

Is the Bible Inspired?

This week I received an e-mail from a parishioner who said, “Pastor, I need to know—do you believe all scripture is God-breathed? This is what I believe, and I need to know if you and our church believe this. I can’t belong to a church that doesn’t believe this. If we could meet to talk about this, it shouldn’t take more than ten minutes.” What I knew in reading her note was that this was not a ten-minute conversation.

This woman wanted to know if I believe the Bible is *God-breathed*. I wanted to know precisely what she meant by that. “God-breathed” is a translation of the Greek word Paul used to describe scripture in 2 Timothy 3:16, a word typically translated as “inspired.” In this chapter I’d like us to think carefully about what is, and is not, meant by “God-breathed” or “inspired” as it pertains to the scriptures.

Inspiration is a difficult concept to define precisely, particularly when it comes to the Bible. Many Christians assume that inspiration

means that God composed the Bible, word for word. But the word “inspiration,” at least in English, is quite different in meaning from the word “composition” or “dictation.” Some believe a result of inspiration is that the Bible is completely without error and that its statements are always true and accurate regarding anything it speaks about, not just theological assertions, but science and history as well. But inspiration, at least in English, does not mean perfection. What then does the word “inspired” or “God-breathed” mean when Paul uses it to describe scripture?

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I was preaching on forgiveness recently, and a man came to me following the sermon and said, “Hearing what the scriptures said about forgiveness and the way you helped explain it, I am going home to call my Dad. I haven't spoken to him in over twenty years. It's time for me to make amends.” That's the power and inspiration of scripture. I think of a woman who gives so much of her time to our work with inner-city schoolchildren. She notes that it all began as she listened to the scriptures and a message on Jesus's parable of the sheep and the goats. The inspiration and power of scripture's message set her on a path to selflessly serving “the least of these.” In my own life, while reading Luke's Gospel, I found myself so

inspired when

moved by the story of Jesus that I got on my knees in my bedroom and offered my life to Christ. That is the inspirational power of scripture.

Another way we experience inspiration through scripture is illumination. There are moments when reading scripture, hearing it read, or hearing it preached, that the listener suddenly understands his or her life situation in a new light. Confusion gives way to clarity. These are the kind of “aha” moments that scripture evokes.

Captured in the examples above but often going beyond them, is the way we enter into a conversation with God through scripture. We hear God's voice as we listen to scripture's words. I find I am most likely to hear God in scripture when I approach it anticipating that God will speak. Sometimes, before I read, I pray the prayer that Eli taught young Samuel in 1 Samuel 3:9, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

Up to this point I've described the way scripture inspires us. But the question we want to consider in this chapter is not simply how we are inspired by the Bible, but in what sense God inspired its human authors or, more to the point, in what sense its words are in fact the message of God.

The phrase “inspired by God” is found only once in the Bible. It appears in 2 Timothy 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” (emphasis added). Before considering what “inspired by God” means, let's begin by asking what “all scripture” refers to.

Though many of the New Testament documents were written before 2 Timothy, it is unlikely that Paul² was speaking of any of these documents as he wrote the words “all scripture.” I believe it would have been unthinkable to Paul that his letters were on a par

with the Law of Moses or the Prophets, even though the church would later consider them so. “All scripture,” for Paul, would have referred to those scrolls or documents that were considered authoritative by the Jewish and early Christian community. As we’ve seen, there was still debate in Paul’s day as to which documents were authoritative. Did Paul mean all the documents that were part of the Greek translation of the Old Testament, since he seemed most often to quote from this translation (including those books found in the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Old Testaments and not found in the Protestant Old Testament)? Or did he mean the documents that were accepted by the leaders in Jerusalem, which are only those found in the Protestant Old Testament?

Further, when he said “all scripture is inspired by God,” did he literally mean every word of scripture? Or was he referring to its big ideas and key messages? It is not clear, as we read 2 Timothy 3:16, precisely what Paul meant by “all scripture.”

