

6.

Inspiration and inerrancy

A book without error

On 2 April 1792 William Pitt presented the House of Commons with a passionate speech against the slave trade, and among those in the House was William Wilberforce, who was the acknowledged leader of the crusade to end slavery. Wilberforce commented on that speech in his own diary and concluded: 'For the last twenty minutes he [Pitt] really seemed to be inspired.' Did Wilberforce, who himself believed in the total trustworthiness of the Bible, mean by that phrase that Pitt was speaking with infallible accuracy? Of course not. He was using the word 'inspired' in a more general way, without any conscious reference to the intervention of God. In answering the question, 'What was God's method of inspiration?', we must be aware of two extremes.

Two errors to be avoided

General inspiration

This is the most widely held view by critics of the Bible. Admitting that the Bible is a very special book with a unique message, they claim that the writers were merely prompted by God to a deeper spiritual understanding than most men. But then, so the argument

runs, the English poet Shakespeare and the French philosopher Voltaire were similarly ‘inspired’ – though perhaps not by God. Many of their ideas were good, but we must not say that their words were infallible. In a similar way, it is suggested that the Bible writers were spiritual and pious men but, like Shakespeare or Voltaire, they were capable of error and at times were either too extreme or too loose in their statements. We must bring our own reason and common sense to the Bible to remove the errors.

Such a view wholly ignores the Bible’s claim for itself – a claim that Shakespeare and Voltaire never made for their writings. It also overlooks the fact that the only way to convey the truth is through words. Shakespeare and Voltaire could not help but be fallible writers. On the other hand, if God has a message for mankind but his words cannot always be trusted, then without doubt the truth is unreliable as well. When a man is learning a new language, he will often get his words wrong; he knows exactly what he wants to say, but he fails to communicate his message because he does not use the right words. If the words of the Bible are not exactly right then, however ‘inspired’ and well-meaning the writers may have been, we may as well give up all hope of finding the true truth. Besides, this view of general inspiration assumes that the scholar who removes the error and discovers the truth is more ‘inspired’ than the original writer.

Mechanical inspiration

This view makes the human writers mere dictating machines or keyboards for a computer – they were not thinking, but simply wrote down letters and words as God dictated them. Admittedly, such a view of the Bible would emphasize its status as the word of God, but it is inaccurate for a number of reasons.

First, it ignores the obvious preparation of the man by God. If God is merely dictating, the writer’s only necessary qualification would be the ability to write legibly.

Secondly, it ignores the fact that the various writers in the Bible reveal their own character, style and culture, to such a degree that at

times we can recognize characteristics of Paul's letters or John's Gospel in much the same way that people can recognize our own phrases and style from our letters.

Thirdly, it ignores the fact that some writers used the results of their own research into documents available. Long lists of family histories (genealogies) and official letters were almost certainly reproduced from government records. Some of the lists of names in Chronicles are 'records ... from ancient times' (1 Chr. 4:22). See also, for example, 1 Kings 11:41; 1 Chronicles 29:29-30; Ezra 4:11-22 and Luke 1:1-4.

It is true that in the history of this debate over how the Bible came to us, some have referred to the Spirit 'dictating' what was written – John Calvin, John Wesley and many of the early church leaders, including Augustine, used this language. However, what they undoubtedly meant by this was that the Holy Spirit ensured the accuracy of the outcome, in much the same way that we might refer to an officer 'dictating' the deployment of his soldiers. Having said this, there is no reason why we should deny that some parts of Scripture were in fact dictated in the narrow sense of this word. After all, the Ten Commandments were originally written by the finger of God (Deut. 9:10).

Self-authentication – the witness of the Bible to itself

To say that the Bible is the word of God, and therefore without error because the Bible itself claims this, is seen by many as an argument in circles. It is rather like saying, 'That prisoner must be innocent because he says he is.' Are we justified in appealing to the Bible's own claim in settling this matter of its authority and inerrancy? How can we defend our trust in this self-witness of the Bible?

If people were not unreliable, witness to oneself would be enough. In John 5:31-32 Jesus agreed with the principle that self-witness is normally not sufficient: 'If I testify about myself, my testimony is not valid. There is another who testifies in my favour, and I know that his testimony about me is valid.' Later, in John

8:13, the Pharisees took up this point when Jesus claimed, 'I am the light of the world.' They corrected him by saying, 'Here you are, appearing as your own witness; your testimony is not valid.' In defence our Lord showed that in his case, because he was the Son of God, self-witness is reliable: 'Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid...' (v. 14), and the verses that follow make clear our Lord's position that self-witness is reliable where sin does not interfere. Because Christ was never found to be a false witness and no one could prove him guilty of sin (John 8:46), his words could be trusted. In the same way, since the Bible is never found to be a false witness we have a right to listen to its own claim about itself.

This 'self-authentication', as it is known, is used frequently in our daily experience. When someone writes his own life story, much of it can never be checked because the facts could not be known unless the author revealed them. He may write about his childhood fears or memories and we must take his word for these things. We either believe what he says or call him a liar. The same is true when someone relates a dream; no one can possibly confirm or deny the account since there is only one witness. In this case the reader or listener will rely entirely on self-authentication and will either trust or not, depending upon how trustworthy the witness is known to be. This is exactly Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 2:11 when he writes, 'Who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.'

