

Inspiration

1 INTRODUCTION

When we speak of Scripture, we are speaking of God’s special revelation preserved in written form. As we’ve already seen, God has revealed himself in many ways—through direct address to individuals, through dreams and visions, and most importantly, through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. But what sets Scripture apart is that in it God has communicated himself in such a way that it is preserved forever through the medium of written communication. But how was this written Word communicated? How was it preserved and what sets Scripture apart as the unique form of special revelation we know as the Bible? This topic—called *inspiration*—is the focus of this paper.

2 CONCEPT OF INSPIRATION

We tend to think of inspiration in the same way as we view inerrancy, authority, clarity, sufficiency, etc.—as a quality or characteristic of Scripture. To a certain degree, inspiration is a defining quality of Scripture. But it is much more than that. In fact, inspiration speaks more of the *process* of how God communicated himself in written form. In fact, inspiration is foundational to these qualities. We can speak of Scripture as authoritative, inerrant, sufficient, etc., only *because* it is inspired. As Pinnock writes,

The Bible in its entirety is God’s written Word to man, free of error in its original autographs, wholly reliable in history and doctrine. Its divine inspiration has rendered the Book “infallible” (incapable of teaching deception) and “inerrant” (not liable to prove false or mistaken).... Inspiration involves infallibility as an essential property, and infallibility in turn implies inerrancy. This threefold designation of Scripture is implicit in the basic thesis of Biblical authority.¹

The foundational text concerning inspiration is 2 Timothy 3:16. In the preceding verses, Paul exhorts Timothy to persevere amidst the reality of hardship and persecution, which is an expectation of all who desire to live godly in the present world (2 Tim 3:12). While evil people will descend into deeper and deeper levels of immorality (3:13), Paul urges his young protégé in the faith to press on in what he has learned and believed (3:14), remembering that he grew up reading and knowing the “holy writings” which “are able to give you wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (3:15). These “holy writings,” according to Paul, are none other than the Scripture, they are “inspired by God” (3:16).

The term “inspired” is a unique term, found only here in the NT. The term is θεόπνευστος (*theopneustos*), a compound noun that combines θεός (*theos*), “God” with πνέω (*pneō*), “to blow.” The idea is a writing (Scripture) which is produced by the blowing of God. The English term, unfortunately, seems to connote the idea of inhalation, as if God “breathed into” Scripture a certain quality, or breathed into the writers some special insight by which they penned the text. The Greek, however, speaks of God “breathing out” Scripture, and some contemporary versions have attempted to capture that nuance by translating the

¹ Clark H. Pinnock, *A Defense of Biblical Infallibility* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1967), 1.

term “God-breathed” (NIV) or “breathed out by God” (ESV), rather than the traditional word “inspired” (NAS). Thus, the concept of inspiration points to the *source* of Scripture—it is produced by God.

This verse also clarifies the *extent* of inspiration. Paul writes that “all Scripture,” or “every Scripture” is inspired by God, two legitimate renderings that mean the same thing, though the former captures the composite whole while the latter emphasizes every individual portion of the whole.

However, this phrase also identifies the subject of inspiration: “Scripture.” It is not biblical authors that are inspired. Rather, Paul writes that “all Scripture is inspired.” The immediate and historical context of the verse necessarily limits Paul’s reference to “Scripture” to the OT texts. This fact is made plain not only in the mention of the “holy writings” in verse 15, but in the fact that all 51 occurrences of the term γραφή (*graphe*), “Scripture,” in the NT refer to the OT. In fact, the term γραφή was a technical term used by the NT writers to refer to the OT. This, however, should not limit the application of the term “inspiration” only to the OT. The apostle Peter demonstrates an awareness of the Pauline epistles in 2 Peter 3:16 and places them in equal footing with the OT when he speaks of Paul’s hard-to-understand letters which are often twisted and distorted by people, who also distort “the rest of Scripture.” Thus, very early in the NT, Paul’s letters were already viewed as part of Scripture along with the OT. In 1 Timothy 5:18, we see Paul speak of what “the Scripture says,” whereby he quotes first from Deuteronomy 25:4 and then from Jesus’ words in Luke 10:7.²

But the reality is that while 2 Timothy 3:16 is critical for understanding Scripture’s source, it only provides us the *fact* of inspiration. It offers little detail regarding the *process* of inspiration. It also introduces an important tension—if Scripture is indeed produced by God, then how are the human writers involved in this process? How can it be produced by God and yet still be written by men? These two questions have led to a number of theories regarding just how inspiration occurred.

3 INADEQUATE VIEWS OF INSPIRATION

The various theories regarding the process of inspiration can be divided into two important spectrums. The first spectrum deals with the emphasis on the source of inspiration. Some attempt to heavily emphasize the divine source of Scripture, while others attempt to emphasize the human side of the process. The second spectrum deals with the extent of inspiration’s application to the text—how much of Scripture is inspired. As we’ll see, each theory comes with certain strengths, yet the parallel weaknesses make them inadequate explanations of the inspiration process.

