

Week Two: The Story of the Bible and its Inspiration

Overview

- 1) Many Christians assume that “the inspiration of Scripture” effectively denies the Bible an origin story. Yet the Bible has a very human origin story. The Bible we have has not dropped out of heaven with the “words of God” set in stone. For me, as the Bible contains no doctrine of the Bible (how could it? the Bible was not written or complete when any of the 66 texts making up the Protestant Bible were written) it is reasonable to **explore the phenomena of the Bible** to help us understand what it is (and, therefore, how it should be read) and what it might mean to describe it as “inspired.”
- 2) There is absolutely no possibility of discovering original texts for any of the books of the Bible. **Textual Criticism** provides a meticulously careful analysis of existing evidence to provide very reliable (but certainly not exact) edition of the 66 texts. As a matter of transparency, textual criticism provides explanations for its judgment calls with various degrees of confidence: {A}, {B}, {C}, or {D}.
- 3) *Biblos* is a Greek word for book, but as verses such as Luke 3:4 or 20:42 indicate, it is used for individual scrolls or parchments, not the binding together into one codex of all 66 texts that together make up our Protestant Bible. As such, it is never completely clear which texts should be considered part of “the Bible.” A list of agreed texts that should be considered part of the one whole is called a **canon**. The Church had a role to play in “recognising” the canon, but it certainly did not “make-up” the canon.
- 4) Based upon my understanding of Revelation (discussed in week one), I do not believe that **Inspiration** means God has deposited Truth in the Bible that Christians can dig up and know about God and be saved. I believe that Inspiration in the ever-present presence of God (that is, God-breathedness is a living act of encounter) who shares himself (for he is Truth) with us in and through the medium of the Scriptures (the *writings*) now bound together into the Bible, which has **formative authority** for the Church.
- 5) Every reading of Scripture, without exception, is a **translation** in which we turn the words of another into meaning. But some translations are better than other. A good translation is *dynamic* and seeks to convey as unambiguously as possible the intent of the author to the reader. However, as meaning is constructed in the mind of the reader, even good translations must be interpreted. (Remembering that intent of the interpretation is an encounter with the living God, not “objective” knowledge about God – as if God was an object that could be described.

Key Terms

1. Textual Criticism and Manuscripts
2. Canon and Formative Revelation
3. Inspiration

Keep Track of Your Questions

Preliminary Cautions

- 1) The issues associated with the declaration that the “Holy Scripture *is* the Word of God” have become quite divisive among many Christians who otherwise have much in common. We should not turn a person’s understanding of the nature of Scripture into a litmus test of the genuineness of their faith. The prime assertion of faith is always “Jesus is Lord” and the only test of faithfulness is obedience to Jesus, whose commandment is “Love one another” (John 15:12). This is the great pity of much of the so-called “battle for the Bible.” In arguing over the nature of Scripture they fail to obey its clear directives to “love one another.” In this respect, orthodoxy is no substitute for orthopraxy. A person’s view of Scripture is not expressed in definitions but in practice.
- 2) Many Christians have become confused about the source of their Christian assurance believing that an “inerrant Bible” is what guarantees their salvation rather than the witness of God’s Spirit to our spirit that we are his children (Rom 8:15-16). They have exchanged a personal encounter with God (revelation) for an assurance that others have had an encounter with God (inspiration).
- 3) We must be careful to encourage one another before we admonish one another.

Revelation: A Review of Our Previous Discussion

- 1) Revelation is God’s self-disclosure through encounters (that contain information/propositions) with the intent of drawing the individual into deeper personal relationship.
- 2) We have seen that dividing Revelation into two discrete types is unhelpful for it usually results in General Revelation being reduced to impersonal and propositional discovering of God through human sensitivity to the created order. This is no longer revelation. And Special Revelation is usually located solely within the Bible, excluding the possibility of God to directly encountering people through dreams or prophetic words as he has done previously.
- 3) Therefore, we have proposed describing all Revelation as Sacramental Revelation. God’s self-disclosure to individual through the agency of the created order.
- 4) Leon Morris says, “That individual Christians have such direct contact with God and receive what they take to be divine guidance directly from him is not to be doubted. And since on occasion this represents the communication of knowledge and guidance it is appropriate to speak of ‘revelation’ as taking place. But clearly this is something quite different from... [the revelation found in reading the Bible]. That kind of revelation is not private, but one which concerns the whole Christian community. It has the characteristic of being definitive for the Christian church and not simply an aid to Christian living” (*I Believe in Revelation*, 68). He does not label this private-type of revelation, but “personal revelation” would seem appropriate. He does label the not private-type of revelation as “primordial revelation” and the current experience of it as “repetitive revelation” together constituting “formative revelation,” that is, Revelation that forms and reforms the church.
- 5) Sacramental Revelation = God’s use of means to encounter all people and call them by name, including the use of the Bible to provide formative/normative revelation for the Church

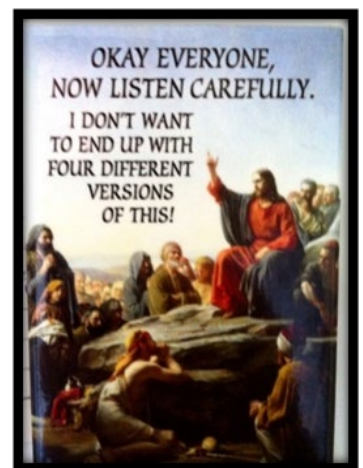
A Phenomenal Understanding of the Bible

The Biblical Witness to “The Fact of Inspiration”

- 1) Erickson is typical of many Evangelical scholars who contrast (a) those who emphasise “the biblical writers’ actual statements about the Bible and the view of it revealed in the way they use it,” and (b) those who examine “what the Bible is like” (that is, the phenomena of the Bible). Erickson argues, “Both aspects are needed but one must carry greater emphasis... The teaching will give us the formal nature of the doctrine. While the phenomena help fill out the content... We must conclude that the Scripture writers’ uniform testimony is that the Bible has originated from God and is his message to the human race. This is the fact of the Bible’s inspiration.”
- 2) I am not convinced by Erickson’s approach to this issue. While there is no doubt that the early church considered the books which became the OT to be divine Scripture, this does not mean that they treated the OT text with the precision required to prove Erickson’s points about a particular form of inspiration that leads him to a particular view of inerrancy. **The Bible has no self-consciousness**; that is, it does not know that it exists. Hence, it contains no doctrine of Scripture or inspiration. What it points to is a confidence that God speaks in Scripture and that such speech is equally valid (though subject to reinterpretation in light of the Christ event) today, whether today is first century Rome or thirty-first century Adelaide.
- 3) Two widely quoted verses for creating a doctrine of Scripture actually **focus on the use of Scripture** more than its nature.
 - All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)
 - For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God. Everything is naked and exposed before his eyes, and he is the one to whom we are accountable. (Hebrews 4:12-13)

The Actual Phenomena of Scripture

- 1) There are discrepancies between parallel passages, and inconsistencies in chronology. None of which substantially change the life-forming purpose (that is, the meaning) of the text; but it does challenge what we mean by “true.”
 - a) In Mark 1:2 we read, “It is written in Isaiah” before a mixture of texts from Exodus 23:20; Malachi 3:1; and Isaiah 40:3 is quoted.” One commentator suggests, “Mark probably ascribes the entire quotation to Isaiah not to identify its source but because that prophet had special importance for him.”
 - b) John 13:1-2, 18:28, and 19:13-14 seem to indicate that the Last Supper happened before the Passover and Jesus dies as the Passover lamb. While the other three Gospels seem to place it as the Passover meal.
- 2) There are many examples of grammatical errors, but are these real errors? (Consistency in spelling is certainly a modern concern.)
- 3) Some explain errors in the Bible by suggesting that the Bible contains true records of inaccurate sources. Is it an error for the text to accept as accurate the scientific worldview or culture of its authors and readers?
- 4) Erickson is willing to acknowledge that there are “apparent” errors in the Bible that are not easily resolved. “It is better to acknowledge that we do not yet have all the answers. This humble approach will probably make the Bible more believable than will asking people to accept some of the proffered explanations, and in the process suggesting that the integrity of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy depends on acceptance of such contrived solutions.”
- 5) **Why would proven errors in the Bible challenge the faith of some Christians?** Must an inspired text be inerrant?



