

The following is a three-part article written by Dr. Sam Storms, Ardmore, Oklahoma, from his website, *Enjoying God Ministries*. I have reformatted the three parts into one document for ease of sharing.

Below, Dr. Storms summarizes the classic evangelical Protestant position, as it was articulated during the Protestant Reformation, and which was the belief and teaching of OT prophets, Jesus Christ, the Apostles, and the Church (with minor variation) over the past two thousand years. For purposes of clarity, he also summarizes the errant views on this subject by: Roman Catholicism, religious liberalism, neo-orthodoxy, and those who hold to so-called “limited” inerrancy).

WithChrist.org affirms the classic evangelical Protestant doctrine of *Special Revelation*. This has been my personally-held view for over forty years. *WithChrist.org* is dedicated to a biblical framework for interpreting Scripture built upon the recovery of truths contained in the Apostle Paul’s epistles, which more-or-less began with Martin Luther (1483–1546) and the Protestant Reformation (first stage), and was then followed by John N. Darby (1800–1882) and the early Plymouth Brethren (second stage). *Dan R. Smedra*

Special Revelation

There is no more critical issue in theology than that of authority: ***by what standard, on what grounds, from what source, and for what reasons do we believe something to be true and therefore binding on our conscience (beliefs) and conduct (behavior)?*** Donald Bloesch put it this way:

“Is authority to be placed in human wisdom or cultural experience, or is it to be located in an incommensurable divine revelation that intrudes into our world from the beyond? Does it lie within the compass of what we can ordinarily discover or conceive, or does it break into our world as a new reality that overturns human imagination and conception? Is it a truth waiting to be uncovered through diligent searching, or is it a word personally addressed to us, calling us to repentance and obedience?” (*A Theology of Word and Spirit*, 185).

Authority for the Christian may come from one of three sources:

(1) the *church* (as is the case with the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) and Eastern Orthodoxy who regard the consensus of the church, as expressed in its traditions and creedal formulations, as the authoritative guide to God’s will; hence, “What the Church says, God says”);

(2) the *individual* (such that the Bible and the church are little more than resource materials to assist each person in making up his/her own mind on what is true and authoritative; hence, “What my own spirit says, God says”); or

(3) the *Bible* (as affirmed, e.g., in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*: “The supreme judge by which all controversies are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are

to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture” [I,x]; hence, “What Scripture says, God says”).

It is for the third of these options that I will contend. The first paragraph, in most ecclesiastical doctrinal statements, affirm belief in the inspiration and authority of the 66 books of the Bible. How could it be otherwise? For apart from a belief in the authority of Scripture, we would have no way of knowing with any certainty whether any of the remaining doctrinal affirmations are true or false. If the Bible is not the sole, sufficient revelation of God himself, how could we possibly know that God is a Trinity of co-equal persons or that the second person of that Trinity became a man in Jesus of Nazareth and died for sinners and was raised on the third day? Simply put, the inspiration and authority of the Bible is the *bedrock* upon which our faith is built. Without it, we are doomed to uncertainty, doubt, and a hopeless groping in the darkness of human speculation.

But do we have good reason to believe that this book, the Bible, is different from Plato’s *Republic* or Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* or any other human composition? Why do we believe that the 66 books of the Bible are divine revelation and authoritative for belief and life? There are any number of reasons, drawn from historical, archaeological, theological, and experiential resources and arguments (perhaps chief among which is that the Holy Spirit has borne witness in our hearts that Scripture is God’s Word). But we must also take into consideration that *Jesus himself clearly believed in the inspiration and authority of Scripture*. Being a disciple of Jesus entails not only doing what Jesus did *but also believing what Jesus believed*. It is impossible to accept the authority of Christ without also accepting the authority of Scripture. To believe and receive Jesus as Lord and Savior is to believe and receive what He taught about Scripture.

Clearly, then, the question: “What think ye of the Bible?” reduces to the question: “What think ye of Christ?” To deny the authority of Scripture is to deny the lordship of Jesus.

Consider the people and events of the OT, for example, whom/which Jesus frequently mentioned. He refers to Abel, Noah and the great flood, Abraham, Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot, Isaac and Jacob, the manna from heaven, the serpent in the desert, David eating the consecrated bread and his authorship of the Psalms, Solomon, Elijah, Elisha,, and Zechariah, etc. In each case he treats the OT narratives as straightforward records of historical fact. But, say the critics, perhaps Jesus was simply *accommodating* himself to the mistaken beliefs of his contemporaries. That is to say, Jesus simply met his contemporaries on their own ground without necessarily committing himself to the correctness of their views. He chose graciously not to upset them by questioning the veracity of their belief in the truth and authority of the Bible. However,

- Jesus was not at all sensitive about undermining mistaken, though long-cherished, beliefs among the people of his day. He loudly and often denounced the traditions of the Pharisees and took on their distortion of the OT law in the Sermon on the Mount.
- Jesus challenged nationalistic conceptions of the kingdom of God and the coming of the Messiah. He was even willing to face death on a cross for the truth of what he declared.