3.1 MECHANICAL DICTATION

The mechanical dictation theory suggests that God provided the human writers with the exact words of Scripture, and that the writers were passive secretaries in the process. They simply penned the words as God directed them in what to write. There are several strengths to this theory. First, it maintains a high

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 75-76.

view of Scripture's divine origin. Likewise, it emphasizes the full extent of inspiration to all Scripture. There are no words which were not fully and directly revealed by God.

The Bible does include several instances in which divine dictation occurred (Exod 20:1; 31:18; 34:27; Jer 30:2; Rev 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14). These texts are then used by purveyors of this theory as the pattern of inspiration for all of Scripture. But the flaw of this theory involves its complete de-emphasis on the human participation in the process. The biblical writers are merely passive instruments, with no creative participation. If this theory were accurate, we would necessarily expect a uniform style, vocabulary, and point of view. After all, it was produced by a single author. Yet instead we find the exact opposite. The Bible evidences a variety of styles and vocabulary throughout its various parts, which lends to the notion that it was the product of multiple authors with various perspectives, styles, and backgrounds.

3.2 NATURAL INSPIRATION

The natural theory of inspiration falls on the exact opposite side of the spectrum from the dictation theory. This perspective views Scripture as a literary masterpiece. Its writers were "inspired" in the same way as gifted writers, composers, artists, etc., who demonstrate their personal genius through expressive communication. In this case, the biblical writers "were men who gained amazing spiritual insight through their exceptional sensitivity and giftedness. As a result, their writings were of an inspired quality."³

The strength of this view is that it highlights the human contribution of the writers. Unfortunately, it fails dismally to adequately capture the divine source of Scripture. In this way, Scripture is a magnificent literary work. Yet because it is simply a human work and not a divine work as well, it is fraught with all of the weaknesses of humanity. As Barrick succinctly writes, "Even genius is capable of error."⁴

3.3 PARTIAL INSPIRATION

Partial inspiration attempts to arrive at a mediating position between dictation and natural inspiration. In this view, inspiration applies only to those things which are unknown or unknowable by human experience or research. Things which everyone knows or understands involve little or no inspiration, as do things which involve human investigation. In this way, Scripture is allowed to be called inspired while also possessing errors. While this view views Scripture as a work of by divine and human origins, it nevertheless fails to accurately capture extent to which inspiration applies. No "all of Scripture" is breathed out by God, but only those portions which transcend human insight.

3.4 CONCEPTUAL INSPIRATION

The conceptual view of inspiration is another mediating position, but it differs from partial inspiration in that it does not attempt to limit inspiration to only certain portions of Scripture. Rather, it holds that God inspired the concepts in Scripture, but left the human writers free to address them in their own words. In this way, God inspired the concept of love in the mind of the apostle Paul, but allowed Paul to express

³ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Biblical Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 77.

⁴ William D. Barrick, Syllabus for Old Testament Introduction (TMS, Summer 2009), 1.

that concept using his own style and wording (e.g., 1 Cor 13). What results is a Bible that is inspired in concept but human in the detail and expression. “This approach,” MacArthur and Mayhue write, “allows God to be true in what he conveyed to the human authors, while at the same time leaving room for inadequacies in what was actually written. In this view, God either accommodated himself to the limitations of the human writers or left it to them to convey his truth in their own words, explaining why what the human authors wrote is not necessarily factually accurate.”⁵

3.5 MYSTICAL INSPIRATION

The mystical view of inspiration departs from the previous views in that it perceives the concept of inspiration in a fundamentally different way. In fact, this view comes closest to the actual concept of “inspiration” denoted by the English term—the act of breathing into something. Thus the basic idea of the mystical view is that Scripture is inspired when it speaks to an individual or engenders faith in the person.

This view is a product of what is known as neo-orthodoxy, a theological movement that arose at the turn of the 20th century in response to growing concerns over the systematic dismantling of the Christian faith by liberal theology. As the latter slowly eroded the trustworthiness of Scripture through its relentless higher critical methods, which found more and more scientific and historical objections in the text, neo-orthodoxy developed as a way to “rescue” the Christian message. It claimed that “by its very nature, divine revelation cannot be inscripturated. As soon as it is imprisoned in words, especially words setting forth propositions about God and spiritual truth, then it becomes the object of men’s minds and cognitive powers. It thus falls under the control of man, and finds itself imprisoned within the covers of the written word.”⁶

Accordingly, neo-orthodox theologians like Karl Barth and others held that the Bible a book is *not* the word of God, but it *contains* the word of God and may *become* the word of God as it brings the reader into a mystical relationship with God. To them, divine revelation was not the act of revealing truths about God, but rather a “direct encounter between God and man.”⁷ Archer explains,

*More typically Neo-Orthodox is the view which regards the Bible as something less than the written Word of God; the Bible is merely a witness to the Word of God. According to this view, the Word of God is a dynamic principle which comes into operation only when there is a living or “existential” encounter between the believer and God. God speaks with power to him from the pages of Holy Writ and establishes a personal relationship, rather than merely instilling propositional truth into his mind.*⁸

Thus, the Bible is not, strictly speaking, the Word of God, but *becomes* the Word of God (i.e., inspired) when it speaks to the individual in some mystical or existential way. The implications of this view are

⁵ MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 76.

