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**Inspiration and
Canonicity of the Bible**

Chapter 3

CHAPTER 3

VERBAL INSPIRATION IN CHURCH HISTORY

In this section only a survey of the doctrine through the great periods of Church history will be attempted. The situation is clear and is freely admitted by many — even of those unfriendly to the doctrine. We shall consider only the post-Reformation era, the Reformers themselves, and the times of the Early Church.

It is safe to say that there is no doctrine, except those of the Trinity and the deity of Christ, which has been so widely held through the ages of Church history as that of verbal inspiration. This, however, is by no means the common conception of the situation. Occasionally an effort is made to picture this doctrine as a recent growth, the product of the Hodge-Warfield-Machen School of Princeton Seminary. This was the contention of men in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. who defended the Auburn Affirmation of 1924. They asserted that in 1923 the General Assembly of that Church had erred when it re-adopted five basic points, including the doctrine of verbal inerrancy, as essential to Presbyterian standards. They maintained that the Westminster Standards teach that the Bible is "our only infallible rule of faith and practice," that is to say, an infallible guide in spiritual matters. But the Auburn Affirmation argued that "the doctrine of inerrancy of Scripture, intended to enhance the authority of the Scriptures, in fact impairs their supreme authority for faith and life."¹ It was argued that inerrancy is not found in the Westminster Standards, but was a new development adopted by the General Assembly under pressure from the Fundamentalist groups.

This argument had already been considered by Warfield and dealt with at length.² Philip Schaff had written in 1893, at about the time of the heresy trial of his colleague, C. A. Briggs, that "the theory of a literal inspiration and inerrancy was not held by the Reformers."³ Warfield goes on to consider the argument by Briggs that the Westminster Confession does not teach this doctrine. The Confession, of course, devotes its first chapter to the Scriptures, and declares that the canonical books and these alone are of authority. The Apocrypha are not, but are mere "human writings." The authority of Scripture depends "upon God (who is truth itself), the author thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God." "Nothing at any time is to be added" to Scripture. There is a wonderful "consent of all the parts" among its "many other incomparable excellencies." "The Old Testament in Hebrew . . . and the New Testament in Greek . . . being immediately inspired by God . . . are therefore authentical . . . the Church is finally to appeal unto them."

It would seem that the Confession speaks positively enough, although the word "inerrant" is not used. Why the word "inerrant" is not used is easy to see. Three hundred years ago the modern critical problems and the conflict of science and the Bible or serious questions of historical accuracy had not yet arisen. The Confession does speak of "the infallible truth" of the Word of God and this should be sufficient. "Inerrant" means "without mistake"; "infallible" means "incapable of error." It is actually a stronger word. In 1646 there had not yet arisen the distinction Modernist theologians now attempt to draw between spiritual truth and historical error. The old creed therefore does not specifically say that the Bible is true also in matters of history and science as well as in the spiritual sphere. It simply emphasizes that the Bible is all true. As Chapter XIV of the Westminster Confession puts it, "By this faith [saving faith], a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God Himself speaketh therein." It is also to be noted that the

matter of self-contradiction in the Bible had repeatedly arisen,⁴ but that here the Confession took its stand with the other Reformation creeds to insist that there are no contradictions in Scripture. It mentions "the consent of all the parts." So the Westminster standards actually teach Biblical inerrancy, even though they do not use the modern terminology which has been developed to meet a new attack.

Warfield carefully considers this in the above mentioned article, but, with his characteristic thoroughness, he does even more. He treats in detail the writings of eminent Westminster divines that have been preserved for us and shows that they clearly deny the possibility of mistakes in Scripture. He quotes John Ball's catechism, which declared that "the Holy Scriptures in the Originals were inspired both for matter and for words."⁵ Richard Capel is quoted also as saying that the original writers of Scripture were "indued with the infallible Spirit" and "might not err."⁶ The great Richard Baxter is briefly quoted to the same effect. "No error or contradiction is in it, but what is in some copies, by the failing of preserver, transcribers, printers, or translators."⁷

Warfield quotes many of the other authors of the Westminster Confession to the same effect, much to the detriment of the contrary view which C. A. Briggs had set forth in his still-sold book *Whither?* Warfield showed how Briggs had, in a serious manner, taken quotations of these men out of context. They believed precisely what we believe when we affirm the doctrine of verbal inspiration today.⁸

Happily in this point, Warfield's argument is admitted today. The tendency now is to say that the awful doctrine of verbal inspiration was not held by the Reformers but was the product of an atrophied orthodoxy of the century after the Reformation, when the high character of the Reformers had been superseded by the sterile intellectualism and cold orthodoxy of the creed-making age.