Much of the Bible's story is such that unless God had revealed it we could never have known it. There are many scientific theories telling us how the world came into being. Some of these theories differ only slightly from each other, but others are contradictory. This only shows that no one can really be sure about such matters because no scientist was there when it all happened. Unless the God who was there has revealed it, we could never know for certain. The same is true for all the great Bible doctrines. How can we be sure of God's anger against sin, or his love for sinners, or his plans to choose a people for himself, unless God himself had told us?

There must be a final court of appeal

When people want to confirm that what they are saying is true, they often appeal to someone or something greater than themselves; they swear on a holy book or say something like, 'God is my witness.' But God had no one greater than himself to confirm his word, and therefore he appealed to his own character: 'When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself...' (Heb. 6:13). In law, there must always be a final court of appeal, beyond which there is no higher authority. Therefore if the Bible is God's word it will have to be its own witness. There can be no higher authority than God to witness to its truth. Hilary of Poitiers, a fourth-century theologian, once claimed, 'Only God is a fit witness to himself' – and no one can improve on that.

We should test authority by its results

This was the principle our Lord left us in John 10:37-38: 'Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does. But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father.' This principle ran through the Old Testament too: 'You may say to yourselves, "How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the LORD?" If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the LORD does not take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken' (Deut. 18:21-22).

If the Bible can be proved true wherever we can test it, then we are right to accept its word in those areas where we cannot test it. It is therefore essential that the Bible is seen to be accurate in its history, geography and prophecy – areas that we often can test – in order for us to trust its doctrine, which is an area we cannot test. A prisoner on trial is more readily believed when he asserts things that we cannot check, if he has been proved right in the things that we can check. Similarly, if the author writing his autobiography is proved wrong on many of his supposed facts, then we are hardly

willing to trust his word for those childhood fears and memories either.

The accuracy of the Bible in its facts helps to demonstrate its own claim to be a God-given book.

The book that speaks for itself

During his lifetime our Lord witnessed to the inspiration of the Old Testament, a subject we shall return to in the next chapter, and the Holy Spirit witnesses in the mind of the Christian. So often young Christians accept the authority of God's word without being told they must do so. It was through the Bible that they became Christians in the first place and the same book speaks with a living power to their minds and hearts each day. Of course, this does not prove that the Bible is true in every part, but this ring of truth is not insignificant. The church leaders in the first two or three centuries were confronted with a vast amount of literature claiming to be written by apostles, and one way they had of clearly sifting out the false books was the authentic authority that was conveyed by the Scriptures. The Bible is a book that speaks for itself.

What is meant by 'inspiration'?

In all the Bible, the phrase 'God-breathed' is found only in 2 Timothy 3:16, which reads: 'All Scripture is God-breathed...' It is just one word in the Greek and is often translated by 'inspired'. Usually this is explained as the divine 'inbreathing' into a man by God's Holy Spirit, with the result that the man speaks, or writes, with a quality, insight, accuracy and authority that are possible in no other form of human speaking or writing. The word *may* be defined in this way, but it ought not to be!

The word 'inspire' came into our English language from the Latin *inspirare* via the Norman French *inspirer* and it was not used to refer to the Scriptures until the Reformation in the sixteenth century. William Tyndale, normally a most accurate translator, used

the word 'inspire' in his 1526 English New Testament. The Greek word is *theopneustos*, and it is made up from two Greek words: *theos* – 'God' – and *pneuma* – 'breath' or 'wind'. Our word 'theology' comes from the Greek word for 'God'; theology is the study of God. And our words 'pneumonia' and 'pneumatic' are derived from the Greek *pneuma*; they refer to breath or air.

Benjamin B. Warfield was a brilliant biblical scholar in the United States in the early part of the twentieth century, and he carefully studied this word *theopneustos* in all its uses outside the Bible. In his book, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, Philadelphia, 1948), he showed that it is always used in a passive sense, something that is breathed out, and never in an active sense, breathing into something. Thus the word *theopneustos* does not mean 'breathed *into* by God' but, more exactly, 'breathed *out* by God'. There is a big difference between breathing into something and breathing out, between inspiring and expiring!

This means that in 2 Timothy 3:16 there is no reference to the human writer at all. Another passage in the Bible tells us about the human writer; it is 2 Peter 1:20–21 and we shall look at that later. In 2 Timothy 3:16 there is no reference to the *method* by which we received the Scripture, but only to its *origin*, where it came from. It is not breathed *into man*, but breathed *out by God*. That is a very big claim.

The emphasis is on where the words came from (they were breathed out by God) and not on what happened to the human writer (God breathing his words into him). If someone says to me, 'How did you get that new car I see in your garage?' I may reply, 'It was sold to me by a friend of mine.' Or I may say, 'I drove it home from my friend's house.' Both answers are correct, but the first tells me where the car came from – you notice the passive use of the verb: 'It was sold to me.' On the other hand, the second answer tells me how the car came to be in my garage: 'I drove it home' – and that is an active use of the verb. *Theopneustos* is passive; it tells us where the words came from. The word 'inspiration' is therefore misleading

and not strictly scriptural. However, it has become a technical term and we shall have to continue to use it, though with the correct understanding. 'God-breathed' is an excellent translation of the word *theopneustos*.

How much of the Bible is inspired?

If 'inspired' really means 'God-breathed', then the claim of the Bible is that all Scripture, being God-breathed, is accurate, without error and can therefore be trusted completely. God would cease to be God if he breathed out errors and contradictions, even in the smallest part. So long as we give *theopneustos* its real meaning, we shall not find it hard to understand the full inerrancy of the Bible.