⁶ Gleason Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 33.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

significant. First, it elevates the subjective experience of the reader over and against the objective element of Scripture. The individual decides what is “God’s Word” as he is “hit,” so to speak, by something in it—an “aha!” moment. Notice, however, that there is no logical connection between the Bible, per se, and this personal encounter. Can God make the Koran become the word of God?

Second, it opens the avenue, as with previous theories, for the possibility of Scriptural errors, as Archer goes on to explain:

Since the biblical text was written by human authors, and all men are sinful and subject to error, therefore, it is claimed, there must be error in the biblical text itself. But, it is argued, the living God is able to speak even from this partially erroneous text and bring believers into vital relationship with Him in a saving encounter. Such a view of the Bible leaves ample room for all manner of scientific and historical errors, and for all the adverse judgments of rationalistic higher criticism against the authenticity of the writings of Moses, Isaiah, Daniel, and all the rest. All these findings may be (and undoubtedly are) true as an accurate account of how the Bible humanly originated. Nevertheless, God has appointed this error-studded Scripture to be a uniquely authoritative witness to His revelation, and he is able to use it in a dynamic way to “save” men.⁹

As a whole, neo-orthodoxy has died down as a popular theological approach. However, its core philosophical and theological thrusts rest quite comfortably in the constructs of postmodern theology, and so it is no surprise that we have begun to see a rise of neo-orthodox-like concepts in the last twenty years.

4 BIBLICAL VIEW OF INSPIRATION

The biblical view of inspiration, over and against these inadequate views, must take into account every facet of the issue introduced by 2 Timothy 3:16. It must identify God as the source and originator of Scripture, yet it must not undermine the contribution made by the human writers in the process. It must articulate the full extent of inspiration, and it must correctly identify the subject of inspiration.

4.1 DEFINITION: PLENARY VERBAL INSPIRATION

There have been numerous articulations of the biblical view of inspiration, all of which capture to varying degrees the key components of the doctrine. Ryrie described it as the process whereby “God superintended the human authors of the Bible so that they composed and recorded without error His message to mankind in the words of their original writings.”¹⁰ Warfield writes that “Inspiration is...a supernatural influence exerted on the sacred writers by the Spirit of God, by virtue of which their writings are given divine trustworthiness.”¹¹ And Kantzer writes that it is the “work of the Holy Spirit by which, without setting aside their personalities and literary or human faculties, God so guided the authors of

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Charles H. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1999), 38.

¹¹ Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture* (Louisville, KY: SBTS Press, 2014), 131.

Scripture as to enable them to write exactly the words which convey His truth to men, and in so doing so preserved their judgments from error in the original manuscripts.”¹²

Perhaps the best and most carefully articulated definition of inspiration comes from the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, wherein Articles VI-VIII state the following:

ARTICLE VI

***We affirm** that the whole of Scripture and all its parts, down to the very words of the original, were given by divine inspiration. **We deny** that the inspiration of Scripture can rightly be affirmed of the whole without the parts, or of some parts but not the whole.*

ARTICLE VII

***We affirm** that inspiration was the work in which God by His Spirit, through human writers, gave us His Word. The origin of Scripture is divine. The mode of divine inspiration remains largely a mystery to us. **We deny** that inspiration can be reduced to human insight, or to heightened states of consciousness of any kind.*

ARTICLE VIII

***We affirm** that God in His work of inspiration utilized the distinctive personalities and literary styles of the writers whom He had chosen and prepared. **We deny** that God, in causing these writers to use the very words that He chose, overrode their personalities.¹³*

The commonality of all these definitions, and particularly of the Chicago Statement, can be summed up in the phrase **plenary verbal inspiration**. This phrase has clearest and most explicit epithet for biblical inspiration.

4.1.1 Plenary

The term *plenary* carries the generic meaning of “without restriction,” “unqualified,” “unconditional,” “unlimited,” or “comprehensive.” Used of inspiration, it signifies that inspiration “extends to all parts alike.”¹⁴ In light of the various theories espoused which limit inspiration, the term clarifies unequivocally that inspiration applies to the whole of Scripture without restriction—that is, without exception of any of its parts. Sproul explains, “Plenary means that the whole of Scripture is given by divine inspiration. Because some have maintained that the whole has been given by inspiration but some parts of that whole are not by divine inspiration, we are speaking of the origin of Scripture, which does not begin with the insights of men but comes from God himself.”¹⁵

¹² K. S. Kantzer, “The Communication of Revelation,” in *The Bible: The Living Word of Revelation*, ed. M. C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 180.

¹³ R. C. Sproul, *Scripture Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2005), 181-2.

¹⁴ Pinnock, *Defense of Biblical Infallibility*, 1.

¹⁵ Sproul, *Scripture Alone*, 136.