- In referring to the OT, Jesus declared that “the Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35). Again, “It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the law” (Luke 16:17). See also Mark 7:6-13; Luke 16:29-31. He rebuked the Sadducees saying, “You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God” (Mt. 22:29).
- When faced by Satan’s temptations, it was to the truth and authority of the OT that he appealed (Mt. 4:4ff.). Note especially his words: “It has been [stands] written.”
- Jesus didn’t hesitate to deliberately offend the religious sensibilities of his contemporaries when he chose to eat and socialize with both publicans and prostitutes.

There is a tendency in some evangelical circles to drive a wedge between revelation (the transcendent Word of God) and the Bible (understood as man’s written record of or witness to the Word). It is said that we cannot identify the words of Scripture with divine revelation. Rather, the former is the sacramental means or instrumentality by which the latter encounters or engages us experientially. The writings of Scripture are said to *mediate* the revelatory Word to us. But the former are not identical with the latter.

I believe, on the other hand, what Augustine meant when he put into God’s mouth the words: “Indeed, O man, **what My Scripture says, I say**” (*Confessions*, 13.29; emphasis mine). Scripture is thus the “transcript of divine speech” (Packer, *God Has Spoken*, 28). In his article on “Inspiration”, Packer unpacks the significance of this principle:

“Christ and his apostles quote Old Testament texts not merely as what, e.g., Moses, David or Isaiah said (see Mk. 7:10, 12:36, 7:6; Rom. 10:5, 11:9, 10:20, etc.), but also as what God said through these men (see Acts 4:25, 28:25, etc.), or sometimes simply what ‘he’ (God) says (e.g., 2 Cor. 6:16; Heb. 8:5,8), or what the Holy Ghost says (Heb. 3:7, 10:15). Furthermore, Old Testament statements, not made by God in their contexts, are quoted as utterances of God (Mt. 19:4f.; Heb. 3:7; Acts 13:34f.; citing Gen. 2:24; Ps. 95:7; Is. 55:2 respectively). Also, Paul refers to God’s promise to Abraham and his threat to Pharaoh, both spoken long before the biblical record of them was written, as words which *Scripture* spoke to these two men (Gal. 3:8; Rom. 9:17); which shows how completely he equated the statements of Scripture with the utterance of God” (*The New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas et al. [London: IVP, 1962], 564).

Let us begin by defining two critical terms: *revelation* and *inspiration*.

(1) **Revelation** is the activity of God by which he unveils or discloses or makes known what is, to humanity, otherwise unknowable. It is God making himself known to those shaped in his image. Revelation is what God does, not what mankind achieves. It is a divinely initiated disclosure, not an effort or endeavor or achievement on the part of mankind. “Revelation does not mean man finding God, but God finding man, God sharing His secrets with us, God showing us Himself. In revelation, God is the agent as well as the object” (Packer, *God Has Spoken*, 47). The God of the Bible, notes Donald Bloesch, “is not a God who is discovered in the depths of nature or

uncovered in human consciousness. Nor is he a God who is immediately discernible in the events of history, . . . For the living God to be known, he must make himself known, and he has done this in the acts and words recorded in Scripture” (*A Theology of Word and Spirit*, 20).

Much has been made of an alleged distinction between *revelation as propositional* and *revelation as personal*. Since God is himself a person, so some say, revelation cannot be propositional (or at least, not primarily so). Revelation is God making *himself* known; the event of disclosing his person to other persons. But this distinction should not be pressed too far:

“Personal friendship between God and man grows just as human friendships do – namely, through talking; and talking means making informative statements, and informative statements are propositions. . . . [Indeed] to say that revelation is non-propositional is actually to *depersonalize* it. . . . To maintain that we may know God without God actually speaking to us in words is really to deny that God is personal, or at any rate that knowing Him is a truly personal relationship” (Packer, 52-3).

In other words, revelation is a *verbal* activity, in the sense that “God has communicated with man by means of significant utterances: statements, questions, and commands, spoken either in His own person or on His behalf by His own appointed messengers and instructors” (Packer, 63). This does not mean that God is less active, less personal, as if he were nothing but a celestial lecturer. He discloses himself by powerful acts in history, encountering his people, showing himself gracious by redeeming them, kind by forgiving them, strong by delivering them, etc. The Bible “itself is essentially a recital of His doings, an explanatory narrative of the great drama of the bringing in of His kingdom, and the saving of the world” (71). Let us not forget that faith is often portrayed in Scripture as trusting, often against great odds, what God has **said** – see Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:6; Heb. 6:13ff.; 11:8-13,17; 11:33.

