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Theories of Inspiration of the Scriptures

The Bible is a compiled book that consists of sixty-six smaller books written by about forty men over a period of approximately 1600 years. The early Christian community recognized that these particular writings were "inspired by God," or God-breathed (2 Tim. 3:16), and thus they compiled the writings together into their Holy Scripture, also known as the Word of God or the Bible. A person's belief in a particular view of Biblical inspiration will determine his or her approach and attitude towards the Bible, especially with reference to interpreting it and to its authority in their life. A proper view of Biblical inspiration is the foundation to properly understanding the Word of God. Since there is no authority greater than God (Heb. 6:13) who created heaven and earth and all that is in them, any words coming from God would also be authoritative and have the ultimate right to command obedience from His creation. Several theories have been posed over the recent years to explain the nature of the Bible being inspired by God yet written by men, but the verbal plenary inspiration theory continues to be the traditional orthodox Christian view and to have the greatest Biblical support (Geisler and Nix 180-81).

In order to preserve the revelation of God, inspiration was needed. Thus, the Scripture was "God-breathed," *theopneustos* in Greek (Vinyard 13:87; 2 Tim. 3:16), and "written by men carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21)" (Enns 159). As an evangelical, J. I. Packer describes "inspiration of Scripture" as "a divine activity that produced Scripture" and defines it as "a supernatural, providential influence of God's Holy Spirit upon the human authors which caused them to write what He wished to be written for the communication of revealed truth to others" (77-78). Different theories of inspiration emerge when overemphasis is placed on either the human-aspect of inspiration or the divine-aspect of inspiration (Belcher 17-20). This writer believes that the verbal plenary theory of inspiration properly balances these two aspects and has the greatest Biblical support of the different theories.

Because the Bible characterizes inspiration as verbal and plenary, the orthodox view of inspiration held by evangelicals and most fundamentalists is called the verbal plenary inspiration theory (Enns 162). It is said to be verbal because "The very words of the prophets were God-given, not by dictation but by the Spirit-directed employment of the prophet's own vocabulary and style" (Geisler and Nix 192). Based on 2 Tim. 3:16, inspiration is plenary, meaning "full, complete, extending to every part" (Geisler and Nix 52), since "all" of Scripture is "equally" God-breathed. Some words in the Bible were spoken by men, angels, Satan, demons, or God, but "all have come into being because God inspired the writers, and they recorded faithfully the message they received" (Roslim and Duncan 34). Enns lists several important aspects that should be included in the proper definition of inspiration, as expressed by the verbal plenary theory:

- (1) the divine element—God the Holy Spirit superintended the writers, ensuring the accuracy of the writing;
- (2) the human element—the human authors wrote according to their individual styles and personalities;
- (3) the result of the divine-human authorship is the recording of God's truth without error;
- (4) inspiration extends to the selection of words by the writers;
- (5) inspiration relates to the original manuscripts. (160)

Biblical inspiration further implies infallibility and inerrancy. Because God does not lie (Titus 1:2) and Scripture cannot be broken (John 10:35), His Word is infallible, meaning "wholly trustworthy and reliable" and "does not deceive or mislead" (Packer 95; Roslim and Duncan 39). The Bible also has complete inerrancy in that it "is wholly true and without error" (Geisler and Nix 52). "Inerrancy means that when all the facts are known, the Scriptures in their original autographs and properly interpreted will be shown to be wholly true in everything they teach, whether that teaching has to do with doctrine, history, science, geography, geology, or other disciplines of knowledge" (Boice 13).

"Throughout its broad and diverse ranks, Christians of all major persuasions prior to World War I officially adhered to the belief that the Scriptures are the divinely inspired, authoritative, infallible, and inerrant Word of God" (Geisler and Nix 131). "Nevertheless, between the early seventeenth and the early twentieth centuries a series of changes in the climates of opinion gradually prepared the ground for a direct and open confrontation between religion and science over the issues of revelation, inspiration, and the authority of Scripture" (163). Eventually, other theories of inspiration of the Scripture gained a following, such as those held by liberals, neo-orthodox, neo-evangelicals, and hyper-fundamentalists.

Some liberals and many non-Christians hold to a natural inspiration theory. "This view understands the writers of the Bible to be men of great genius who did not need any supernatural help in writing the Bible" (Ryrie 73). This theory portrays the Bible as "merely a human product," written with "superior insight on the part of natural man into moral and religious truth" (Roslim and Duncan 35). Those who hold this view either deny the existence of God or deny that God had direct involvement in producing the Bible.

The majority of liberals hold to a spiritual illumination theory that suggests that the authors were illuminated by the Holy Spirit in a similar way that is experienced by any devout Christian (Enns 161). "The writing of the Bible as a whole was accomplished by an extraordinary stimulation and elevation of the powers of men who devoutly yielded themselves to God's will and sought, often with success unparalleled elsewhere, to convey truth useful to the salvation of men and nations" (Geisler and Nix 165). Furthermore, liberals believe "the Bible merely contains the Word of God, along with many errors. One must use human reason and the 'spirit of Christ' to determine which parts of Scripture are true and which are false" (166). The liberal theories emphasize man's participation in inspiration to the exclusion (or near exclusion) of God's participation.

The neo-orthodox view sees the Bible as an errant human written record of God's revealed acts and God's personal revelation in Christ. Christ is the Word of God, and "the Bible is simply a witness to Christ" and "only a fallible human record of that revelation" of Christ (Geisler and Nix 172, 175). The Bible only "becomes the Word of God as the reader encounters Christ in his own subjective experience" (Enns 162). In comparison, "The orthodox believe the Bible *is* God's Word; liberals believe the Bible *contains* God's Word; neo-orthodox hold that the Bible *becomes* God's Word" (Geisler and Nix 171).

