

No one wants to defend a dictation theory of biblical inspiration. Muslims hold to something like that for the Qur'an, but Christians theologians recognize that the Scriptures are the products of their human authors as well as the divine author.

### (b) Supervision

So some sort of supervision theory of inspiration seems best. But the problem is formulating such a theory – showing how we can make sense of God's superintending work so that the final product will be verbal, plenary, and confluent in its inspiration.

### (3) The Apparent Incoherence of Plenary, Verbal, Confluent Inspiration

Here contemporary theologians have not had a whole lot to say. Let's look at the bewilderment that is expressed by some representative Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed theologians. These are classical thinkers that represent these traditions.

First from the Catholic perspective, John Henry Newman, the great British cardinal, in his *Lectures on the Scripture Proofs of the Doctrines of the Church* in 1838, has the following to say about this question.

In what way inspiration is compatible with that personal agency on the part of its instruments, which the composition of the Bible evidences, we know not; but if any thing is certain, it is this, – that, though the Bible is inspired, and therefore, in one sense, written by God, yet very large portions of it, if not far the greater part of it, are written in as free and unconstrained a manner, and (apparently) with as little consciousness of a supernatural dictation or restraint, on

the part of His earthly instruments, as if He had had no share in the work. As God rules the will, yet the will is free, – as He rules the course of the world, yet men conduct it, – so He has inspired the Bible, yet men have written it. Whatever else is true about it, this is true, – that we may speak of the history, or mode of its composition, as truly as of that of other books; we may speak of its writers having an object in view, being influenced by circumstances, being anxious, taking pains, purposely omitting or introducing things, supplying what others had left, or leaving things incomplete. Though the bible be inspired, it has all such characteristics as might attach to a book uninspired, – the characteristics of dialect and style, the distinct effects of times and places, youth and age, or moral and intellectual character; and I insist on this, lest in what I am going to say, I seem to forget (what I do not forget), that in spite of its human form, it has in it the spirit and the mind of God.<sup>1</sup>

Here Newman expresses very eloquently that, while God is the author of Scripture, in some inexplicable way it is also very much a human product which evinces all of the characteristics of its human authors.

From a Lutheran perspective, listen to what Robert Preuss, in his book *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism* published in 1970, has to say. Preuss writes,

The Lutheran doctrine of inspiration presents a paradox. On the one hand it was taught that God is the *auctor primaries* [that is to say, the primary author] of Scripture, that He

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<sup>1</sup> John Henry Newman, *Lectures on the Scripture Proofs of the Doctrines of the Church*, Tracts for the Times 85 (London: J. G. F. & J. Rivington, 1838), p. 30.

determined and provided the thoughts and actual words of Scripture and that no human cooperation concurred *efficienter* [that is to say, as efficient causes] in producing Scripture. On the other hand it was maintained that the temperaments (*ingenia*), the research and feelings (*studia*), and the differences in background (*nationes*) of the inspired writers are all clearly reflected in the Scriptures; that there is nothing docetic about Scripture; that God's spokesmen wrote willingly, consciously, spontaneously, and from the deepest personal spiritual conviction and experience; that psychologically and subjectively (*materialiter et subjective*) they were totally involved in the writing of Scripture. These two salient features of the doctrine of inspiration must be held in tension. . .

Now it may seem utterly inconsistent that the Spirit of God could in one and the same action provide the very words of Scripture and accommodate Himself to the linguistic peculiarities and total personality of the individual writer so that these men wrote freely and spontaneously. But this is precisely what took place according to the Biblical evidence and data. And if Scripture does not inform us how both of these facts can be true, we must not do violence to either or try to probe the mystery of inspiration beyond what has been revealed. The Lutheran teachers are well aware that there is a lacuna [or a "gap"] in their theology at this point. . . . ; and they are content to retain this logical gap and accept the paradox.<sup>2</sup>

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2 Robert D. Preuss, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 2 vols. (St. Louis; Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), 1: 290-291.

On Preuss' view, the doctrine of inspiration is inherently paradoxical and mysterious and it is no good trying to probe this mystery to resolve it.