4.1.2 Verbal

The term *verbal* denotes that which is relating to words, and in the present context, it signifies the extent to which inspiration applies. Contrary to those theories which attempt to limit inspiration to the concepts or doctrines outlined in Scripture, *verbal* inspiration means that the very words used and the language forms found in the text originated with God.

4.1.3 Inspiration

The term *inspiration* has already been discussed, but in summary, it denotes the process by which Scripture originated. It refers to the divine origins of Scripture as a book breathed out by God by means of human agents. As 2 Timothy 3:16 clarifies, it is “all Scripture” that is inspired, not the biblical writers. So, while it is appropriate to speak of an individual writing the text “under divine inspiration” or the like, it is inaccurate to speak of a biblical writer as being “inspired.” Remember that the term refers to the “breathing out” of Scripture by God. In reference to a person, the term construes the process to be that God is “breathing into” the biblical writers. This is not the case, as Warfield articulates: “The Greek term has...nothing to say of inspiring or of inspiration: It speaks only of a ‘spiring’ or ‘spiration....’ What it says of Scripture is, not that it is ‘breathed into by God’ or is the product of Divine ‘inbreathing’ into its human authors, but that it is breathed out by God, ‘God breathed,’ the product of the creative breath of God.”¹⁶

4.2 THE PROCESS OF INSPIRATION

We must admit that the process of inspiration is largely a mystery to us. In rare cases, Scripture offers us a window into the writing of certain portions of Scripture (e.g., Jer 36), but even still, we are left with little to no release of the tensions between divine and human contribution. Pinnock describes inspiration as “confluent,” meaning that it is the “product of two free agents, human and divine.”¹⁷ But it is exceedingly difficult to clarify how these two “free agents” worked together to product a document which was, on the one hand, the product of a human individual, and yet at the same time, exactly what God wanted to say—all without divine “overruling” of the human author.

The only passage in Scripture which offers any kind of commentary on the process of inspiration is 2 Peter 1:19-21. Peter’s epistle is an exhortation for believers to persevere in faith and purity, in light of the future return of Christ and the judgment that follows. He will warn his readers of the coming false prophets and teachers who will lead Christians astray into immorality, denying the return of Christ as a way of excusing their sin.

Peter’s aim is to point his readers both to the OT and to the words of Jesus and the apostles (3:2). Peter, after all, was an eyewitness of the future glory of Christ, when Jesus was transfigured before his eyes (1:16-18). In the same way as Peter’s testimony concerning Christ’s return was reliable, his readers also possessed an equally reliable testimony in the “prophetic word,” to which they would be wise to heed until Christ finally returns (1:19).

¹⁶ Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority of Scripture*, 133.

¹⁷ Pinnock, *Defense of Biblical Infallibility*, 1.

Just as he emphasized that his testimony of Christ's return was not based on "cleverly devised fables" (1:16) but on his eyewitness encounter with the transfigured Lord (1:17-18), he also desired his readers to understand that no "prophecy of Scripture"—the OT in this context—originated from the prophet's initiation (1:20). Indeed, no Scripture has *ever* been the product of "human determination." Rather, Scripture is uniquely God's words. Men "spoke for God," meaning that God initiated the words. They were able to speak for him because "they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (1:21).

Three elements are featured in this text, which clarify the process of inspiration: divine causation, human agency, Spirit control, and Scriptural result.

4.2.1 Source: God

Peter's primary aim is to clarify for his readers that the true source of Scripture is God and not man. In this way, his point is very similar to that of 2 Timothy 3:16. "No prophecy of Scripture comes about from one's own initiation." The phrase "one's own initiation" is difficult to render here. It consists of terms, ἐπιλύσεως (*epiluseos*), literally meaning "a loosing" or "a liberation," but figuratively here to meaning to uncover or release something that is obscure, and ἰδίας (*idias*), "one's own," meaning belonging to a particular person. This phrase has been the source of numerous interpretations.

Roman Catholic theology has understood it to refer to individual interpretation by the reader, meaning that no individual can interpret the Scripture on their own, but must receive the interpretation given by the church. (2) Older Protestant interpretation has viewed the phrase as referring to the prophecy itself, meaning that no Scriptural passage stands in isolation from the rest of Scripture, but is understood in light of the rest of the Bible—what they refer to as *analogia fidei* (Analogy of Faith). These two views are far less than adequate, not the least because they fail to account for verse 21.

A better view of this phrase understands ἐπιλύσεως to refer not to interpretation or explanation, but rather to origination or creation. In light of verse 21, which clarifies that Scripture is originated by God, it seems best to understand the phrase to indicate that Scripture is not the product of the prophet's own initiation. Rather, as Peter goes on to explain in the next verse, "no prophecy was ever produced by human determination, but rather men spoke from God because they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (1:21). In two parallel statements, Peter denies the human origination of Scripture and then immediately affirms the divine origination of it.

4.2.2 Agency: Human Writers

Nevertheless, Peter does not deny human involvement in this process. He affirms the fact that men "spoke from God," a phrase which highlights both the human and divine elements of the message. It is on the one hand man that is speaking. Yet they are not speaking "for God"—on God's behalf—but "from God," meaning that God was the cause and source of their message.