However, some people do find it hard to accept this, as we saw in the first chapter. Many have a very liberal view of Scripture and they will not accept the supernatural, such as miracles, nor will they trust the words of Moses, Paul, or even our Lord himself. Others accept the words of our Lord but believe that Paul, John and Peter were not always correct. Still others believe that the doctrines revealed in the Bible are reliable and so are most, but not all, of the historical facts. A view held by many today is that the words of God are not to be found in the Bible at all; the Bible only becomes the word of God when it speaks to the individual. To various extents each of these views has to deny the true meaning of *theopneustos*.

In all our discussion of inspiration and inerrancy, there are a few points that we should remember.

The first is that when we talk about inspiration we are referring to the original writer of Scripture, whether it was Moses, Isaiah, Paul or John etc. Unfortunately, we do not have any of the original 'autographs', as they are called, but only copies. This subject will recur in chapter 12, but it is sufficient here to emphasize that in the many copies of copies that have been made over the centuries, small errors of transcription have crept into the text. However, these are small, rare and often understandable; in chapter 17 we shall see how one small stroke of the pen can alter a Hebrew number.

Nothing of importance, and certainly no doctrine or teaching, is affected by these small errors. Besides, the New Testament writers, and Jesus himself, were using copies – and a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures – and they had total confidence in their authority and accuracy.

The second point to remember is that while the whole of Scripture is God's word in the sense that it is part of his revelation, not all of the words in the Bible are the words of God; it accurately records words spoken by men and women – some of them pagan or evil people – and even by the devil himself. There are even lies in the Bible! When God sent a young prophet to King Jeroboam he ordered him to deliver his message and return home at once without accepting any hospitality. On the way back he met an old prophet who, wanting to entertain the younger man, claimed, 'I too am a prophet, as you are. And an angel said to me by the word of the LORD: "Bring him back with you to your house so that he may eat bread and drink water"' (1 Kings 13:18) – but he was lying, and the Scripture says so. When we speak of the Bible as without error, we mean that even these words are *an accurate record* of what the old prophet actually spoke.

Thirdly, we must also allow that at times we have the record of the personal views of that writer, which may not be in harmony with truth. Job, for example, wished that he had been stillborn, and the writer of Ecclesiastes concluded at one point that the whole of life was without meaning. Inerrancy means that *this is exactly how they felt*; it is the role of exegesis (explaining the words and context) and hermeneutics (understanding the meaning) to discover when we are hearing truth.

Fourthly, it is evident that some writers used available documents from carefully stored archives. We are not to suppose that Moses or Nehemiah reproduced lists of genealogies from their memory, least of all their imagination. Verbal inerrancy does not demand that all details were corrected if, here or there, there was an error in the list; it simply guarantees that this is how the list appeared to the writer. There is a caution to be added to this concession and we shall return to it in chapter 17.

Fifthly, we should be aware that at times different words may be used in recounting what appears to be the same incident. For example, in Matthew 3:11 John the Baptist speaks of ‘carrying’ the sandals of the Messiah, whereas in John 1:27 he talks about ‘untying’ them. Even a superficial glance at the two passages indicates that since John was preaching over a period of time, he would undoubtedly have repeated himself and, like any preacher, would have used different words; these two records have all the appearance of referring to two separate occasions.

Plenary and verbal inspiration

There are two words that are sometimes used to explain what evangelicals really mean when they speak about the Bible as God’s word: ‘plenary’ and ‘verbal’ inspiration. ‘Plenary’ comes from the Latin *plenus*, which means ‘full’, and refers to the fact that the whole of Scripture *in every part* is God-given. ‘Verbal’ comes from the Latin *verbum*, which means ‘word’ and emphasizes that even *the words* of Scripture are God-given. By definition, the term ‘plenary and verbal inspiration’ means that the Bible is God-given (and therefore without error) in every part (doctrine, history, geography, dates, names) and in every single word.

Unfortunately, some today use these words ‘plenary’ and ‘verbal’ yet mean something different. They say there are errors in the Bible – just small ones here and there – but these need not be counted against plenary and verbal inspiration because the facts that the Bible intended to state are what matters. One significant writer who advocates this line, John Goldingay, has expressed it like this: ‘The implicit claim of biblical narrative is to be reasonably accurate’ (*Models for Scripture*, Clements Publishing, 2004, p. 282) – only ‘*reasonably accurate*’, you will notice. This is a variation on the error noted in chapter 1 that some try to draw between infallibility and inerrancy. It is often suggested that we need only trouble ourselves to discover what the Bible intends to say, and if some details are incorrect, no matter. There is a proper use of discovering what the Bible intends to say, and we shall look at this in chapter 14, but to

use 'intention' to cover up possible errors is incorrect. It is like a football team discounting all goals scored against them by the argument that it was never their intention to let the ball into the net. Such reasoning may satisfy their supporters, but certainly not their opponents! A witness to a crime may give a lot of details to the court, but if many of them are proved to be completely false the witness cannot be allowed to plead, 'Well, what I intended to say was that I saw the crime, and in that everyone agrees I am right.' The fact is that he has lied, or at best has proved himself an unreliable witness, and no court will take him seriously.

John Goldingay criticizes the view of full inerrancy since, he claims, 'it is not directly asserted by Christ or within Scripture itself (as above, p. 273); it is therefore a deduction from Scripture rather than plainly taught in Scripture, and he suggests that it is better to work from the observable facts (he calls them the 'phenomena') of Scripture. In other words, the argument runs like this: there clearly are errors and contradictions in the Bible, so we should discover a doctrine of inspiration that fits with that fact.

