

CHAPTER 3.

HOLY SCRIPTURE

“And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers” (1 Thess 2:13). These are remarkable words. On his second missionary journey, the apostle Paul, along with Silas, stopped in the city of Thessalonica. You can read what happened in Acts 17:1–9. Paul and Silas did not stay there very long. In less than one month (Acts 17:2) they left for the neighbouring town of Berea. Yet, when these two men entered the city of Thessalonica, some people who listened to their teaching accepted the words of these men as the very words of God himself.

And they were not mistaken either! The apostle Paul did not rebuke them, saying, “Do not put such high value in our words. After all, we are but mere mortals.” On the contrary, Paul and Silas later write to this congregation that they “thank God constantly” because the Thessalonians accepted their word as the word of God. The miraculous process by which God spoke through mere men is called *inspiration*.

Yet how do we know for sure that the Bible was inspired? After all, other religions have their holy books as well. Muslims have the Koran, Hindus have their Vedas, and Sikhs have the Guru Granth Sahib. For those who practise these religions their holy book has some kind of divine authority. So, how can Christians claim that the Bible, both the Old and New

Testaments, are the very word of God? Isn't that at best presumptuous and at worst arrogant? We need to address that question in this chapter.

The doctrine of inspiration has generated other questions as well. People want to know how it happened. Did the Holy Spirit dictate and did such men as Moses and Paul act as secretaries? Or let us use a more modern example. Today we have voice recognition software for our computers. If we speak into the microphone, the words appear on the screen. Is that similar to the way in which God inspired the Scriptures, except that instead of computer software he used such men as Moses and Paul? Or was it quite different from that? Did God merely plant the basic ideas he wanted to convey in the minds of these men? And then did these men work out the rest of the message as they saw best?

These questions are not only interesting but also important. In the end, what is at stake in this discussion about inspiration is the reliability of Holy Scripture. Can we trust what we read in the Bible? Can we trust *everything* that we read in the Bible? The answer to that question is crucial for the strength and stability of our faith.

SCRIPTURE IS GOD-BREATHED

The most well-known text describing the doctrine of inspiration is 2 Timothy 3:16: "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." In fact, the term *inspiration* is taken from this text. The literal meaning of inspiration is "in-breathing," or as Scripture says in this verse, "breathed by God."

On the sixth day of creation God also breathed for a special purpose. You can read about this in Genesis 2:7, where Moses writes, "Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature." To be sure, the LORD'S in-breathing on the sixth day of creation was different from his in-breathing when he inspired the prophets and apostles. However, it is helpful to compare these two events in order to appreciate their extraordinary nature. It is true that God gives "to all mankind life and breath

and everything” (Acts 17:25), but when God first breathed the breath of life into Adam’s nostrils, it was a unique event. The Lord simply does not do so with everyone. We do not even read that he did it with Eve. Clearly, divine in-breathing is exceptional. Likewise, when God inspired such men as Moses and Paul to bring his own divine words to his people, he was doing something truly special. He does not fill everyone with his inspired words, but only those special messengers that he chose in his sovereign good-pleasure.

The literal meaning of inspiration, that is, in-breathing, also helps us make the right connection to the Holy Spirit. In the Bible the word for “Spirit” can also mean “breath” or “wind.” Thus, the Lord Jesus was using a play on words when he said to Nicodemus, “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). Since there is this tight connection between “Spirit” and “breath,” it is not surprising that the Holy Spirit is intimately involved in God’s in-breathing of his Scriptures. In fact, the apostle Peter speaks about this when he writes, “For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet 1:21).

The inspired Scriptures, then, start with God’s desire and decision to reveal something to sinful human beings. Moses was not the one who decided one day that he wanted to write a book called Exodus or Deuteronomy. Neither did Moses come up with his own ideas about what should be written in those books. As the apostle Peter says, the origin of prophecy lies with God, not with man (2 Pet 1:21). In this way inspiration is fundamentally different from illumination. The Holy Spirit works in all God’s children, shining the light of the knowledge of God into the natural darkness of their hearts and minds (2 Cor 4:6). Indeed, some of God’s children are blessed with profound insight into spiritual matters. This can be called illumination, but it is not inspiration. When the Holy Spirit inspired Moses, Paul, or any other Scripture writer, he did not merely illuminate them so that they could share their profound thoughts about God. Instead, the Spirit inspired them so that they spoke

the very words of God, words just as divine as if the voice of God himself had breathed them out.

