

Systematic Theology for the Local Church

#14—Bibliology—Part V¹

The Nature of Inspiration

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For the studies in Bibliology: Become familiar with Sections 6-12 in House's *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine*. Read all of Packer's *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*. Packer's book was written against the background of the debate over Fundamentalism in the late 20th century. However, his presentation of the systems of authority (reason, tradition and Scripture) is timeless. Also, read Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, ch. 1, "The Fact of Divine Revelation," ch. 2, "The Inspired Nature of Holy Scripture," ch. 3, "The Attributes of Holy Scripture," and ch. 5, "The Bible as the Που Στῶ for Knowledge and Personal Significance," which deals with the Bible as the basis for life.

In his book *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World* John MacArthur describes the insights of Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the great British preacher (and Calvinist, I should add) of the latter part of the 19th century, and the insights of one of his colleagues in ministry [underlining is mine]:

In March 1887, Charles Spurgeon published the first of two articles entitled "The Down Grade" in his monthly magazine, *The Sword and the Trowel*. The articles were published anonymously, but the author was Robert Shindler, Spurgeon's close friend and fellow Baptist pastor. Shindler wrote the articles with input from Spurgeon, who footnoted the first article with a personal endorsement: "Earnest attention is requested for this paper. We are going down hill at breakneck speed."

Tracing the state of evangelicalism from the Puritan age to his own era, Shindler noted that every revival of true evangelical faith had been followed within a generation or two by a drift away from sound doctrine, ultimately leading to wholesale apostasy. He likened this drifting from truth to a downhill slope, and thus labeled it "the down-grade."

Christianity in England was beginning to show the results of theological liberalism (from which, in my view, it has never recovered). MacArthur goes on to say,

In the case of every errant course there is always a first wrong step. If we can trace that wrong step, we may be able to avoid it and its results. Where, then, is the point of divergence from the "King's highway of truth"? What is the first step astray? Is it doubting this doctrine, or questioning that sentiment, or being skeptical as to the other article of orthodox belief? We think not. These doubts and this skepticism are the outcome of something going before.

What was that "something"? What was the common denominator between all those who started on the down-grade?

MacArthur quotes Shindler at this point:

The first step astray is a want of adequate faith in the divine inspiration of the sacred Scriptures. All the while a man bows to the authority of God's Word, he will not entertain any sentiment contrary to its teaching. "To the law and to the testimony," is his appeal concerning every doctrine. He esteems that holy Book, concerning all things, to be right, and therefore he

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hates every false way. But let a man question, or entertain low views of the inspiration and authority of the Bible, and he is without chart to guide him, and without anchor to hold him.

Here is MacArthur's summary:

In looking carefully over the history of the times, and the movement of the times, of which we have written briefly, this fact is apparent: that where ministers and Christian churches have held fast to the truth that the Holy Scriptures have been given by God as an authoritative and infallible rule of faith and practice, they have never wandered very seriously out of the right way. But when, on the other hand, reason has been exalted above revelation, and made the exponent of revelation, all kinds of errors and mischiefs have been the result.

Shindler noted a correlation between Calvinistic doctrine and a high view of Scripture, suggesting that the great majority of those who remained committed to the authority of Scripture were "more or less Calvinistic in doctrine." In the "Notes" section of that same issue of *The Sword and the Trowel*, Spurgeon added this: "We care far more for the central evangelical truths than we do for Calvinism as a system; but we believe that Calvinism has in it a conservative force which helps to hold men to the vital truth." The clear implication to both Spurgeon and Shindler was that a high view of Scripture goes hand in hand with a high view of divine sovereignty.²

"A want of adequate faith in the divine inspiration of the sacred Scriptures"—what a simple phrase, but how significant for the course of the history of the Church and the course of the lives of individual Christians. Do you have complete faith in the inspiration of the written Word of God? I encourage you to use these studies to solidify yourself in this cardinal doctrine of orthodox Christianity.

In the last study we laid the groundwork for detailed study of the biblical teaching on inspiration. Two key passages provide extensive teaching on this: 2 Tim. 3:16-17 and 2 Pet. 1: 9-21. We are going to examine each of these passages in depth in this study and the next. The crucial verses—16 and 17—do not occur in a vacuum. The problem at hand is false teaching that is connected with persecution of those who hold to the truth. This passage predicts (it is a prophetic passage!) declining interest in sound teaching (3:13 and 4:3) and ongoing persecution of believers (3:12). Whatever Paul says about Scripture here must be designed to show the ability of Scripture to enable the believer to face and defeat these problems. Here is the Pauline passage in its context. I have underlined key sentences and phrases that refer to the problem Paul is dealing with.

