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Joel S. Williams

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# INERRANCY, INSPIRATION, AND DICTATION

JOEL STEPHEN WILLIAMS

Gainesville, FL

The terms "inerrancy," "infallibility," and "inspiration" imply something different depending on the speaker and the listener. How one defines these and similar terms is a reflection of how one views the nature of the Bible. A conservative view of inspiration was common in the early centuries, although it was not identical to the form and function it has in modern fundamentalism. It is interesting, though, that difficulties in explaining discrepancies in the Bible led to the dominance of allegorical interpretation in Jewish interpreters like Philo and in most Christian theology from a very early period. Allegorical interpretation was dominant from Origen until the Reformation. Scholars are still debating Martin Luther's view of Scripture but it is clear that inerrancy was the view of many early Protestants.<sup>1</sup> Today a conservative view of inspiration can be assumed throughout most of conservative Protestantism, and inerrancy is the all important code word for fundamentalism.

Most laymen today will interpret "inerrancy" or "infallibility" in a manner similar to Andrew Quenstedt's (1617-1688) formulation:

The original canonical sacred Scripture is of infallible truthfulness and wholly free of error, or, what is the same thing, in the canonical sacred Scripture there is no lie, no falsehood, not even the smallest error either in words or in matter, but everything, together and singly, that is handed on in them is most true, whether it be a matter of dogma or of morals or of history or of chronology or of topography or of nomenclature; no want of knowledge, no thoughtlessness or forgetfulness, no lapse of memory can or ought to

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<sup>1</sup> See Jack Rogers and Donald McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979); John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982); idem, "The Rogers and McKim Proposal in the Balance," *BSAC* 142 (April-June 1985) 99-113.

be attributed to the secretaries of the Holy Spirit in their setting down of the sacred writings.<sup>2</sup>

Quenstedt also affirmed an inerrant transmission of the sacred text in history.<sup>3</sup> Others in this period of Protestant scholasticism of the seventeenth century affirmed that Masoretic Hebrew vowel pointings, which were added in the ninth and tenth centuries, were inspired and therefore inerrant.

Quenstedt's definition of inerrancy is near to the dictation theory, if it is not the same in fact. But it is a far cry from most formal definitions in contemporary evangelicalism. Should we use terms like 'inerrancy,' which will be understood by most people in a manner similar to Quenstedt, when we mean something far different? For example, Robert Mounce seems to affirm inerrancy, but it is defined quite differently from Quenstedt: "Are there errors in the Bible? Certainly not," he writes. But his sentence continues: ". . . so long as we are talking in terms of the purpose of its authors and the acceptable standards of precision of that day."<sup>4</sup> Mounce explains 2 Chron 4:2, the circumference of the molten sea, as an approximate measurement not meant to be exactly precise. That is a reasonable explanation which makes unnecessary the harmonizing efforts which make one measurement on the inside and one on the outside of the molten sea in order to obtain the proper numerical value for pi. After all, if I give the value of pi as 3.14, that is correct if I need accuracy only to two decimal points. Likewise, 3.14159265 is more accurate, but 3.14 is not an error any more than 3 is as derived from 2 Chron 4:2, as long as we are not concerned with modern scientific precision. I. H. Marshall puts the question of accuracy of measurement in focus:

One does not fault a carpenter for measuring a table leg accurately to only one decimal place when the standard of accuracy in a laboratory runs to several places of decimals. The problem, then, is what degree of imprecision is compatible with the intended purpose of the Bible.<sup>5</sup>

Mounce explains Paul's 23,000 in 1 Cor 10:8 versus the 24,000 in Num 25:9 as unimportant. Paul's "concern was to warn against immorality, not to give a flawless performance in statistics."<sup>6</sup> The precision of Abiathar versus Ahimelech the son of Abiathar in Mark 2:26 and 1 Sam 21:1 again

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<sup>2</sup> Cited by Arthur Carl Piepkorn, "What Does 'Inerrancy' Mean?" *CTM* 36 (September 1965) 578.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 589.

<sup>4</sup> Robert H. Mounce, "Clues to Understanding Biblical Accuracy," *Eternity* 17 (June 1966) 18.

<sup>5</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 69-70.

<sup>6</sup> Mounce, "Clues," 18.



is not significant for Mounce, since for the purpose intended "no greater degree of precision should be required."<sup>7</sup> Mounce may be exactly correct in his assessment of each of these biblical difficulties. It is admirable that he does not continually run to the refuge of nonexistent autographs to explain away every apparent discrepancy. He says this "is the easy way out, but it doesn't seem an honest way to face facts."<sup>8</sup> He is correct that twentieth century standards of accuracy should not be imposed on the ancient world. Where I part company with Mounce is that the terms *inerrant* and *infallible* are not proper terms for the Bible we have today because they will rarely be understood in the very limited sense he suggests. They will continue to promote a view of the Bible that is not true to the human element.

Another example is "A Statement on the Form and Function of the Holy Scriptures" adopted by the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 26 April 1960. This statement uses the term *inerrant*, but only in a qualified sense:

The Scriptures express what God wants them to say and accomplish what God wants them to do. In this sense and in the fulfillment of this function they are inerrant, infallible, and wholly reliable. . . . There is no human or secular criterion by which their truthfulness, their infallibility as the only rule of faith and practice, and their reliability can be measured and made evident.<sup>9</sup>

This definition of inerrancy is much more acceptable to many biblical scholars than Quenstedt's definition, but would it be understood in this highly technical sense by the common person?

Modern evangelical definitions of inerrancy are very sophisticated and complex with numerous limitations.<sup>10</sup> The Chicago Statement on Inerrancy by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy is complex and contains numerous qualifications.<sup>11</sup> Similar qualifications will be found in the twelve adjuncts to the doctrine of biblical inerrancy outlined by Robert

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>9</sup> "A Statement on the Form and Function of the Holy Scriptures," *CTM* 31 (October 1960) 205.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen T. Davis, *The Debate About the Bible: Inerrancy Versus Infallibility* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977) 24-30.