This special work of inspiration applies to the whole Bible. The apostle Paul writes, “*All Scripture is breathed out by God.*” There are many different kinds of writing in the Bible. There are historical books (Genesis through Nehemiah), poetic books (Psalms and Proverbs), letters (Romans through 3 John), and apocalyptic books with visions (Daniel, Ezekiel, and Revelation). Some passages in the Bible are easier to understand than others, and some are more difficult. But one thing all chapters and verses of the Bible have in common is this: they are all inspired. Sometimes this is also called *plenary* (i.e., complete) inspiration.

We do not understand exactly how the process of inspiration worked. Without a doubt it was a miracle. However, we can safely say that human authors were much more than dictation machines. One of the gospel writers, Luke, says at the beginning of his account, “It seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus” (Luke 1:3). Obviously Luke was engaged in researching and gathering information about the teachings and sufferings of our Saviour. Yet Luke was not an ordinary biographer. He was not just like so many other biographers who have written books about important people. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit worked in Luke in such a special way that when we read his gospel we can accept it—just as the Thessalonians accepted the words of Paul and Silas—“not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God” (1 Thess 2:13).

At the same time, God also did more than merely, in a general sort of way, plant concepts into the minds of those who wrote the Scriptures. Inspiration extends far beyond concepts and reaches right down to the level of words. In fact, at one point in Galatians the apostle Paul builds his argument on just a single letter in the Old Testament, namely, the letter *s*. He writes, “It does not say, ‘And to offsprings,’ referring to many, but referring to one, ‘And to your offspring,’ who is Christ” (Gal 3:16).

Clearly, the Holy Spirit was intimately involved in the entire process of writing, from initial idea right through to finished form.

HOW DO WE KNOW FOR SURE?

Now we need to return to the pressing question how we can be confident that the Bible is inspired. Couldn't a Hindu worshipper claim the same for his Vedas? Yes, theoretically, he could, but we are looking for more than a claim; we are looking for well-founded confidence. We need to be able to say, "Yes, we know for certain that the Bible is the inspired Word of God." There are several facts that build that kind of confidence.

- *The Bible presents itself as the inspired word of God.* This can be seen in well-known passages such as Deuteronomy 18:18, 1 Thessalonians 2:13, 2 Timothy 3:16, and 2 Peter 1:21.
- *Jesus believed that the Old Testament was inspired.* For example, in Matthew 19:5 Jesus quotes Genesis 2:24 and introduces it by saying that "he who created [Adam and Eve] . . . said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother . . .'" Now if you look back at Genesis 2:24 you will notice that this is not a direct quote from the mouth of God. God did directly say, "Let us make man in our image" (Gen 1:26), but it was Moses who wrote, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother . . ." (Gen 2:24). Yet, without the slightest hesitation, Jesus attributes those words of Moses to God. Our Saviour believed in inspiration. Peter also believed that Paul's writings were inspired since he puts them on the same level as "the other Scriptures" (2 Pet 3:15–16).
- *The Bible does not hide the ugly or embarrassing facts.* Human beings usually want to make themselves look good. Yet the Holy Spirit prevented the authors of the Bible from skipping over the dark side of our sinful existence. From the adultery of King David (2 Sam 11) to the corruption of Israel (Isa 1) or the denial of Peter (Matt 26:69–75), the miserable reality of sin is duly recorded. This makes the Bible authentic and true to real life.
- *Remarkable prophecies are fulfilled in remarkable ways.* More than

seven hundred years before it happened, Isaiah prophesied that a virgin would conceive and give birth to a son (Isa 7:14). About four hundred years before the Ptolemaic (Egyptian) and Seleucid (Syrian) dynasties clashed, Daniel predicted what would happen, even to the point of indicating how Ptolemy VI would be defeated through the bad advice of those who ate at his table (Dan 11:26). Only someone inspired by God could make such detailed and accurate prophecies centuries before the events actually occurred.

- *Humanly speaking, the gospel of salvation is fundamentally counter-intuitive.* That God would send his own well-beloved Son to die a horrific death, all so that ungrateful sinners could be redeemed and enjoy eternal glory as God's own children (Matt 3:17; Rom 5:6–11; 1 John 3:1–3), does not make logical sense. This is not the kind of plan that human beings would devise for salvation. Its complete originality confirms its divine origin (1 Cor 1:18–25).