We have already acknowledged the fact that while divine dictation occurred at certain times in the production of Scripture, it by no means constituted the norm. Rather, we see throughout Scripture a variety of styles, language, idioms, vocabulary, and personalities. Indeed, 2 Peter 1:19-21 seems to affirm that while God produced Scripture, he used human agency to accomplish this.

There must be within this process a freedom given to the authors. While we can say that they "spoke from God" so that every word written is divinely originated, we must at the same time acknowledge that each word was also the product of an individual human author. All these authors shared certain characteristics

common to all people. They were all relational beings, who spoke languages and had categories of thought patterned after God. In effect, they were all created in God's likeness.

Yet they each exhibit unique characteristics. They come from a variety of geographical, hereditary, educational, and historical backgrounds, with varied interests and employments. Their vocabulary and style were certainly influenced by these elements. There is no doubt that all of these elements were prepared by God through his providence. As Warfield explains, their preparation was "physical, intellectual, spiritual, which must have attended them throughout their whole lives and indeed, must have had its beginning in their remote ancestors, and the effect of which was to bring the right men to the right places at the right times, with the right endowments, impulses, acquirements, to write just the books which were designed for them."¹⁸

4.2.3 Control: Holy Spirit

God providentially prepared the biblical writers for the task of writing Scripture. He allowed them to produce Scripture by expressing themselves in their own words using their own style, incorporating their own experiences, backgrounds, education, etc. Yet they were human beings and thus capable of error. Nevertheless, they produced documents which expressed God's perfect words, completely free from error. In fact, they produced texts that were, down to the very words, *exactly* what God wanted them to write, all without overruling their creative decisions.

The key to this human-divine confluence is the controlling influence of the Holy Spirit. Peter writes that men spoke from God "because they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." The phrase "carried along" translates the verb φερόμενοι (*pheromenoi*), a verb that finds usage in maritime activity to describe the effects of the wind on a ship. The term here is a participle, and either indicates cause ("because they were carried along..."), contemporaneous action ("as/while they were carried along..."), or most likely both. The Spirit's ministry explains why Scripture is not the product of human initiation—they wrote because they were "carried along by the Holy Spirit." But it also explains how they can both speak freely from themselves and yet "speak from God." During the process, the Spirit was superintending the writers, guiding them in their writing so that they produced documents which were simultaneously theirs and God's.

This process was necessarily varied. Moses wrote the Torah partly under direct dictation, yet at other times relying on historical documents and genealogies. David composed many of his psalms based on direct events and circumstances, while others derived from his general life experiences. Solomon searched out and collected proverbs from many different sources, and wrote his own proverbs based on personal observations of the world around him. Matthew and John composed their gospel accounts based on their own personal witness of Jesus' life and ministry. Luke, however, was not an eyewitness, but as a doctor he conducted extensive research, undoubtedly interviewing numerous eyewitnesses.

Yet throughout these various processes, the Holy Spirit was directing them and guiding them as they wrote. Never did he overrule them. Rather, he superintended the process so that the product was God-breathed Scripture. As Lewis writes, "All believers are indwelt, taught, and filled with the Spirit; only the writers of Scripture are said to have been inspired [*sic*] by the Spirit. The writers had the ministries of the Spirit

¹⁸ Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority of Scripture*, 155.

common to all the people of God, but in addition they had the special supervision of the Spirit as prophetic and apostolic spokesmen in their work of composing and writing books of the Bible.”¹⁹

4.2.4 Result: Scripture

The result of this process is what was produced—Scripture. This brings us back full circle to Peter’s original emphasis. His readers possessed a reliable account and testimony of Christ’s future return in the “fully reliable prophetic word.” It possessed this quality because it was not the product of human determination. Rather, it was produced when men spoke for God as and because they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

An important nuance to our understanding of inspiration must be addressed here. Nearly every nuanced definition of plenary verbal inspiration includes reference to the “original documents” or “original autographs.” In fact, Article X of Chicago Statement on Inerrancy reads,

ARTICLE X

*We affirm that inspiration, strictly speaking, applies only to the autographic text of Scripture, which in the providence of God can be ascertained from available manuscripts with great accuracy. We further affirm that copies and translations of Scripture are the Word of God to the extent that they faithfully represent the original. We deny that any essential element of Christian faith is affected by the absence of the autographs. We further deny that this absence renders the assertion of biblical inerrancy invalid or irrelevant.*²⁰

This distinction may seem trivial to some and alarming to others, but it is an essential element of biblical inspiration, for it deals with the relationship between the original documents and copies of the text we have today, as well as the Bibles that we read and study from on a daily basis. In what way can we say that our English Bibles are “inspired” in the same way the original documents were inspired?