There are two responses to this approach. First, there are other doctrines that are deduced from Scripture rather than being plainly stated. The most obvious of these is the doctrine of the Trinity, which is never spelt out in the Bible by the use of the word 'Trinity'; that doctrine is presumed from the fact that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are each equally revealed as truly and fully God.

But a second response is this: to arrive at a doctrine of inspiration based on the 'phenomena' of Scripture (i.e. to say that we can admit to some errors and contradictions because there clearly are errors and contradictions) is to put the cart of evidence before the horse of instruction – or, in the terms scholars would use, it puts the experimental cart before the didactic horse. We should never look at the problems and then work towards a doctrine, but rather we should discover the doctrine from the Bible and then resolve the problems.

We must watch for those who use the terms 'plenary' and 'verbal' but only in a limited way. This new thinking by some evangelicals is the top of a slippery slope into a full liberal critical

view of the Bible. Allow just a little acceptable error here and there in the Bible and where can the line be drawn? History is repeating itself, because this is how some evangelicals argued in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when confronted with critical views of the Scriptures.

Why is inerrancy important?

Those who believe in biblical inerrancy are sometimes accused of spending too much of their time 'straining at a gnat' while the big issue should be what the Bible teaches. This is both untrue and unfair. No group of Christians has been more exact in their interest in what the whole Bible says and in comparing Scripture with Scripture to discover the word of God, and no preachers have been more precise in biblical exposition, than those who affirm inerrancy. Besides, the subject is only dealt with because it is denied. To ignore it would lay them open to the charge of being obscurantist – avoiding any challenge to their faith.

Is this whole debate about whether or not the Bible contains nothing but the truth merely a theological quibble? Certainly not! The question of ultimate authority is of the highest importance for the Christian, and for a number of good reasons.

Inerrancy governs our attitude to the truth of the gospel

We cannot offer the world a reliable gospel presented in an unreliable Scripture. How can we be sure of truth on any issue if we are suspicious of errors anywhere? An airline pilot will ground his aircraft even on suspicion of the most minor of faults, because he is aware that one fault destroys confidence in the complete machine. If the history contained in the Bible is wrong, how can we be sure that the doctrine or moral teaching is correct? The answer is that we cannot be sure. Some theologians claim that it is the real message of the biblical writer that is important and that if the writer is incorrect in a number of facts, or even makes them up, it does not at all alter

the truth of his message. But in no other area of life would we accept this argument.

A farmer, wishing to sell his cow to a neighbour, may describe in great detail its size and weight, food intake and milk output, its age and characteristics, and then add that it is brown in colour. If, on the following day, he arrives with a black-and-white cow, his neighbour will quite rightly distrust all the important details given the previous day. Either it is a different cow or the farmer does not know his animals. When I collected my car from the garage after a service on one occasion, I noticed that although the list of items to be checked included refilling the windscreen-wash bottle, the mechanic clearly had not done so. The foreman suggested that it was a very small item, but I pointed out that if they missed something so obvious and simple, I had good reason to question what else of greater importance they might have overlooked.

These are not theoretical objections either. Some who claim to hold a high view of the inspiration of Scripture have nevertheless suggested that parts of the Gospel stories have been influenced by Jewish tradition or prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures. Thus a few unhistorical elements in the narrative of Jesus' birth and Luke's account of Judas' death in Acts 1:18-19 are regarded as perfectly acceptable. It is a short step from this to allowing that Paul may have been mistaken in some of his statements also – perhaps, for example, his claim in 1 Corinthians 15:6 that 500 saw the risen Christ. When these writers assert that 'Factual error need not hinder effectiveness and meaningfulness', and that the 'narrative parts make no claim to be dictated by God', they appear to limit the 'all Scripture' of 2 Timothy 3:16, but they never provide us with a list of just what we can and cannot accept as historical fact. Are we no longer entitled to look for an explanation to an apparent contradiction or historical blunder in the Bible? Do we simply assume an error and move on with a shrug? Or if there is no immediate resolution to the problem do we capitulate? In which case, as chapter 16 will show, we shall have egg on our faces when the solution is eventually offered by the critics themselves!

The gospel of salvation may sound wonderful, but if the history in which it is all said to have happened is not correct, then how can we trust the gospel itself? The heart of the Christian message is rooted in history. The incarnation – God becoming a man – is proved by the virgin birth of Christ. Redemption – the price being paid for man’s rebellion to be forgiven – is obtained by the death of Christ on the cross. Reconciliation – the privilege granted to the sinner of becoming a friend of God – is gained through the resurrection and ascension of Christ. If the recorded events are not true, how do we know that the theology behind them is true?

Inerrancy governs our attitude to the value of Christ

We cannot have a reliable Saviour without a reliable Scripture. If, as many suggest, the stories in the Gospels are not historically true and the recorded words of Christ are occasionally inaccurate, how do we know what we can trust about Christ? Must we rely upon the conflicting interpretations of a host of critical scholars before we know what Christ was like, or what he said? If the Gospel stories are merely the result of the wishful thinking of the church in the second or third centuries, or even the personal views of the Gospel writers, then our faith no longer rests upon the historical Jesus but upon the opinions of men. Who will want to trust an unreliable Saviour for their eternal salvation?