<sup>11</sup> Ronald Youngblood, ed. *Evangelicals and Inerrancy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984) 230-39; Norman L. Geisler and J. I. Packer, *Explaining Hermeneutics: A Commentary* (Oakland, CA: International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, 1983); cf. Roy L. Honeycutt, "Biblical Authority: A Treasured Heritage!" *RevExp* 83 (Fall 1986) 605-6.

Preus.<sup>12</sup> Inerrancy "dies the death of a thousand qualifications. Inerrantists are unable to use the term without elaborate qualification and exception."<sup>13</sup> The average person in the pew has no idea what all can be implied in the term "inerrancy" on the lips of an evangelical scholar. Does one mean detailed inerrancy, partial infallibility, irenic inerrancy, complete infallibility, or some other view?<sup>14</sup>

Are we acting honorably to use the terms *inerrancy* or *infallibility* in a highly restricted sense with numerous qualifications and limitations which the common man will not ascertain? As one student said to me: "Some people place more limitations on inerrancy than there are riders on a cheap insurance policy." Terms such as *limited inerrancy*, about which there is copious literature, make as much sense to some people as terms such as *square circle*. This is one reason that many conservative scholars call for an abandonment of the terms as I do here. Abandoning these misleading terms might play a small role in bringing about a greater awareness of the human element of Scripture within the Churches of Christ and help lead to a better hermeneutic which is properly aware of the human element of Scripture. It is for this and other reasons that I allowed my membership in the Evangelical Theological Society to lapse in early 1992. To be a member of the Society one was required to sign the following statement annually: "The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs." To me the continued use of the term *inerrancy* in some highly restricted sense with many qualifications and limitations was not honest. As Boer put it: "It uses the word of the marketplace, but it gives it a nuance that is never understood in the marketplace."<sup>15</sup> To the average layman "inerrancy" means the Scriptures are without a single mistake, even in minor details of geography, history, numbers, or science. Honeycutt lists the chief objections one might raise to the continued use of inerrancy:<sup>16</sup>

1. Inerrancy is a highly technical term that knowledgeable inerrantists usually apply to the original autographs rather than to the contemporary Bible that is constructed out of varying manuscripts.

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<sup>12</sup> Preus, "Notes on the Inerrancy of Scripture," *CTM* 38 (June 1967) 368-75.

<sup>13</sup> Honeycutt, "Biblical Authority," 608.

<sup>14</sup> Robert K. Johnston, *Evangelicals at an Impasse: Biblical Authority in Practice* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979) 19-35; Robert M. Price, "Inerrant the Wind: The Troubled House of North American Evangelicals," *EvQ* 55 (July 1983) 132; Louis Igou Hodges, "Evangelical Definitions of Inspiration: Critiques and a Suggested Definition," *JETS* 37 (March 1994) 99-114.

<sup>15</sup> Harry R. Boer, *Above the Battle? The Bible and Its Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 7.

<sup>16</sup> Honeycutt, "Biblical Authority," 607-11.



2. Inerrancy is a theory about the Bible which is developed outside the Scripture and is then imposed upon the Scripture.
3. The qualifications which are necessary to explain "inerrancy" rob the theory of unique significance.
4. Infallibility as defined by "inerrantists" makes sweeping claims for the Bible's trustworthiness on all matters of knowledge.
5. Inerrancy/infallibility as used by "inerrantists" fails to allow the Bible to state its own basis for inspiration and authority.
6. Inerrancy ignores or at best obscures the divine/human nature of the Bible and the historical character of God's revelation.
7. Inerrancy defines the nature of the Bible negatively but makes no positive statement about what the Bible is.
8. Many persons unduly emphasize "inerrancy" as the sole norm by which to measure one's fidelity to the Bible.

Expanding the sixth of these, to many people inerrancy means that the Scriptures were given word-for-word by dictation from God. What is the relationship between dictation and inerrancy? Inerrancy is a natural concomitant of the dictation theory of inspiration. Fundamentalists make frequent disclaimers that they do not believe in the dictation theory or any mechanical theory of inspiration. While the word *dictation* may have dropped out of general usage as evangelical definitions of inerrancy become more sophisticated, the underlying assumption is still very near the surface. In the past, dictation was assumed to be the method by which the Holy Spirit performed inspiration. When modern historical and critical study made dictation indefensible, the term was dropped, but inerrancy was not likewise dropped, and the belief in dictation, or something close to it, is still present. A popular classic on inspiration still being reprinted says the Bible "is a book which he [God] dictated to them."<sup>17</sup>

In the Churches of Christ the dictation theory, or something quite close to it, is still believed very widely. Note, for example, the definition of inspiration offered by Guy N. Woods: "Inspiration is that miraculous power which the Holy Spirit exercised on biblical speakers and writers, enabling them to speak and to write without error, as Deity dictated."<sup>18</sup> If

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<sup>17</sup> L. Gaussen, *The Divine Inspiration of the Bible*, tran. David D. Scott (repr. of 1841 ed.; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1971) 49. Cf. J. I. Packer, "Fundamentalism" and the Word of God (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958) 78-79, 178-81.