Let’s consider another question, how precisely does inspiration work? I began the chapter talking about our typical experience of inspiration: We feel moved, provoked, roused, stimulated, influenced, urged to do something. If this is what Paul had in mind, then he may have been saying that each biblical author was moved, provoked, roused, stimulated, influenced, or urged to write.

As I was preparing my sermon this week, I began by praying, “God, please speak to me as I study the scriptures” (I was preaching on the story of Hagar in Genesis 16 and 21). As I read the scriptures, I felt deeply moved by several things in the story. As I studied the stories in more depth, I learned things that I felt urged to share with the congregation. In the end, the story touched me, and I attempted to share what touched me with the congregation in a way that would inspire them. After the sermon, some said that they felt God was speaking to them during the message. I felt *inspired* as I

studied and wrote the message. I did not feel God dictated to me what to say, but I did feel a strong compulsion to share the message I did. I prayed that God would use me to speak to the people.

I suspect that we all have experienced this kind of inspiration from time to time—this sense that God wants us to say or do something. Perhaps, in 2 Timothy 3:16, Paul was saying that the biblical authors were inspired like this as they wrote. I would never claim that every word in my sermon was chosen by God. I do pray, however, that the overarching message in some imperfect way communicated God’s heart, character, and will to the congregation.

If this is what Paul meant, then the biblical authors were moved, urged, or compelled to write the message yet did so in their own words, with their own cultural assumptions and within the limits of their vocabulary and knowledge. They may not have communicated perfectly, but they were nevertheless used by God as they wrote.

So often those who cite 2 Timothy 3:16 as the basis for their understanding of scripture assume a view of inspiration that Paul never claimed, that scripture nowhere teaches, and which no human being alive today claims to have experienced. One way to understand what Paul meant by “inspired by God” would be to look to our own experience of inspiration from God and posit that the scripture writers were similarly inspired.

Let’s take a closer look at the Greek words Paul uses in 2 Timothy 3:16 to see if they can help us understand what he means. This phrase, “inspired by God,” is just one word in the Greek: *theopneustos*. It is a compound word, derived from *theo*, meaning “God,” and *pneo*, meaning “to breathe out” or “to blow.” Paul appears to have created this word himself. It appears nowhere else in the Bible and, to our knowledge, nowhere else in the Greek language until after

In the case of the scriptures,

1. Authors write scriptures.
2. God breathes on them.
3. The words come to life.

I don't know if this is precisely what Paul meant by the word *theopneustos*. My point is that there are numerous ways of understanding what Paul might have been thinking when he wrote that scripture is "God-breathed."

There are other scriptures that might help us understand how the early church thought of the idea of inspiration. In 2 Peter 1:20–21, we read, "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." Peter⁶ is referring here to words he believed foretold the coming of the Messiah. Interestingly, as we learned earlier in the book, many of these prophetic words meant something completely different to generations of Jews before the time of Christ. But when Christians read the prophets, they suddenly heard something that others hadn't heard before. This captures both senses of what *theopneustos* might mean: the biblical authors were "moved by the Holy Spirit," and the scriptures were breathed upon as Christians read them, so that they saw things that previous generations had not seen in the prophetic words.

In Acts 1:15–26, the disciples are discussing Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus and then took his own life. Concerning Judas's betrayal and subsequent death, Peter says, "Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas." He goes on to quote Psalm 69:25: "Let his homestead become desolate, and let there be no one to live in it,"

Paul's time.³ That makes it difficult to know precisely what Paul meant by the word. (When you see a new word, you typically learn its meaning by looking at the context and its etymology. To get an even clearer understanding, you look for other uses, but in this case there are no other uses.) It could have meant "God-exhaled" or "God-breathed," or perhaps he was drawing from the Greek word for Spirit, *pneuma*, in which case it might mean something like "God-Spirited."

Let's consider the idea of "God-breathed" or "God-exhaled." What could Paul have meant by this exactly? We don't know. The word seems metaphorical, not offering a precise definition of God's literal involvement with the writing of scripture but clearly associating scripture with God's breathing (an anthropomorphism since we don't believe that God literally breathes).