The fact that revelation is verbal does not mean that knowing God is simply a matter of memorizing texts or cataloging doctrines. “But what the claim that revelation is essentially verbal does imply is that no historical event, as such, can make God known to anyone unless God Himself discloses its meaning and place in His plan. Providential happenings may serve to remind us, more or less vividly, that God is at work (cf. Acts 14:17), but their link, if any, with His saving purpose cannot be known until He Himself informs us of it. No event is self-interpreting at this level” (72). Again, “all history is, in one sense, God’s deed, but none of it reveals Him except in so far as He Himself talks to us about it. God’s revelation is not through deeds without words (a dumb charade!) any more than it is through words without deeds; but it is through deeds which He speaks to interpret, or, putting it more biblically, through words which His deeds confirm and fulfill” (73). Again:

“For no public historical happening, as such (an exodus, a conquest, a captivity, a crucifixion, an empty tomb), can reveal God apart from an accompanying word from God to explain it, or a prior promise which it is seen to confirm or fulfill. Revelation in its basic form is thus of necessity propositional; God reveals Himself by telling us about Himself, and what He is doing in His world” (76-77).

The notion of propositional revelation in no way denies the revelatory activity of God in events, personal encounters, or in the dynamic and relational ways whereby he engages his people and makes himself immediately and experientially known to them. See Heb. 1:1. The “various ways” in which God “revealed” himself personally included theophanies, angelic visitations, an audible voice from heaven, visions, dreams, supernatural writing, inward impressions, natural phenomena, etc. But in each of these instances the divine disclosures introduced or confirmed by these means were propositional in substance and verbal in form. In other words, whereas not every statement or revelatory deed comes to us in strict propositional form, all do in fact *presuppose a proposition* on the basis of which a truth claim about the nature of reality is being made.

Another characteristic of revelation is that it is *progressive*, i.e., cumulative. God has not revealed himself comprehensively at any one stage in history or in any one event. Revelation is a series of divine disclosures, each of which builds upon and unpacks or unfolds that which preceded it. Revelation moves from what is piecemeal and partial and incomplete (but always accurate) to what is comprehensive and final and unified. This contrast between the incomplete and complete, between the partial and the full, is not a contrast between false and true, inaccurate and accurate, but a contrast between shadow and substance, between type and antitype, between promise and fulfillment.

(2) *Inspiration*, on the other hand, was the related process whereby God preserved the biblical authors from error when communicating, whether by his voice or in writing, that which he had shown them. The Holy Spirit *superintended* the writing of Scripture, that is to say, he acted to insure that what the human authors intended by their words is equivalent to what God intended (also referred to as *concurrent inspiration*). Thus “each resultant oracle was as truly a divine utterance as a human, as direct a disclosure of what was in God’s mind as of what was in the prophet’s” (Packer, 91). The Spirit thus brought the free and spontaneous thoughts of the human author into coincidence with the thoughts of God.

Many question how this can be done. They contend that if God’s control over what the biblical authors said was exhaustive, they must have written as mindless automatons. On the other hand, if their minds operated freely according to their own volitional creativity, then God cannot have kept them free from error. But this dilemma “rests on the assumption that full psychological freedom of thought and action, and full subjection to divine control, are incompatible” (93).

The doctrine of *verbal, plenary* (i.e., complete, total) *inspiration* means that **the words of the Bible are the words of God**. This doesn’t mean that God spoke every word himself, but that the words spoken by the authors of Scripture are the words that God desired them to speak in the revelation of himself. Thus there is no significant difference between the ultimate authority of God and the immediate authority of Scripture. “The authority of Scripture is the divine authority of God Himself speaking” (96). Some argue that one cannot stand under the authority of the living Word, Jesus Christ, and at the same time stand under the authority of the written Word, the Bible. This is a false antithesis. Jesus Christ is the lord of the Scriptures and in the latter the former is revealed and made known and his will unfolded. To obey the latter is to obey the former. To disobey the latter is to disobey the former.

A. *The Roman Catholic Doctrine of Scripture and Religious Authority*

Rome differs from the Protestant view of Scripture principally on three issues.

1. *The Extent of Scripture* – What actually constitutes inspired Scripture, says Rome, is determined by the conciliar consensus of the church or by papal edict. Thus, the *apocrypha* was officially introduced into the canon by the Council of Trent in the mid-16th century.
2. *The Clarity of Scripture* – Rome denies the basic clarity or perspicuity of Scripture, insisting that the individual believer interprets the Bible to his or her own harm. The *RCC is the custodian and guardian of Scripture*. The Bible was not given to the world, nor even to believers, but was deposited in the Church, to which was entrusted the exclusive right of interpretation and teaching (the so-called *magisterium*).
3. *The Sufficiency of Scripture* - Although acknowledging the Bible's inspiration, the RCC denied its sufficiency. Revelation, according to Rome, takes two forms: *written* (the Bible) and *oral* (tradition). The latter is an uninscriptured body of truth that has come to expression in the pronouncements of church councils and papal decrees. Bellarmine (1542-1621), noted Jesuit theologian, divided tradition into three classes: *divine* (those which Christ himself taught and deposited with his followers to be transmitted orally generation after generation), *apostolic* (those derived from the apostles, though not written), and *ecclesiastical* (conciliar and papal decrees accumulated through the centuries). In practical effect, Scripture is subordinate to tradition, as Ramm explains:

“Obscure and partial teaching of the Scripture is to be explained by the fuller teaching in the unwritten tradition of the Church. The Roman Catholic believes that he has two sources of revelation which mutually interpret each other. Scripture makes clear matters of the unwritten tradition, and unwritten tradition makes clear obscure matters in Scripture. Hence the Catholic scholar does not feel it necessary to find full teaching of all his doctrines in the Bible but allusions are sufficient (e.g., prayers for the dead, veneration for Mary, confession, the supremacy of Peter). The Catholic Church does not intend to limit itself entirely to the word of Scripture. Its source of revelation is the Deposit of Faith in an unwritten and written form. The unwritten tradition may then be used to fill out what is deficient in the written form (Scripture)” (*Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 43-44).