Barth speaks almost as if this doctrine were the invention of the post-Reformation era: "The historic conception of

the Bible with its cult of heroes and the mechanical doctrine of verbal inspiration are products of the same age and the same spirit. They have this in common, that they stood for the means by which men of the Renaissance claimed to control the Bible."⁹ He speaks of the "period of orthodoxy (subsequent to Calvin) which was the counterpart of the fatal doctrine of inspiration."¹⁰

Brunner speaks a bit more accurately and at length. His view is that Luther had come to the grand conclusion that it is not the Bible that counts but Christ therein contained. We should note that this position invents a false antithesis. It is our view that the Bible counts because it is the true revelation of Christ. And as to Luther's view, which has been much discussed, Marcus Reu has admirably drawn together the evidence from the great Reformer's writings to show that he fully believed in verbal inspiration.¹¹ But, Brunner declares, "Calvin is already moving away from Luther toward the doctrine of verbal inspiration. His *doctrine* of the Bible is entirely the traditional, formally authoritative, view. From the end of the sixteenth century onwards there was no other 'principle of Scripture' than this formally authoritarian one."¹² Brunner here at least agrees with Warfield and disagrees with Briggs and older Modernists when he declares that verbal inspiration has been the teaching of the Protestant Church and its creeds. Most students of the Reformation will be astonished at the suggestion that Calvin believed anything else. Luther has been quoted as questioning the doctrine because of his oft-mentioned remark that James is a "right strawy Epistle." It should be noted, however, that Luther's problem was not one of inspiration but of canonicity. Luther had denied the Apocryphal books of the Old Testament, a denial in which he was on solid ground and had much support from previous as well as contemporary scholars. But it need not be wondered at too much if, in facing the problem of the reconciliation of the Epistle of James with Luther's essential doctrine of justification by faith, Luther was perhaps led to solve it too easily simply by questioning the canonicity

of James. After all, the Epistle had actually been questioned in certain circles of the Early Church and its apostolic origin was not thoroughly demonstrated. Luther, a pioneer, might well have questioned it. However, in Luther's defense it should further be said that he kept the Book of James in every edition of his Bible. Actually, the context of his reference to James shows that he only argues that James is an "epistle of straw" in comparison with the greater and more basic books of the gospels, major Pauline Epistles, etc. In this we admit that he was right. Verbal inspiration as a doctrine by no means teaches that Obadiah is as important as Genesis. It merely insists that the entire Bible is true. Luther plainly accepted the doctrine of verbal inspiration.

Brunner makes the further admission that the doctrine is an ancient one: "The doctrine of verbal inspiration was already known to pre-Christian Judaism . . . and was probably also taken over by Paul and the rest of the apostles."¹³ He proceeds to argue that the doctrine was of no great consequence through the medieval period because the principle of allegorical interpretation allowed the scholastics to make what they would out of the Bible. The doctrine was revived in the Reformation. Probably Brunner does not realize the import of what he is here saying. He says that this doctrine — which he cordially castigates — was the legacy of Judaism, accepted by the apostles, and held by the Early Church through the years of her strength down to the times of Origen and Augustine, who set the pattern of allegorical interpretation for a thousand years. The loss of this doctrine as a practical element in theology (though it was by no means lost in theory) corresponded with the Dark Ages. After the Reformation, the doctrine lasted through three centuries of the Church's strength till the rise of higher criticism. It was held by the Church which spread abroad in the great missionary movement of the nineteenth century. It has been denied by the scholars of the late nineteenth century and by the laity and churchmen of the twentieth. This terrible doctrine seems to be absent in the times of the Church's apostasy and present in the times of her power.

At least Brunner is historically rather accurate. One might well here urge Brunner to reconsider and embrace a doctrine evidently so productive of spiritual power and blessing!¹⁴

With these admissions it perhaps is a work of supererogation to search the old Christian writings to prove that the Early Church was faithful in following its Lord in this doctrine. The evidence has been set forth in some detail by Sanday in his Bampton Lectures on "Inspiration," especially in his first chapter, where he gives a great number of brief references to the writers of the early centuries, especially after 200 A.D.¹⁵

It might be of interest to quote Warfield's estimate of Sanday's work: "Dr. Sanday, in his recent Bampton Lectures on 'Inspiration' — in which, unfortunately, he does not teach the Church doctrine — is driven to admit that not only may 'testimonies to the general doctrine of inspiration' from the earliest Fathers 'be multiplied to almost any extent'; but (that) there are some which go further and point to an inspiration which might be described as 'verbal'; 'nor does this idea,' he adds, 'come in tentatively and by degrees, but almost from the very first.' He might have spared the adverb 'almost.' The earliest writers know no other doctrine."¹⁶ With this we heartily agree. Sanday does not hold to verbal inspiration. But, like Brunner, quoted above, he is constrained to admit that this has been the teaching cherished by Christians through the ages. He is an unwilling witness to the fact that the early Fathers believed in a verbally inspired Scripture. Much of the evidence is referred to also by Gaussen in his well-known book *Theopneustia*,¹⁷ but the quotations are not printed nor classified as conveniently as in Sanday.