From Revelation to Inscripturation to Revelation

Reader: *This is the Word of the Lord.*

Congregation: *Thanks be to God.*

- 1) The Bible is a record of past revelatory encounters maintained through the witness of oral culture, the record of prophetic words, and interpreted history. This includes propositional revelation. Erickson argues, “If revelation includes propositional truths, then it is of such a nature that it can be preserved. It can be written down or *inscripturated*” (Erickson, 221). We can learn from the records of these revelatory encounters of others.
- 2) **But the Bible *is* even now a living word of revelation** as we encounter the living God. God’s word is living and active because the Spirit breathes it (Heb 4:12). The Spirit is not just in the interpreter trying to prompt the mining of truths from a dead book. Nor is the Spirit locked up in the book waiting to be released by the reader. **The Spirit is involved in the whole process, creating a discourse between the Scriptures and the reader that leads to a divine encounter.** God’s word remains his word and **it is voiced anew to each one of us.** It is not a document to be mined for truth but an invitation into living encounter, i.e., the word cannot be separated from the Spirit.

The Word of God in the Bible and the witness of the Holy Spirit are to be “understood and experienced, not as a duality, but as a unity. What is of concern is the truth given once for all, the truth of salvation and revelation clearly discoverable and available in the words of the Bible. But **this Biblical truth can never be considered as available, willy-nilly, at the command of the church in doctrine or dogma, but as the Word of the living, present Spirit of God, wherewith the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ himself, takes possession of our hearts and himself makes his home there.** This paradoxical unity of Word and Spirit, of historical revelation and God’s contemporary presence, of ‘Christ for us’ and ‘Christ in us’ – this is the secret of the Reformation, of its power to renew Biblical faith and shake of the fetters of a century-long foreign rule, both theological and ecclesiastical” (Brunner, *Truth as Encounter*).

Sources: Where does the Content of the Bible Come From?

- 1) How did the biblical authors know what to write about events and people outside their direct experience? This is more of an issue in the OT which spans thousands of years in contrast to the NT which spans a single lifetime. The Old Testament contains pre-history, history, wisdom collections, Psalms, and Poems, and Prophecies that were preserved by the community. Much of this relies upon sources (oral or written) that have not been preserved. The New Testament contains Gospels, History, Letters, and Apocalypse.
- 2) The Bible contains history, but it is not a history book. Many scholars judge that while the nature of the biblical text does not demonstrate entirely the characteristics of twentieth-century history writing, it does, however, represent a major source of information for the reconstruction of the history of ancient Israel that merits consideration and, together with archaeology, comparative material and social sciences, must form the basis for reconstruction.
- 3) The Bible uses sources that are now lost to us. However, it is evident that these sources are not themselves scriptures although they have been edited into the Scriptures. For example, the Book of Kings is dated to the Exilic (or post-Exilic period), although it covers the 400 years preceding the Exile. “It is probable that the books have been formed from materials and sources that stretch back over the four-hundred-year period that is its subject. Kings itself contains references to annalistic sources (“the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel” [1 Kings 14:19], “the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah” [1 Kings 14:29], “the Book of the Acts of Solomon” [1 Kings 11:41]), but nothing of these is known otherwise to history. Other sources can only be guessed at but might include prophetic records containing the stories of Elijah and Elisha, and perhaps recording the prophetic role in the rise and fall of kings. If such sources lie behind Kings, they must have been collected and woven together into the work as we have it.”
- 4) In the NT, it is evident that sources lie behind the Synoptic (i.e., seen together) Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. This provides evidence of **faithful but not precise** use of sources. This is consistent with an oral culture and how the ancients approached the writing of history in which speeches were composed on the basis of what might reasonably been said on the occasion.
- 5) In Jude’s short letter (v.9) he writes, “But even Michael, one of the mightiest of the angels, did not dare accuse the devil of blasphemy, but simply said, “The Lord rebuke you!” (This took place when Michael was arguing with the devil about Moses’ body.)” The source of this is probably the *Assumption of Moses*, which has not been accepted by the church as among the Scriptures. Paul’s reference to the wandering Israelites

drinking “from the spiritual rock *that followed them*” (1 Corinthians 10:4) references Rabbinic oral tradition rather than the story told in the Scriptures.

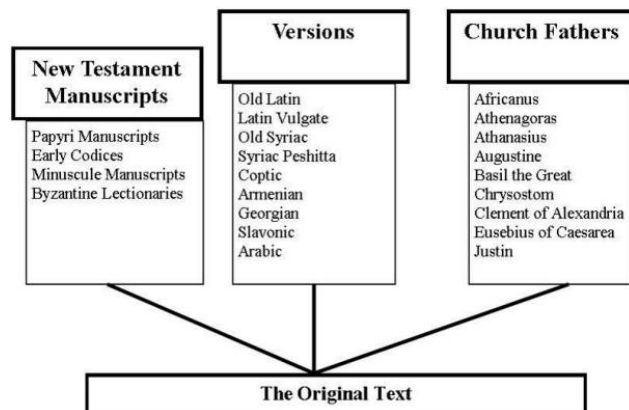
- 6) New Testament quotations of Old Testament texts are not precise and not all are based upon the Hebrew. Even Paul, who read Hebrew, uses the Greek text of the Septuagint for some of his quotations.
- 7) What does this phenomena suggest to us about the nature of our Scriptures?

Manuscripts and Textual Criticism

- 1) There are no extant autograph copies of books of the Bible, its text must be established by the process known as textual criticism. **Textual criticism** involves the comparison of witnesses to the text, such as manuscript copies, early translations and citations. The textual critic is not concerned with the sources behind the text but aims to reconstruct the text as it was finalized.

- 2) Broad Evidence Used to Reconstruct the Text

- a) Papyrus was a writing material derived from a reed plant and was in use as early as the third millennium B.C.E. until well into the first millennium C.E. Great quantities of papyri, including biblical papyri, have been preserved in the sands of Egypt. As papyrus became more difficult to obtain, parchment (scraped and prepared animal skin) eventually replaced papyrus around the fourth century for most biblical manuscripts.



