B. B. Warfield of Princeton in the late nineteenth

century. That doctrine is encapsulated in three particular words. You can take them all, or you can choose the one that you think best.

First, it may be said that the Bible is marked by *infallible* inspiration. This means either that the Bible is never deceived, or that the Bible never deceives. The trouble with it is that it is negative. Even a railway timetable may be said to be infallible in the negative sense that it contains no errors. But that does not make it inspired. The word *infallible*, then, has its uses, but it reminds us only that the Bible does not deceive. It doesn't take us much further than that.

Secondly, there is the word *verbal*, stressing the totality of inspiration. It literally means that every word in scripture is inspired and I'm quite happy to endorse it. The difficulty with it is that the *word* is not the unit of meaning. You don't get the meaning of the Bible by taking a word and looking at it till you've taken all the blood out of it. The unit of meaning is usually the sentence. But if we want to emphasize the totality of inspiration, meaning that every unit of meaning is given by expiration of God and by the supervision of God, then the word *verbal* can be useful.

My own preference is for the third word, *plenary*, which means simply full. What this highlights is that the Bible in its entirety is inspired by God. Whatever the authors intended to say, and whatever they taught - their history, their ethics, their chronology - is all covered by inspiration.

There are, then, three words: *infallible*, *verbal* and *plenary*. I haven't used the word *inerrant*, because inerrancy is a consequence of inspiration, not a quality of it. But it is indeed a consequence of it. There is, of course, much that is inerrant that is not inspired. But what is inspired-what has God for its author - must be inerrant.

There is yet another word which I want to sow in your minds: the word *organic*. Inspiration is infallible, verbal, plenary and organic. I use the word *organic* because it encapsulates the idea that the scriptures are given through the organism, the human personality. I'll come back to that in the next chapter. But if we want a complete picture of inspiration, we must keep this word *organic*, to safeguard the idea that in inspiration God uses human character and human gifts and personality.

The attestation of scripture

Well, what have I done so far? We've seen the Bible's claims for itself and we've seen the doctrine which we build upon those claims. We come now to this question: Can we substantiate these claims? It's all very well to say the Bible makes these claims, but can we substantiate them and if so, how?

In the Westminster Confession of Faith there is a superb chapter on scripture. I want to pause here for a moment, just to make this point: this chapter is the greatest single statement on scripture to be found anywhere in the English language, and I commend it to

you most warmly. It's a piece of superb prose, it's a piece of superb theology, it's a piece of superb pastoral counselling. It isn't long, so read it and digest it.

In the fifth section of this chapter there is a great statement as to the way we come to be persuaded of the infallible inspiration of the Word of God. The proof, says the Confession, takes the following course: first of all, the testimony of the church; secondly, the internal excellencies of the Bible itself; and thirdly, the witness of the Holy Spirit. Note carefully that not one of these points taken in isolation, but all three of them taken together, form the process by which we come to be persuaded that the Bible is the Word of God. Let me just touch upon each of them briefly.

First of all, the testimony of the church. We could reword that and say quite simply 'tradition'. I don't want to be sidetracked on this, but if we go back into Puritan theology we find that men like John Owen, for example, tended to minimise the importance of the church's role. It's quite fascinating to see how the Free Church fathers in the nineteenth century, William Cunningham in particular, sought to redress the balance, and really re-introduced this emphasis on the role of the church. If you can obtain Cunningham's *Theological Lectures*, you will find there a superb, though sadly neglected, discussion of the whole doctrine of scripture.

Well, what does the church do? Fundamentally, it tells us what the Bible is. What is scripture? How do you know what constitutes the Old Testament? How do you know what constitutes the New Testament? The church tells you. It tells you, for example, that the list of books in the Old Testament as we have it today is exactly the same as the list of Old Testament books in the days of our Lord himself. We know that because of tradition: because of the church's testimony.