<sup>18</sup> Guy N. Woods, *The Case for Verbal Inspiration* (Shreveport, LA: Lambert Book House, n.d.) 5.

someone objects that this is only a metaphor which Woods certainly did not mean to be taken seriously, then listen to his illustration of what he means by dictation: "Professor Einstein could dictate to a secretary his exceedingly profound and abstruse theory of relativity; and the secretary could transcribe the message accurately, word by word, though she knew little or nothing about the theory itself or the significance of the words which she penned."<sup>19</sup> Note further Woods's definition of verbal inspiration:

By verbal inspiration it is meant that those empowered by the Lord to reveal the message of life and salvation were supplied the substance (thought), and impressed by the Spirit to use the very words which the Spirit designated. . . . Those who wrote used words selected for them by the Holy Spirit.<sup>20</sup>

If this is not the dictation theory, what is it? He calls it "dictation." He refers to a "secretary" who "transcribes" a message. The "very words" are selected by the Holy Spirit. A rigid view of inspiration of this type is widely held in the Churches of Christ.<sup>21</sup> But the dictation theory, or anything closely related to it, is an ancient dinosaur in light of modern knowledge of the Bible.

William Abraham's evaluation and criticisms of the continued presence of the dictation theory in the modern world are in order:

The fact is that prior to modern times many Christians really did believe that the Bible was dictated by God. This was nothing to be ashamed of in their times for they lived through a period when history as we know and practise it just did not exist. In its day the identification of inspiration with dictation was relatively harmless. It was simply part of the mental furniture of many of our forefathers. But the intellectual content and context of our times is different, and without in any way embracing passing fads and fashions we must come to terms with the use and results of responsible historical study. . . . Without dictation inerrancy is without warrant, for the two are linked by way of logical inference. Dictation is the foundation from which the claim to inerrancy flows; it does

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>21</sup> Although the word *dictation* is avoided and a mechanical theory is denied, in essence, the same theory is promulgated by Thomas B. Warren and B. C. Goodpasture in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. W. B. West, Jr., Bill Flatt, and Thomas B. Warren (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1971) 13, 30. When rigid, mechanical theories of inspiration of this sort are combined with philosophies like those of Bacon or Locke, the result is "blueprint" theology, which treats the Bible like a list of rules and propositions which can be prooftexted for direct application to a modern setting.



not flow from inspiration unless the two are confused as they are by Gausson. . . . What I am suggesting is that the claim to inerrancy really rests on a covert appeal to the concept of dictation, which despite disclaimers to the contrary, is still basic to the thought of those who continue to insist that inspiration means or guarantees inerrancy. They have abandoned use of the term "dictation" and may thus sincerely avow that inspiration is not to be confused with dictation. But in substance that is what they mean, for there is no other relevant way in which divine inspiration can be seen to license inerrancy. Those who regard the issue of dictation as a matter of the mechanics of inspiration only mask this informal assimilation of inspiration to dictation.<sup>22</sup>

Speaking of Warfield and his followers in their attempt to avoid dictation and still rescue inerrancy, Abraham observes:

They cannot use the term "dictation" but they must provide an act of God or a set of acts of God that will bring about the exact results that dictation does. I think that this has happened and the difference between the two views is just one of terminology. What we are in fact offered is a kind of telepathic dictation without the writer being aware of it.<sup>23</sup>

He then quotes from evangelical scholars of no less stature than Millard Erickson and J. I. Packer to prove his point. As Abraham shows, divine speaking and inspiration are not to be equated. The OT prophets referred almost two thousand times to God speaking.<sup>24</sup> The Bible, then, is viewed by fundamentalists simply as man recording what God has said, and we are back to something similar to dictation. William Abraham asks an appropriate question:

How are we to interpret "speaking" when predicated of God? Are we to imagine that God spoke in an audible voice, in a fashion very similar to human speaking? Or are we to think of the speech of God as something unique and interior, something that involved an inner voice but no outer noises, say, rather like a form of telepathy?<sup>25</sup>

As long as God's speaking to the prophets is thought of as dictation, and as long as the prophetic model is used to define the totality of inspiration and how the Bible came into existence, we are going to end up

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<sup>22</sup> William J. Abraham, *The Divine Inspiration of Holy Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) 29, 34-35.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.



with the dictation theory of inspiration or something very close to it. To quote William Abraham again: "So long as the prophets are treated as the paradigm of inspiration and so long as attention is concentrated on their claim to have received special revelation, then so long will divine speaking and divine dictating be in the background of the proposed analysis of inspiration."<sup>26</sup> But the Bible is not a collection of divine oracles written by individual authors as a part of a developing set of propositional truths.<sup>27</sup> God has spoken in many different ways. He speaks through his great acts in history. Furthermore, the inspiration of all of the writers of the Bible is not to be equated with the OT prophetic model of God speaking to the prophets and their declaring "Thus says the Lord." Psalms, Proverbs, the Gospels, historical narratives, and epistles do not come across with the idea of "Thus says the Lord," which might imply that the authors were mere secretaries writing down the exact set of words God wanted recorded.

When a prophet declared, "Thus says the Lord," was he necessarily implying every single time that God told him exactly that specific set of words to declare? Should we think of the Bible as a collection of oracles of this nature? I think not. Is not another scenario possible? The prophets had a certain worldview which was informed by their belief in the holiness and omnipotence of God. Based upon what God had revealed of his very nature to the prophets, and based upon their insight into social conditions and political events, the prophets became aware, through inspiration, if you desire to use the term here, of God's viewpoint on certain matters. Therefore, the prophets cried out against oppression, injustice, immorality, and evil, saying all the time, "Thus says the Lord." They were expressing what God's mind, his way of thinking, and his will on those matters were. It was the word of God, but it was not dictated by God as if he chose exactly that set of words and led the prophets to say those specific syllables. Abraham concludes: "It has never been shown that God spoke or dictated every word of the Bible. This is a hangover from writers like Gausson and others who had simply failed to distinguish inspiration from speaking or dictation."<sup>28</sup>

Confusion between God speaking and God inspiring is evident in a parallel confusion over how the Bible is God's word. The phrase "word of God" has become synonymous with "Bible," but how accurate is the equation? Should the two be identified? God is a God who speaks and has spoken in many and various ways (Heb 1:1). When the Bible speaks of God speaking, the language is anthropomorphic, because God is a Spirit

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>27</sup> Paul J. Achtemeier, *The Inspiration of Scripture: Problems and Proposals* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) 99-104.