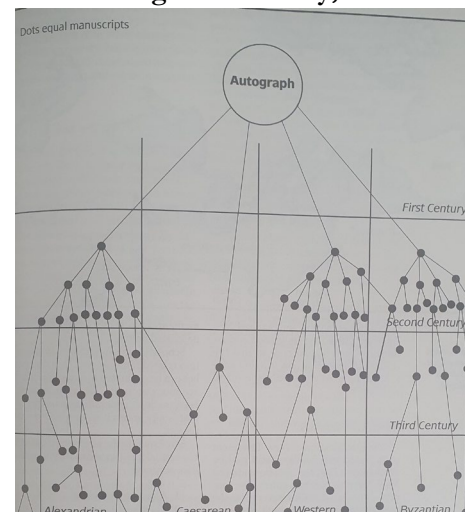
- b) Uncial (from “inch-high” letters) refers to parchment texts (similar to papyri with no letter spacing and minimal punctuation). Uncials were written in a formal and careful literary hand using capital letters. that were sometimes more rounded than ordinary Greek capitals. The cursive or “running” hand, known as “minuscule” (small-lettered), became dominant after the 9th C.C.E. because of its convenience and economy in writing.

- c) The lectionaries are the least studied because they preserve only cyclical readings, not running text. Numbering about 2,400 manuscripts, lectionaries are church service books containing readings from the Bible for each day of the church year. They were extremely important to the churches, which could get along without a continuous Bible manuscript for study but definitely needed a lectionary for reading during church services.

- d) Though not included in the manuscript evidence, another important source for studying the text of the New Testament is the large body of quotations of the New Testament preserved in the writings of early Christians. Scholars conclude that if all the other Greek manuscripts were lost, almost the entire New Testament could be reconstructed from the writings of the Church Fathers.

- 3) According to most scholars, the earliest copy of any NT book is a papyrus manuscript designated p⁵², dated around 110-25 C.E., containing a few verses of John (Jn 18:31-34, 37-38). This fragment, arguably only thirty years removed from the autograph, was part of one of the earliest copies of John’s Gospel. Other scholars, however, believe there is an even earlier manuscript, designated 7Q5, which preserves two incomplete verses of Mark 6:52-53 and has been dated to about 65 C.E.
- 4) A very early manuscript p⁴⁶, contains the letter to the Hebrews and all of Paul’s epistles except the Pastorals, and it can be dated to the early part of the second century. other second-century manuscripts are p⁴, p⁶⁴, p⁶⁷ (Matthew, Luke), p³² (Titus), p⁶⁶ (John), p⁷⁵ (Luke, John), p⁷⁷ (Matthew), p⁸⁷ (Philemon), p⁹⁰ (John) and p⁹⁸ (Revelation). There are many early copies of various parts of the NT and several other papyrus manuscripts (about 40) that are dated in the third and fourth centuries.
- 5) At present we have more than 6,000 manuscript copies of the Greek NT or portions thereof. **No other work of Greek literature can boast such numbers.** Homer’s Iliad, the greatest of all Greek classical works, is extant in about 800 manuscripts; and Euripides’ tragedies exist in about 350 manuscripts. The numbers on all the other works of Greek literature are far less.
- 6) The span of time between the original composition and the next surviving manuscript is far less for the NT than for any other work in Greek literature. The lapse for most classical Greek works is about eight hundred to a thousand years, whereas **the lapse for many books in the NT is around one hundred years.**

- 7) The earliest extant copy of an entire NT text is the one preserved in Codex Sinaiticus (compiled about 375). The earliest manuscript containing the whole OT in Hebrew is known as Codex Leningradensis. It comes from 1008 C.E. and forms the basis for the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia, the standard critical edition of the OT.
- 8) **Textual Critics have the resources to reconstruct the original text of the NT with great accuracy, and they have produced some excellent editions of the Greek NT.**
- 9) Textual critics generally agree that there are three main text types or “families” of NT texts, with the possibility of a fourth. The main families are Byzantine, Alexandrian, Western, and possibly Caesarean. The majority of Greek manuscripts, both uncials and minuscules (in other words, the Majority Text) are from the Byzantine textual family. This is the text type from which the Textus Receptus was developed. Textus receptus means the “received text,” or the text that has been accepted universally as authoritative since about 1624. The fact that one text type is attested in thousands of manuscripts does not necessarily mean that the family is more original or accurate. **Quantity does not equal quality.** Conversely, because a manuscript is dated early and is rare does not automatically mean it is closest to the original.
- 10) The OT text from which almost all modern Bible translations are made is basically the **Masoretic Text**. This Hebrew text, edited by Jewish scholars between approximately the sixth and the tenth centuries C.E. That accuracy of the MT has been demonstrated by comparisons with the first century texts found at Qumran.
- 11) Among the **Qumran** scrolls every book of the Pentateuch is represented in several fragmentary manuscripts, with Deuteronomy heading the list with at least thirty-one such copies. Ten of the texts of the Pentateuch (and one of Job) are written in the paleo-Hebrew script, as opposed to the square “Assyrian” script that is now normally thought of as the Hebrew script.
- 12) The earliest witness to an OT text is two tiny silver rolls, possibly amulets, from Ketef Hinnom that contain a quotation of the wording of the priestly blessing (Num 6:24-26), with some variation from the MT. These probably date to the century before the Babylonian exile.
- 13) There is little dispute that from at least the beginning of the second century A.D. the tradition from which the MT derives has been handed down with extreme care. On the other hand, several centuries before this there seem to be significant variations between witnesses, such as the proto-Masoretic, proto-Samaritan and LXX-type texts. The second and third centuries B.C.E. could then be seen as a time when a variety of texts was allowed within Judaism, before the proto-Masoretic text gradually gained the ascendancy witnessed in the Masada texts (from A.D. 73 or before), which are almost all proto-Masoretic. The proto-Masoretic text thus pushed out the other texts so that they survived only outside Judaism.
- 14) The **Septuagint** (or LXX) was the first translation of the Pentateuch into Greek, completed in Egypt during the first half of the third century B.C. The rest of the Greek OT, was probably complete before the end of the second century B.C.E.
- 15) **Targums** are translations of the Bible into Aramaic. Originally Targums were not written down. As a result, those that we now have in written form may contain oral elements significantly older than the time of their final editing. The earliest Targum is Targum Onqelos, made some time between the first and fifth centuries C.E.
- 16) The **Vulgate** is the Latin translation of the Bible made by Jerome between A.D. 390 and 405.