But what of the 'longer canon' and the Apocrypha? It is alleged that at Alexandria there was a longer list than the list at Jerusalem and that this Alexandrian list contained the books called the Apocrypha, which the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches accept as canonical but the Protestant churches do not. I don't want to go too far into this, but the basic Protestant position is that there is no evidence whatever that that longer list was ever deemed canonical. It was a list, in fact, which came into being only when the Emperor Ptolemy asked for a translation of Hebrew literature. He seems to have said, 'Give me everything you've got', and the translators did just that. They gave him the whole lot- all the Jewish literature they had, scripture plus other things: a whole library. But there is no evidence that those other things were ever regarded as canonical in Judaism, and certainly not in the Christian church until quite late in its history.

What about the New Testament? The position is this. The church always had a canon: it had the Old Testament. But from the resurrection of Christ onwards- indeed, from the commencement of the Lord's ministry - that canon was being constantly augmented. It was being augmented by the Lord's own oral teaching, by the apostles' oral teaching, and by the apostles' written teaching in their epistles, gospels, and so on. That written teaching quickly came to be recognised as scripture in its own right. In 2 Peter 3:16, for example, Peter refers to Paul's writings as *scripture*: 'which they that are unlearned and

unstable wrest, as they do also the other *scriptures*, unto their own destruction'. What happened was that the church put those other elements -the Lord's oral teaching, the apostles' oral teaching and the apostles' written teaching - on a par with scripture.

The question then becomes, how do we know which are the apostolic writings? The answer is, the church tells us. Tradition tells us. We can go right back into the age of the apostles and the age immediately succeeding them and see which church-writings of the period were deemed canonical. We can also see that there were other writings, such as the *Shepherd of Hermas* and the *Epistle to Diognetus* and some others, which were Christian and which were in fairly wide circulation but were not deemed of apostolic provenance, and therefore weren't regarded as canonical.

What tradition does, then, is to tell us which books formed the Old Testament canon and which books are apostolic. It also tells us that the church has found these books "profitable", making believers wise unto salvation and fully equipping them for every good work (2 Timothy 3:15-18). The Westminster Confession puts it this way: `We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to a high and reverent esteem of Holy Scripture' (1:5). As a matter of personal history, all of us first met the Bible through the church, and all of us first came to love it through the church's recommendation (or maybe through parental recommendation: it's the same thing).

The second line of proof consists of what the Confession calls the `incomparable excellencies' of scripture: the internal qualities of the Bible itself. In other words, this book bears upon itself the marks of divine authorship. All you would expect in a book which comes from God is found here. It has a marvelous unity. It has an unsurpassable elevatedness of concept and grandeur of thought. It has a majestic ethic which our consciences fully endorse. There is nothing in its view of God, or of ourselves, which is repugnant to what we know of ourselves or of our environment. Above all (at least for me) there is this: Christ Himself. That is the supreme `incomparable excellence' of the Bible-the picture of the way of salvation, with Christ at its centre.

Modern scholars tell us that the Christ of historic Christian belief is a creation of the faith of the early Christian community. Now, I think I've read a fair sample of the world's greatest literature and it seems to me that there is something here that belongs to a different order altogether. Indeed - and I think I've said this often enough - if I couldn't worship the Christ of the Bible, I'd worship those who invented him. There is no record in the whole of literary history of a community creating a figure comparable to Christ: such grandeur, such compassion, such magnificent teaching, such magnificent *ways* of teaching, such marvelous relationships with men, with women, with children! So good, and yet so credible; so divine, and yet so human; so real that the narrative totally convinces us that if we came to Him we'd find rest for our souls. As far as I am concerned, I am a Christian because of what the Christ of the Bible does to me, and I come at the Book through Him. I accept it as God's Word, because it has this incomparable excellence, Christ Himself. Even as a concept, He is unsurpassable. There is no way in which I would want Him improved or want Him altered. When I find Him, I find the Absolute and I find the Ultimate. My spiritual quest is over.