<sup>28</sup> Abraham, *Divine Inspiration*, 71.

(John 4:24). Vernon Kooy explains: "What is intended in referring to God as speaking is that God is a Person, and as such communicates with men, revealing something of himself and his purpose. The manner in which he communicates is not necessarily indicated in referring to him as speaking."<sup>29</sup> In the Bible a "word" is something dynamic and alive. It "is more than a vocalization of sound, a symbol of an idea. It is an act. . . . Thus God is depicted as acting by means of words (cf. Ps 33:6)—his words become his acts."<sup>30</sup> Prophets of God not only hear his words, they see them (Isa 2:1; Amos 1:1). Sigmund Mowinckel described the word of God as "the being of God in outgoing activity."<sup>31</sup> God's word reveals who he is as a just, loving, holy, righteous, jealous, merciful, and powerful God. "God's word, as an extension of his personality, always reveals some aspect of his character."<sup>32</sup> The Bible can be called the word of God, but this does not mean it is simply a message which God dictated to human secretaries.

The Bible is the word of God in that its message originates from God's revealing of himself (2 Pet 1:20-21), and in that message we hear God speaking to our hearts and calling us to a life of faith and holiness. H. L. Ellison contends that the term "word of God" is never used in the Scriptures themselves as a mere synonym for the Bible. He suggests four ways in which "word of God" is used in the Bible. It refers to (1) Jesus himself, (2) the gospel message which the church proclaimed, (3) God's revelation of himself and his will in specific utterances, and (4) God's revelation in general through his servants the prophets.<sup>33</sup> J. H. Bernard's special note on the use of the phrase "the word of God" in the NT lists the thirty-eight instances under four categories.<sup>34</sup>

(1) The "word of God" can mean a word which came from God, in contrast to a word that tells of God. The source rather than the content is the emphasis. Bernard lists only four examples (John 10:35; 1 John 2:14; 1 Pet 1:23; 2 Pet 3:5).

(2) The "word of God" came to mean the content of what God had revealed. It became a synonym for the gospel which was preached by Christ and the apostles. Most NT occurrences are found here in Bernard's classification (Luke 5:1; 8:1, 21; 11:28; Acts 4:31; 6:2, 7; 8:14; 9:1; 12:24; 13:5, 7, 44, 46; 17:13; 18:11; Rom 9:6; 1 Cor 14:36; 2 Cor 2:17;

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<sup>29</sup> Vernon H. Kooy, "The Word of God and the Words of Scripture," *Reformed Review* 14 (March 1961) 30-31.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>31</sup> Cited by *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> H. L. Ellison, "Some Thoughts on Inspiration," *EvQ* 26 (October 1954) 212-13.

<sup>34</sup> J. H. Bernard, *The Pastoral Epistles*, CGTC (Cambridge: University Press, 1899) 74-76.



4:2; Col 1:25; 1 Thess 2:13; 2 Tim 2:9; Tit 2:5; Heb 4:12; 13:7; Rev 1:2, 9; 6:9; 20:4).

(3) The "word of God" can mean the Word incarnate, that is, the pre-existent Christ who became flesh (Rev 19:13; cf. John 1:1-3).

(4) Since the "word of God" refers primarily to the divine message, and since that message is contained within the Scriptures, the phrase is applicable to the sacred writings. But this usage is rare at best. Bernard can offer only three possible examples (Matt 15:6; Mark 7:13; 1 Tim 4:5).

Bernard concludes: "The result of this investigation tends to confirm the legitimacy of the title 'the Word of God' as commonly applied to Holy Scripture. . . . It is nevertheless remarkable that the title is but rarely so applied in early Christian literature. . . . Origen is the earliest writer in whom I have succeeded in finding the full title [the word of God] applied to Scripture."<sup>35</sup> My point is not to contravene the use of the phrase "the word of God" in reference to the Bible, but to purify it of wrong connotations. When people say: "The Bible is God's word," they may imply something akin to the dictation theory of inspiration. But the living and active nature of the "word of God" presents a different picture from a recording of statements spoken by God.<sup>36</sup>

Calling the Bible "the word of God" is proper, but we can also call it "the word of men." The Gospels are the gospel of Jesus (Mark 1:1), but they are also the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. As Ridderbos explains:

We cannot say everything of Scripture that we say of the word of God. . . . The Word of God exists in eternity, is perfect. But Scripture is neither eternal nor perfect. Inspiration consists in this, that God makes the words of men the instrument of his word, that he uses human words for his divine purposes. As such, the human words stand in the service of God and participate in the authority and infallibility of the Word of God, answer perfectly God's purpose, in short, function as the

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>36</sup> The nature of the Bible has relevance to the question of patternism in the Churches of Christ. As Ellison commented: "While God could have inspired a manual of theology, He did not. He could have made Himself known in a series of theological propositions, but He used instead the experiences of men. This is partly because experience must always be fuller and richer than its verbal expression. . . . Ultimately the only knowledge of God that can save and satisfy is a personal experience of the Living God in Christ Jesus. Any effort to formulate men's living experience of God into a formal and self-consistent system is bound to be inadequate and to omit factors which for others are of vital importance" (Ellison, "Some Thoughts on Inspiration," 216-17).