Some neo-evangelicals hold a conceptual inspiration theory and others hold a partial or dynamic inspiration theory. In conceptual inspiration "only the concepts or ideas of the writers are inspired but not the words" chosen by the writers which could contain errors (Enns 161). "The partial inspiration theory teaches that the parts of the Bible related to matters of faith and practice are inspired whereas matters related to history, science, chronology, or other non-faith matters may be in error" (161). Ryrie points out that the "contemporary expression of this view of inspiration teaches that the Bible is inspired in its purpose" or intent to "show men how to be saved," but errors

could be in the other parts of the material (74). Although the Bible is seen to be infallible in its purpose to save (Geisler and Nix 180), Belcher sees the dynamic view as overbalanced toward the human aspect of inspiration since the view claims there are errors in the original text (19-21). While "neo-evangelicals hold that inspiration is limited to receptive truths," evangelicals hold to unlimited inspiration that produced an infallible and inerrant Scripture (Geisler and Nix 178, 189).

Geisler and Nix note that some hyper-fundamentalists may hold a mechanical dictation theory of inspiration (190), but Packer is probably correct that "no Protestant theologian . . . has ever held it" and the theory is "a man of straw" set up as a misrepresentation of the true evangelical view (78-79). In this theory the writers of Scripture were merely secretaries for God and their writing was simply a "mechanical exercise of recording dictation" that "bypassed their human intellect" (Roslim and Duncan 36-37). This view holds that the writers were passive and "only wrote the words they were told to write" (Enns 161), thus ensuring an infallible and inerrant product. Even though evangelicals and fundamentalists "hold that the biblical writers were completely controlled by the Holy Spirit" (Packer 78), they believe that the "mechanical dictation overbalances in the direction of the divine . . . at the expense of man's full involvement" (Belcher 17) and they disagree with the theory since the style and vocabulary vary between books of the Bible, which would not be the case if God dictated the entire Bible. Some extreme fundamentalists incorporate a human dimension to the mechanical view and call it verbal dictation theory. In this more plausible theory, God purposefully created the men and made their different writing styles according to His plan; Thus the end product is a verbally dictated inerrant Bible with God's styles emanating from writers chosen by God (Geisler and Nix 170-71).

This writer affirms the modern evangelical view of Scripture, verbal plenary inspiration, which is "the traditional orthodox position of historic Christianity from biblical times to the present" (Geisler and Nix 180). In contrast to the liberal views that claim that God had very little influence in writing of Scripture, the Bible clearly records that the writers themselves acknowledged that the Lord God was uniquely speaking to them or through them. Roslim and Duncan state that words such as "Thus said the Lord" appear more than 3,800 times in the Old Testament (33). In contrast to the neo-evangelical views that only concepts are inspired, the Bible affirms verbal inspiration and that the very words of the Bible are God-given as noted by Moses (Ex. 24:4), Isaiah (Isa. 8:1), Jesus (Matt. 5:18), and Paul (1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Tim. 3:16; 1 Cor. 2:13). While neo-evangelicals believe that only parts of the Bible are inspired, the Word of God says that "all" of Scripture is inspired (2 Tim. 3:16) and, according to Geisler and Nix, "that inspiration extends universally to all of Scripture is borne out by the use of inclusive phrases 'it is written,' 'the Scriptures,' 'the law and the prophets,' 'the word of God'" (52). In contrast to the neo-orthodox view that the Bible only becomes the Word of God as Christ is experientially revealed to the reader, "The Bible is the objective and authoritative Word of God whether or not a person responds to it (John 8:47; 12:48)" and "there are no objective criteria for evaluating what would constitute a 'legitimate' encounter with God" (Enns 162). Each of these unorthodox views deny that the Bible is inerrant, and thus the truth becomes subjective. However, the "Bible teaches only truth (John 17:17)" (Geisler and Nix 52, 58) breathed out from God who is true (Rom. 3:4). While these unorthodox views over-emphasize the human aspect of inspiration, the dictation theories of extreme fundamentalists over-emphasize the divine aspect in theories of divine dictation. While the Bible does contain portions of dictation, such as the Lord speaking to Moses in Ex. 34:27, most of the Bible was clearly not dictated and is further evidenced by varying writing styles that reflect the particular author's vocabulary, style, experiences, and background. "Just as Christ the living Word of God was truly human, yet without sin (Heb. 4:15), even so the written Word of God is

truly human, yet without error" (Geisler and Nix 188).

Belcher, who commends much of Bernard Ramm's warnings of a potential over emphasis on the valid doctrine of biblical inerrancy, gives a balanced perspective of the importance of holding a particular theory of inspiration of the Scriptures:

Truly the essence of Christian faith and doctrine centers on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Positively, this is the core of the gospel that must be proclaimed to a lost world. This gospel is the power of God unto salvation, not one's view of Scripture. (24)

Adding to this thought, Belcher is convinced that there is a relationship "between the doctrine of Scripture and the essence of Christianity" (27). Additionally, Belcher ends by writing, "The nature of Scripture is linked vitally to one's view of the person and work of Christ. Only as evangelicals hold to inerrancy and infallibility can they know that they are preaching the real, historical, and saving Jesus Christ" (79). As people hold to the Biblical truth that "all Scripture is inspired by God" as expressed in verbal plenary inspiration theory, then the Scripture becomes an authority in one's life and is practical "and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (NASB 2 Tim. 3:16-17).

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