It would appear, then, that in Roman Catholicism Scripture is not simply interpreted from within tradition as its context but by tradition as its judge.

B. *The Reformers' Doctrine of Scripture and Religious Authority*

1. *Sola Scriptura* – The concept of Scripture *alone* most characterized the reformers of the 16th century. It was Luther who most clearly stated the principle of the “infallible Word of God” (*verbum Dei infallibile*) over against the “fallible word” of the Church and its extra-biblical traditions. [An excellent discussion of Luther’s view is provided by J. I. Packer in “Sola Scriptura in History and Today,” in *God’s Inerrant Word*, ed. by John W. Montgomery.] Contrary to Rome which insisted that the Church should determine what the Bible teaches, Luther argued that the Bible determines what the Church ought to teach.

The authority of the Bible entails its sufficiency, which is best stated in Article 6 of the 39 Articles of the Church of England: “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith”.

2. *Scripture is the Interpreter of Scripture* (or, *scriptura scripturae interpres*) – In other words, the Bible is, in a manner of speaking, a world of its own. It can and does interpret itself to the faithful from within, apart from any appeal to tradition, council, or pope. The Reformers enclosed the interpreter within the pages of Scripture and insisted that the obscure text yield to the clear. Says Packer:

“This was part of the meaning of ‘only’ in the slogan ‘by Scripture only’; as Scripture was the only *source* from which sinners might gain true knowledge of God and godliness, so Scripture was the only *judge* of what the church had in each age ventured to say in her Lord’s name” (45).

This is closely related to the principle of the *analogy of faith* (*analogia fidei*). Rome interpreted Scripture by means of the marginal glosses and catena of citations from the Fathers. Luther insisted, instead, on the organic theological unity of the Bible. All relevant biblical material on any given subject was to be collected so that the overall pattern of divine revelation might be apparent and obscure texts might yield to clear ones.

3. *The Internal Testimony of the Holy Spirit* – All study of the Scriptures is futile apart from the bestowal of enlightenment or illumination by the Holy Spirit. Said Luther: “The Bible cannot be mastered by study or talent; you must rely on the influx of the Spirit.” The only authoritative interpreter of a book is its author!

4. *The Clarity or Perspicuity of Scripture* – As noted above, Rome in part justified withholding Scripture from the laity by arguing that its meaning was inaccessible to the untrained mind. Only those duly authorized by the church and endowed with the essential skills can interpret Scripture. The Reformers, on the other hand, argued for the essential clarity of the Bible’s fundamental message. Luther wrote this to Erasmus:

“I certainly grant that many passages in the Scriptures are obscure and hard to elucidate, but that is due, not to the exalted nature of their subject, but to our own linguistic and grammatical ignorance; and it does not in any way prevent us knowing all the contents of Scripture” (*Bondage of the Will*, 71).

5. *The Unity of Scripture* – Whereas Luther placed more emphasis on the Law / Gospel motif than did Calvin, both saw Christ and his redemptive work as the overall unitive theme of the Bible.

6. *Grammatical-Historical Interpretation* – Both Luther and Calvin opposed the allegorical hermeneutic of the medieval period. They emphasized grammatical exegesis, philology, contextual, historical, and cultural analysis of the Scriptures.

C. *Modern Developments in the Doctrine of Scripture*

1. *The Doctrine of Scripture in the Princeton Theology* – Here I have in mind Archibald Alexander (1772-1851), Charles Hodge (1797-1878), A. A. Hodge (1823-1886), and Benjamin B. Warfield (1851-1921). These men consistently affirmed the complete inerrancy of the text:

“And could it be shown that the evangelists had fallen into palpable mistakes in facts of minor importance, it would be impossible to demonstrate that they wrote anything by inspiration” (A. Alexander, *Evidences of the Authenticity, Inspiration, and Canonical Authority of the Holy Scriptures*, 1836, 229).

The elder Hodge said that Scripture “is free from all error whether of doctrine, fact or precept” (*Systematic Theology*, I:152). Inspiration was “not confined to moral and religious truths, but extends to the statements of facts, whether scientific, historical, or geographical” (I:163). A. A. Hodge and Warfield jointly published a famous article entitled, “Inspiration” (*The Presbyterian Review*, April 1881), in which their view was set forth in five theses:

- (1) Scripture is plerarily or fully inspired.
- (2) Scripture is verbally inspired.
- (3) Scripture is inerrant on all matters upon which it touches.
- (4) Since inerrancy applies only to the original manuscripts of Scripture, what we see as apparent errors or discrepancies need not disprove the theory.
- (5) By the proper use of historical and critical methods of interpretation such “errors” can be resolved or shown to have enough ambiguity as to constitute no threat to the doctrine of inerrancy.