The Text of the Bible

- 1) When extensive texts are copied manually over long periods of time it is inevitable that mistakes are introduced, and it is clear that this has occurred with manuscripts of the Bible. In addition, it is shown by the scrolls at Qumran that whereas accurate and skilled copying existed for some purposes, not all copying was done to equal specifications.
- 2) There are certain common mistakes that occur accidentally in copying. For example, the term dittography is used for the writing twice of an element (varying in extent from a letter to a section) that should only appear once. The converse is haplography, which occurs when something that should be written twice is written but once.
- 3) However, while many of the variants introduced in manuscripts of the Bible have been accidental, others have clearly been introduced deliberately. A deliberate change may result from the attempt by a scribe to restore a text that is already corrupt, or that the scribe believes to be corrupt, but changes in the text also resulted from theological disputes between different groups.
- 4) Scholars follow certain criteria as they judge individual variants, for example,
 - a) more weight is to the shorter reading (*lectio brevior*) among variants since scribes tend to add rather than delete.
 - b) more weight to the more problematic reading (*lectio difficilior*) among variants because copyists tend to simplify difficult readings.
 - c) more weight to those variants which are in higher quality manuscripts, have wide geographical distribution, or appear in more than one textual family.
- 5) In most texts where there are two possible variants, good and contrary explanations can be given for the originality of each. The textual critic gains insight only by experience and by acquaintance with a number of cases in witnesses where the direction of origin of the variant is much clearer. The large agreement in the text, and the insignificance of much of the variations, provide a high degree of confidence in the Biblical text we find in our Bibles.
- 6) The variants and the reasons for the reasons for the committee's choice of text are clearly set out in the *Textual Commentary on the New Testament*, edited by Bruce Metzger, which examines 1440 sets of variant readings noted in the UBS text edition, chosen on the basis of exegetical significance, plus 600 additional sets of variant readings. The committee notes their degree of confidence in each decision using a four-part scale. The letter **{A}** signifies that the text is virtually certain, while **{B}** indicates that there is some degree of doubt concerning the reading selected for the text. The letter **{C}** means that there is considerable degree of doubt whether the text of the apparatus contains the superior reading, while **{D}** shows that there is a very high degree of doubt concerning the reading selected for the text. In fact, among the **{D}** decisions sometimes none of the variant readings commend itself as original, and therefore the only recourse was to print the least unsatisfactory reading.
- 7) If we cannot access the original "autographs," does that mean that our Bible cannot be trusted? (Some argue, for example, that God engineered the mistakes into the copying so that the KJV would be the inspired words that God wanted from the beginning.)

Developing The Canon

- 1) With respect to early Christian writings, canonical means that these writings were received by the church as the rule of Christian doctrine and action – a “straight rule” against which all else could be measured.
- 2) Jesus and Paul had no canon. However, they did recognise Scriptural authority.
- 3) The early Church had no canon, but they submitted themselves to the authority of the gospel and to those writings that had formed them.
- 4) A canon is a closed (i.e., completed) list of authoritative texts. The Protestant Christian canon consists of 27 New Testament books and 39 Old Testament books that the Church recognises as having divine authority in the church’s life and ministry and consequently to be inspired by God. The Roman Catholic church accepts as canonical an additional 12 books, the **Apocrypha**, of these the Orthodox Church accepts 4; in practice, these books lack the authority of the canonical OT and NT books.
 - a) The Apocrypha is the name given to a collection of books that were thought to contain “hidden” or “secret” truths (from the Gk *apokryptō*, “to hide, conceal”). The apocryphal OT includes books that are still deemed important for Judaism and Protestant Christianity, such as 1 and 2 Maccabees and Wisdom of Solomon, even though they are not considered canonical.
 - b) The Roman Catholic Apocrypha consists of Tobit, Judith, the Additions to Esther, the Additions to Daniel (the Prayer of Azariah and the Three Young Men, Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon), the Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus (also called Sirach), Baruch (also called 1 Baruch), the Letter of Jeremiah, 1 Maccabees, and 2 Maccabees.
 - c) The Greek Orthodox Church adds 1 Esdras, Psalm 151, the Prayer of Manasseh, and 3 Maccabees, with 4 Maccabees in an appendix.
 - d) The Russian Orthodox Church adds 1 Esdras, 2 Esdras, Psalm 151, and 3 Maccabees
- 5) It is certain that the NT writings were not recognized as Scripture at the same time for all of the churches everywhere or even by churches in the same geographic location. The literature that was first acknowledged in the churches as Scripture and eventually formed the core of the biblical canon included the four Gospels, the epistles of Paul and Acts, but there were differences even at the beginning between those who believed that Matthew better represented who Jesus was than did Paul.
- 6) The four Gospels, Acts, Paul’s 13 letters (and sometimes Hebrews as a 14th), 1 John, 1 Peter, and Revelation were from the beginning almost universally accepted as authoritative. The literature that took the longest to gain near universal approval in the churches as canonical was Hebrews, the General Epistles, and Revelation.
- 7) Regarded by some as authoritative, but failing to win the approval of the whole church were, among others, the *Shepherd of Hermes*, *1 Clement*, the *Wisdom of Solomon*, and the *Didache*. These, and all other early Christian writings, can be easily found in English translation (e.g., Schneemelcher, Robertson, Sparks) and make for interesting reading.
- 8) The need for a canon of Scripture arose within the Church because...
 - a) The model of the OT Scriptures provided the Church with a reason to seek to establish which of their writings were also Scripture.
 - b) The need to distinguish between orthodox truth and heretical error, e.g., Gnosticism, Marcion (c.140), and Montanists (c.140-180), leads to a desire to establish the authoritative texts for the Church.
 - c) There was a desire to establish a commonness and a catholicity within the Church with respect to those books which were recognised as useful in the life and worship of the Church. For example, when Constantine asked Eusebius to produce 50 copies of the NT for the churches of “New Rome” (Constantinople) what texts was he meant to include?
 - d) Persecution that included the burning of books (particularly the Diocletian persecutions, 303-13) forced the Church to decide which texts it considered sacred.
 - e) The technology of book production was developing to allow larger collections of texts to be bound together. This required some degree of agreement on which texts to bind together.

The Formation of the Canon

1) History of the Canon

- a) The earliest list of books containing each and only the 27 books of the New Testament is Athanasius' (Bishop of Alexandria) Easter letter of 367CE. The canon was confirmed by the Councils of Hippo (393) and Carthage (397). **The decision was a process rather than an event.** "The coming of the Word of God in print is only slightly more capable of explanation than the coming of the Word of God incarnate" (McRay, *EDT* 141).
- b) In many canonical lists, books were characterised in three ways:
 - i) Authoritative (canonical) – to be used in public worship
 - ii) Useful, but not authoritative – to be used for private instruction
 - iii) Spurious
 - iv) The status of some books change with time and with place.
 - v) *Homologoumena* – books universally accepted by the early church. A term first used by Origen
 - vi) *Antilegomena* – the term used by Eusebius to identify "disputed writings" – those neither universally accepted nor universally rejected as authoritative.
- c) References in the writings of the second century Apostolic Fathers – either quotations or reference to a text – show the assessment of these church leaders and give some sense of dating (e.g., the earlier the reference the greater the likelihood of authenticity). Sometimes an Apostolic Father would directly comment on whether they thought a particular text was authoritative and the level of its acceptance among the churches. It is not true that the Apostolic Fathers were simple-minded, superstitious men who accepted all texts uncritically.

2) The process by which the books of the Bible came to be regarded as exclusively authoritative is not known. A number of criteria have been identified to explain/justify why these, and not other, books were chosen. But these criteria are all after-the-fact. (See L. M. McDonald, "The Criteria for the New Testament Canon – Another Look," pages 228-49 in *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, rev.)