Word of God and therefore can be so called. But this remains a human instrument in the hands of God.<sup>37</sup>

How, then, should we think of the inspiration of the Bible? No effort will be made in this article to give a systematic theological statement of inspiration or revelation. An effort will be made only to point one in the direction of a more suitable way to view the Scriptures. Inspiration is a very difficult concept. The Greek word for "inspiration" in 2 Tim 3:16 appears only once in the entire NT. The English word "inspiration" is used only a handful of times by various translations. The method or medium by which inspiration was accomplished is not much explained in the Bible (2 Pet 1:20-21). The paucity of explicit references to inspiration in the Bible should encourage caution in the formulation of any theory of inspiration. Reading conservative literature on inspiration, one might think that the Bible makes one's view on inspiration paramount. When one leaves fundamentalist literature on the inspiration of the Bible and goes to the Bible itself, an absolutely remarkable change is evident. The Bible says nothing about inerrancy in the modern sense and very little about inspiration. The few statements in the Bible on inspiration are quite vague. They have been used by evangelicals and fundamentalists as a mold into which modern, philosophical assumptions are poured. Then it is assumed that these modern philosophical systems are what Paul or Peter implied. In a well-meaning effort to bolster the authority of the Bible, views of inspiration alien to the Bible are forced upon it. The scarcity of information on inspiration is evidence in and of itself that a particular view of inspiration is not a touchstone of orthodoxy and faithfulness to Christ.

Not only does the Bible not make a theory of inspiration the apex of faith, biblical writers do not advertise their inspiration as authors. Luke begins his Gospel: "It seemed good to me also to write" (Luke 1:3). Some of the Old Latin manuscripts reveal a dissatisfaction with Luke's statement, so they add the words "and to the Holy Spirit," a gloss from Acts 15:28. Luke justifies his adding another account of Jesus, not on the basis that he is inspired or that God has given him a detailed message to pass along, but on the basis that he has studied the matter carefully as a historian. That does not sound like a man who is writing a specific set of words which were an oracle from God. David Nyvall declares:

The apostles do not ask to be believed because they were inspired [with rare exceptions], but because before God they are conscious of speaking the truth and telling what they have heard and seen. . . . No one who reads Paul's writings without prejudice can conceive of Paul insisting that every single

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<sup>37</sup> Herman Ridderbos, *Studies in Scripture and Its Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 25-26.



word, even every letter in his writings, is an inerrant oracle from God himself. . . . Even in minor and insignificant matters Paul assures his readers that "before God, I do not lie!" [Rom 9:1; 2 Cor 11:31; Gal 1:20; 1 Tim 2:7]. How strange would not such an assurance be for a person who believed he was delivering an oracle from heaven.<sup>38</sup>

The attitude of most of the writers of the Bible reveals something far distant from a mechanical theory of inspiration.

What is true for the writers of the Bible is true for much of the content of the Bible. Many sections of the Bible are unimportant for the communication of saving truth to the world. Many parts of the Bible are nothing more than what Dewey Beegle calls trivialities (e.g., Judg 12:5-6; 8-10). In reference to the forty sons and thirty grandsons of Abdon who rode on seventy asses, Beegle declares: "Are not God's ways exceedingly mysterious if, out of all the good things Abdon must have done, God decreed that we should have only this incident of Abdon's seventy sons and grandsons, each with his own means of transportation?"<sup>39</sup> There are vastly different levels of revelatory and salvific value to the Bible which cannot be totally disassociated from inspiration. The usefulness of certain sections of the Bible like obscure genealogies is limited outside an antiquarian interest, while books like Luke, Romans, and Galatians are unequalled in excellence. The Bible is a collection of religious, legal, historical, sermonic, and poetic literature of God's people.

In contrast to the presence of trivialities in the Bible, what is the chief purpose of the word of God? It is to be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Ps 119:105). It is to create faith in our hearts (John 20:31; Rom 10:17). It is to give us new life in the new birth (1 Pet 1:23). It is to give us assurance of our salvation (1 John 5:13). It 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" (2 Tim 3:16-17). It is "for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom 15:4). It testifies to Jesus (John 5:39; Acts 8:35; 17:2). It does not originate in the opinions or interpretations of men, but in God (2 Pet 1:20-21), and is suited perfectly for the religious and spiritual end toward which it is directed. Only when the Bible's purpose and its nature are understood correctly will interpretation and application be done in the proper manner.

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<sup>38</sup> David Nyvall, "The Inspiration of the Bible," *Covenant Quarterly* 44 (May 1986) 12, 14-15.

<sup>39</sup> Dewey M. Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition and Infallibility* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 245-46.

Debate has raged for years over the locus of inspiration. Is it the words themselves or the authors? Is the Bible an inspired book or were its authors inspired men? Or both? In light of the Bible's purpose as a means to faith and grace, it might be more appropriate to place the locus of inspiration in the content of the biblical message. Rather than the form of a precise set of words being the goal of inspiration, its chief goal is to make us wise for salvation (2 Tim 3:15). This is not a rejection of verbal inspiration unless it is defined in too restrictive a manner. Paul said the Scriptures, that is, the sacred writings, which consist of written words, are inspired (2 Tim 3:16). God's will is communicated not only in his acts in history, but in the written interpretation of those acts. The words of the Bible have their origin in God (2 Pet 1:20-21). However, the method of inspiration is not the scholastic sense which limits inspiration to the formal process of biblical authors writing down words.

Inspiration as a dogma of systematic theology is very complicated and usually focuses on God controlling the authors of the Bible in their writing. But inspiration in the biblical sense is a broad concept. Inspiration includes the whole process of producing sacred writings, since in the Bible sense it refers quite broadly to the activity of God's Spirit among his people bringing light and life.<sup>40</sup> The Bible is verbally inspired in that its words are alive with God's Spirit. The Bible is not a dead letter to us when it leads to knowledge of God and life in the inner person. In and by the Scriptures we can be born anew by "the living and abiding word of God" (1 Pet 1:23). In the written word we can come to know the Word, Christ the Lord.