D. *The Doctrine of Scripture in Religious Liberalism*

Theological liberalism was and is “a creative appropriation of and accommodation to the spirit of Enlightenment man” (Pinnock, “Three Views of the Bible in Contemporary Theology,” *Biblical Authority*, 50). Thus whatever is not in harmony with the educated mentality and the moral

sensibilities of modern man is to be rejected. Reason, informed by the scientific method, is the ultimate religious authority. Liberalism's view of the Bible entails several points.

1. *The Bible is largely, if not entirely, a human book* – Liberalism seeks to strip the false veneration accorded Scripture because of its supposed divine origin and authorship. Since the Bible was written, copied, translated, and interpreted by sinful people, it necessarily contains all manner of internal contradictions, moral absurdities, legend, myth, saga, etc. It is worthy of special respect only insofar as it is a unique witness of those in whose lives God once worked.

2. *The Bible is not divinely inspired, but it is divinely inspiring* – The Bible is not the inscripturated revelatory disclosure of God. Rather, “the inspiration of the Bible is its power to inspire religious experience. Revelation is redefined as human insight into religious truth, or human discovery of religious truths” (Ramm, 64-65). Thus, **according to orthodoxy, inspiration is what God does to the Bible. According to liberalism, inspiration is what the Bible does to us.** Packer explains:

“The Bible was viewed as a testament of religion, a documentary record of how God was sought and found, containing more of men's spotty and uneven thoughts about God than of God's true and abiding thoughts about mankind. The function of Scripture, thus conceived, was to give the church moral inspiration and emotional encouragement, rather than to rule the church for God by mediating God's instruction and direction” (61).

3. *The supernatural is marginalized* – The supernatural is often redefined to refer to those activities by which *we* reach beyond the material order to God (through prayer, ethics, mystical thought, etc.), rather than the activity of God by which he manifests his presence and power in the created order of things. Insofar as science assumes the regularity of nature, miracles are by definition excluded. The biblical record of “miraculous” events is no more than folklore, mythology, or the poetic elaboration of a people who lived and interpreted their experience in a pre-industrial, pre-scientific age. They are no more than the forms by which first century folk give expression to their religious beliefs.

4. *The interpretation of the Bible is subject to an evolutionary presuppositional framework*

5. *The principle of accommodation* – Much, if not all, of the theological statements of the text are cast in the shape of the transitory, culture-bound thought forms of the ancient world.

E. *The Doctrine of Scripture in Neo-Orthodoxy*

So-called *neo-orthodoxy* was born from a reaction to the extremes of classical religious liberalism. “Neo-orthodoxy or dialectical theology,” notes Pinnock, “provided a haven for liberal refugees fleeing from the disenchantment with an devastating consistency of their own optimistic

humanism. Ostensibly, it marked a return to classical Protestant orthodoxy and, although the change was noticeable, certain similarities with liberalism remained” (164). As a theological movement, it began with the publication of Karl Barth’s commentary on Romans (*Romerbrief*) at the end of WW I.

1. *The Neo-orthodox concept of revelation* – The neo-orthodox refuse to identify revelation with Scripture. Revelation is not propositional or conceptual (i.e., dianoetic). It is existential, dynamic, and personal. Revelation is not words about God. Revelation is God himself, experientially and dynamically present to my religious consciousness. William Temple writes:

“What is offered to man’s apprehension in any specific revelation is not truth concerning God but the living God himself. There is no such thing as revealed truth. There are truths of revelation; but they are not themselves directly revealed” (*Nature, Man, and God*, 316, 322).

God does not reveal information by communication: He reveals himself by communion. Revelation is a personal meeting of God with man. It is a meeting of mind with mind or person with person, but not subject (person) with object (propositional truth).

2. *The Neo-orthodox concept of Scripture* – If revelation is not itself propositional truth, the Bible itself cannot be revelation. Rather, the Bible is a witness to or a record of revelation. The Bible is the account given by certain people of their own or someone else’s encounter with God. Thus it bears witness to and testifies concerning revelation, but the words of Scripture are not themselves that revelation. Pinnock explains:

“For neoorthodoxy, the Bible is the Word of God only in a restricted and derivative sense; namely, as it becomes the Word by a miracle in the heart, by which its fallible witness mediates an encounter. As witness to revelation, the Bible is an indispensable, though human, document because it occupies a preeminent place chronologically in the Christian faith. The Spirit uses the fallible, human text to induce a dynamic revelation encounter in contemporary man” (*BR*, 164).

