

## **The Doctrine of the Word of God**

(Preliminary Draft, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition)

### **Part Four: The Media of God's Word The Inspiration of Scripture**

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In Memory of  
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(1917-2005)

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### **23. The Inspiration of Scripture**

I believe I have established that there is among us a collection of God's written words, which we may call canon. These are God's personal words to us. Now we must look at some questions that pertain to the entire canon. In this chapter I will consider the relationship between God's personal words and the human writers

of Scripture. Scripture is both a divine book and a human book. God is the author, and there are also human authors.

Many recent books on the doctrine of Scripture begin with human authorship, assuming that the human writers of Scripture made mistakes and at times misrepresented the divine word.<sup>1</sup> Such books, then, have to deal with the problem of how God can reveal himself authoritatively in such writings. In this book, I have chosen, rather, at the risk of being criticized as old-fashioned, to begin with God's intention to speak personal words to his people. I assume here that God is able, one way or another, to get his words to us. This method avoids the problem of the other books, but it does render somewhat problematic the very presence of human writers on the scene. Are these writers mere secretaries, mere recipients of "dictation?" Does God operate upon them in a "mechanical" fashion?

Among writers who hold the traditional view of Scripture, almost all have answered no. Some older writers including Calvin<sup>2</sup> have spoken favorably of divine dictation, and others have used mechanistic analogies, such as Athenagoras' illustration: God is like the flute-player, and the prophets were like flutes.<sup>3</sup> But neither of these writers was dealing with the precise question before us. One can agree that dictation and flute playing are meaningful *analogies* of the relation between God and the human authors of Scripture, without accepting these as literal *analyses* of inspiration.

Most advocates of the traditional view reject the idea that God literally dictated to the human writers the contents of the Scriptures, and most deny that the relationship is well-described as "mechanical." Some theologians, I think, have been *too* eager to avoid suspicion of a dictation theory. Certainly there are places in Scripture where God literally dictates words for human beings to write down. God dictated to Moses the words of the law, according to Exodus 34:27. Note also Jereremiah 36:4, "Then Jeremiah called Baruch the son of Neriah, and Baruch wrote on a scroll at the dictation of Jeremiah all the words of the LORD that he had spoken to him." And Revelation 2-3, where the risen Jesus tells John to write as he dictates letters to the seven churches of Asia.

Does divine dictation degrade the humanity of those who receive it? Theologians sometimes say it does, but I do not find this representation persuasive. The work of a secretary, amanuensis, or, as we now say, an "administrative assistant" is a noble calling. The apostle Paul made use of such amanuenses, such as Tertius in Romans 16:22. To be God's secretary must be a wonderful thing indeed. Speaking for myself, I would consider it a transcendent privilege to receive

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<sup>1</sup> This is the error common to the books of Wright, Enns, and McGowan, that I discuss in the reviews found in Appendices to this volume.

<sup>2</sup> Commentaries, at 2 Tim. 3:16.

<sup>3</sup> In Athenagoras, *Plea on Behalf of Christians*.

dictation from God. What a wonderful experience it must have been, for Moses, Baruch, and John.

But of course this sort of dictation is rare in Scripture. There is no record of Joshua, or Samuel, or David, or Luke, or even Paul receiving literal dictation from the Lord. The regular pattern, rather, is that God appointed the biblical writers to be prophets, apostles, or associates of the apostles, and those writers wrote what they chose to write. In their writing, their individual human qualities appear vividly. David writes in a very different way from Moses. Luke's writing is very different in style from that of John, or of Paul. But as we have seen, all of these very different writers were chosen by God to convey his personal word to the world.

The result of their writing is nothing less than the word of God, the personal word of God to us. It is *like* dictation, because what Luke writes is exactly what God wants us to hear. It is *like* mechanical inspiration, because God is in full control of the process. But how *unlike* mechanical dictation it is! God's dealings with Luke, for example, are person-to-person, as are all God's dealings with human beings. God uses Luke's gifts as a historian and as a physician, his careful accuracy, his association with Paul, to add distinctive elements to Luke's gospel and the Book of Acts. He uses Luke's intellect and style to convey the truth with the nuance that he desires. God also uses the very different endowments of John and of Paul, to present other perspectives on the gospel of Christ.

Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck called this process "organic" inspiration, to distinguish it from dictation or mechanical inspiration. Organic inspiration means that God used all the distinct personal qualities of each writer. God used the differences of heredity, environment, upbringing, education, gifts, talents, styles, interests, and idiosyncrasies to reveal his word. These differences were not a barrier that God had to overcome. Rather, they were God's chosen means of communicating with us. God's word is complex and nuanced. God used the organic complexity of human persons and the diversities among persons to communicate the complexity of his own personal word. He used human persons to communicate with us in a fully personal way.

Remember that God's word is not *merely* propositional. God's purpose is not merely to convey information to us, though he certainly does that. His purpose is to do for us all that can be done by language. He means to convey, not only information, but tone, emotion, perspective. He means to convey his love to us, along with the sternness of his justice. Human language is rich in this way, conveying a wide variety of content. God's language is all the richer. And in communicating it, he employs a wide variety of writers with a rich diversity of experience.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> To say that inspiration is restricted to "thoughts" or "ideas" is to give the doctrine of inspiration a very intellectualist cast. (Normally liberals charge conservatives

And the final result is exactly what he wanted to say to us. Just *like* dictation or mechanical inspiration. What an amazing treasure is the written word of God.

I would define *inspiration* as a divine act creating an identity between a divine word and a human word. To describe the conformity of the text to God's intention, theologians have also used other technical terms. *Plenary* inspiration simply means that *everything* in Scripture is God's word. To say this is merely to say that the entire canon is God's word, as we have already seen. If the Bible is plenary inspired, we may not pick and choose within the Scriptures, regarding one part as God's word and another part as merely human.

*Verbal* inspiration means that the *words* of Scripture, not only the ideas of the biblical writers, are God's word. In the light of our discussion in this book, that should be obvious. God's intention is to speak personal *words* to human beings. He has identified those words with the canonical text. We recall Peter's question, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68) The emphasis on the *words* of God, Christ, and the apostles, is pervasive in the New Testament (See Matt. 7:24-28, 24:35, Mark 8:38, 13:31, John 3:34, 5:47, 6:63, 8:47, 14:10, 24, 17:8, Acts 15:15, 1 Cor. 2:13, 1 Tim. 4:6, 6:3, 2 Tim. 1:13, 2 Pet. 3:2, Jude 17, Rev. 1:3, 19:9, 21:5, 22:6-10, 18-19). In the singular, *word* can sometimes be read as designating thoughts or ideas apart from their formulation in words and sentences; but the plural, *words*, cannot be.

Our whole discussion since chapter 14 has underscored the point that God's intention is to give us *words*, personal words, not just thoughts or ideas. The divine voice, as on Mt. Sinai, spoke words in the hearing of Israel. So did the voice of Jesus in his earthly ministry. So did the prophets and apostles. And so did the text of God's written word, from covenant document to complete canon. At no point in this redemptive history is God content to give thoughts or ideas to his spokesmen, without giving them words in which to express those thoughts. Rather, he assigns them the role of speaking and writing his words.

Therefore, it should not be surprising that the only time we find the word *inspiration* in the English Bible (2 Tim. 3:16) it refers to the written word: not to the ideas of prophets and apostles, not even to their oral speech, and not to the biblical writers as such, but to the very *text* of Scripture. Now it is not wrong to

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with intellectualist views of inspiration; but the shoe is on the other foot.) "Thought"-inspiration suggests the notion that God reveals to the writers a set of *concepts*. But as we have seen, God wants to reveal to us a wide variety of things: not only propositions or concepts, but events, promises, feelings, tone, etc. These don't fit very well into the notion of God revealing "ideas," but they fit very well into the revelation of *words*, for words (not ideas) are capable of communicating in all of these ways.

ascribe inspiration to the prophets and to the writers of Scripture. The New Testament frequently refers to the Holy Spirit as governing the words of prophets and apostles, ( Matt. 10:20, 22:43; Acts 1:16, many other texts - see Chapter 15). There is no reason why we should not describe this influence of the Spirit as inspiration, using the same definition as above. But we should never say, as some have, that inspiration properly pertains to persons rather than to written texts. In Scripture, the Spirit inspires not only prophets, apostles, and biblical writers, but also *texts*. As we have seen, Jesus and the apostles regard the texts of the Old Testament as fully authoritative, just as authoritative as God's direct voice. The text has no less authority than the divine voice itself, or than the prophets and apostles.

Because inspiration is verbal, it is also, often, textual. You can't put an idea or a thought exhaustively on paper; but you can put a *word* on paper. Inspiration is of words, whether spoken orally or put on a material medium (stone tablets, parchment, paper, digital media, etc.) So there is no reason to deny that God's personal words take written form in the canonical books he has given to us.

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