- a) **Apostolicity** – clearly in their teaching the Apostles created the core of the gospel tradition and, therefore, their writings should hold to be accorded authority.
- b) **Orthodoxy** – clearly the oral tradition of the Church was not abandoned with the development of written tradition, as such there was a canon by which a written canon could be measured. However, it must be recognised that there is more breadth in the Bible than is usually acceptable within a Church (see J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*).
- c) **Antiquity** – this is linked with apostolicity and orthodoxy
- d) **Inspiration** – Metzger notes "A writing is not canonical because the author was inspired, but rather an author is considered to be inspired because what he has written is recognised as canonical, that is, recognised as authoritative."
- e) **Traditional usage among the Churches is the key criterion.** "In the larger history of the NT canon the primary force was the developing pattern of the use of Christian writings in the early church, and principally their use in the liturgical assembly as resources for preaching and instruction" (Gamble). **The process involved not the granting to certain books an authority they did not otherwise have but a recognition of which books were exercising authority within the church.** "The canon...represents the collective experience and understanding of the Christian community during the formative centuries of its existence." McDonald rightly concludes, **"The question of whether a book should be regarded as scripture and placed within a canon seems to have been determined ultimately by early church use..."** Widespread use in the churches appears to be the best explanation of why some writings were recognised and preserved as authoritative in some churches but not in others, why some writings met the worship and instructional needs of the churches, but others did not. The writings that did not survive in the church did not meet the needs of the greater church."
- f) "For the Reformers only the Spirit of God authorises the canon, but the church was led to recognise and accept what the Spirit had already determined. It is the Spirit who authenticates the Bible, and the church confirms this work of the Spirit by looking to the Bible as its ruling norm and source. In

Reformation theology the Word of God, the message of Scripture, which comes directly from God, is prior to the community of faith, which is created by this Word. It is readily acknowledged, however, that the community of faith is historically prior to the compiling and canonising of Scripture” (Bloesch).

- g) I would suggest that the recognition of what had “formative” authority over the Church includes all of the above categories.
- h) There is no way to develop “spiritual criteria” that will guarantee that all and only “inspired” texts are numbered within the canon. **“The recognition of the inspiration of a writing was not so much a criterion for inclusion as it was a corollary of its acceptance in the church’s scriptural canon.”**

3) References in Early Canonical Lists

- a) The Marcionite Prologues = comments written by Marcion, a Christian heretic, around the middle of the 2nd century. He identifies as Scripture only Luke and 10 of Paul’s letters (he has removed what he considered to be sympathetic to the Jewish God and his people).
- b) The Muratorian Fragment = Latin list of New Testament books drawn up in Rome, dated by some as belonging to the end of the second century although the majority view is that it was written during the 4th century.
- c) Increasingly during the second century various Christian writings circulated as collections: the four Gospels, the Pauline letters, the general (catholic) epistles. For example, the oldest extant manuscript of the Pauline Epistles is dated c.200 (note: doesn’t contain the Pastorals).
- d) “The frequent appearance of catalogues of scriptural books during the fourth century, and their absence before that time, indicates that the question of the precise limits of Scripture, and hence the notion of a canon, arose in this period, just as the variations in the terminology, categories and contents of these various catalogues show that the situation was still somewhat indeterminate and that some points were resolved only at a late date” (Gamble).

New Testament Apocrypha and Gnostic Gospels

- 1) Some mischievous authors, editors, and publishers choose to talk about Lost Gospels, Books excluded from the Bible, or Hidden Books. However, these texts were never a part of the New Testament canon and they were never hidden away from the Church. What is the case is that these texts never commended themselves to the Church but belonged to small religious sects that were not Christian in the gospel sense.
- 2) The Gospel of Thomas is considered by some scholars to contain a few possibly genuine Jesus traditions but it is not a Gospel in the tradition of Mark’s literary genre. The Gospel of Judas, for example, tells us nothing about Jesus, Judas, or the historical betrayal of Jesus, but it does provide historical insight into the religious views of some second century religious groups that recognised Jesus as a significant spiritual person.
- 3) Many Gnostic writings were found and translated in the Nag Hammadi Library discovered in 1945.
- 4) ALL manuscripts connected to the church (very broadly understood) have been published and translated and are readily available in libraries and for purchase.

The Old Testament Canon

- 1) The Gospels give evidence of the acceptance by Jesus of “the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.” However, it is impossible to say which texts were identified as authoritative Scripture.
- 2) Some have suggested that the Rabbis identified the 39 books of the Hebrew Bible at Jamnia c.90CE following the destruction of the Temple. This is now widely rejected as legendary.
- 3) There is evidence that some Christians used as Scripture some texts that were not included in the final 39. For example, Jude refers to the *1 Enoch* (Jude 14).

The New (and Old) Testament Canon

- 1) The Scriptures have the authority to define the Church – its faith and practice. It is the “foundational revelation” for the Church.
- 2) Therefore, no group that does not accept the authority of the canon can truly claim to be Christian. For to go beyond the canon, or to reject part of the canon, is to change the foundation of the church and to lose the continuity that binds the church through the centuries.

The Nature of Biblical Authority: Formative Revelation and a Closed Canon

What Does it Mean When We Say the New Testament is Formative Revelation?

- 1) First level of authority is God. "In revelation God declares his authority" (McDonald).
- 2) "For Christian faith Christ is known as God's final revelation."
- 3) The Bible has conferred authority. "Because the Bible points beyond itself to God, it has a conferred authority. Yet the Bible has a real authority in itself as the authentic embodiment of God's self-disclosure."
- 4) The Bible mediates the revelation which formed the Church. Implicit in the recognition of the canonical writings as Scripture is the acknowledgment that they not only speak in the voice of their human authors but also speak for an Other (Johnson)
- 5) No church can truly claim to be Christian that does not accept the authority of the canon.
 - a) "It is the nature of the canon to be closed. Because it is closed, the canon can perform the function of mediating a specific identity through successive ages to the church. Because the church today reads the same writings as were read by Polycarp and Augustine and Aquinas and Luther and Barth, it remains identifiably the same community, and on that basis can debate with those earlier readers their interpretations and realisations of that identity" (Johnson).
 - b) The canon is more than the residuum of a historical process. It is a faith decision for the church to make in every age and place. The acceptance of the canon is the most fundamental identity decision the church makes (Johnson).
- 6) Authority to reform the Church.
 - a) The canon of Scripture is the church's working bibliography. (Johnson)
 - b) Because the canon is closed and exclusive, it can be catholic, that is, have universal and enduring significance (Johnson).
 - c) The church asserts that it does not control these writings but that these writings in a very real sense control it, by providing the definitive frame for its self-understanding (Johnson).
- 7) Formative revelation is authoritative in shaping the identity and practices of the Church because it contains the full and completed acts of God in providing for our redemption. In the same way that there is nothing that needs to be added to our salvation so there is nothing that can be added to the revelation that forms us into God's people. The personal invitation of sacramental revelation and the transforming word of private revelation continue because God continues to call us each by name. But the self-disclosure that forms God's people has been made. The communication of that formative revelation to the church is preserved through inspiration. "The Reformation passed to its heirs the belief that ultimate authority rests not in reason or a pope, but in an inspired Scripture" (Feinberg, 141).

Why has the Church used Bible Translations from the beginning?

Inspiration

- 1) Does this process of selection undermine the claim that the NT writings are “inspired”?

