

Some Thoughts on the Inspiration of the Bible

By Gerhard Pfandl

The word inspiration can have different meanings. An orchestra can give an inspired performance. Artists can speak about what inspires them. Athletes are inspired by their Olympic goals. In each case inspiration is something quite different from what the Apostle Paul meant when he said: "All Scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16 NKJ)

Revelation and inspiration in the Bible belong together. While revelation refers primarily to the contents of God's communication (Rev 1:1), i.e. the actual message; inspiration describes the means God used to communicate his message to sinful human beings, for example, in visions and dreams (Num 12:6) or by the "moving" of the Holy Spirit on the biblical authors. Peter says, "Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (2 Pet 1:21 NIV). As a leaf is carried along by the wind, so the writers of Scripture were carried along by the Spirit, they could not control the Spirit, they had to proclaim the message from God.

When the prophet Balaam was hired by Balak, king of the Moabites, to "curse" Israel, he was promised earthly riches (Num 22:37). But when, under the inspiration, he tried to curse Israel, he could only proclaim a blessing (Num 23:7-10, 18-24). In Scripture, inspiration guarantees the accuracy of that which is revealed.

Because the Bible does not develop a full theory of inspiration, various views have arisen in regard to the nature of inspiration: (1) The intuition theory defines inspiration as a heightened degree of insight. The biblical authors were religious geniuses but in principle no different from other great thinkers, such as Plato, Buddha or Mohammed. (2) The illumination theory allows for the working of the Holy Spirit, but only in heightening the biblical authors' natural abilities. There is no special communication of truth, but merely a deeper perception of spiritual matters. (3) The plenary or dynamic view of inspiration has the Spirit of God imbuing the writers with the thoughts and concepts they are to pass on. This view allows the writer's own personality to come into play in the choice of words and expressions. (4) In the verbal inspiration theory the Holy Spirit supplies not only the thoughts but also the words and expressions, albeit from the writers own vocabulary and background. (5) The dictation theory teaches that the Holy Spirit actually dictated the biblical books to the various writers. "This means that there is no distinctive style attributable to the different authors of the biblical Books."¹ In the last two theories the prophets and apostles can be compared to God's pens rather than his penmen.

The first two views are generally held by liberal scholars. The dictation theory goes back to Philo and Josephus² and was held by a few Christians, but is rarely found today. However, it is often equated with verbal inspiration which is the commonly accepted view among evangelical Christians.

Inspiration - The Claims of Scripture

Any discussion about the inspiration of the Bible must take into account what the inspired writers themselves said about it. In the Old Testament, the writers frequently claim to be recording the very words of God, for example, "Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying. . ." (Exod 25:1), or "The word of the Lord came to me, saying . . ." (Ezek 32:1). David said, "The Spirit of the Lord spoke by me, and His word was on my tongue" (2 Sam 23:2). According to H. M. Morris, there are about 2600 such claims in the Old Testament.³

The New Testament confirms the divine inspiration of the Old Testament. Paul wrote, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Tim 3:16). And Peter stated that "prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21).

The same is true, of course, of the New Testament. Although the apostles do not claim inspiration as frequently as did the Old Testament writers, it is clear that they did regard their messages as given by divine authority. Paul, for example, wrote, "These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches" (1 Cor 2:13), and "When you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God" (2 Thess 2:13).

Paul also acknowledged the inspiration of other parts of the New Testament. In 1 Timothy 5:18 he quotes from both Testaments as Scripture. For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain," and,

“The labourer is worthy of his wages.” The first part of the text is a quote from Deuteronomy 25:4 and the second from Luke 10:7. Similarly, Peter refers to the writings of Paul as Scripture when he says that in Paul’s epistles “are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction as they do also the rest of the Scriptures” (2 Peter 3:15,16). In summary, the Bible clearly claims to be the inspired word of God.

Inspiration – A Definition

Throughout Scripture, the biblical authors claim to be inspired. But how does inspiration actually work? Paul tells us that the Bible was given “by inspiration” (2 Tim 3:16). The Greek word used literally means “God-breathed.” The NIV, therefore, translates: “All Scripture is God-breathed.” The idea here is that God through the Holy Spirit influenced the human authors in such a way that what they wrote became His word.

In contrast to the verbal inspiration theory, Seventh-day Adventists believe that the Holy Spirit inspired a prophet’s thoughts, not his or her words, except in texts where God’s words are actually quoted. That is, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, the thoughts of the authors became the thoughts God wanted them to write down. God provided the thoughts, and the prophets, in relaying the divine message, supplied the best words in their vocabulary. In this way, the personality of the writers was not overridden, because each expressed in his own words what had been revealed to him. Although the prophet was human with sinful tendencies, the operation of the Holy Spirit guaranteed the truthfulness of the message as an expression of God’s will. Ellen White describes the process of inspiration by saying:

The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God’s mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented . . . The writers of the Bible were God’s penmen, not His pen. Look at the different writers. It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man’s words or his expressions but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thoughts. But the words receive the impress of the individual mind. The divine mind is defused. The divine mind and will is combined with the human mind and will; thus the utterances of the man are the word of God.”⁴

Nature and Authority

Such a view of the inspiration of Scripture makes the Bible unique in nature and authority. Though God used human beings to write the books of the Bible, they cannot be credited to them, but must be attributed to God. Because the contents of Scripture has its origin in God, it is endowed with reliability and trustworthiness. With the Psalmist the Christian, therefore, can say: “Your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light to my path” (119:105).

I have yet to hear a man or woman say: “I was in a terrible state; I was a hopeless alcoholic, a disgrace to my family. I contemplated suicide. But then I began studying philosophy and science, and this completely changed me. Since then I’ve been happy as can be!” However, there are hundreds-of-thousands of people around the world who can testify that reading the Bible has changed their lives. That is because the Spirit who inspired the Scriptures is the same Holy Spirit who speaks through the Word to the heart of its readers. Not all will respond, but those who do will experience a transformation of their lives.

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¹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), 207.

² A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (King of Prussia, PA: Judson Press, 1907), 209.

³ Henry M. Morris, *Many Infallible Proofs* (San Diego, CA: Creation-Life Publisher, 1974), 157.

⁴ Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 3 vols. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958), 1:21.