These five facts set the Bible apart from other holy books, and they might also persuade someone that the Scriptures are inspired. Still, at the end of the day, if someone is truly convinced that the Bible is inspired, it is because the Holy Spirit himself worked that conviction in the person's heart. Confidence that the Bible is God's Word is just as much a miracle as the process of inspiration itself; the Holy Spirit ought to receive the credit for both. The man without the Spirit will not accept Scripture as God's Word, but the man in whom the Spirit works faith will be deeply convinced of this truth (1 Cor 2:11–14). This also means that when someone casts doubt on the inspiration of Scripture, you should not only reason with him cogently, but you should also pray for him fervently. Only the Holy Spirit can penetrate through the hard crust of doubt and plant the tender seed of faith in a human heart. In Article 5 the Belgic Confession sums up this truth nicely when it says:

We believe without any doubt all things contained in them, not so much because the church receives and approves them as such, but especially because the Holy Spirit witnesses in our hearts that they are from God, and also because they contain the evidence of this in themselves; for even the blind are able to perceive that the things foretold in them are being fulfilled.

SCRIPTURE IS INFALLIBLE

In general, we are taught to read books critically. That does not mean we should read suspiciously. It simply means that we are to read with discernment because we realize that people make mistakes. They make factual errors as well as errors in judgment. When you read books you may therefore come across a statement that is simply not true. Perhaps an author says that the Ming Dynasty ended in 1646; however, when you check the facts you realize that it actually ended in 1644. Also, an author may have all his facts correct, but when you read his conclusions, you may disagree with them. Then you interpret the facts in a rather different way. Normally speaking, this is how we read books.

But when we read the Bible it is different. It is different because its Author is different. The Bible is God-breathed, and God does not lie. He does not make mistakes, and he does not make errors in judgment either. Here are a few passages that confirm this point.

God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it? (Num 23:19)

And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret (1 Sam 15:29).

The LORD is righteous in all his ways (Ps 145:17).

As a result the God-breathed Scriptures are as trustworthy and true as God himself. As the psalmist David once declared, “This God—his way is perfect; the word of the LORD proves true; he is a shield for all those who take refuge in him” (Ps 18:30). Notice the progression in this verse. It begins with God himself, affirming that his ways and his actions are perfect. Next it moves to the Word of the LORD. As surely as the LORD’S ways are perfect, so certainly his Word is flawless.

This trustworthiness of Scripture gives us a place of security and refuge. This world is full of people who twist and warp the truth (Ps 116:11). It can be very discouraging when people, even people whom you love, do

not always deal with you honestly and sincerely. However, even if the world is filled with an ocean of deception, there is one island of flawless and reliable truth: the Word of God! We call this the *infallibility*, or *inerrancy*, of Holy Scripture.

Of course, there are people who question the infallibility of Scripture. They say that there are contradictions in the Bible. For example, in John 1:18 we read, “No has ever seen God.” Yet in Exodus 24:10 we are told that Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, as well as seventy elders “saw the God of Israel.” Is this a contradiction in the Bible? No, not if we take a moment to consider how language is being used in each verse.

Let us take an example from daily life. Someone may ask, “Have you ever seen the back of your head?” Upon hearing that question some people might be inclined to answer, “No.” Since your eyes are firmly fixed in the front of your head, you cannot see the back of your head. Others would be inclined to say, “Yes.” If you have two mirrors, you can arrange them in such a way that you see the back of your head. However, another person may reply and say, “Yes, but technically speaking, you do not actually see the back of your head; you see a *reflection* of the back of your head in the mirror.” That is true, but it is also true that it is perfectly legitimate to say, “Yes, I’ve seen the back of my head in the mirror.” That is not a lie. That is simply the way language works.

Let us return now to John 1:18 and Exodus 24:10. In the first place, since God is invisible (1 Tim 1:17), it is impossible to see him in his natural, divine essence. That is what John 1:18 means. However, on various occasions, for a short time, God has taken on a visible form. For example, he appeared to Abraham in the form of a man (Gen 18:1–2). Daniel also had a vision in which he saw God in the form of a man with white clothing and white hair (Dan 7:9). In a similar way, on Mount Sinai, the leaders and elders of Israel saw a special, visible manifestation of God. But they did not see the invisible essence of God. Thus there is no contradiction between John 1:18 and Exodus 24:10. This also applies to other so-called contradictions in the Bible. If we look at the passages in

their context and understand well how the language is being used, the so-called contradictions turn out to be no contradictions at all.

SCRIPTURE HAS PERFECTIONS

In addition to being flawless, Scripture also has certain special attributes that are often called the *perfections* of Scripture. We will look briefly at the four most common ones: authority, necessity, clarity, and sufficiency.

In the first place, God's Word is the first and final *authority* in all matters related to our Christian faith. This can be best understood if we compare it to the infallibility of Scripture. As mentioned earlier, just as God does not lie, so also his Word is flawless. Similarly, just as God is sovereign over everything (2 Chron 20:6), so also his Word comes to us with weight and authority. In Article 6, the Belgic Confession summarizes it in this way: "We receive all these books, and these only, as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith." When it says "all these books," the Belgic Confession is referring to the list of sixty-six books in Article 5. These sixty-six books are called the *canon* of Scripture. Canon means the *rule*, or the *standard*. So, in practical terms, in all matters of faith, when we want to know the truth, we turn to the standard of the Bible, in which God has the final say about everything he reveals.

