

CHAPTER 5

VERBAL INSPIRATION

Meaning of verbal inspiration

Verbal inspiration means that the process of inspiration applies to the very words used in the biblical books. It does not mean that God mechanically dictated the words of the Bible, but that those words express the thoughts that God intended, and, being correctly interpreted, are free from errors of fact, doctrine, or judgment. The particular words do not need to be the best words to express the thought, but they must be adequate words to express the thought.

Scripture teaching of verbal inspiration

In many ways the Bible claims this type of inspiration for itself.

OT claim to verbal inspiration

Many of the OT writers testify that the words they spoke (and therefore wrote) were actually the words of God. We note that the emphasis in these passages is on the words used, not merely the thoughts:

Exod 4:12, “I will help you speak and will teach you what to say” (lit. “I will be with your mouth”)

Num 22:38; 23:12, 16, Balaam’s words: “I must speak only what God puts in my mouth”

2 Sam 23:2, [David speaking] “The Spirit of the Lord spoke through me; his word was on my tongue.”

Jer 1:6, 9, “[Jeremiah] Ah, Sovereign Lord, I do not know how to speak. . . . [God] Now, I have put my words in your mouth.”

Ezek 3:4, “Son of man, go now to the house of Israel and speak my words to them.”

Jesus' support for verbal inspiration

Our Savior also testifies to verbal inspiration. In several passages, Jesus bases an argument on the particular wording of the OT:

Matt 5:18, "I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished."

Jesus gives meaning and approval to the very words, even the parts of words, even the parts of letters, in the OT. Also note his emphatic phrases: "I tell you the truth"; "by any means"

Matt 22:31-32, [Jesus arguing with Sadducees] "Have you not read what God said to you [note: Scripture still speaks as the word of God], 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'?"

Here the understood present tense of the verbless clause in Exod 3:6 is assumed to indicate the continued existence and future resurrection of these patriarchs.

Matt 22:43-45, [Jesus arguing with Pharisees] "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit [note inspiration here indicated], calls him 'Lord'? For he says, 'The Lord said to my Lord' . . . If then David calls him 'Lord,' how can he be his son?"

Here Jesus bases his whole argument on one word in Ps 110:1, "my Lord" (actually, in Hebrew the pronoun is only an added ending to the word "Lord").

Paul's support for verbal inspiration

The apostle Paul, who wrote half of the NT books, also testifies to verbal inspiration in various ways:

1 Cor 2:13, [speaking of his own preaching] "This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words."

1 Thess 2:13, [again of his own preaching] "When you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God."

Gal 3:16, "The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say 'and to seeds,' meaning many people, but 'and to your seed,' meaning one person, who is Christ."

Here Paul notes the singular form of the word *seed* in Gen. 12:7; 13:15; and 24:7; and he draws a suitable inference from that form. In this case, he depends on the number of a single noun in the biblical text.

Logic of verbal inspiration

Actually, it would be impossible to have a Bible whose thoughts are inspired and yet whose words are not inspired. Thoughts are expressed by words, and the words deliver thoughts. If the words are not inspired, then the thoughts must also be suspect.

Most confusion surrounding this issue is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of verbal inspiration. God prepared the authors, the circumstances, and all the motivation for the biblical authors. He did not normally dictate the words at the end of the process. Their freedom is maintained, yet the result is the word of God.

Verbal inspiration, infallibility, and inerrancy

Because the Bible is the word of God, it must convey his truth. God cannot lie, and his general revelation and his special revelation cannot be false. This proposition in turn implies that the Bible contains no errors; it is true in its statements. Traditionally the term “infallible” has been used to assert this point.

“We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverent esteem of the holy scripture, and the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole, (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man’s salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the word of God; yet, notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.” (WCF 1:5)

The term “infallible/infallibility” was used throughout the controversies between modernism and fundamentalism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

When it became clear that, within evangelical circles, the pro-infallibility position was favored, some who denied that doctrine changed their terminology. They redefined infallibility as meaning infallible in leading to correct faith and practice—reliable to direct our lives. They taught that this infallibility did not extend to relatively minor points of history or science. The position that all the Bible’s statements, including those of history and science, are correct was relabeled as “inerrancy.”

To illustrate this change, note the changes made by the editors of the *New ISBE* (1982). The old *ISBE* (1930) contains a detailed article by B. B. Warfield, “Inspiration.” There is no separate article on “Infallibility” or on “Inerrancy”; those ideas are fully discussed in Warfield’s article. The *New ISBE* reprints Warfield’s article, but adds several others which considerably modify and change the position Warfield defended. G. W. Bromiley, “Inspiration, History of the Doctrine of” criticizes the traditional view of infallibility as “rationalistic” and not “genuinely biblical and Reformed.” J. Daane’s article “Infallibility” defines the term as limited to “the basis of faith,” but not as “an uncertain grasping at straws of human verification,” i.e., historically or scientifically verifiable or falsifiable. The *New ISBE* lists “Inerrancy” as a topic, and refers the reader to Daane’s article “Infallibility.” Yet Daane does not define inerrancy formally, but does criticize the concept strongly.

Objections to verbal inspiration and infallibility or inerrancy

Atheist authors often attack the verbal inspiration of the Bible, using examples. Here are a couple of examples:

- C. Dennis McKinsey, *The Encyclopedia of Biblical Errancy* (1995; evangelistically atheistic; massive collection of examples, zealously discussed, often superficially)
- Dan Baker, *Godless: How an Evangelical Preacher Became One of America's Leading Atheists* (2008; a whole chapter devoted to many examples, with explanations and arguments)

Here are some well-known “conservative” theological books which still deny, to a greater or lesser degree, the doctrine of biblical inerrancy:

- James Orr, *Revelation and Inspiration* (1910)
- G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* (1966; ET 1975)
- Jack Rogers, ed., *Biblical Authority* (1977)
- I. Howard Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration* (1982)
- Herman Ridderbos, *Studies in Scripture and Its Authority* (1987; gives many examples which, in his view, show the Scriptures contradict themselves in matters of historical detail, etc.)