First, it must be stated that Scripture affirms that copies of Scripture are the Word of God (Deut 17:18; Ezra 7:14; Matt 22:29; John 5:39; Acts 17:2; 2 Tim 3:15). Yet their quality and authority as Scripture pertains to their accurate reflection of the original. If they do not reflect the original, they cannot rightly be called Scripture and thus cannot rightly be regarded as inspired. Sproul, commenting on Article X of the Chicago Statement, writes,

*Article X deals directly with the perennial issue of the relationship of the text of Scripture that we presently have to the original documents which have not been preserved except through the means of copies. In the first instance, inspiration applies strictly to the original works of the inspired authors. What this does indicate is that the infallible control of God in the production of the original Scripture had not been miraculously perpetuated through the ages in the copying and translating process.... So the framers of the document are not arguing for a perpetually inspired transmission of the text.*²¹

¹⁹ Gordon R. Lewis, “The Human Authorship of Inspired Scripture,” in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 256.

²⁰ Sproul, *Scripture Alone*, 182-3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 146-7.

In other words, Sproul is emphasizing the fact that inspiration pertains *only* to the production of the original documents. While we clearly see that God has providentially preserved Scripture throughout the centuries, that is a completely *different* process than what we find in the production of Scripture itself. Inspiration produced a fully inerrant and infallible text. Divine preservation has not protected the text from the inclusion of errors in the copying process. This clarification makes it clear that to hold to inspiration is not to hold to inspired copies and translations, as do some in the King James Only movement.

Sproul goes on to write,

Since we do not have the original manuscripts, some have urged that an appeal to the lost originals renders the whole cause for the inspiration of the Scripture irrelevant. To reason in this manner is to do despite to the very serious work that has been done in the field of textual criticism. Textual criticism is the science which seeks to reconstruct an original text by a careful analysis and evaluation of the manuscripts we presently possess.... In the Bible as we have it (and as it is conveyed to us through faithful translation), we do have for practical purposes the very Word of God, inasmuch as the manuscripts do convey to us the complete vital truth of the originals.²²

Here, Sproul is clarifying the fact that although the *process* of inspiration does not apply to the preservation and translation of the text, the qualities that derive from inspiration do apply to those copies to the extent that they accurately reflect the original. Through the myriad of manuscript witnesses to the OT and NT, and through the reliable science of textual criticism, we can confidently assert that “for more than ninety-nine percent of the cases, the original text can be reconstructed to a practical certainty.”²³ There is no reason to throw away the concept or validity of inspiration as if we no longer know what the originals said.

But why make the distinction between originals and copies? And why stress the importance of accurate reflection of the originals? To this Sproul makes an important set of comments:

The further affirmation of article X is that copies and translations of Scripture are the Word of God to the extent that they faithfully represent the original. Though we do not actually possess the originals, we have such well-reconstructed translations and copies that to the extent to which they do correspond to the original documents they may be said to be the Word of God. But because of the evident presence of copy errors and errors of translation the distinction must be made between the original work of inspiration in the autographs and the human labor of translating and copying those autographs.²⁴

To this, Sproul makes this final comment:

To limit inerrancy or inspiration to the original manuscripts does not make the whole contention irrelevant. It does make a difference. If the original text were errant, the church would have the option of rejecting the teachings of that errant text. If the original text is inerrant (and the science of textual criticism must be depended upon to reconstruct that inerrant text), we have no legitimate

²² Ibid., 147-8.

²³ Ibid., 147.

²⁴ Ibid., 148.

basis for disobeying a mandate of Scripture where the text is not in doubt.... Therein lies the important issue of the relevancy of the character of the original manuscript.²⁵

While we will explore the topics of preservation, textual criticism, and Bible translation at a later point in this study, their relationship to the doctrine of inspiration is all too important. It matters whether we can read our Bible and know if it is the Word of God. It matters if our copies of the original manuscripts possess the same qualities of inerrancy, infallibility, clarity, authority, and sufficiency as the originals themselves. In the process of inspiration, God superintended the human authors to produce documents which were his very own words as well, perfect in every way.

5 DEMONSTRATING INSPIRATION

Demonstrating the Bible's inspiration is both profoundly simply and dauntingly difficult. On the one hand, the Scripture claims to be the Word of God. Such a claim, however, is far from convincing if left to itself. The reason for this is two-fold: (1) There are many writings, both ancient and modern, that claim to be divinely authoritative. Such claims do not constitute definitive proof. (2) Even if the Bible is, in fact, what it claims to be, humans have an innate "allergy" to God's word and are not willing to submit themselves to God and his Word, no matter how convincing the claim is.

5.1 PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

Before discussing the various evidences for inspiration, we must first discuss in brief some preliminary considerations. The first consideration involves the prerequisite event of spiritual illumination, and the second involves the role of evidences.

5.1.1 Prerequisite: Spiritual Illumination

Thus, the ultimate persuasion of any individual to the claims of Scripture concerning inspiration comes as the Holy Spirit softens the sinner's heart, causing him to acquiesce to the Bible's authority. As Grudem explains,

Our ultimate conviction that the words of the Bible are God's words comes only when the Holy Spirit speaks in and through the words of the Bible to our hearts and gives us an inner assurance that these are the words of our Creator speaking to us. Just after Paul has explained that his apostolic speech consists of words taught by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:13), he says, "The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor 2:14). Apart from the work of the Spirit of God, a person will not receive spiritual truths and in particular will not receive or accept the truth that the words of Scripture are in fact the words of God.²⁶

Thus, we might say that, apart from the Holy Spirit's involvement in the heart of an individual, attempting to demonstrate the authority and inspiration of Scripture to an unbeliever is a hopeless task. Yet this is only partially true. On the one hand, no one has control over another person's heart disposition, and no

²⁵ Ibid., 148-9.