Many today doubt the reality of the resurrection of Christ but then claim that such an unbelief does not stop us from believing in Christ as a life-giving spirit. We are told that one-third of Church of England bishops do not believe in the virgin birth of Christ or his resurrection, which is hardly surprising when one of them referred to the resurrection as ‘merely a conjuring trick with bones’. We can only reply that since the Bible is so plain, straightforward and insistent in its claim to the literal truth of Christ’s resurrection, if it is wrong at this point we must all despair of ever understanding what it means about anything. Or, as Paul writes, ‘Our preaching is useless ... we then are found to be false witnesses ... your faith is futile, you are still in your sins ... those who have fallen asleep in

Christ are lost ... [and] we are to be pitied more than all men' (1 Cor. 15:14-19). Not a little hangs on the historical reality of the resurrection.

Some will object that of course they believe in the literal, historical resurrection, but this does not preclude some errors having crept into the accounts. The problem is, where are these errors? Did Mary Magdalene meet Christ in the way John records? Did she separate from the other women, go back to the tomb, rush off to Peter and John and then meet Christ alone and in confusion, and did she then return to the disciples, on her own, before the other women arrived? It is certainly not easy to fit all this into the other resurrection accounts – so how much should we attribute to faulty reporting, and how much are we allowed to 'harmonize'? The problems raised by evangelicals who deny inerrancy are far greater than those caused by upholding it.

Inerrancy governs our response to the conclusions of science

We shall consider the Bible and science again in chapter 17, but the matter can be stated very simply here. If we believe the Bible contains errors, then we will be quick to accept scientific theories that appear to prove the Bible wrong. In other words, we will allow the conclusions of science to stand in judgement upon the Bible. On the other hand, if we believe in inerrancy, we will not be prepared to accept the hasty theories that often come to us in the name of science, but will test those theories by Scripture. The history of scientific theories is full of spectacular reverses of opinion, and recent claims by 'experts' in one field or another have often proved lamentably short-sighted and disastrously wrong. A belief in inerrancy means that we will allow Scripture to stand in judgement upon scientific theories. A Bible in error is at the mercy of the wisdom of the current opinions of science, but an inerrant Bible submits to no man's judgement.

Inerrancy governs our attitude to the interpretation of Scripture

If we believe that scriptural inerrancy is a higher principle than scientific theories, then we will be prepared to accept those passages that are written as history but which may seem to be contradicted by some scientific views. We will have no trouble in accepting the account of creation, or Jonah and his big fish, or any of the miracles in the Bible; they are plainly written as history and we will readily accept them as such. They are no more difficult to believe than the virgin conception or the resurrection of Christ. Only when we doubt inerrancy do we have to invent new principles for interpreting Scripture that for convenience turn history into poetry and facts into myths. It means that the first question anyone must answer when they turn to a passage of the Bible is this: 'How reliable is this passage?' Only then will they be able to decide what to make of it.

Inerrancy governs our attitude to the preaching of Scripture

A denial of biblical inerrancy always leads to a loss of confidence in Scripture, both in the pulpit and in the pew. It was not the growth of education and science that emptied churches, nor two world wars, but the cold deadness of theological liberalism. If the Bible's history is doubtful and its words are open to dispute, then people understandably lose confidence in it. Must every preacher first check with the latest view of critical scholarship before he can claim any authority for a passage from the Bible? If he has to discover whether a particular verse is what Christ actually said, or what Matthew thought Christ said, or what the second-century church wanted Matthew to say that Christ said, then he is not likely to have much confidence in what he himself eventually says!

Besides, most congregations have better things to do than listen to this sort of nonsense. People want authority. They want to know what God has said. Where inerrancy is denied there is no longer clear authority. A church without authority is like a crocodile without teeth; it can open its mouth as wide and as often as it likes, but who cares?

At one time, doctrinal statements used the word 'infallible' to describe the Bible. That is a good word, though unfortunately it became less and less usable as some theologians employed it but denied that the Bible was without error. This is a false distinction, as we mentioned in the first chapter. You cannot have infallibility without inerrancy, though you can have inerrancy without infallibility. I may make a statement that in every respect is wholly factual and without error, but that does not make me infallible; however, if I am infallible then all my statements will be without error. Only God is infallible, and if the Bible is his revelation then it is inerrant because he is infallible.

Inerrancy protects the character of God

Almost all theologians agree that Scripture is in some measure God's revelation to the human race. But to allow that it contains error implies that God has mishandled inspiration and has allowed his people to be deceived for centuries until the twentieth-century scholars disentangled the confusion. The alternative is that God has revealed himself plainly and without error in words that carry his eternal authority and by their trustworthiness reflect his honour and glory.

Perhaps on this issue at least, we should align ourselves with Origen who, in the early part of the third century claimed: 'If we believe for certain that the Gospels were written with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit, those who wrote them could not have had any lapse of memory.'

Does the Bible claim to be God-breathed and without error?

The answer to this question is certainly 'Yes'. Some of the strongest critics of the Bible, who themselves deny inerrancy, have admitted that this was clearly the belief of our Lord and the apostles. The

German theologians Adolf Harnack (1851–1930) and Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) are examples of this. F. C. Grant, of Union Seminary in the United States of America, a very liberal critic of the Bible, has written of the New Testament: ‘Everywhere it is taken for granted that what is written in Scripture is the work of divine inspiration and is therefore trustworthy, infallible, and inerrant.’ He then added: ‘What is described or related in the Old Testament is unquestionably true.’

We shall look at the biblical position briefly here and return to it in the following chapters.