Evans reminds us that the NT age was an age of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the church. It was an age when there were many prophets in the church. It was an age in which the Holy Spirit spoke through individuals like Elizabeth (Luke 1:42), Zechariah (Luke 1:67), Simeon (Luke 2:27), Anna (Luke 2:36), Stephen (Acts 6:8, 10, 15; 7:55) and others. It was an age when who knows how many apostolic writings were lost (1 Cor 5:9; 2 Cor 10:10; Col 4:16; 3 John 9). "Look at the quantity and the quality of the inspiration which this view gives you; . . . not an occasional spurt or spasm, but a great dynamic, oecumenical fact; not the flow of a few artesian wells, but a mighty tide, surging out of the great supernatural deep."<sup>41</sup>

What shall we say of the chief texts on inspiration? Paul wrote Timothy: "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for

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<sup>40</sup> G. W. H. Lampe, "Inspiration and Revelation," G. Buttrick (ed.) *IDB* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962) II, 713-18.

<sup>41</sup> Llewellyn J. Evans, "Biblical Scholarship and Inspiration," in *Inspiration and Inerrancy* (London: James Clarke & Co., 1891) 169-71.



reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17). There are several difficulties in this passage. Should it read "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful" or should it be "Every Scripture inspired by God is also useful"? "Scripture" in the context of the NT undoubtedly means a sacred writing, a Scripture, and not simply a writing of any sort. Paul has in mind the OT. If he is thinking of the OT as a whole, then "all" makes sense. However, when *pas* ("all" or "every") appears in Greek with a noun with no definite article, it usually means "every" instead of "all." If it means "every," then Paul is thinking of individual passages of Scripture within the OT. The choice between the two renderings is difficult.

The next problem is that the Greek contains no verb. "Is" is supplied by the translator and its location is not certain. If the adjective "inspired" is in the predicate position, then it would read: "All (every) Scripture is inspired by God and is useful" (cf. 1 Tim 4:4). *Kai* would be translated "and." Two statements are made about Scripture. It is inspired and it is useful. If, however, "inspired" is in the attributive position, it would read: "All (every) inspired Scripture is also useful." *Kai* is rendered "also" in this scenario. Again, the choice between the two is very difficult. And exactly what difference in meaning these two ways of translating will make is a difficult matter.

One point seems fairly clear in this passage, however. The context contains no hint that the inspiration of Scripture is being called into question. The theme of the passage is the usefulness of Scripture in the "moral equipment of the man of God."<sup>42</sup> Guthrie agrees: "Timothy is not therefore being informed of the inspiration of Scripture, for this was a doctrine commonly admitted by Jews, but he is being reminded that the basis of its profitableness lies in its inspired character."<sup>43</sup> So whether or not Paul assumes inspiration ("all inspired Scripture") or affirms it ("all Scripture is inspired"), inspiration is not the essence of the passage. Rather Paul is explicating the salvific purpose of Scripture. As Achtemeier argues:

The very ambiguity of the language . . . makes one wonder whether the author really intended to make a statement about the inspiration of Scripture at all. It is more likely that the intention is to emphasize the continuing utility of Scripture for religious purposes, even after one has learned the rudiments of

<sup>42</sup> Newport J. D. White, in *The Expositor's Greek Testament* (ed. W. Robertson Nicoll; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) IV, 175; cf. Bernard, *Pastoral Epistles*, 137; and Edward W. Goodrick, "Let's Put 2 Timothy 3:16 Back in the Bible," *JETS* 25 (December 1982) 486.

<sup>43</sup> Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957)

the faith from it, a point the context also supports. . . . The point of the verse is not the nature of Scripture in itself, but the nature of Scripture for the purpose of aiding the Christian life."<sup>44</sup>

A further difficulty in this verse is the meaning of *theopneustos* which occurs only here in the NT. The singular occurrence of the word here comes as quite a surprise to many Bible students. *Theopneustos* is a rare word in Greek literature in general, which makes one suspicious of dogmatic, precise definitions, especially if the definition seems molded perfectly to fit an already formed theory. The singular occurrence of *theopneustos* in the NT is one of the earliest known occurrences of this word in Greek literature. Non-Christian writers used the word in the second century and Christian writers used it in the third and fourth centuries. The first part of the word, *theo*, means "God." The second part, *pneu*, means "breath, breathe, Spirit, or spirit." The *tos* ending makes the first part of the word the subject. For example, *theodidaktos* means "God" (*theo*) and "teaches" (*didak*), and with *-tos* it means "God-taught." Thus *theopneustos* means "God-breathed."<sup>45</sup> Does it mean God-breathed, God breathed out, or God breathed in? Goodrick suggests:

To one schooled as well as Timothy was in the OT the new word, *theopneustos*, would have triggered his recollection of that primeval episode in which God, by breathing into the nostrils of an image molded from inert clay, made it spring into life. . . . If this is how Timothy understood the word, he would have understood the inspiration of Scripture as did the writer to Hebrews, who says the Word of God is *zōn* ("alive" [Heb 4:12]). . . . Scripture as *theopneustos* [is] alive with the vitality of God.<sup>46</sup>

Cremer speaks of the Scriptures "breathing a divine spirit" or being "spirit-filled."<sup>47</sup>

Goodrick offers this translation: "For Scripture, alive as it is with the vitality of God himself, is valuable for indoctrinating people, for rebuking people who should know better, for correcting people who do not, for guiding people, so that God's man can be completely equipped for every good work."<sup>48</sup> Notice what this text tells us and what it does not tell us. It

<sup>44</sup> Paul J. Achtemeier, *The Inspiration of Scripture: Problems and Proposals* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) 107.

<sup>45</sup> Goodrick, "2 Timothy 3:16," 484.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 484-86.

<sup>47</sup> Hermann Cremer, *Biblico-Theological Lexicon of NT Greek* (4th ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1895) 282, 703.