For example, in the first century God revealed himself in the event of the cross and in the religious experience of those individuals whose lives were transformed because of it. The Bible is a *recital* of these incidences of revelation. The recorded meaning of these events in the words of Scripture is neither revelation nor inspired. The “Word” of God cannot be “frozen” in Scripture. God may certainly use the words of Scripture as a medium to encounter the human soul in a revelatory experience, but those words are not themselves the revelation. To identify the words of Scripture with divine revelation would be to imprison the Spirit of God and subject God himself to human control. The locus of revelation is thus transferred from the text of Scripture to the soul of the individual who encounters God through it. Ramm summarizes:

“Revelation *is* when, and only when, God speaks. But God’s speech is not words (orthodox view) but is *His personal presence*. ‘The Word of God’ is God Himself present to my consciousness. The ‘objective’ form of this speech is Jesus Christ which is God present in mercy, grace, and reconciliation. When God addresses me by Jesus Christ and I respond, then revelation *occurs*. Revelation is thus both God speaking to me of grace and forgiveness in Jesus Christ and my response of faith to this personal address” (71-2).

3. *The Neo-orthodox confusion of Revelation with Illumination* – By “revelation” is meant that act of God by which he communicated to men a knowledge of himself and his will. By “inspiration” is meant the influence of the Spirit on the minds of selected individuals rendering them organs or instruments for the infallible and inerrant inscripturation of that revelation. By “illumination” is meant the divine quickening of the regenerate mind by virtue of which it is enabled to understand and enjoy the truth that has been revealed and inscripturated in the text. It would appear that neo-orthodoxy has confused these concepts by virtually identifying revelation with illumination.

F. *The Debate on the Inerrancy of Scripture in Contemporary Evangelicalism*

1. *The Doctrine of Limited Inerrancy* - A growing number within evangelicalism advocate the concept of *limited innerancy*. One of the better defenders of this view is Daniel Fuller (see his two articles, “The Nature of Biblical Inerrancy,” *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*, June 1972; and “Benjamin B. Warfield’s View of Faith and History,” *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society*, XI, 2, Spring 1968). Elements of his view:

- The “inerrancy” of a book or piece of literature can be evaluated solely in light of the author’s intention or purpose. Does the author fulfill his/her purpose in writing? If so, the work is inerrant. If not, it is not.

- The purpose of the Bible is to make us “wise unto salvation” (2 Tim. 3:15). The purpose of the Bible is not to make us wise unto botany or geology or astronomy or history. Fuller writes:

“The Biblical writers make it clear that their purpose was to report the happenings and meanings of the redemptive acts of God in history so that men might be made wise unto salvation” (“Inerrancy,” 47).

- By this criterion, says Fuller, the Bible is inerrant. It perfectly lives up to its purpose. It never fails to fulfill its purpose or intent of making the reader wise unto salvation.

- Since inerrancy should only be expected in the case of those biblical assertions which teach or rightly imply knowledge that makes man wise unto salvation,

Scripture can and does err in other matters. I.e., there are passages in the Bible which are but incidentally related or entirely unrelated to its primary purpose. These incidents or texts are called by Fuller, *non-revelational* matters; i.e., biblical statements on such topics as geology, meteorology, cosmology, botany, astronomy, geography, history, etc. Since the *principal aim or authorial intent* of Scripture is *not* to teach truths on such matters as these, the latter may err while the former remains inerrant. The Bible is inerrant on those matters it intends to teach, those matters that are essential to make us wise unto salvation. These, and these alone, are revelatory.

Fuller is not saying that the Bible *cannot* err on revelational matters. He is saying that on non-revelational matters there may indeed be errors in Scripture (indeed, there are), but that on revelational matters he has discovered none yet and hopes he never will:

“I sincerely hope that as I continue my historical-grammatical exegesis of Scripture, I shall find no error in its teachings. But I can only affirm inerrancy with high probability” (“On Revelation and Biblical Authority,” *JETS*, XVI, 2, Spring 1973, 67-69).

The Doctrine of Complete Inerrancy

Contrary to the perspective of limited inerrancy, the Bible makes no distinction between inspired and uninspired texts or topics nor does it place any restrictions on the kinds of subjects on which it speaks truthfully. See esp. Acts 24:14; Luke 24:25; Romans 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:11. The word “infallibility” comes from the Latin *infallibilitas* = the quality of neither deceiving nor being deceived. “Inerrancy” comes from the Latin *inerrantia* = freedom from error. This means that Scripture does not affirm anything contrary to fact. Together they express the idea that all Scripture comes to us as the very words of God and are thus reliable and true and free of error. Here are four explanations of the concept of inerrancy as it is applied to all of Scripture:

“Inerrancy will then mean that at no point in what was originally given were the biblical writers allowed to make statements or endorse viewpoints which are not in conformity with objective truth. This applies at any level at which they make pronouncements” (Roger Nicole, “The Nature of Inerrancy,” in *Inerrancy and Common Sense*, 88).

“Inerrancy means that when all facts are known, the Scriptures in their original autographs and properly interpreted will be shown to be wholly true in everything that they affirm, whether that has to do with doctrine or morality or with the social, physical, or life sciences” (Paul Feinberg, “The Meaning of Inerrancy,” 294).

“When all the facts are known, the Bible (in its original writings) properly interpreted in light of which culture and communication means had developed by the time of its composition will be shown to be completely true (and therefore not false) in all that it

affirms, to the degree of precision intended by the author, in all matters relating to God and his creation” (David Dockery, *Christian Scripture*, 64).