What if Paul, in using the word "God-breathed," is drawing upon the Genesis story of Creation? Genesis 2:7 says, "Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being." When God first forms man out of clay, he is not yet a living being. God breathes into him and he becomes animated—he is now alive. Paul knew of scripture's human authors. Was he suggesting that God breathes upon the human words of scripture thereby animating them, making them "living and active"?⁴ The words come alive in the moment when God, by the Spirit, uses these human words to speak to us.⁵

To clarify this parallel to Genesis 2, we might say that in the view of Genesis 2,

1. God forms the man.
2. God breathes into him.
3. He becomes a living being.

and Psalm 109:8: "Let another take his position of overseer." Notice once more Peter has made reference to the Holy Spirit's role in the writing of the scriptures.

Peter seems to say here that the Holy Spirit led David to write the words of Psalms 69 and 109, and these words were a prophecy about the betrayal of Christ by Judas Iscariot. Here I'd remind you of our discussion in chapter 7. The early Christians read the Old Testament through the lens of Jesus's life. They often gave new meaning to old scriptures. They saw Jesus on nearly every page of the Old Testament. But when you go back and read verses like Psalms 69:25 and 109:8 in their original context, they don't look like prophecies and they don't sound like things we would expect the Holy Spirit to inspire.

These two psalms seem to be speaking of events from the time of David. In Psalm 109, David prays that God will show no pity on one who has betrayed him. He prays that the man's children will become wandering beggars.

I love psalms like this because they are brutally and uncomfortably honest in expressing the author's hurt and pain. But here's the question: Would the Holy Spirit have inspired David to pray such a prayer? Is it not the opposite of Jesus's command to love our enemies? Though the meaning of David's words seems clear, the New Testament apostles lifted these words out of their original context and heard God speak through them a word needed in the light of Judas's death. This passage points once more to the idea that God might breathe fresh meaning into the otherwise static written words of scripture.

Recognizing that we have no clear definition of what Paul meant by *theopneustos*, we can still say with confidence that the apostles believed the sacred writings were influenced by the Holy Spirit in some way, that they not only spoke to the people in the time they

were written, but the Holy Spirit would continue to use these words of scripture and give them new meaning, making them alive and active, and useful for the early church.

So let me ask a question that might make you uncomfortable, one that I've already hinted at in this chapter: do you think the scripture writers Moses, David, Matthew, and Paul were inspired to a greater degree or in a different way than we experience the inspiration and guidance of the Spirit as Christians today? When a pastor prays while preparing his or her messages each week, "Holy Spirit, guide me that I might speak the words you would have me share with the congregation," will the guidance he or she receives from the Spirit be less than or different from that received by the scripture writers?

In the appendix to his excellent book, *A High View of Scripture?*, Craig Allert lists nineteen examples of the church fathers, through the first four hundred years of the Christian faith, using *theopneustos* or similar phrases to describe their own writings or the sermons, decisions, and writings of others.⁷ His point is that this term, as used and understood in the early church, apparently did not have the exclusive meaning that many Christians imbue it with today.

As Paul was writing his letters, he no doubt sought to be led by the Spirit, but he does not indicate that he was in any heightened state of inspiration. And Luke, when he describes the process for writing his Gospel, describes doing research, reading what others had written, interviewing eyewitnesses, then intentionally sitting down to write an orderly account of Jesus's life. None of the New Testament authors, with the exception of John in Revelation, claimed an extraordinary inspiration beyond what is available to anyone who is in Christ and led by the Spirit.

What, then, would make Paul's words, or the Gospel accounts of Jesus, of any greater authority than something a contemporary

of God. This doctrine is often referred to as verbal, plenary inspiration.

Verbal, plenary inspiration is not taught in the Bible, and it is not the essential meaning of *theopneustos* as it was used by Paul or the early church. It was not a doctrine taught in the creeds of the early church. That's not to say that none in the early church held a similar view. Origen, for example, held such a view, but his belief that each word was chosen by God led to allegorical forms of interpretation that no one finds acceptable today.