²⁶ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 77.

argument will be “good enough” to convince a sinner of the Bible’s inspiration. Anyone who thinks otherwise is profoundly ignorant both of their own limitations and the noetic effects that sin has on the human heart.

On the other hand, it would be false to say that such a task is utterly hopeless. After all, Paul writes that when the Thessalonians heard the gospel proclaimed to them for the first time, they “accepted it not as a human message, but as it truly is, God’s message, which is at work among [those] who believe” (1 Thess 2:13). What explanation is there for their response? The Holy Spirit was at work in their hearts, bringing them to the conviction that what they were hearing was God’s word. In this way we see that the Christian must understand his role and distinguish it from the Holy Spirit’s role. As Calvin stated,

There are other reasons, neither few nor feeble, by which the dignity and majesty of the Scriptures may be not only proved to the pious, but also completely vindicated against the cavils of slanderers. These, however, cannot of themselves produce a firm faith in Scripture until our heavenly Father manifest his presence in it, and thereby secure implicit reverence for it. Then only, therefore, does Scripture suffice to give a saving knowledge of God when its certainty is founded on the inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit. Still the human testimonies which go to confirm it will not be without effects, if they are used in subordination to that chief and highest proof, as secondary helps to our weakness. But it is foolish to attempt to prove to infidels that the Scripture is the Word of God. This it cannot be known to be, except by faith. Justly, therefore, does Augustine remind us, that every man who would have an understanding in such high matters must previously possess piety and mental peace.²⁷

It is important to remember that the Holy Spirit does not “convince” sinners of the Bible’s authority external from the Bible itself. In other words, as Grudem writes,

...this conviction that the words of Scripture are the words of God does not come apart from the words of Scripture or in addition to the words of Scripture. It is not as if the Holy Spirit one day whispers in our ear, “Do you see that Bible sitting on your desk? I want you to know that the words of that Bible are God’s words.” It is rather as people read Scripture that they hear their Creator’s voice speaking to them in the words of Scripture and realize that the book they are reading is unlike any other book, that it is indeed a book of God’s own words speaking to their hearts.²⁸

In other words, the Scripture and the work of the Spirit are so intertwined that we cannot think of spiritual illumination occurring the one without the other. The Spirit uses the word to convince the sinner of the truthfulness and authority of the word.

5.1.2 The Role of Evidence in Demonstrating Inspiration

Thus, we recognize that proofs for inspiration work in a confirmatory manner to the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. As Calvin wrote, “The human testimonies which go to confirm it [Scripture] will not be without effects, if they are used in subordination to that chief and highest proof, as secondary helps to our weakness.”²⁹ Thus, there is value in things like biblical archaeology and the various internal and

²⁷ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, I.viii.13

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 77-78.

²⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, I.viii.13.

external evidences that point to the Bible's uniqueness from other ancient books. But we must not look at these things as "proving" the inspiration of Scripture. At most, things like archaeology support the credibility of the Bible by confirming the setting the Bible presumes, but it does not "prove" how it happened. The Bible's truth claims do not rest on whether outside evidences can prove it.

In fact, the strongest evidences to inspiration actually come from the internal testimony of the Bible itself. The Bible attests of itself that it is inspired, and the various ways in which this occurs can be used to buttress the believer's view of the word.

5.2 JESUS' VIEW OF SCRIPTURE

MacArthur and Mayhue have rightly noted that "for a Christian, there can be no better witness to the correct understanding of the character, nature, and authority of Scripture than Christ himself. His view must be the believer's view."³⁰ In fact, Christ's view of Scripture is perhaps the best place to begin a discussion of the Bible's inspiration. Harris remarks that citing such passages as 2 Timothy 3:16 to prove inspiration invites the charge of circular reasoning, regardless of the contributions that passage makes to our understanding of the doctrine. But he then goes on to say,

Need we allow thus claim of the critics? Must we reason in a circle? Surely a doctrine so universally held as this one of verbal inspiration has a better basis. That basis is found simply in the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ. Suppose we approach the New Testament, for the sake of the argument, merely as an exceedingly old and obviously worth-while source book for the history of early Christianity and the teachings of Jesus. What do we find? We find pervading the sources, the doctrine of verbal inspiration, and this from the lips of Jesus Himself. Scattered throughout the Gospel record in every Gospel and in every type of record—parables, history, Passion record, etc.—from first to last, is the assurance in the teaching of Jesus that the Scriptures of the Old Testament, to which He referred so frequently are true. He makes no distinction in veracity between the religious and the practical. All the teachings of Scripture were alike true for Christ; He believed them all.³¹

As we look at the gospel accounts, we see that Jesus both affirmed the OT's authority, inspiration, and historicity:³²

- He appealed to the OT's authority against Satan (Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13)
- He appealed to the OT's authority to resolve spiritual and practical matters like the Sabbath (Matt 12:1-8), divorce (Matt 19:3-9), the purity of the temple (Matt 21:12-13)
- He appealed to the OT's authority to testify to his identity (John 5:17-47)
- He appealed to the OT's authority by personally submitting to it (Matt 5:17-19; John 5:31)
- He affirmed the OT's human authorship (John 5:45-47; Luke 20:42; Matt 13:14; 24:15-16) and divine authorship (Mark 12:26; Matt 15:1-11)

³⁰ MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 88.