<sup>48</sup> Goodrick, "2 Timothy 3:16," 486.



tells us nothing of the method by which God's inspiration brought Scripture into existence. It says nothing about inerrancy. As Abraham affirms:

Indeed the inferences that Paul draws are very modest compared to the highly specific and inflated ones that have been drawn from the concept. The didactic content of Scripture is primarily theological. It aims to teach the will of God rather than impart detailed information about nature or history. Furthermore, although Scripture clearly is didactic, its ultimate content is spiritual and moral. The whole context of the chapter makes this clear. Scripture aims to make the man of God complete, equipped for every good work. In other words Scripture is centrally to be seen not so much as a book of divine truths but more as a means of grace.<sup>49</sup>

In another key text related to inspiration Peter declares: "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 moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Pet 1:20-21). "Interpretation" does not refer to the interpreting of Scripture by the reader. It has reference to the prophets. Peter's point is that the true prophets are not giving their own opinions and interpretations, as false prophets did (Jer 14:14; 23:16, 21, 25-32; 27:15; 29:9; Ezek 13:3). Their declarations did not arise from their own human reasoning, but rather they originated with God.<sup>50</sup> Peter proclaims the divine origin of Scripture. This passage reveals a little more about the method of inspiration. The prophets were "moved" by the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Pet 1:10-12). The term *pherō* means "to bear, carry, or drive, or to be driven or to let oneself be driven, to be moved."<sup>51</sup> It can refer to a ship which is carried along by the wind filling its sails (Acts 27:15, 17). To read into this term a mechanical theory of inspiration is wrong, and conservative commentators are quick to point this out.<sup>52</sup> The prophets were not merely passive recipients of a divine oracle. Not only did the Spirit "move" the prophets, "men spoke." The human agent, as denoted by the verb, is active. Additionally, Strachan argues from the word order: "It is of much significance for the interpretation of the whole passage that *anthropoi* occupies a position of emphasis at the end of

<sup>49</sup> Abraham, *Divine Inspiration*, 93-94.

<sup>50</sup> Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (Waco, TX: Word, 1983) 228-35.

<sup>51</sup> Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the NT and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and ed. Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) 854-55.

<sup>52</sup> For example, Michael Green, *The Second Epistle of Peter and the Epistle of Jude* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 91-92.

the sentence, thus bringing into prominence the human agent."<sup>53</sup> Note also what the passage does not contain. While this is "perhaps the fullest and most explicit biblical reference to the inspiration of its authors,"<sup>54</sup> there is no detailed theory of inspiration and no reference to inerrancy. The single word *pherō* has been made to carry too much weight in the Warfield-fundamentalist theory of inspiration. And it should not go without notice that the two key texts on inspiration are in two of the most disputed books of the NT as far as authorship and canonicity are concerned.

George Eldon Ladd makes an interesting comment on this passage based on the words of verse 19: "You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts." The meaning of the "lamp," the "day dawning," and the "morning star rising" is disputed, but Ladd defines them in relation to the question in the context, the second coming of Christ. He states:

Peter's concept of the prophetic word is significant. It is entirely trustworthy, but it is likened to a lamp shining in a dark place. An ancient lamp was vastly different from modern electric lights; at best it gave only limited light. However, it provided sufficient light for the bearer to make his way through dark streets. In other words, the prophetic word is the truth of God, but only partial truth. The full truth will be disclosed when "the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (1:19)—at the parousia. Prophecy, then, is light shining from the future upon the dark present to enable God's people to make their way in the world. It is in no way a full blueprint of the future.<sup>55</sup>

A third key text on inspiration is John 10:35 where Jesus declares, as an aside from an argument made from the OT: "The Scripture cannot be broken." Inerrantists interpret this to mean: "The Scriptures never make a mistake. The Scriptures cannot be proven wrong even in minor details." Jesus may have been making an *ad hominem* type of argument in this passage, but, if not, his statement is still not a declaration of inerrancy. Alternative translations reveal the meaning of his words: "The Scripture cannot be annulled" (NSRV; R. F. Weymouth); "The Scriptures cannot be made null and void" (Charles B. Williams); "Scripture cannot be set aside" (NEB; William F. Beck; Edgar J. Goodspeed); "Scripture cannot lose its

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<sup>53</sup> R. H. Strachan, in *The Expositor's Greek Testament* (ed. W. Robertson Nicoll; repr., Eerdmans, 1976) V, 132-33.

<sup>54</sup> Green, *The Second Epistle of Peter*, 91.

<sup>55</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 605.



force" (NAB); and "Scripture cannot be deprived of its validity."<sup>56</sup> The root meaning of the word *broken* is to "loose, untie, set free, release." In reference to "commandments, laws, statements" it means "repeal, annul, abolish" (Matt 5:19; John 5:18; 7:23).<sup>57</sup> In contexts like this, Bernard says: "The opposite of setting the Scripture at naught or 'destroying' it is the 'fulfilling' of it."<sup>58</sup> Jungkuntz concurs: "In contexts such as these, where the Law or the OT Scriptures are under consideration, the antonym to *luō*, 'undo,' is *pleroō*, 'fulfill.' Consequently, in such contexts the meaning of *luō* must be 'to undo' in the sense of 'render incapable of fulfillment,' 'keep from being fulfilled,' 'prevent attainment of the goal or intention.'"<sup>59</sup> The statement of Jesus that the Scriptures cannot be broken is not an affirmation of inerrancy as per fundamentalism. This passage is tenuous support for a modern philosophical definition of a rigid form of inspiration which includes inerrancy.

The debate about inerrancy, infallibility, and inspiration seems to be at an impasse.<sup>60</sup> In the Churches of Christ it has been suggested that we are at an impasse in hermeneutics, which, if true, must be partially due to a flawed theology of inspiration.<sup>61</sup> What suggestions might point us in a better direction?