The view of the Old Testament writers

The Old Testament writers saw their message as God-breathed and therefore utterly reliable.

God confirmed this to Moses and future prophets in Deuteronomy 18:18: ‘I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him.’ This was also Jeremiah’s experience at the beginning of his ministry: ‘Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, “Now, I have put my words in your mouth”’ (Jer. 1:9).

The Hebrew word for prophet means ‘a spokesman’ and the prophets’ message was, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says...’ As a result they frequently so identified themselves with God that they spoke as though God himself was actually speaking. Isaiah 5 reveals this clearly. In verses 1–2 the prophet speaks of God in the third person – ‘he’ – but in verses 3–6 there is a change, and Isaiah speaks in the first person – ‘I’. Isaiah has become the actual voice of God. It is little wonder that King David could speak of the word of the Lord as ‘flawless’ (2 Sam. 22:31; cf. Prov. 30:5).

The New Testament agrees with the Old

Peter and John saw the words of David in Psalm 2 not as the opinion of a king of Israel, but as the voice of God. They introduced

a quotation from that psalm in a prayer to God: 'You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David' (Acts 4:25). Similarly, Paul accepted Isaiah's words as God himself speaking to men: 'The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your forefathers when he said through Isaiah the prophet...' (Acts 28:25).

So convinced were the writers of the New Testament that all the words of the Old Testament Scripture were the actual words of God that they even claimed, 'Scripture says,' when the words quoted came directly from God. Two examples are Romans 9:17, where Paul writes, 'For the Scripture says to Pharaoh,' and Galatians 3:8, where he says, 'The Scripture ... announced the gospel in advance to Abraham...' In Hebrews 1 many of the Old Testament passages quoted were actually addressed to God by the psalmist, yet the writer to the Hebrews refers to them as the words of God.

Our Lord believed in verbal inspiration

Clearly our Lord believed that the words of the Old Testament were God-breathed. Here are three examples.

In *John 10:34* (quoting from Ps. 82:6) our Lord based his teaching upon a phrase: 'I said, "You are gods."'

In *Matthew 22:32* he emphasized the words 'I am' in Exodus 3:6. Our Lord was in conflict with the Sadducees, who denied the resurrection of the body. If God had said to Moses, 'I was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,' or even if he had meant, 'I am the God who was worshipped by Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,' then Christ had established nothing by quoting this verse from Exodus. In fact the present tense, 'I am', is all-important here and forms the basis of our Lord's argument. In its Old Testament context the verb is understood as God saying to Moses, 'I am still the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I am not the God of dead men, but living men; their death has been conquered and their resurrection is certain.' We should note here as a matter of accuracy that the Hebrew of Exodus 3:6 does not contain a verb, only the personal pronoun 'I'. However, in such a case the present tense is understood. The Septuagint – the Greek translation of the Old Testament – does

contain the present tense of the verb and our Lord used the present tense in Matthew 22:32. In all this, he settled an issue by reference to one word in the Hebrew Old Testament.

In Matthew 22:43-44 our Lord quoted from Psalm 110:1 and emphasized a single word, 'Lord'; and here he was revealing himself as the Son of God.

Paul believed in verbal inspiration

In a very significant passage Paul bases an argument upon the fact that a particular word in the Old Testament is singular and not plural. Writing to the Galatians, Paul claims that in God's promises to Abraham God does not say, "and to seeds", meaning many people, but "and to your seed", meaning one person, who is Christ' (Gal. 3:16). Paul is quoting from Genesis 12:7; 13:15; 22:18 and 24:7. In each verse our translators use the word 'offspring' and the Hebrew word is in the singular. Paul's argument here is that God's chief purpose in speaking of the offspring of Abraham is not to refer to Israel, but to Christ. It may rightly be argued that the singular of this particular word can also have a plural meaning – in English also the word 'offspring' can refer to one or many; it is also true that in Galatians 3:29 Paul uses the word (in this case translated 'seed' instead of 'offspring') with the plural meaning. What is significant, however, is the way Paul draws attention to the fact that the Hebrew word in Genesis is singular when God could have chosen a plural word. As far as Paul is concerned, God chose the singular for a special purpose because it emphasized that the greatest descendant of Abraham was Christ (singular) and that by faith in him many become spiritual descendants. This is a belief in verbal inspiration; it mattered to Paul whether God used a singular or plural in these passages of the Old Testament. It is therefore not surprising that in Romans 3:2 Paul gives as one advantage of being a Jew the fact that 'They have been entrusted with the very words of God.'

The method of inspiration

We have already seen that 2 Timothy 3:16 should be translated accurately: 'All Scripture is God-breathed...' This verse tells us of the origin of Scripture. It comes from God and its accuracy and authority are therefore plenary, covering every part, and verbal, covering even the words themselves. But there is one more question we must ask: 'How was the Bible inspired?'

2 Peter 1:20-21 will help us answer this question: 'No prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.'

The Scriptures came through men

The claim of the Bible's critics is that since it was men who wrote down the words of Scripture, the light from heaven was broken up and spoilt by human error. To show that the words of God are marred by man, the critics use the illustrations of the pure rays of the sun broken and shaded as they filter through the trees of a thick forest, or the clear sunlight becoming a kaleidoscope of broken colour through the stained-glass window. But we may use the same illustration with an opposite purpose. Suppose the Creator so designed the leaves and the trees that the light and shade falling across the forest floor are exactly what he intended? Or suppose the craftsman planned the window exactly as he wanted the colours to be reflected?