“Except for the types of textual corruption that can arise in the course of repeated copying, the Bible offers an accurate, though not comprehensive, description and interpretation of the world and human history from the creation to the rise of the Christian church, as well as a reliable record of divinely revealed truths about God and his plans for humanity, which careful exegesis can demonstrate to be internally consistent and concerning which, through fair and informed analysis, plausible solutions for apparently fundamental conflicts between it and objective extra-biblical data can be suggested” (Richard Shultz).

2 Timothy 3:16-17 is crucial to the doctrine of inerrancy:

(1) “all” or “every” – The word “all” has a collective sense and means the whole of Scripture; the entirety of the Bible, inclusive of all its parts. The word “every” has a distributive sense and means each Scripture individually, the various parts of the Bible of which the whole is comprised. Whether it be “all” Scripture or “every” Scripture Paul is saying that whatever is Scripture is God-breathed.

(2) “Scripture” – In v. 15 the words “sacred writings” refer to the OT. On what grounds, then, do we extend the affirmation of inspiration to the NT writings? a) Peter refers to Paul’s writings as Scripture in 1 Pt. 3:14-16. b) Paul directed that his epistles be read publicly for instruction in the church, presumably along with the OT – Col. 4:16; 1 Th. 5:27. c) He called his message “the word of God” in 1 Thess. 2:13. d) in 1 Cor. 2:13 he refers to what God has revealed to him as “words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit.” e) in 1 Tim. 5:18 Paul indicates that there is more to Scripture than the OT: he places Luke’s gospel (or at least the materials from which Luke’s gospel was to be composed) on a par with Deuteronomy.

(3) Is it “all God-breathed Scripture is also profitable . . .” (or “all Scripture which is God-breathed is also profitable . . .”) or “all Scripture is God-breathed and profitable . . .”? The former might (but need not) suggest that only some of Scripture is God-breathed, not all, and hence only some Scripture is profitable. The latter, however, is more likely. It is a double predicate adjective connected by *kai* (“and”).

(4) Meaning of *theopneustos*? The word “inspiration” can be misleading, for it might suggest to some an already existent text into which God breathed or to which he imparted some special spiritual or divine quality. The word actually means “breathed out from God” not “breathed into by God”. The Scriptures are a product of the divine breath (origin). The Scriptures find their origin in God, not in the creative genius of humans. In the OT the “breath” of God is his creative power (cf. Job 32:8; 33:4; 34:14). See also Gen. 2:7; Ps. 33:6.

(5) Lastly, it is difficult to see how error can be “profitable” and contribute to our “instruction” in righteousness. According to Packer, “authority belongs to truth and truth only. . . . I can make no sense – no reverent sense, anyway – of the idea, sometimes met, that God speaks his truth to us in and through false statements by biblical writers” (*Truth and Power*, 46).

The inerrant perfection of God's written Word is clearly affirmed by Jesus in Matthew 5:18. The word translated "smallest letter" is literally *iota*, the tiniest letter in the Greek alphabet. We use it in such statements as: "It doesn't make an iota of difference to me!"

Point: not a "t" will remain uncrossed nor an "i" undotted! Not the slightest part of God's Word is insignificant. Not the slightest or smallest part will prove untrue or fail of its purpose. See also John 10:35; Mt. 24:35.

There are several factors in the evangelical doctrine of inerrancy:

- It is no objection to inerrancy that God used sinful, error-prone human beings in the process of inscription. It is one thing to say that because we are human we *can* make mistakes. It is another thing to say we *must*. See esp. 2 Pt. 1:20-21. The doctrine of inerrancy, therefore, does not diminish the humanity of Scripture any more than the deity of Christ diminishes the reality of his human flesh.
- It is no objection to inerrancy that sometimes the Bible describes things as they *appear*, i.e., phenomenologically, rather than as they really are. However, "if the Bible taught that things appeared one way and they did not appear that way, that would be an error. Or, if the Bible taught that things were one way and they were not that way, that would also be an error. But for the Bible to teach that things appear one way when they actually are another way is not error" (John Gerstner, "The Church's Doctrine of Biblical Inspiration," in *The Foundation of Biblical Authority*, 25).
- It is no objection to inerrancy that God often accommodates himself to human language and experience when making known his will and ways in Scripture.
- It is no objection to inerrancy that the Bible contains figures of speech. Some erroneously believe that inerrancy requires that everything in the Bible be taken literally, as if to suggest that this doctrine means that God literally has wings and that mountains literally leap for joy, etc. But truth is often expressed in non-literal language.
- It is no objection to inerrancy that the Bible emphasizes certain concepts or doctrines more than others. Some have drawn the unwarranted conclusion that since the Bible does not emphasize, say, geology, that on those occasions when it does speak geologically it speaks erroneously. It is true that the declaration "Jesus Christ, [is] risen from the dead" (2 Tim. 2:8) is more important than "Erastus remained at Corinth" (2 Tim. 4:20). But the comparative unimportance of the latter does not necessitate its falsity.
- It is no objection to inerrancy that we engage in textual criticism of the NT documents.
- It is no objection to inerrancy that the authors of Scripture make occasional errors in grammar. A statement can be ungrammatical in its style while entirely true in its content.
- It is no objection to inerrancy that our interpretations of the Bible are less than uniform. The explanation for disparate interpretations must rest with the interpreter, not with the text.