Inspiration

- 1) We must be careful how we use this term. It is easily confused with “poetic” inspiration, the “spark” which ignites the imagination, or with inspirational, the feeling generated within a person that energises them. What these have in common is a focus upon the human “spirit.” The Christian doctrine of inspiration relates to the Spirit of God.
- 2) Inspiration is an acknowledgement that the authority of the text depends, ultimately, upon God. It is not to be equated with a particular means of composition or author. A clarifying question that helps us explore what we mean by Inspiration is, “If we discovered today an ancient letter, written by the Apostle Paul to the Christians in Laodicia, would we add it into the printed versions of our Bibles?”
- 3) Revelation continues today. And to the extent that that revelation is communicated to others in a way that preserves the truth of that self-disclosure of God then inspiration continues today. Such revelation does not create new formative revelation because we cannot lay new foundations. But it is creating opportunities for transforming divine encounters.
- 4) *Formative (biblical)* inspiration has ceased because the formation revelation is complete. “The Bible has a unique authority because it is the appointed witness to what God did for our salvation in biblical history – especially in the life history of Jesus Christ” (Bloesch). The inspiration of the NT texts are recognised by...
 - a) Their authority to teach and to correct.
 - b) Their suitability to be read in public worship as God’s word to his church, suitable for forming their faith and life.

God-breathed

- 1) One of the key verses for understanding God’s relationship to Scripture is 2Tim 3:16-17.

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

- a) It is to be noted that the word used here is *theo-pneustos*, God-breathed). God-breathed “does not imply any particular mode of inspiration, such as some form of divine dictation. Nor does it imply any particular suspension of the normal cognitive facilities of the human authors. On the other hand, it does imply something quite different from poetic inspiration. It is wrong to omit the divine element from the term implied by *theo-*, as the NEB does in rendering the phrase ‘every inspired scripture’. The expression clearly does not imply that some Scriptures are inspired, whilst others are not. The sacred scriptures are all expressive of the mind of God; but they are so with a view to their practical outworking in life.”
 - b) “God-breathed undoubtedly points to the mystery of [the Scripture] being filled with truth and trustworthiness. The meaning of this God-breathed writing is evident; it is aimed at a concrete and great goal: for teaching, for reproof, for correction and all this is summarized into one goal, ‘that the person of God may be complete, equipped for every good work’” (Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture*, 140). This testimony points “to the origin and the mystery, to the contrast between true and false, to the true authority which asks for faith and obedience.”
 - c) Evangelical theologian, Bloesch, writes, “I hold to an ontic difference between the Bible and other books, for the Bible has both a divine origin and a divine goal.” J. A. Bengel writes, “Scripture was divinely inspired not merely while it was being written, God breathing through the writers, but also while it was being read (and expounded), God breathing through the Scripture.”
- 2) A second key verse is 2 Peter 1:21. This seems to strengthen the understanding of the divine role in the production of prophecy/scripture.

First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

- a) "Scripture is not simply the Word of God or human words but the Word of God *in* human words" (Bloesch).
 - b) This emphasis upon the divine/human partnership is reflected in verses such as Acts 1:16 "Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold." However, Scripture does not shy away from acknowledging the status of humans as its authors as in Luke 3:4, "as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah."
 - c) Yet it understands that "what Scripture says, God says; its authority is His authority, for he is the ultimate Author, having given it through the minds and words of chosen and prepared men who in freedom and faithfulness 'spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit' (1 Peter 1:21). Holy Scripture must be acknowledged as the Word of God by virtue of its divine origin" (Packer, *God Has Spoken*, 144) although John Goldingay rightly notes that Scripture does discriminate between "words of God" and words of others.
- 3) Hebrews 4:12 suggests that the inspiration of Scripture relates not just to an act of the past but that it is also a continuing act of the present. God keeps his word alive because **it remains his word**. (How we move from the words of Paul to the word of God is a question of hermeneutics that will be addressed next week.)
- Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*
- a) "Fundamentalism...espouses a static theory of inspiration. To speak of the inscription of the Word (as do Warfield and Henry) is not out of line with historic orthodoxy, but when such language becomes normative and determinative in our understanding of scriptural authority, the dynamic quality of God's inspiring work is invariably diminished. God's Word cannot be encapsulated in either legal codes or clerical pronouncements, for the Word of God is "living and active" (Heb 4:12). Inspiration is an event in which God acts and speaks and his prophetic messengers and witnesses begin to discern and believe... [Fundamentalism] reduces truth to facticity and revelation to conceptuality or logic" (Bloesch, *Holy Scriptures* 97).
 - b) God's inspiration of Scripture has both ontological and functional consequences. Because the Scripture is God-breathed there is an immediate effect upon the writer, the text, and the reader.

Relationship between Inspiration and Revelation

- 1) For some Evangelicals, the doctrine of inspiration acts as a guarantee of revelation. "While revelation is the communication of truth from God to humans, inspiration relates more to the relaying of that truth from the first recipient(s) of it to the other persons, whether then or later. Thus, revelation might be thought of as a vertical action and inspiration as a horizontal matter."
- 2) Bloesch takes a broader view. "Inspiration depends on revelation and serves revelation. It records and preserves the truth of revelation. It provides both a trustworthy account of past revelation and an appropriate vehicle for ongoing revelation. Inspiration concerns the reliability of the scriptural witness... Inspiration signifies the election of the biblical witness... Inspiration is the overseeing and directing of the biblical writing... Inspiration means that the Bible is penetrated and filled with the Holy Spirit; revelation occurs when the Bible transmits the Word of God by the action of the Spirit. Inspiration has to do mainly with the form of the Bible; revelation, with its content... **Revelation is the shining of the light of God through the prism of Scripture; inspiration is ensuring that Scripture can be a prism for God's light.** Inspiration reaches its goal in revelation; revelation finds its springboard in inspiration. Inspiration encompasses not only the writing but also the compiling, the editing, the preserving of Holy Scripture."
- 3) Bloesch suggests that **God's inspiration works through God's adoption of the writings of his divinely selected writers, "inspiration is the divine election and superintendence of particular writers and writings in order to ensure a trustworthy and potent witness to the truth."**

Inerrancy or Infallible?

The biggest problem with terms like “inerrancy” or “infallible” are that they describe what the Bible is (in language that it does not use) rather than what it is. When the Bible speaks of Scriptures, it describes them as

Inerrancy

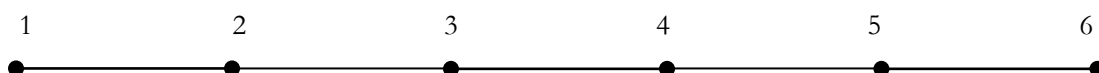
- 1) Erickson identifies a common Evangelic perspective, linking inspiration even to the choice of words which leads to the assurance that there can be no errors in the Bible. “By inspiration of the Scripture we mean that supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit on the Scripture writers which rendered their writings an accurate record of the revelation or which resulted in what they wrote actually being the Word of God... Inspiration extends even to the choice of words.” Therefore, inerrancy “is the doctrine that the Bible is fully truthful in all of its teachings... If the Bible is not inerrant, then our knowledge of God may be inaccurate and unreliable. Inerrancy is a corollary to the full inspiration of the Bible... [I]nerrancy means that the Bible, when judged by the usage of its time, teaches the truth without any affirmation of error.”
- 2) Feinberg describes inerrancy as “the view that when all the facts become known, they will demonstrate that the Bible in its original autographs and correctly interpreted is entirely true and never false in all it affirms, whether that relates to doctrine or ethics or to the social, physical, or life sciences.” This reliance on the “original autographs” suggests that errors may have crept during the copying phase.