The Scriptures came from the pen of men prepared by God. God did not choose Paul as the most suitable man. He formed and equipped Paul for his sovereign purpose. If a commanding officer has an important message to relay to his troops, he will take every precaution to make sure the exact message he wants to communicate gets through. Armies spend time and money to ensure that their communications network is of the highest possible standard of accuracy. It is possible today for a soldier to gain a satellite bearing on his location to within a few feet of accuracy; the expense of time

and technology for that information was colossal. But God has something far more important to say to us, and his accuracy is greater than that of any man-made system.

In Galatians 1:11-24 Paul recounts his personal testimony. Among his claims are two of great importance: First, 'The gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ' (vv. 11-12). Secondly, 'God set me apart from birth and called me by his grace' (v. 15). This was exactly the experience of the prophets Isaiah (Isa. 49:1-2, 5) and Jeremiah (Jer. 1:5); and this is what Peter is referring to in 2 Peter 1:20-21, particularly when he claims that 'No prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation.'

The Scriptures did not come by the prophets' own interpretation

It is wrong to think of the human writers of the Bible as co-authors with God. Certainly they reflected their own personality and employed their own style of writing, but they had nothing at all to do with the *origin* of the message; that belonged to God alone. However, although they wrote the God-breathed message in God's words, they were personally involved in the message. An officer may send a warning to the platoon of some danger that threatens it. The messenger is given a carefully prepared message which he delivers faithfully and exactly. The message is not his own, but the urgency of his voice and the excitement of his gestures are. The message has become part of his thinking and action. He feels the urgency, and although everyone knows that he is passing on the very words of the commanding officer, the soldiers can rightly claim, 'That man's message is very important.'

So it is with the human writers of the Bible. The ultimate origin is not from themselves; they received it from God. It was not written for them on a sheet of paper, as in the case of our military messenger, but in their minds, and it became so much a part of their thinking that it was their own message. They spoke it or wrote it with all the force and enthusiasm they could. It was exactly God's

message, given by men. Similarly, Peter assures us that the human writers were not free simply to interpret the message God gave to them. No officer allows his vital communication with the front-line troops to be interpreted by the soldier into a message he thinks the forces will best understand – or enjoy!

Three times in the Bible this relationship between the human messenger and the God-breathed message is spoken of as the writer ‘eating’ the words of God. One of these is in Jeremiah 15:16: ‘When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart’s delight.’ The other two are in Ezekiel 2:8 – 3:4 and Revelation 10:8–11. As a result, the prophets often preached a message they did not fully understand; they preached God’s words, not their own. This is Peter’s claim in 1 Peter 1:10–12. In contrast to all this, false prophets were described as ‘those who prophesy out of their own imagination’ (Ezek. 13:2). No commanding officer wants a messenger like that!

The Scriptures came by men ‘moved’ by the Holy Spirit

The Greek word used here in 2 Peter 1:21 is *phero*, which means ‘to bear’ or ‘to carry’. It was a familiar word to the sailor, referring to the sailing ship carried along by the wind – and remember that Peter used to be a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee. The human writers of the Bible certainly used their minds, but not to make up the message. The Holy Spirit carried them along in their thinking so that only his God-breathed words were recorded. The apostle Paul states the matter plainly in 1 Corinthians 2:13: ‘This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit.’

A summary therefore, is that 2 Timothy 3:16 tells us where the Scriptures came from – that is, the origin of the Bible: it came *from God*. 2 Peter 1:20–21, on the other hand, tells us how the Scriptures came to us – that is, the method by which we got our Bible: it came *through men*. This same distinction is seen also in the Old Testament. In Nehemiah 8:1 we read of ‘the Book of the Law of Moses’ and this is immediately followed by the description, ‘which the Lord

had commanded for Israel'. This is the same as Peter's statement that 'Men spoke from God'.

A definition of inspiration

With all this as a background, it is time to offer a definition of what we mean when we talk of the Bible as inspired by God:

The Holy Spirit moved men to write. He allowed them to use their own style, culture, gifts and character, to use the results of their own study and research, to write of their own experiences and to express what was in their mind. At the same time, the Holy Spirit did not allow error to influence their writings; he overruled in the expression of thought and in the choice of words. Thus they recorded accurately all that God wanted them to say and exactly how he wanted them to say it, in their own character, style and language.

The inspiration of Scripture is a harmony of the active mind of the writer and the sovereign direction of the Holy Spirit to produce God's inerrant and infallible word for the human race.

Who believes this?

Today large quantities of printer's ink are spent on the question of whether or not the evangelical view of Scripture outlined here represents the mainstream of Christian thought throughout the history of the church. Understandably many evangelicals are convinced that it does, while others claim that inerrancy was never asserted until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when it was given its clearest statement by B. B. Warfield. But is this true?

The first five hundred years

Clement of Rome, writing to the church at Corinth in *the first century*, reminded them: 'You have studied Scripture [he was referring to the Old Testament] which contains the truth and is inspired by the Holy Spirit. You realize that there is nothing wrong or misleading in it.'

In a similar way Justin Martyr, in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, a Jew he was seeking to win for Christ, claimed, 'I am entirely convinced that no Scripture contradicts another.'