- It is no objection to inerrancy that the Bible is not equally clear in every place. In other words, the inerrancy of Scripture does not guarantee its complete lucidity.
- It is no objection to inerrancy that the Bible records lies and unethical actions. We must distinguish between what the Bible merely *reports* and what it *approves*, between *descriptive* authority and *normative* authority.
- It is no objection to inerrancy that authors of the NT cite or allude to the OT with less than verbal precision.
- It is no objection to inerrancy that the authors of Scripture round off or approximate numbers and measurements. Alleged “inaccuracies” must be judged by the accepted standards of the cultural-historical context in which the author wrote, not by the scientifically and computerized precision of 21st century technology. “The limits of truthfulness,” notes Grudem (91), “would depend on the degree of precision implied by the speaker and expected by his original hearers.”
- It is no objection to inerrancy that the recorded account of certain events is not exhaustive in detail. That the description of an event is partial does not mean it is false. Inerrancy simply means that when Scripture does speak, however, extensive or minimal it may be, it speaks accurately.
- It is no objection to inerrancy if two authors record the same event from differing perspectives and for different purposes.
- It is no objection to inerrancy that the biblical authors used uninspired and errant material in composing Scripture. Inerrancy simply means that when they do quote or borrow from uninspired sources they do so accurately.
- It is no objection to inerrancy that we cannot, at this time, harmonize all allegedly disparate events or data. This would make the authority of the Bible depend on the resourcefulness of humans. It would also indicate that we have learned little from history, for on countless occasions historical, archaeological, exegetical, and scientific discoveries have resolved what were apparent contradictions in the Bible.

So, why is this doctrine or concept of Scripture as verbally, plenary, and inerrantly inspired so critical? Two answers may be given:

First, in the words of J. I. Packer,

“biblical *veracity* and biblical *authority* are bound up together. Only truth can have final authority to determine belief and behavior, and Scripture cannot have such authority further than it is true. A factually and theologically trustworthy Bible could still impress us as a presentation of religious experience and expertise, but clearly, if we cannot affirm its total truthfulness, we cannot claim that it is all God’s testimony and teaching, given to control our convictions and conduct” (*Truth and Power*, 134).

Second, we should subject our souls to the infallibility and authority of the Scriptures, immerse our minds in its truths, and bathe our spirits in its teachings because the inerrant special revelation of God in Scripture has the *power* to change human lives and to transform the experience of the church.

- The Word of God is the means or instrument by which the Holy Spirit regenerates the human heart. That is to say, the proclamation or communication of the Word is the catalyst for the inception of spiritual life. See 1 Peter 1:23-25. Observe that this "word" which brings life is a "preached" word!
- The Word of God is the power of God unto salvation. See especially Romans 1:16-17; 10:14-15; and 1 Cor. 1:18-25.
- The Word of God is the spring from which the waters of faith arise. Paul says in Rom. 10:17 that "faith comes from hearing" and that hearing comes "by the word of Christ."
- It is from or through the Scriptures that the Spirit imparts perseverance and encouragement: "For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through *perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures* we might have hope" (Romans 15:4).
- It is from or through the Scriptures that joy, peace, and hope arise. How so? Paul prays in Romans 15:13 that God would "fill you with all joy and peace **in believing**, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." Both joy and peace are the fruit of *believing*, which in turn yields hope. But believe "what"? Belief is confidence placed in the truth of what God has revealed to us in Scripture about who He is and our relationship to Him through Jesus. Belief does not plant itself in mid-air, but in the firm foundation of inspired, revelatory words inscripturated for us in the Bible.
- It is the Word of God that accounts for the on-going operation of the miraculous in the body of Christ. Again, how so? We read in Galatians 3:5, "Does He then, who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?" The instrument God uses is the faith that we experience *upon hearing the Word of God!* When we hear the Word of God (in preaching and teaching), our thoughts and hearts become God-centered; our focus is on His glory and and thus our faith in His greatness expands and deepens, all of which is the soil in which the seeds of the supernatural are sown. Apart from the truths of preached texts, there can be no genuine, long-lasting, Christ-exalting faith; and apart from such faith there can be no (or at best, few) miracles.
- It is the Word of God, expounded and explained and applied, that yields the fruit of sanctification and holiness in daily life. Consider the following:

*"And for this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received from us the word of God's message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, **which also performs its work in you who believe**" (1 Thess. 2:13).*

*"In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, **constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following**" (1 Tim. 4:6).*

*"Like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word, that **by it you may grow in respect to salvation**" (1 Peter 2:2).*

"For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4:12).

Question: "What would have to happen in order for you to reject inerrancy? What would you have to see or discover in your study of Scripture for you to reject this doctrine? Or is there no amount or kind of evidence that would lead you to redefine your concept of Scripture?"