The modern adoption of verbal, plenary inspiration was in many ways a response to perceived threats to Christian doctrine and to traditional understandings of the Bible that emerged, particularly in the nineteenth century, as a result of the Enlightenment. When I think of the history of this view of scripture, I'm reminded of Newton's third law of motion, in which he postulated that "for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction." When the Enlightenment thinkers began to critically study the Bible, questioning virtually everything in it, some Christians responded by articulating a doctrine of inspiration which said that every word of the Bible was chosen and inspired by God himself. Why was this important? Because if inspiration means that God chose every word, and God is all-knowing and without error, and thus totally trustworthy, then the book he authored must be without error and totally true and trustworthy. And this means the Bible is above question, and whatever it affirms is true, whether this affirmation is about history or science, geography or theology. Verbal, plenary inspiration was a way of building a fence around the Bible and making it impossible to question it or any doctrine built upon it. Those who held this view knew their doctrines were above question because "God says it (in the Bible), I believe it, that settles it."

Verbal, plenary inspiration and the doctrine of the inerrancy

Christian might write? Isn't that the question the church wrestled with in the process of canonization? Remember, the word "canon" refers to something like a ruler—it is a standard by which other things are measured. The writings of the New Testament are our earliest sources for the Christian faith. The Gospels are the earliest accounts of the life of Jesus—what he said and what he did—that we possess. And the letters of Paul and the other apostles represent the attempts of the earliest leaders of the church to describe both the meaning of the Christian faith and its implications for the lives of believers.

These early Christians may have written under the same kind of inspiration we experience today, but what differentiates their writing from ours is that they were closest to the events described. They had seen Jesus, knew those who had, or had access to the earliest traditions of the Christian church. They are the founding fathers of our faith, just as Washington, Jefferson, and Adams are the founding fathers of our country. Jefferson's words will always have greater authority than any of our nation's leaders today.

Not only that, but during the first four hundred years of church history, the words of the documents in our Bible were found to be useful, helpful, and inspirational for Christians across a wide swath of the ancient Roman world. When the church finally set the "ruler" by which all other words about the faith would be measured and judged, it chose these documents.

Many Christians read the word "inspired" or "God-breathed" in 2 Timothy 3:16 (*theopneustos*) and immediately give a definition that Paul himself did not give. To them, "God-breathed" means something very close to God-dictated. Regardless of what Paul, or Luke, or Peter perceived themselves to be doing, many Christians today believe that God influenced the choice of every word and every idea, so that the words written were literally the words

and infallibility of the Bible go hand in hand. If you examine the “faith statement” of many conservative Christian organizations or churches, the very first statement of faith, even before the organization says it believes in God or what it believes about Jesus, is a statement about what it believes about the Bible or a word about verbal, plenary inspiration. This is very different from the ancient creeds of the church, which always began with God, not scripture: “I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.”

None of the historic creeds of the church, those from the first five hundred years of the Christian faith, mention an infallible or inerrant Bible or the idea of verbal, plenary inspiration, and none begin with an affirmation of faith in the scriptures. But for many, this has become the first and foundational creed of Christendom.

This new foundation for the Christian faith, namely that Christianity is true because the Bible is infallible, inerrant, totally true, and trustworthy, feels to me like a house of cards that can easily be brought down. All that is necessary is for someone to demonstrate even one genuine error or one logical contradiction in the Bible, and the entire Christian faith comes into question. Jesus and the apostles were thoroughly immersed in the scriptures. Yet they never taught this view, and this was certainly not the foundation of their faith. They did not call people to a belief in verbal, plenary inspiration.

Often those who hold this view quote scriptures that they interpret as teaching verbal, plenary inspiration, but if you read these scriptures carefully (the chief of which is 2 Timothy 3:16), none actually teach this. The scriptures are read through the presupposition or filter of verbal, plenary inspiration, leading those who hold this view to interpret scripture in the light of this presupposition.