Tertullian led the church in Carthage, North Africa, in *the second century* and argued that whatever the Scripture teaches is true and binding upon us, and Clement of Alexandria called it the first principle of instruction because in it we hear the voice of the Lord. Irenaeus represented the Greek church in the second century and wrote, 'The Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God and his Spirit.' Expressing his confidence in Luke as a historian, Irenaeus continued: 'No person of common sense can permit them to receive some things recounted by Luke as being true, and to set others aside as if he had not known the truth.'

As we have seen, Origen of Alexandria and Caesarea in the early part of *the third century* agreed with this: 'If we believe for certain that the Gospels were written with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit, those who wrote them could not have had any lapse of memory.'

John Chrysostom, the 'golden-mouthed' preacher from Antioch in *the fourth century*, declared that even the most trivial statement in the Bible has more than superficial value since it all came from God, and he urged his congregations to obtain and read a copy of the Scriptures. In the same way Athanasius, the fourth-century champion for the truth, recorded that 'The sacred and divinely inspired Scriptures are sufficient for the exposition of the truth.' He spoke also of 'the plain authority of the Scriptures' and 'the divine Scriptures'.

Augustine represented the western church one hundred years later and claimed that the Bible books are 'free from error'; while he

acknowledged some difficult places in Scripture, he allowed ‘variations but not contradictions; diversities but not contrarities’.

If anything, the conclusion must be that the early church leaders, in their desire to lay full emphasis upon the divine inspiration and infallibility of the Scriptures, fell into the danger of overlooking the importance of the human authors and of leaning at times towards a ‘dictation’ view of inspiration. If they did not use the word ‘inerrancy’ or the phrase ‘without error’, it is because they were not confronting the issue of those who call Scripture ‘the word of God’ and then proceed to demolish its authority by debating its accuracy. In the first five centuries at least, for Jews and Christians alike, if the Scriptures were the word of God they must be true and free from error. Today we have been forced to fine-tune our definitions because of the views of modern critics both inside and outside the ranks of evangelical belief.

The Reformation and beyond

Despite claims to the contrary, there can be little reasonable doubt that the Reformers in the sixteenth century also followed the position of the early church leaders. Not only was the watchword of the Reformation *Sola Scriptura* – Scripture alone – but it was a Scripture that, according to Martin Luther, ‘cannot err’. Unfortunately Luther sat loosely to this at times, as is evident in his commentary on Zechariah in 1528, when he raised the question why Matthew should attribute Zechariah 11:13 to Jeremiah (see Matt. 27:9) and concluded with the possibility that Matthew ‘is not quite correct about the name’. Elsewhere, however, he maintains that ‘It is impossible that Scripture should contradict itself; it only appears so to senseless and obstinate hypocrites!’ Luther also refers to the Scriptures ‘which have never erred’ and claims that ‘One letter, even a single tittle of Scripture, means more to us than heaven and earth. Therefore we cannot permit even the most minute change.’ Slackness in the occasional comment was due not to a low view of scriptural accuracy, but to carelessness at a time when hardly anyone was taking issue with inerrancy; the reliability of the Bible was in

fact the one thing that both Luther and his Catholic opponents, Desiderius Erasmus and John Eck, had in common.

The sixteenth-century French Reformer John Calvin was clear: the Bible is the 'pure word of God' and 'the infallible rule of his holy truth'. Edward Dowey, one of the opponents of inerrancy today, admits: 'To Calvin the theologian, an error in Scripture is unthinkable.' In fact the same writer suggests that Calvin's chief fault was his constant harmonizing and explaining to avoid the possibility of error anywhere. Even the Matthew 27:9 passage that Luther dismissed as 'not quite correct', Calvin resolves by assuming the name of Jeremiah 'crept in' through a copyist's error. (See chapter 18 for a more reasonable solution). Just one quotation from Calvin must be sufficient: 'It is not even enough to believe that God is trustworthy, who can neither deceive nor lie, unless you hold to be beyond doubt that whatever proceeds from him is sacred and inviolable truth.'

Later Reformers and Puritans followed the same line but with one noticeable difference. Until the end of the seventeenth century there was little dispute among either Catholics or Protestants regarding biblical infallibility. The eloquent John Eck advised his friend: 'Listen, dear Erasmus, do you suppose any Christian will patiently endure to be told that the evangelists in their Gospels made mistakes?' and Archbishop James Ussher calculated the year of creation as 4004 BC on the basis of the absolute reliability of biblical dates.

However, with the Age of Enlightenment, free thinking led to scepticism and the Protestants began to tighten their terms of reference. William Whitaker, a Cambridge scholar, published his *Disputation on Holy Scripture* in 1588. He believed unquestionably in biblical inerrancy and he demonstrated that this was the view of the Church Fathers in the early centuries. Whitaker claimed: 'We must maintain intact the authority of Scripture in such a sense as not to allow that anything is therein delivered otherwise than the most perfect truth required.' Whitaker was a typical Puritan and believed that this infallibility related to the original documents written by the

biblical writers. He was followed by William Ames in *Marrow of Sacred Divinity* in 1624.

By the eighteenth century evangelicals were in no doubt. 'If there be one error in Scripture,' concluded John Wesley the preacher and evangelist, 'there might as well be a thousand. It would not be the truth of God.' A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield, the Princeton theologians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, were no inventors of new things when they spelt out the detail of biblical inerrancy and offered clear scriptural reasons for the doctrine; they were simply following a long history of mainstream Christianity. Professor Kirsopp Lake at Harvard University can be permitted the final word on this question of how old the evangelical view of the Bible is: 'It is we [the liberals] who have departed from the tradition.'