We must realize that the doctrine of inspiration is not the capstone of Christian theology. A fundamentalist view of inspiration does not insure orthodoxy. Many who hold to a fundamentalist view of inspiration are in extreme error on more significant truths such as the deity of Christ. Furthermore, many people come to faith in Christ and salvation without knowing even the rudimentary elements of a doctrine of inspiration. The bottom line is not whether one holds a certain view of inspiration. The bottom line is this: Does one read the Bible? Does one love and believe the good news which the Bible proclaims? Does one study the Bible to learn the gospel? Does one pattern one's life after the holy lifestyle which is an appropriate response to the gospel (Matt 5:48; Eph 4:1; Phil 1:27; Col 1:10; 1 Thess 2:12; 1 Pet 1:14-16)? Does one hear God speaking in the Bible and submit to his authority? Does one come to know the Word, Christ Jesus, God's supreme revelation, by means of the biblical witness? We

<sup>56</sup> Achtemeier, *Inspiration of Scripture*, 111.

<sup>57</sup> Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 483-84.

<sup>58</sup> J. H. Bernard, *Gospel According to John* (2 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928) II, 368.

<sup>59</sup> Richard Jungkuntz, "An Approach to the Exegesis of John 10:34-36." *CTM* 35 (October 1964) 559-60; cf. Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (2 vols.; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) I, 403-04.

<sup>60</sup> Johnston, *Evangelicals at an Impasse*.

<sup>61</sup> Russ Dudley, "Restorationist Hermeneutics Among the Churches of Christ: Why Are We at an Impasse?" *ResQ* 30/1 (1988) 17-42.

should read the Bible in awe and wonderment of the great story of what God has done and allow it to function as a means of grace as it leads us to faith as we come to know something of the character of God.

We should cease to treat a fundamentalist view of inspiration as a line of defense which must be protected at all costs. In his Foreword to Dewey Beegle's book, which rejected inerrancy, F. F. Bruce, the founding father of modern evangelical scholarship, said: "I endorse as emphatically as I can his deprecating of a Maginot-line mentality where the doctrine of Scripture is concerned. The Word of God is something alive and active, not least when it bursts the confining bands in which our well-meant definitions try to enclose and protect it."<sup>62</sup>

We need a more realistic view of the slippery slope. Fundamentalist propaganda constantly warns about the slippery slope. If one dares to take a single step away from absolute, strict inerrancy, one will take another, and another, and end up sliding down the slippery slope into denial of fundamental truths of the gospel or into skepticism. While this path has been followed by many individuals and many educational institutions, it is not an automatic process. One has only to note scholars such as F. F. Bruce, G. E. Ladd, Dewey M. Beegle, James Orr, Jack Rogers, William J. Abraham, Stephen T. Davis, G. C. Berkouwer, Bernard Ramm, Clark Pinnock, and Robert H. Gundry, amongst many others, to see that unorthodoxy is not a necessary result of a rejection of a fundamentalist view of inspiration.

We should focus on a functional view of the inspiration and authority of the Bible instead of philosophical theories which are more a creation of our scholastic reasoning. A functional view would be more in line with the apostle Paul's own thinking. As Bernard Ramm assures us, we "do not have to absolutize the human side of Scripture in order to protect it as a vehicle of divine revelation." Commonly recognized difficulties in the Bible do not "prevent the text from being an authentic witness to the Word of God."<sup>63</sup> Coleman, a defender of inerrancy, recognizes that progress will be achieved only if the focus is given to the functional purpose of Scripture:

The heart of the matter, if the discussion concerning inerrancy is going to progress, is not about errors but about the basic character of the biblical writings. If the essential character of Scripture is dogmatic, and if absolute truth is required to achieve this purpose, then inerrancy will be defended in one way. If the fundamental character of Scripture is kerygmatic,

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<sup>62</sup> F. F. Bruce, in Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition and Infallibility*, 10.

<sup>63</sup> Bernard Ramm, *After Fundamentalism: The Future of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983) 46.



and essential truth is necessary to achieve this purpose, then inerrancy will be defended in another way."<sup>64</sup>

Marcus Dods's comments are pertinent at this point:

Not a few . . . distinguished persons declare that their salvation depends on the absolute accuracy of every word from the first in Genesis to the last in Revelation. Happily their salvation depends on nothing of the kind, but on a living Person whom we can know and trust. . . . If Matthew affirms that Jesus was asked by the people, Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath-day? while in point of fact, as another Gospel tells us, it was He who put that question to them, is my salvation thereby imperilled? If we are told in Samuel that the price paid for Araunah's threshing floor was fifty silver shekels, while in Chronicles we are told that it was six hundred gold shekels, does this prevent my perceiving that Christ reveals God and accepting that revelation? To me the assertion seems simply monstrous. And that intelligent Christian men should avow that their faith hangs on so precarious a tenure is a most significant circumstance.<sup>65</sup>

Positive statements about the usefulness of the Scriptures in instructing mankind for salvation affirm more about the Bible than a negative statement that it is without error. The Bible is not the ultimate end. Instead, it is a witness to God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. As John the Baptist pointed toward Christ, the Bible is a witness pointing toward God. A witness is not identical with that to which it attests. The Bible stands under the authority of God. By calling the Bible a witness, the emphasis is placed on God as the end, with the Bible as the means to that end. The Bible is revelatory as it points toward the will and nature of God. God is infallible and the word of God that we learn from the Bible will thus be infallible, but the two should not be confused. The Bible is our final court of appeal in this world, since it is the written document which records God's historical revelation of his will to man, especially in Jesus Christ, but the Bible's authority derives from God. In this context the truth claims of the Bible should be examined and accepted.

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<sup>64</sup> Richard J. Coleman, "Another View: The Battle for the Bible," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 31 (June 1979) 77-78.

<sup>65</sup> Marcus Dods, *The Bible: Its Origin and Nature* (New York: Association Press, 1895) 140.