¹⁰ You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, ¹¹ persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. ¹² In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, ¹³ while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. ¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

4 In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: ² Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. ³ For the

² John F. MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World* © 1992 by John F. MacArthur, Jr. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001).

time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.⁴ They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.⁵ But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

The meaning of ‘Scripture’

The first reference to writings in this passage is in v. 15, where Paul speaks of ‘the holy Scriptures’ (NIV) or ‘the holy writings’ (τὰ ἱερά γραμματα; *ta hiera grammata*). The Greek phrase occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. However, it was a frequently occurring phrase among Greek-speaking Jews such as Philo and Josephus, and was used to refer to the Old Testament.

The second reference to writings in this passage is in v. 16, where Paul speaks of ‘Scripture’ (γραφῆ; *graphē*). This word is built on the same root as *grammata* and it can simply mean ‘a writing’ or ‘a book.’ In the context it certainly refers *at least* to the same thing as *grammata*. But could it have a wider reference?

The only writings that Timothy could have known and used ‘from infancy’ to make him ‘wise for salvation’ (v. 15) were the Old Testament, the ‘holy Scriptures’ to any Jewish person. However, although Timothy’s salvation was built on what he knew when he was younger, and almost certainly would not have included any New Testament books, is it possible that Paul had in mind a wider body of writings when he spoke of ‘Scripture’ in v. 16?

We know that at times Paul was conscious that he was writing by the leading of the Spirit of God, as in 1 Cor. 7:40:

In my judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is—and I think that I too have the Spirit of God

We find essentially the same thing in 1 Cor. 14:47:

If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command

Even more valuable in showing the extent of the reference in Paul’s use of ‘Scripture’ is his linking of the Old Testament and Luke’s writings in Tim. 5:18, calling them both ‘Scripture’:

For the Scripture says, “Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,” and “The worker deserves his wages.”

A careful examination of the quotations that Paul uses reveals that Paul cites Dt. 25:4 and Lk 10:7. While it is not surprising that he would refer to the passage from Deuteronomy as ‘Scripture,’ it is very instructive that he puts Luke’s words in the same category. Although he does not mention Luke by name, Paul clearly knew what Luke wrote, and viewed it as being of the same character as the Old Testament. I agree with Reymond’s summary of Paul’s view of the extent of ‘Scripture’:

Thus Paul would have included within his expression “all Scripture” any and every written document that was from God and thus of the nature of “sacred writings,” including not only the Old Testament and those portions of the New Testament that were already written but also those portions of the New Testament that were yet to be written.³

³ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of The Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 35.

So, whatever qualities Paul ascribes to ‘Scripture’ probably cover all that would later be considered to be Scripture—66 books.

The inclusiveness of inspiration

Here is the Greek text of the key portion of the passage, with a transliteration and literal translation under it:

πᾶσα	γραφὴ	θεόπνευστος	καὶ	ὠφέλιμος
pasa	graphē	theopneustos	kai	ōphelimos
all/every	scripture	God-breathed	and/also	profitable

Part of the difficulty in interpreting/translating this verse is due to the fact that there is no ‘be’ verb. When we provide one in a translation, we cannot be sure of the place it should go. While the NIV translates this central sentence ‘All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable,’ it is possible to translate it as ‘Every Scripture that is God-breathed is also profitable.’ This is essentially what the Revised Version of 1881 (also called the English Revised Version) translation has: “Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching.” There are two issues that this second translation raises.

‘All’ versus ‘every’

First, can or should the Greek words be interpreted as ‘every Scripture’—that is ‘every portion’? As to the possibility of this translation—yes, it is legitimate. However, the question here is whether Paul was thinking of individual portions of the Old Testament or the Old Testament as a whole, in which case ‘all Scripture’ would be the better translation.

The word γραφή (*graphē*) is used in the N.T. of a particular passage of Scripture (Mk. 12:10; Jn. 19:37; 20:9; Acts 8:35) or Scripture as a whole (Gal. 3:8, 22; 1 Tim. 5:18). The first usage would support the translation ‘every Scripture’ here.