Secondly, God's Word is *necessary*. We touched on this already in chapter 2. Since God is so lofty and so holy, we need him to teach us about himself and the salvation that he has worked for us in Jesus Christ. These are things that we, as finite creatures, cannot figure out on our own. Moreover, this is even truer now that we live after the fall into sin. Sin has clouded and corrupted our minds. We can still think, of course, but by nature we will not think *correctly* about God. For this reason having God's Word is not a pleasant luxury but a real necessity.

Thirdly, God's Word has its own *clarity*. This does not mean that everything in the Bible is instantly easy to understand. Even the apostle Peter says that there are challenging passages in the letters of the apostle Paul:

“There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures” (2 Pet 3:16). But this should not discourage us. We have received a great blessing. The Lord Jesus Christ has sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in us and remain with us forever (John 14:16–17). This Holy Spirit is the very same one who inspired the Scriptures in the first place. Certainly, the Author of Scripture will be able to help us, the readers, understand his own Word. If there is a lack of clarity or confusion, then the problem is with our understanding, not with God’s revelation. However, prayerfully and patiently we will grow in understanding what the Lord teaches us in the gospel.

Finally, what God has revealed in Scripture is *sufficient* for salvation and for worshipping the Lord in a manner that is pleasing to him. It is true: the Bible does not give us an answer to every possible question that might arise in our minds. There are certain things that the LORD in his divine wisdom has decided to keep to himself (Deut 29:29). But what he has revealed is enough. The Belgic Confession sums it up in this way in Article 7:

We believe that this Holy Scripture fully contains the will of God and that all that man must believe in order to be saved is sufficiently taught therein. The whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in it at length. It is therefore unlawful for any one, even for an apostle, to teach otherwise than we are now taught in Holy Scripture: yes, even if it be an angel from heaven, as the apostle Paul says (Gal 1:8). Since it is forbidden to add to or take away anything from the Word of God (Deut 12:32), it is evident that the doctrine thereof is most perfect and complete in all respects.

The words of men—no matter how intelligent or wise they may be—can never equal the Word of God. The difference is simply too great. It is the difference between Creator and creature. Therefore we need to be content and trust that whatever we really need to know about salvation and worship, the Lord has taught us. It is sufficient.

NO MORE INSPIRED REVELATIONS TODAY

The sufficiency of Scripture also warns us to be careful with people who claim to have direct, personal revelations from God and who treat those private revelations as if they were inspired. Let us remember that the inspiration, or in-breathing, of Scripture was a very special, unique event. It was not a common everyday experience.

In addition, the Lord inspired the prophets and apostles for the special purpose of laying the foundation of truth upon which he will be building his church until he returns on the clouds of heaven. The apostle Paul speaks of this in Ephesians 2:19–22:

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

Once the foundation of a building is laid, that task is finished. It does not need to be repeated. The Lord used inspiration for foundation work. However, now our Lord is beyond the foundation stage in building his church. Now Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, who uses the inspired Word, is busy building the walls of his church and making us living stones within those walls (1 Pet 2:4–5). The era of inspiration ended with the apostles; however, the time for preaching and studying the inspired Word is most certainly still with us (2 Tim 4:2).

Suggested Readings: 2 Timothy 3:10–17; 2 Peter 1:16–21

QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. What is the difference between illumination and inspiration? Define both terms as carefully as you can.
2. Read the Belgic Confession, Articles 3–7. In your own words, summarize the main points of Articles 3, 5, and 7.

3. Identify the four attributes, or perfections, of Scripture and briefly describe each one.
4. What is the canon of Scripture? What are the apocryphal books? Can we use them? See the Belgic Confession, Article 6.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. In your experience, what kind of doubts do people have concerning the trustworthiness of the Bible? If possible, give three concrete examples and explain how you would respond to each one.
2. When a fellow Christian is having difficulty understanding a certain passage in the Bible, what should he do, and what can you do to help him? Try to list four different things and explain why each one is important.
3. Use an online search engine to learn about the doctrine of abrogation in Islam. How does this doctrine compare with the way that Scripture speaks about itself, for example, in Matthew 5:17–18 and Revelation 22:18–19?
4. Sometimes people claim to have a direct message from God and will make bold predictions or strong demands. Read Deuteronomy 18:14–22 (esp. vv. 21–22) and 1 John 4:1–3. Referring to these passages, explain how we should deal with such people.

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