Finally, from the Reformed perspective we have this from the great Princeton theologian of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, B. B. Warfield, in his book *Calvin and Calvinism*. Warfield wrote the classical doctrine of inspiration,

purposely declares nothing as to the mode of inspiration. The Reformed Churches admit that this is inscrutable. They content themselves with defining carefully and holding fast the effects of the divine influence, leaving the mode of divine action by which it is brought about draped in mystery.<sup>3</sup>

Once more we see from Warfield's point of view the doctrine of inspiration is simply mysterious and should just be left at that.

I think that while we may sometimes be forced to advert to mystery in doing theology, we should do so only as a last resort after attempts to make sense of Christian doctrine have failed. I don't think that we've reached that point yet with the doctrine of inspiration. Let's try to probe this a little farther and see what sense we can make of a doctrine or theory of inspiration that would allow inspiration to be verbal, plenary, and confluent.<sup>4</sup>

#### (b) Biblical Inerrancy and the Problem of Evil

As our springboard for discussing this, I want to look at an article published several years by a pair of Christian philosophers, Randy

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3 Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *Calvin and Calvinism* (Oxford University Press, 1931; rep. ed.: Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1981), p. 62.

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and David Basinger, entitled “Inerrancy, Dictation, and the Free Will Defence” which was published in the *Evangelical Quarterly*.<sup>5</sup> What Basinger and Basinger argue is that if you hold to the doctrine of biblical inerrancy then you cannot use the free will defense to answer the problem of evil.

For those of you who are not familiar with the Free Will Defense, in response to the atheist argument that there is suffering and evil in the world that a good and all-powerful God would not and could not permit, the free will defender will say that evil in the world is possibly the result of the free actions of creatures – either human or demonic. Therefore, God cannot guarantee that a world of free creatures with as much good as this world has would have less evil. That is the free will defense against the problem of evil. It appeals to creaturely freedom to explain how God can be all-loving and all-powerful and yet suffering and evil still exist.

What Basinger and Basinger initially argue that if you hold to the free will defense, you cannot believe in biblical inerrancy. Why is that? They give this following argument which they imagine in favor of biblical inerrancy. This is how the biblical inerrantist might argue, they think.

1. The words of the Bible are the product of free human activity.

That just is to say that the Scripture is confluent in its inspiration. It is not dictated by God. The words of the Bible are the product of free human activity.

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<sup>5</sup> Randall Basinger and David Basinger, “Inerrancy, Dictation and The Free Will Defence,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 55 (1983): pp. 177-180.

2. Human activities, such as penning a book, can be totally controlled by God without violating human freedom.

This is the supervision view of inspiration that says God can supervise the writing of Scripture without violating the freedom of the human authors.

3. God totally controlled what the human authors did, in fact, write.

So you get verbal inspiration.

4. Therefore, the words of the Bible are God's utterances.

5. Whatever God utters is errorless.

6. Therefore, the words of the Bible are errorless.

This is an argument for biblical inerrancy based upon the words of the Bible being the product of free human activity and God's total control of those free human authors.

Basinger and Basinger say that, in light of the endorsement of premise (2) by the defender of inspiration (namely that human activities can be totally controlled by God without violating human freedom), that person cannot utilize the free will defense in response to the problem of evil. He can't say that evil was somehow then outside of God's control. If human activities can be totally controlled by God without violating human freedom then God should be able to totally control the world so that evil and sin never occur. Given the reality of human evil and the fact that God cannot be the author of evil they say premise (2) must be false. If you are going to hold to the reality of evil and yet God's superintendence over the world, you've got to say that human

activities *cannot* be totally controlled by God without violating human freedom. That is to say, (2) is false.

But then you can present the following argument against verbal inspiration:

1. The words of the Bible are the product of free human activity.
- 2'. Human activities, and their products, cannot be totally controlled by God without violating human freedom.

Now a new premise (7):

7. The doctrine of verbal, plenary inspiration of the Bible entails God's total control of the words of the Bible.
8. Therefore, the doctrine of verbal, plenary inspiration of the Bible is false.