The second usage would support the translation ‘all Scripture’ here. This is supported by the fact that Paul is certainly thinking of the O.T. in its entirety here. Raymond points out that Paul essentially says this in Rom. 15:4:

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

The Greek word translated ‘Scriptures’ in Rom. 15:4 is the same as in 2 Tim. 3:16.

Ultimately, however, the choice of ‘every Scripture’ or ‘all Scripture’ does not make any difference with respect to the extent of inspiration. Either way, all of the writings that Paul viewed as ‘Scripture’ are included—either by the aggregation of the parts or simply as a whole unit.

The position of the verb

The second issue is the outcome of the interpretation for the syntax of the translation. The translation ‘every Scripture’ views the holy writings as having pieces. Because they did not believe that all the writings are from God, the translators of the Revised Version rendered the first portion of v. 16 as ‘Every Scripture inspired of God (i.e. ‘every God-breathed Scripture’).’ Clearly this means that some portions of Scripture are

God-breathed and some are not.

It should be noted that the Greek text itself allows this translation. The text can be translated ‘every Scripture that is God-breathed is profitable’ or ‘every/all Scripture is God-breathed and profitable.’ There is no verb to be translated ‘is’ and καί (*kai*) can mean ‘and’ or ‘also.’ So either rendering is possible *grammatically*. However, a translation of the Bible at any particular point must be conditioned by what the Bible says elsewhere. Will this translation stand this test?

The late Merrill F. Unger, under whose teaching I was privileged to sit in my seminary years, and who had a fine overall grasp of the Bible even though his primary field of specialization was the Old Testament and archaeology, makes some cogent points about the Revised Version translation here, saying that it is

(1) *exegetically weak* since one does not have to be told the obvious, namely, that every Scripture inspired of God is also profitable, (2) *syntactically objectionable* since the RV renders the same construction (a subject followed by two predicate adjectives joined by the conjunction καί, *kai*) in 1 Corinthians 11:30 [‘many . . . are weak and sick’ NIV], 2 Corinthians 10:10 [‘letters are weighty and forceful’ NIV], 1 Timothy 4:4, and Hebrews 4:12-13 [‘everything is uncovered and laid bare’ NIV] straightforwardly as two coordinate predicate adjectives, (3) *critically precarious* since very few scholars have approved such a rendering, and (4) *doctrinally dangerous* since it suggests that some sacred Scripture may not be the product of the divine breath.⁴

I would add this criticism of the translation: Who is ultimately qualified to decide which portion of Scripture is God-breathed and which is not? Sadly, we will find in subsequent studies that some claim this ability today.

I conclude, then, on several grounds, that the first part of 2 Tim. 3:16 should be translated ‘All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable.’ Inspiration is inclusive: it applies to all that is Scripture.

The meaning of θεόπνευστος

A passive adjective

The word θεόπνευστος (*theopneustos*) does not occur anywhere else in ancient Greek literature. It is a compound, made from θεός (*theos*) and πνέω (*pneō*)—the first word referring to God and the second to breathing or breath. The actual grammatical description of θεόπνευστος is that it is a passive adjective. This means that whatever word it is used to describe has been acted on and remains in that state. It is like English ‘broken’ or ‘improved’ or ‘clarified.’ So the basic idea in English of θεόπνευστος is ‘God-breathed.’

The same passive/state idea is found in 1 Thess. 4:9 (‘You yourselves have been taught by God to love each other’), where ‘taught by God’ is a translation of θεοδιδακτοι (*theodidaktoi*), which is from θεοδιδακτος (*theodidaktos*). The *-tos* suffix is what makes the passive adjective, and, like *theopneustos*, the word used of the Thessalonians has ‘God’ in it. Literally it means ‘God-taught.’

Source in God

The question with *theopneustos*, however, is how does the breathing apply to Scripture? Does it mean that God breathed into the Scriptures (presumably after they were written) or that God ‘breathed out’ the

⁴ Merrill F. Unger, *Introductory Guide to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956), 25-26.

Scriptures. I agree with the words of Benjamin B. Warfield, who, after careful study of the term, wrote forcefully a century ago about the relation between the breathing and Scripture:

The Greek word in this passage—θεόπνευστος (theopneustos)—very distinctly does not mean “inspired of God” The Greek word does not even mean, as the Authorized Version translates it, “given by inspiration of God,” The Greek term has, however, nothing to say of *inspiring* or if *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 the Divine “inbreathing” into its human authors, but that it is breathed out by God, “Godbreathed,” the product of the creative breath of God. In a word, what is declared by this fundamental passage is simply that the Scriptures are a Divine product without any indication of how God has operated in producing them.⁵

It should be of no small interest to us that Warfield wrote against the same incursion of liberalism as Spurgeon and Schindler did—although Warfield was combating its influence primarily in the U.S.