Verbal, plenary inspiration also claims that every word in scripture is equally inspired. It is interesting, however, that Jesus and the

apostles show very clear preferences for certain books of the Old Testament. Psalms is cited sixty-nine times in the New Testament and Isaiah fifty-one times, but Joshua and 1 Samuel are cited only once each, and Ezra, Esther, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Obadiah, Nahum, and Zephaniah are not cited at all. This does not disprove the doctrine, but it does indicate that some books seemed to have been more meaningful to Jesus and the apostles, and hence had a greater impact on the thinking of the early church.

Here’s my point: though the tenets of verbal, plenary inspiration have been ingrained in the minds and hearts of many Christians to the point that they are simply assumed to be true, the Bible’s own witness about inspiration and the influence of the Holy Spirit on the Biblical text allows for a much broader understanding. Clearly New Testament authors believed that Old Testament scriptures were written under the influence of the Spirit, but the precise nature of that influence is not clearly articulated. Paul’s use of *theopneustos* (God-breathed or inspired) in 2 Timothy 3:16, far from being the precise technical term some conservative Christians have suggested, is a metaphor for God’s influence on the Biblical texts that could be understood in a variety of ways.

The various books of the Bible were written by people—people who were shaped by the times in which they lived and the limitations of their knowledge. As we saw concerning Paul in Galatians, their own historical circumstances, their convictions, and even their personalities come through in their writings. They wrote drawing upon the data they had access to and based upon the needs of the communities to whom they were writing. They were devout followers of God, respected and recognized for their spiritual leadership. They sought to love God and neighbor. They wrote to earnestly help their fellow God-followers to know God and to understand God’s will and God’s ways. Yet they were human beings.

Yes, they were influenced by the Holy Spirit, but God saw fit to leave the exact nature and meaning of this inspiration a bit mysterious. The most important dimension of inspiration may be how God uses the words of scripture to speak to us today.

The Anglican side of the Reformation, and the Methodist views based upon it, held that the Bible contains “all things necessary to salvation” (meaning the teaching or knowledge essential to salvation) and that nothing could be insisted upon by way of doctrine or practice that was not clearly demonstrated in scripture.⁸ Neither the Anglican nor Methodist Articles of Religion put forward a particular doctrine of inspiration, but they make clear that scripture is the primary source of faith and practice and that it adequately describes what is essential for salvation. But discovering these truths will require interpreting scripture, making sense of them in the light of the time and circumstances in which they were written. Further, the Jews have understood for millennia the importance of conversation and debate over the meaning of the scriptures as they sought to interpret them.

As we read scripture, we are involved in hearing God speak through it. We may read a passage of scripture and hear nothing at all. Then we read it again prayerfully, and we hear something we did not hear before. We sense God speaking to us. Often it is as we dig deeper into a text, studying the written document’s context, background, and the author’s intention, that we begin to hear God speak through it. The Spirit also uses the exposition of scripture in sermons and meaningful discussion in small groups studying the Bible to breathe upon us and upon scripture so we hear God speak through it. The church and our own intellect help us discern God’s message to us in the midst of the writings of those who lived two and three thousand years ago. Ultimately this understanding of inspiration may sound familiar to some of you: it involves reading

and interpreting scripture with the help of the *tradition* of the faith, the *experience* of the Spirit, and the use of our human *reason*.

I’ve suggested in this chapter that inspiration is not dictation but divine influence, on both the writer and the readers. I’ve suggested that divine influence on the writers was not qualitatively different from the way God inspires or influences by the Spirit today. The difference between biblical texts and some contemporary writings also influenced by the Spirit is that the biblical authors lived closer to the events of which they wrote, their writings served as instruments through which God spoke to the community of faith over long periods of time, and these writings are the founding documents of our faith. This view allows us to value the Bible, to hear God speaking through it, yet gives us permission to ask questions of the biblical text and to recognize that some things taught in scripture may not represent God’s character nor his will for us today, and perhaps never accurately captured God’s will. These topics include things like slavery, misogyny, genocide, and other issues we’ll consider in section 2 of this book.

Through the words of the Bible, the Holy Spirit has spoken and continues to speak. It is inspired, and it inspires. Its words, coupled with the Spirit’s power, are 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.” *And* it also reflects at times the limitations, biases, and assumptions of its human authors.