Infallibility

- 1) Bloesh takes a more phenomenal view of the Bible and speaks of infallibility, which “has historically meant that everything that the Bible reports and teaches is intended by God to be read and heard by his church... It does not connote that the Bible is free from all error of any kind. It means not faultlessness but being incapable of teaching deception.”
- 2) Van Hoozer takes a similar view. “The Bible was not necessarily accurate in all of its factual references, but that it accomplished the divine purpose... As Kevin van Hoozer indicates, infallibility means that in whatever mood Scripture is functioning, it adequately expresses God’s command or question or whatever speech-act is involved.”

Various Conceptions of Inerrancy

- 1) Absolute inerrancy holds that the Bible, which includes rather detailed treatment of matters both scientific and historical, is fully true.
- 2) Full inerrancy also holds that the Bible is completely true, but with regards references to scientific and historical matters it is only phenomenally true; that is, they are reported as they appear to the human eye. They are not necessarily exact; rather, they are popular descriptions, often involving general references or approximations.
- 3) Limited inerrancy also regards the Bible to be inerrant and infallible with respect to salvific doctrinal references. A sharp distinction is drawn, however, between nonempirical, revealed matters on the one hand, and empirical, natural references on the other. The Bible’s scientific and historical references reflect the understanding current at the time it was written. For the purposes for which the Bible was given, it is fully truthful and inerrant.
- 4) Inerrancy of purpose holds that the Bible inerrantly accomplishes its purpose. The purpose of the biblical revelation is to bring people into personal fellowship with Christ, not to communicate (propositional) truths.
- 5) Accommodated revelation emphasises the idea that the Bible came through human channels, and thus participates in the shortcomings of human nature.
- 6) Those who hold that revelation is non-propositional maintain that the Bible in itself is not revelation. Its function is to point us to the person-to-person encounter that is revelation, rather than to convey propositional revelation.



Finally, there is the position that inerrancy is an irrelevant issue. For one thing, “inerrant” is a negative term. Nor is it a biblical concept. Inerrancy distracts us from the proper issues and inhibits biblical research. It is artificial and externally imposed. It makes a major issue out of what should be a minor matter at most.

Arguments for Inerrancy

- 1) Biblical – An implicit rather than an explicit teaching. “At times an entire argument rests on a single word, the tense of a verb, and the difference between a plural and a singular noun. If the Bible’s inerrancy does not extend to every detail, these arguments lose their force... It might be objected that the NT does not always cite the OT text with precision – that as a matter of fact precision is the exception rather than the rule. This is a fair response... A careful study of the way in which the OT is used in the NT, however, demonstrates that the NT writers quoted the OT not cavalierly but quite carefully” (Feinberg, *EDT* 143).
- 2) Historical – Luther says, “But everyone, indeed, knows that at times they [the fathers] have erred as men will; therefore I am ready to trust them only when they prove their opinions from Scripture, which has never erred.” Yet, he was prepared to expel James from the Canon.
- 3) Epistemological – “If the Bible is not inerrant, then any claims it makes may be false. This means not that all claims are false, but that some might be. But so much of the Bible is beyond direct verification. Thus, only its inerrancy assures the knower that his or her claim is justified” (Feinberg). A presupposition is that something that contains error cannot be absolutely authoritative. Erickson typifies this view, “Our basis for holding to the truth of any theological proposition is that the Bible teaches it...[and] ‘false in one, uncertain in all.’”
- 4) The Slippery-Slope – “For many individuals and institutions the surrender of their commitment to inerrancy has been a first step to greater error” (Feinberg, *EDT* 144).

A Common Evangelical Understanding of Inerrancy

“The Bible, when correctly interpreted in light of the level to which culture and the means of communication had developed at the time it was written, and in view of the purposes for which it was given, is fully truthful in all that it affirms...When correctly interpreted it can be fully relied on in all it teaches. It is a sure, dependable, and trustworthy authority.”

- 1) Inerrancy pertains to what is affirmed or asserted rather than what is merely reported.
- 2) We must judge the truthfulness of Scripture in terms of its meaning in the cultural setting in which its statements were expressed.
- 3) The Bible’s assertions are fully true when judged in accordance with the purpose for which they were written.
- 4) Reports of historical events and scientific matters are in phenomenal rather than technical language.
- 5) Difficulties in explaining the biblical text should not be prejudged as indications of error.
- 6) Note J. I. Packer’s comments (in *God Has Spoken*):

...history must be treated as history, poetry as poetry, hyperbole and metaphor as hyperbole and metaphor, generalization and approximation as what they are, and so forth. Differences between literary conventions in Bible times and in ours must also be observed: since, for instance, non-chronological narration and imprecise citation were conventional and acceptable and violated no expectations in those days, we must not regard these things as faults when we find them in Bible writers. **When total precision of a particular kind was not expected nor aimed at, it is no error not to have achieved it.** Scripture is inerrant, not in the sense of being absolutely precise by modern standards, but in the sense of making good its claims and achieving that measure of focused truth at which its authors aimed.

Bloesch’s View of the Truthfulness of the Bible

- 1) “In biblical religion error means swerving from the truth, wandering from the right path, rather than defective information (cf. Prov 12:28; Job 4:18; Ezek 45:20; Rom 1:27; 2 Pet 2:18; Jas 5:20; 1 Jn 4:6; 2 Tim 2:16-19). Scriptural inerrancy can be affirmed if it means the conformity of what is written to the dictates of the Spirit regarding the will and purpose of God. But it cannot be held if it is taken to mean the conformity of everything that is written in Scripture to the facts of world history and science.”
- 2) “As evangelical Christians we are not required to affirm the perfect, factual accuracy of the Bible. Indeed, the text itself seems to belie such accuracy.”

- 3) “A distinction should always be made between what Scripture reports and includes and what it teaches or intends. The point is not whether Scripture is inerrant in all factual details but whether it is true. We must affirm that the writers of the Bible, being human, had a capacity for error. But we must also insist that what the Holy Spirit teaches in and through their words is completely truthfull.”

Conclusion – Because the Scriptures are God-Breathed it is Always Word *and* Spirit.

The Scriptures are divine in origin and in their goal and, therefore, they are true. The Scriptures are the product of human authors and this involves limitations and a historical-cultural specificness. Neither truth can be allowed to swallow up the other. Both must be held together if we are to hear God’s word to us. The issue of discerning God’s word in human words is the issue of hermeneutics.

- 1) “We affirm that what the Scriptures says, God says. May he be glorified. Amen and Amen” (Packer).
- 2) “Scripture is authoritative because it is penetrated and filled with the Holy Spirit. It is God-breathed, and the creative breath of God remains in and with Scripture. Yet the self-revelation of God is not inherent in the letter but is always an act of free grace” (Bloesch).