On the other hand, many excellent books have defended this doctrine:

- L. Gaussen, *God Breathed: The Divine Inspiration of the Bible* (1841; an old classic, reprinted)
- Archibald A. Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield, *Inspiration* (1881; famous article that defined the terms of the debate; reprinted)
- Benjamin B. Warfield, *Limited Inspiration* (1884; article criticizing Henry Preserved Smith's view; reprinted)
- *The Infallible Word* (1946; Symposium by Faculty of WTS)
- B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (assembled from earlier writings, 1948)
- Carl F. H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible: Contemporary Evangelical Thought* (1958; contains controversial article by E. F. Harrison, "The Phenomena of Scripture")
- Stewart Custer, *Does Inspiration Demand Inerrancy?* (1968)
- R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* (2nd ed., 1969)
- John Warwick Montgomery, ed., *God's Inerrant Word: An International Symposium on the Trustworthiness of Scripture* (1974)
- Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority* (1976-83; massive 6 vol. defense of orthodox position)
- Gordon H. Clark, *God's Hammer: The Bible and Its Critics* (1982; Christian philosopher compares contrasting views)
- Ronald Youngblood, ed., *Evangelicals and Inerrancy* (1984; selections from *JETS*)
- Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest, eds., *Challenges to Inerrancy: A Theological Response* (1984; good articles on history of the conflict)

Most of these objections will be dealt with more at length in a positive fashion in ensuing chapters dealing with proper interpretation of the inspired Scriptures. Here they are summarized.

a. Modern Bibles have errors and contradictions.

For common accusations, see C. Dennis McKinsey, *The Encyclopedia of Biblical Errancy* (Prometheus Books, 1995), ch. 4: "Contradictions," pp. 71-88.

Many of these can be shown to arise from faulty copying or translating. Inspiration applies to the autographs, the original writings. Errors of copying or translating do not negate this doctrine. To prove an error or contradiction, it must first be proved that the reading is in the original text. Supposed contradictions usually can be shown to be based on faulty or superficial exegesis.

b. Modern science has disproved the Bible.

This cannot be proved in any particular instance. While modern scientific theories may contradict the Bible, no proven fact has. The Bible must be interpreted properly; when it is, there is no contradiction between the Bible and correct science.

c. Different manuscripts make inspiration useless.

Scientific textual criticism is good at showing the probable original text; and variations are very minor, with no doctrines depending on the outcome. An abundance of textual material is available for text-critical research.

d. The NT quotes the OT without care or precision.

NT writers do quote the OT with varying degrees of precision, from precise quotes to paraphrases. There is no error involved in this type of quotation, as long as there is no claim to verbatim quotation. Careful study of the OT contexts shows that the NT quotes the OT with great care and profundity, being sensitive to the OT context.

e. The Bible has inexact and non-scientific language.

The Bible makes no claim to be written as a science book, with high precision. It is written on the popular level, with many interesting and vivid figures of speech and ordinary expressions. Besides, we ourselves (and even scientists!) use such expressions in daily conversation.

f. Some passages indicate the author is not inspired.

These passages are misinterpreted.

Rom 3:5-6, "What shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) Certainly not!"

Here Paul reproduces a human argument, and proceeds to correct it. Inspiration shows us that this human argument is false.

1 Cor 7:6, "I say this as a concession, not as a command." Paul is not discussing his inspiration as he writes, but rather his relation to the Corinthians as he writes to them.

1 Cor 7:10, 12, “To the married I give this command (not I but the Lord) . . . To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord)”

Here Paul gives two commands, the first one is a repetition of what the Lord Jesus said while on the earth, that a Christian wife must not separate from her husband without remaining celibate or being reconciled (cf. Matt 5:32; 19:6). The second one says that a Christian man or woman must not divorce his or her non-Christian spouse, because of the sanctifying influence the Christian has on the spouse and children. This second command is from Paul alone; it was not first spoken by Jesus. The inspiration is the same for both commands.

Sources for more information about “errors”

Those who posit errors in the Bible usually offer two types of examples: examples of contradictions between the Bible and accepted facts, and examples of contradictions between different passages of the Bible.

The first is the less serious accusation, since our knowledge of the world through the senses is never certain. “Accepted facts” really means widely shared opinions. An example of such opinions being overthrown is “the assured results of modern criticism,” which declared that John’s gospel was written near the end of the second century; these “assured results” were overturned by the discovery of a small papyrus fragment of John (p⁵², the Chester Beatty papyrus), dated before A.D. 130.

The second area, contradictions between two or more Bible portions, can be answered in various ways. Special courses in the curriculum in NT and OT books will deal with these in detail.

There are many sources that list some of the more famous (and not so famous) supposed errors. These lists have been collected and discussed in many books over the years. Here are a few good sources:

- John W. Haley, *Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible* (1874; a tested classic, well organized and thorough)
- B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (collected 1948; excellent ch. 4, “The Real Problem of Inspiration”)
- Edward J. Young, *Thy Word is Truth* (1957; esp. ch. 7, “Are There Errors in the Bible?”)

- Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (1982; an excellent source, with good discussions)
- Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (1976; ch. 9, “Discrepancies in Scripture,” discusses many, with his own sometimes unique solutions)
- Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe, *When Critics Ask: A Popular Handbook on Bible Difficulties* (1992; large book, goes through in Biblical order)