That is to say, a confluent view of verbal and plenary inspiration is false.<sup>6</sup>

If one persists in affirming the doctrine of verbal, plenary inspiration, then since (7) is true virtually by definition (that the doctrine of verbal, plenary inspiration of the Bible entails God's total control of the words of the Bible) you've got to deny (1) – that is to say, you've got to affirm that verbal, plenary inspiration implies a dictation theory of inspiration. That denies confluence if you hold to that. That is to say, you must hold that verbal, plenary inspiration does require dictation. This is the only way in which the words of the Bible could be totally controlled by God. You wind up with dictation.

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### (c) Geisler's Response

Let's now look at a response to Basinger and Basinger that was written by Norman Geisler. He wrote an article in the *Evangelical Quarterly* entitled "Inerrancy and Free Will: A Reply to the Brothers Basinger."<sup>7</sup> He says there is a hidden assumption behind Basinger and Basinger's reasoning; namely:

9. If God can infallibly guarantee what some men will do, then he can do the same for all.

Geisler writes to the contrary:

It may have been because only some men freely chose to cooperate with the Spirit, so that he could guide them in an errorless way. Or it may have been that the Holy Spirit simply chose to use those men and occasions which he infallibly knew would not produce error.

What Geisler is suggesting is that there are certain men that God could pick to use to write Scripture knowing that they would write exactly what he wants them to; but that doesn't mean that he can infallibly control everybody in every circumstance so that evil would never result. It may well be the case that God cannot so totally control everything that evil would never freely be committed even though he did have the ability to pick certain people like Paul and Luke and Matthew so that in these certain occasions they would write infallibly exactly what he would have wanted them to say.

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<sup>7</sup> Norman L. Geisler, "Inerrancy and Free Will: A Reply to the Brothers Basinger," *Evangelical Quarterly* 57 (1985): pp. 347-353.



(d) A Middle Knowledge Perspective: God knew which persons under what circumstances would freely write what He intended to be His Word to us.

Notice the second sentence of Geisler's suggestion. "It may have been that the Holy Spirit simply chose to use those men and occasions which he infallibly knew would not produce error." What kind of knowledge is Geisler attributing to God in saying that? Middle knowledge! That is exactly right. He is saying that God knew what these authors would freely write in certain sets of circumstances. So by placing the authors in those circumstances and leaving them free he knew that they would freely write exactly what God wanted them to write. This suggests, I think, a middle knowledge solution to the problem of biblical inspiration; namely, you can get an inspiration which is truly confluent but also verbal and plenary by attributing to God middle knowledge of what these human authors would write if they were placed in certain circumstances.

It is interesting to me that B. B. Warfield, in his article "The Biblical Idea of Inspiration," offers a view which is almost exactly this. It is a beautiful description of what a middle knowledge perspective on biblical inspiration entails. Here is Warfield:

So soon, however, as we seriously endeavor to form for ourselves a clear conception of the precise nature of the Divine action in this 'breathing out' [remember that is what inspiration means: "God-breathed"] of the Scriptures – this 'bearing' of the writers of the Scriptures [remember in 2 Peter it says that the authors of Scripture were borne along by the Holy Spirit to write what they did] to their appointed goal

of the production of a book of Divine trustworthiness and indefectible authority – we become acutely aware of a more deeply lying and much wider problem, apart from which this one of inspiration, technically so called, cannot be profitably considered. [So Warfield says this problem of biblical inspiration is just an example of a much wider problem. What is it? He says:] This is the general problem of the origin of the Scriptures and the part of God in all that complex of processes by the interaction of which these books, which we call the sacred Scriptures, with all their peculiarities, and all their qualities of whatever sort, have been brought into being. For, of course, these books were not produced suddenly, by some miraculous act – handed down complete out of heaven, as the phrase goes; but, like all other products of time, are the ultimate effect of many processes cooperating through long periods. There is to be considered, for instance, the preparation of the material which forms the subject-matter of these books: in a sacred history, say, for example, to be narrated; or in a religious experience which may serve as a norm for record; or in a logical elaboration of the contents of revelation which may be placed at the service of God's people; or in the progressive revelation of Divine truth itself, supplying their culminating contents. And there is the preparation of the men to write these books to be considered, a preparation physical, intellectual, spiritual, which must have attended them throughout their whole lives, and, indeed, must have had its beginning in their remote ancestors, and the effect of which was to bring the right men to the right places at the right times, with the right endowments, impulses,