Summary: Inspiration

- 1) Inspiration concerns God’s oversight and management of the process by which he brings the truth of his self-revelation to us.
- 2) Inspiration is God’s guarantee that he will speak to us through the text. He always turns up. Whether we feel that we have heard him or not, he is speaking to us each time the text is read.
- 3) What is inspired is the Bible rather than the writers or even their words. It is recorded in human words and draws upon many and varied human sources. This will mean that the form of the communication will contain evidence of it having been written in a specific time and place. This does not compromise its truth for God’s breath guarantees that his truth is preserved through the human process. God can use human means to achieve his ends. In this sense the Bible is both a human word and the divine word.
- 4) No Scripture writer, including Peter and Paul, is infallible. It is not the quality of the writers that guarantee the value of the text. God’s inspiration is his promise that the selected texts are his Word to us.
- 5) The inspiration of Scripture does not mean that each part is of equal worth. It is God’s communication to us with a foreground and a background. Hans Küng makes the observation,

“The testimonies recorded in the New Testament have neither the same texture nor the same value. Some are brighter, some darker; some are more intelligible, some less; some are stronger, some weaker; some are more original, some derivative. There are testimonies that can diverge, contrast, and partially contradict one another. They are held together by the fundamental testimony that Jesus Christ has revealed the God who interacts with us.”

Issues for Further Consideration:

- 1) Define the terms revelation, inspiration, inerrancy and infallible. Identify some of the major differences in understanding of these terms.
- 2) What is the significance of the Bible’s self-description as “God-breathed” (2 Tim 3:16)?
- 3) What is the connection between revelation and inspiration?
- 4) How does the revelation of the Bible (what Spence calls formative revelation) differ from God’s act of revelation to individuals (what Spence calls personal revelation)?
- 5) How does the inspiration of Holy Scripture differ from the inspiration of poets or from the inspiration of Christian teachers?
- 6) What approach should Christians take to apparent errors or discrepancies in the Bible? Do all such apparent problems need to be resolved in order for the Bible to be fully authoritative?
- 7) What is the relationship of revelation and/or inspiration to incidental statements made in the Bible concerning matters of history and science?

Praying to the God who Speaks:

prayers inspired by the study of Theology.



Dr Stephen Spence
Christies Beach Baptist Church
Congregational Pastor

The Self-Revealing God

Word of God; Light in Our Darkness.

Lost, uncertain, we stumble towards the sound of your call.

But distracted and disorientated by the Siren call of our personal dreams and desires, we again find ourselves lost.

Speak louder; shine brighter, we pray.

Our ears are blocked by our self-interest.

Our eyes are dimmed by our self-obsession.

Speak to us, Word of God, not from the general works of your hand but from the special words of your heart.

Shine for us, Light of the World, illuminating for us your face and not just your works.

Speak louder; shine brighter, we pray.

Our ears are blocked by our love of our comforts.

Our eyes are dimmed by our endless pursuit of self-gratification.

Speak clearly to us your name. Reveal to us your person.

Illuminate for us your Way. Speak to us your Truth. Grant us a share in your Life.

Then give to us the courage to see, to hear, and to be.

Speak to us in the words of Jesus, the Word.

Shine bright for us in the deeds of Jesus, Light of the World.

Call us to yourself in the challenge of Jesus, Lord of Life.

Amen

A Prayer Informed by Sacramental [General] Revelation

Creator God, I hear you call my name...

From the deep depths of space where out of darkness light shines

In the unnoticed rhythm of each breath that I take

I hear you call my name, and I know that I am not alone.

Creator God, I hear you call my name...

From the sparkling colours of a rainbow that spans my horizon

In the cacophony of sounds that greet each fresh dawn

I hear you call my name, and I know that living has meaning.

Creator God, I hear you call my name...

From out of the tears of grief that flow from unwanted loss

In the joy of celebration that surrounds a longed for birth

I hear you call my name, and I know that I am loved.

Creator God, I hear you call my name.

And as I turn towards your voice

I hear you tell me your Name

And a new relationship begins.

Amen.

The Gift of Scripture

Lord of the Church, Lord of my life.

How can we serve you if we do not know your will?

How can we know your will if you will not speak to us?

Lord of the Church, Lord of my life, we give you our thanks for your word to us.

Through your word you speak words of life to your church.

Through your word you speak words of challenge to my life.

Lord of the Church, Lord of my life, we confess that at times your word and your will are not clear to us.

Sometimes we know it is our fault. There are none as deaf as those who will not hear.

But sometimes we want to hear your word to us, and yet we can't.

We get confused – hearing static, seeing dimly.

Lord of the Church, Lord of my life, we pray that you will grant us humility.

...a humility that will not claim to know with more certainty than we can honestly have.

...a humility that will not seek to twist your words into our answers.

...a humility that will allow others to speak your revelation to us, even when they are Samaritans.

...a humility that will keep us listening and watching for your Spirit's contemporary speaking and doing.

Lord of the Church, Lord of my life, we give you thanks for Word, Spirit, and Church.

We commit ourselves to the reading of your word

in the midst of the community of your people

with our ears open to all that you are doing in us and around us.

Lord of the Church, Lord of my life, we know that you resist the proud and give grace to the humble.

Grant us the grace to see and hear.

Grant us the courage to obey.

Amen.

A Prayer in Response to the Provision of Holy Scripture

Living Word of God, you speak words of life to us.

Words spoken by your prophets have become our light.

Words spoken by your apostles have challenged our ways.

Words spoken by your unnamed servants have revealed your face to us.

Words of the past have become words of our present as you breathed your life into them.

So we are without excuse.

We ask, where is our God? Your words reveal your presence in our midst.

We ask, what does the Lord will? Your words reveal your ways to us.

We are without excuse.

We commit ourselves again to read your word...

Not in order to discover the past.

Not in order to become a master of the content.

We commit ourselves again to read your word

in order that we might meet with the living God and, thus, be changed.

You speak words of life to us, Living Word of God.

Amen.

The Divinity of Jesus: God's Self-Revelation

The Bible identifies God uniquely as Creator of “all things” and, therefore, as Ruler of “all things.” There is an absolute line of division between God and “all things.” This is why only God can be worshipped.

Surprisingly, then, the New Testament (NT), reflecting the early church's experience of Jesus, identifies Jesus on the God-side of that uncrossable line! Humans, spirits, and angels, are all on the created side of the line; but not Jesus. Jesus is Creator of “all things,” he is Ruler of “all things,” and, therefore, he is worshipped.

Yet this shared identity of the Father and the Son never led the early Christians or the historical Church to the belief that there were two gods. There is only one God, with one story (i.e., with one identity), who is revealed as Father by the Son. (see Trinity)

On the basis of this shared identity of God, the NT concludes that Jesus is the ultimate and the unique revealer of God. Jesus is not merely one who teaches us about God. Jesus is the one who reveals God to us. To know Jesus is to know God.

Prayer to the Divine Jesus

My God Jesus,

in you we have met our Maker and our Lord so we need search for meaning and truth nowhere else.

In you we have found the One who called us by name, our search is over, we have found our God. In you is the life that is the light for all people.

We were formed by you and for you.

We thank you that even in your glory – far beyond our world or our understanding – you loved us enough to become Immanuel, God with us. And not just for a moment; you remain Immanuel, the One who will never leave us nor forsake us.

We are humbled by the demonstration of your grace for you were prepared to do for us what we could not do for ourselves.

Thank you for the cross.

Thank you for your willingness to be both our High Priest and our perfect sacrifice.

Guide us. Form us.

Lord Jesus, we hear your call and we obey.

Amen.