Notice carefully what our Confession says about these excellencies: that they 'abundantly evidence' scripture to be the Word of God. These evidences are fully cogent. The reasonable or spiritual mind has no doubt, when confronted with this Bible, that it is the Word of God. You do not need some further evidence. You have the church's witness and you have the Bible's own characteristics, and these carry total logical and probative force. There are, of course, men and women who say that they aren't convinced. But the defect is not in the evidence. The defect is in ourselves. This is the essence of the Reformed and Confessional position. We have every right to present our neighbours with the evidence, but the evidence, substantially, is this: Read the Bible for yourselves! Let it make its own impact upon you. Come into contact with its Christ, with its concepts, with its morality, with its knowledge of your own soul. Come into contact with these and you will find that the Bible attests itself as the Word of God. It bears the impress of the divine personality. This is why John Owen could say that there are more marks of divine authorship in the Bible than there are in the creation itself.'

The third line of testimony to the divine authority of scripture is the witness of the Holy Spirit. This witness is not to be separated from the others. Nor is it to be regarded as an additional revelation. It isn't the Spirit saying in a revelatory flash, 'This is the word of God!' Nor is the Spirit's witness an additional *evidence*. The position is this: Imagine a court of law-you have an advocate, and you have evidence. In this instance, the evidence is 'the incomparable excellencies' and the advocate is the Holy Spirit. He is not Himself part of the evidence. He uses the evidence there is, but He gives that evidence cogency. He gives it force and power.

But what does that mean? That He changes us! He conditions my mind to respond to the evidence. You can link this with two similar phenomena at different ends of the intellectual spectrum. There are those, for instance, who don't enjoy watching cricket. That is a serious problem. But the problem is in themselves, and the change must take place in themselves. And there are those who don't like Mozart or Bach. Again, the problem is in themselves. It is they who have to be changed.

Similarly, there are those who can't stand the Bible. It doesn't impress them at all. When the Spirit comes, He doesn't change the Bible, although there are many folk who will testify that when they were converted the Bible became a new Book to them. The truth is that they became new people. They were blind, but now they see. It may happen in a flash or it may happen gradually, but the important thing is that the Spirit changes the mind so that it is now sensitive to, and responsive to, the divineness of scripture. George Gillespie once said, in a different connection, 'All thy marks will leave thee in the dark.' In other words, you can have all the evidence in the world, but without inward illumination you still remain in the dark.

Three final points:

First, the *sufficiency* of scripture. The Bible contains everything we need to know for salvation and everything we have a right to lay down as a condition of church membership.

Secondly, the *finality* of scripture. It is the supreme judge in all matters of controversy. We sometimes speak of 'subordinate' standards, but this is a misnomer. As the Shorter Catechism itself points out (Answer 2), 'The word of God ... is the *only* rule to direct us.' You cannot have a subordinate standard. You have one rule, and everything else is under the control of that rule. The Bible is the only touchstone. It judges the preaching. It judges the decrees of councils. It judges the creeds of the church. It judges even our interpretation of the Bible itself.

Lastly, the *perspicuity* of scripture. The Bible has clarity. This is of enormous importance. Indeed, it was one of the great achievements of the Reformation to give the Bible back to the people, stressing that 'not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means' could attain to a sufficient understanding of the scriptures (Westminster Confession I:VII). Today, we need to get back to this. The Bible is not targeted at experts, yielding its meaning only to priests or scholars. You don't need rows of commentaries to understand it. You don't need to go to a theological college. If you are a Christian, it is for you. Hunger, it has been said, is the best *hors d'oeuvre*; and spiritual hunger is the best hermeneutic. If we come to the Bible as needy sinners ('poor in spirit', as Jesus Himself put it) then we'll understand it because we'll find it speaks to our condition.

The Bible, then, is our authority; and it is a sufficient authority, a final authority and a perspicuous authority.

References

1. John Owen, Works, vol. IV, p. 91
- 2 George Gillespie, A Treatise of Miscellany Questions, chapter XXI