acquirements, to write just the books which were designed for them. When ‘inspiration,’ technically so called, is superinduced on lines of preparation like these, it takes on quite a different aspect from that which it bears when it is thought of as an isolated action of the Divine Spirit operating out of all relation to historical processes. Representations are sometimes made as if, when God wished to produce sacred books which would incorporate His will – a series of letters like those of Paul, for example – He was reduced to the necessity of going down to earth and painfully scrutinizing the men He found there, seeking anxiously for the one who, on the whole, promised best for His purpose; and then violently forcing the material He wished expressed through him, against his natural bent, and with as little loss from his recalcitrant characteristics as possible. Of course, nothing of the sort took place. If God wished to give His people a series of letters like Paul’s He prepared a Paul to write them, and the Paul He brought to the task was a Paul who spontaneously would write just such letters.<sup>8</sup>

This is a perfect description of middle knowledge in its superintending the writing of Scripture. God knew what Paul would freely write if he were in such-and-such a circumstance and presented with certain needs to address and be corrected. He knew that Paul would write, for example, the letter to the Romans. Thus, by putting Paul in those circumstances, which of course required (as Warfield says) a whole series of ancestors and events leading

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8 Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, “The Biblical Idea of Inspiration,” in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel G. Craig with an Intro. by Cornelius Van Til (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1970), pp. 154-155.

up to that point, God can guarantee that Paul would write exactly what God wanted expressed to us.

You will notice that that accords very well with the notion that inspiration is primarily a property of the text. It is primarily a property of the end product. It is not, as Warfield says, some sort of an influence that comes upon the author and leads the author to write something. Perhaps the Holy Spirit did in some way come upon these men and bear them along, but the writing of the Scriptures is much more of a historical process than that imagines. It involves the preparation of the author, the preparation of the circumstances, and it may well be that given God's middle knowledge there didn't need to be any sort of influence of the Holy Spirit added on to this. Yet the end product is God-breathed. It is inspired.

This helps to explain, for example, the so-called *levicula* or the trivialities or light things in Scriptures like Paul saying, "I left my coat at Troas" or "Please bring the books that I left" or the greetings that he gives. It is not to say that God wouldn't have been pleased if Paul had greeted somebody else or if Paul had given some other instructions. God allows him freedom to spontaneously greet whom he wishes, and this is all right with God. God is quite happy. This would allow for freedom in Paul's choice of vocabulary. It may be that what God wanted him to express could have been just as well expressed by other words. It could have been that God wouldn't have minded if he greeted other people or greeted them with other terms. But nevertheless God knew what Paul would write in those circumstances, and he was satisfied with what Paul would write that this would be God's Word to us.

This would also make sense of passages where the emotions of the author are expressed. I mentioned the Imprecatory Psalms which are difficult to understand if you think of those as dictations directly from God. On a middle knowledge view, God knew that this author, if he were in these anguished circumstances, would rail against his enemies, he would cry out for their destruction, and curse them. But that doesn't mean that that is necessarily something that God wants us to do. It may be that the purpose God has in allowing the author to express these emotions is to say to us, *You can bring your doubts and your anger and your emotions to me. Go ahead and express yourself in prayer to me with all of the feelings that are pent up within you, and I will listen to you. And I will attend to those prayers.* So it puts a very different perspective on those elements of Scripture that are so much the product of human emotion and anger and so forth.

You might say, *Wait a minute, Bill. Isn't this overkill?* Because given God's middle knowledge and providence, isn't everything that a human author writes in that sense ultimately under God's control? He knew what *you* would write if you were in such and such circumstances. Does that make your philosophical article inspired by God? No, obviously not! I think the difference would be in the intention of God with respect to what is written. Certainly God knew what I would write freely in such-and-such circumstances, but it is not God's intention that that would become his Word to us. That is what serves to differentiate the books of Scripture and set them aside as inspired in a special way, namely, God intends that in having this author write these words, this would become God's own Word to us. So it is both the product of

the human author, but then it is also God's Word to us. That is what sets it aside as inspired and therefore authoritative.

That brings us to a close in the class today. What we will look at next time will be the authority which Scripture has in virtue of being inspired by God.