Not a ‘touch’ from God

The word inspiration has led some to think of the process of giving Scripture as similar to our concept of a thinker or writer getting a sudden flash of intuition. We speak of a poet or a musician rising above himself and accomplishing something extraordinary. The use of the word inspiration in some translations and as the name of a doctrine should be understood quite differently, however. As Warfield reminds us, 2 Tim. 3:16 does not say that the Scriptures result from someone’s being inspired or are even ‘breathed into’ but that they are ‘breathed out.’ Exactly what happened to the individual writers is not stated here, but we can learn a great deal about the process from 2 Pet. 1:19-21, which we will treat in the next study.

It is important, then, that we connect the doctrine of inspiration with the *information*, not with the speaker or writer. The latter were not *inspired*. It is the writings that are breathed out from God.

Not a stamp of approval

Above all what we should avoid thinking is that God took existing writings and put His stamp of approval on them. The initiative and the material were clearly from Him. Simply stated, Scripture came from God. We have a parallel for this act of God in Ps. 33: 6, where His breath creates the heavens: “By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth.” Perhaps the apostle had this passage in mind when he spoke of the Scriptures as being the creation of God. As Warfield also said, “The Scriptures owe their origin to an activity of God the Spirit and are in the highest and truest sense His creation.”⁶

Now we can turn to the definition of *inspiration* given in the previous study and note the various portions of it. This is an important definition to master. I recommend learning the underlined part.

A term applied to the Bible denoting that it is the product of God’s creative activity, figuratively breathed out from Him (2 Tim. 3:16); applies to the process of recording Scripture, not specifically to the people involved; actually, *expiration* would be a better term to reflect the concept of 2 Tim. 3:16; the result is *inerrancy*; 1 Cor. 2:13; 2 Pet. 1:19.

⁵ Benjamin B. Warfield, “The Biblical Idea of Inspiration” in *Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964), 132-33.

⁶ Warfield, 296.

Resulting power of Scripture

Our discussion of this passage would not be complete if we failed to observe the practical outcome of inspiration. *Precisely because it all comes from God*, Scripture is useful in generating and guiding spiritual growth and service. It teaches, convicts of error, leads to the proper realm of behavior and brings about righteousness, ultimately leading to fruitful service for God (v. 17). We should also observe that 2 Tim. 4:1ff contains an exhortation to *use* Scripture for those very ends, especially in ministry to others. This is essential, because correct teaching—which the Bible always provides because of its source—is ignored in every age and will be increasingly shunned in the future (vv. 3-4). Because it is breathed out from God, the Bible always offers us the truth of God and always withstands error. I repeat Schindler’s words from 120 years ago here: “But let a man question, or entertain low views of the inspiration and authority of the Bible, and he is without chart to guide him, and without anchor to hold him.”

Study questions

1. Work on committing to memory the definition of *inspiration* and review the definitions in the running compilation below.
2. In what ways might Spurgeon's time be like ours with regard to spiritual matters?
3. Why is the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture crucial with regard to spiritual decline?
4. What are the textual and theological problems with the RSV translation?
5. What does this passage tell us about how inspiration took place? What does it not tell us that we might like to know?

Running compilation of key definitions

1. Systematic theology: The organized presentation of all that the Bible teaches about God and His works.
2. Exegesis: The actual practice of studying or interpreting a document or other message to determine its meaning.
3. Context: Context in a document or utterance is the surroundings of a portion of a word, a word, or a group of words.
4. Bibliology: The doctrinal study of the nature of the Bible.
5. Biblical authority: The quality inherent in Scripture by virtue of which human beings are completely answerable to its content.
6. Revelation: The information about Himself given by God to human beings.
7. General revelation: God's disclosure of Himself, available directly to everyone, given through means other than dreams, visions, direct words and Christ Himself.
8. Special revelation: The disclosure of information from God that is not available directly to all human beings.
9. Inspiration: A term applied to the Bible denoting that it is the product of God's creative activity, figuratively breathed out from Him (2 Tim. 3:16); applies to the process of recording Scripture, not specifically to the people involved; actually, *expiriation* would be a better term to reflect the concept of 2 Tim. 3:16; the result is *inerrancy*.