³¹ R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible: An Historical and Exegetical Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), 45-46.

³² The following is adapted from MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 89-97.

- He affirmed the OT's veracity and truth claims (Matt 15:3-9; John 17:17)
- He affirmed the OT's plenary verbal inspiration (Matt 5:17-18; John 10:35; Luke 16:17)
- He affirmed the OT's necessary fulfillment (Matt 26:31; Mark 9:12-13; 14:27, 49; Luke 20:17; 24:25-27, 44-46; John 5:39; 12:14; 13:18; 17:12; 19:28-30).
- He affirmed the historicity of OT individuals (Matt 8:11; 19:4-5; 22:32; 23:35; Luke 13:28; John 8:56; etc.)
- He affirmed the historicity of OT places and events (Matt 11:20-24; 12:38-42; 24:38-39; Luke 11:30-32; John 6:49)
- He affirmed the historicity of the OT's authorship (Matt 8:4; 13:14-15; 22:43-44; 24:15; Mark 12:26; John 5:45-46)

Additionally, we could point to Christ's claims regarding his own words—that his words were given to him by the Father and thus were divinely authoritative (John 8:26-28; 14:10)—as testimony to what would become the foundation of the NT Scripture. When we consider that Christ also promised the apostles that more revelation would come (John 14:26; 15:26-27; 16:12-14), we see that even during his earthly ministry, Jesus had already pre-affirmed the inspiration of the NT Scriptures as well.

5.3 VARIOUS EVIDENCES FOR INSPIRATION

5.3.1 Old Testament Evidences

The OT contains numerous internal evidences to its divine authority. Countless times, it identifies itself as God's word using phrases like, "God said," (Exod 17:14; 19:2; 20:1); "the words of the God of Israel" (Ezra 9:4; 10:3); "the words of Yahweh" (24x in Ps 119; 1 Kgs 22:19; 2 Kgs 10:26). The claim is found consistently throughout the OT and affirms plenary inspiration.

We also see in the OT that the writers at times recorded divine speech (Gen 1-2; 3:13-19; 12:1-3; 15:1-21; Joh 1:8-9; 1 Sam 3:21; 1 Kgs 3:5) as well as prophetic speech (Exod 3:15; Deut 12:32; 13:1-15; 18:15-22; 2 Sam 23:2; 1 Kgs 20:13), which was viewed as divinely authoritative. At times, the OT even records speech which was directly dictated to the authors (Exod 34:27; Deut 31:24-26; Jer 30:1-4).

5.3.2 New Testament Evidences

The NT writers likewise affirmed the inspiration of the OT, often identifying the divine authorship in connection with the human writer (Matt 1:22-23; 2:15, 17-18; 4:14-16; 22:44-45; Acts 2:29-31) and affirming the OT historical accounts (2 Pet 2:6-5; Jude 7; Heb 11:7; 1 Pet 3:20; Matt 12:3-4; Acts 7). Yet the NT also clearly affirms divine inspiration for itself in its records not only of divine speeches (Matt 3:16-17; Luke 3:22; 9:35; John 12:27-30; Acts 9:3-7; Rev 1-3), but even in that the NT writers recognized that their own writings were inspired (1 Thess 2:13; 1 Cor 14:37-38; 2 Pet 3:15-16; 1 Tim 5:18).

5.3.3 Other Evidences

Apart from the direct claims that the OT and NT make for its origins, scholars have put forth other internal evidences for the Bible's inspiration. Archer, for instance, notes that the "there is significant unity which underlies the entire collection of thirty-nine books in the Old Testament, betraying an organic

interconnection which carries through the many centuries during which it was being composed.”³³ He also writes that, “of all the world religions, only the Hebrew-Christian offers a logically defensible epistemology (science of religious knowledge).”³⁴ However, the most significant evidence to Archer is fulfilled prophecy, which to him constitutes “an infallible proof of the divine inspiration of the Scripture,”³⁵ in that it unfolds what is beyond the ability of any person to accomplish.

To this, we could add the “proofs” offered by Calvin, including the majesty of the writings, the antiquity of the Books of Moses, along with its miracles and prophecies, the harmony of the gospels, the simplicity of their writings, etc. All these, Calvin wrote, were enough to shut the mouths of skeptics, and yet were nevertheless not themselves persuasive apart from the Spirit’s work in the heart.

³³ Archer, *Old Testament Introduction*, 21.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 562.