A very few of these early statements should be given. The First Epistle of Clement, written near the end of the first century A.D., speaks of the Old Testament with the greatest reverence and tells also of the inspiration of the apostles and their high authority. Several times¹⁸ Clement quotes from the Old Testament and ascribes the words of the human author to God, Christ, or the Holy Ghost. It is

called the "Scripture," "Sacred Scriptures," the "Holy Word," etc. Specifically he says, "Look carefully into the Scriptures, which are the true utterances of the Holy Spirit. Observe that nothing of an unjust or counterfeit character is written in them."¹⁹

Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, who was martyred about 117 A.D., has left us a similar witness. By this time references to the New Testament abound and an exceedingly high view of the apostles is held. He speaks rather depreciatingly of the Jewish law, but it is plainly the Judaizing doctrine that is meant, for he commends the prophets. However, he emphasizes that the word of the new dispensation is far superior. He remarks concerning those who ignorantly deny Jesus that "these persons neither have the prophets persuaded nor the law of Moses nor the Gospel even to this day."²⁰ The way in which he here places the Gospel on a par with the Old Testament is very instructive. Of these prophets he says, "The divinest prophets lived according to Christ Jesus. On this account also they were persecuted, being inspired by His grace to fully convince the unbelieving that there is one God, who has manifested Himself by Jesus Christ His Son."²¹ He says also that we who have received the things of the new dispensation should follow Christ when the "prophets themselves in the Spirit did wait for Him as their teacher." Again he uses such terms when he urges us to flee to "the Gospel as to the flesh of Jesus, and to the apostles as to the presbytery of the Church. And let us also love the prophets because they, too, have proclaimed the Gospel, and placed their hope in Him, and waited for Him; in whom also, believing, they were saved, through union to Jesus Christ, being holy men, worthy of love and admiration, having had witness borne to them by Jesus Christ."²² Ignatius is full of the thought that the new is better than the old. But he does not hint that the new is truer than the old. For him, as he says, "It is written" refers not only to the old dispensation but applies equally well to the gospel.²³

Polycarp, the great martyr and disciple of John, writes near the beginning of the second century, just after Ignatius' martyrdom, "Whosoever perverts the oracles of the Lord to his own lusts, and says that there is neither a resurrection nor a judgment, he is the first-born of Satan."²⁴ Polycarp here is probably speaking of the New Testament. His opinion of the apostles is most high: "For neither I nor any other such one can come up to the wisdom of the blessed and glorified Paul. He, when among you, accurately and steadfastly taught the word of truth."²⁵ The prophets — surely the Old Testament authors — are said to have "proclaimed beforehand the coming of the Lord,"²⁶ thus evidencing a belief in prophecy. The quotation from Psalm 4:4, "Be ye angry, and sin not" (in the Psalm, "Stand in awe, and sin not," A.V.), and from Ephesians 4:26, "Let not the sun go down upon your wrath," are linked together and called Sacred Scriptures.²⁷ (Ephesians 4:26 quotes Psalm 4:4, and possibly Polycarp is taking the whole quotation from Ephesians.) In this short epistle Polycarp has comparatively few references to the Old Testament, but his doctrine of Scripture is clearly the standard one of complete belief therein.

There are a few other fragments and short writings from authors of this early time which do not speak so positively as these, but it must be remembered that neither they nor any of the rest of the authors quoted give any hint that the Scriptures, either Old Testament or New, are not to be trusted. Rather, the spirit of their extant remains is in full agreement with the doctrine so widely witnessed in the apostolic writings that the Holy Scriptures are true and without the slightest mistake.

When we come to the great authors of the late second century where the witness abounds, we also find full testimony to belief in a doctrine of inspiration that must be described as verbal. Irenaeus, the disciple of the aged Polycarp and therefore closely linked to the Apostle John, complains that these men, "when . . . they are confuted from the Scriptures, they turn round and accuse these same

Scriptures, as if they were not correct.”²⁸ But Irenaeus declares that they are correct in whole and in part. He objects to the fact that Marcion and Valentinus use only a part of Luke: “It follows then, as a matter of course, that these men must either receive the rest of his narrative or else reject these parts also. For no person of common sense can permit them to receive some things recounted by Luke as being true and to set others aside, as if he had not known the truth.”²⁹ He maintains that the author of Matthew was so endowed with the Holy Ghost that he, “foreseeing the corruptors,” wrote certain words and not others so as to preclude the Gnostic heresy.³⁰ He declares that the apostles after the Resurrection “were invested with power from on high when the Holy Spirit came down (upon them), were filled from all (His gifts), and had perfect knowledge.”³¹ A final quotation may be given from the many more which could be cited. He says with the humility of true faith, “If, however, we cannot discover explanations of all those things in Scripture which are made the subject of investigation, yet let us not on this account seek after any other God besides Him who really exists. For this is the greatest impiety. We should leave things of that nature to God who created us, being most properly assured that the Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God and His Spirit.”³² What good advice from the second century to the twentieth!

We close this section of our study with a few quotations from Justin Martyr, who wrote just after the middle of the second century and is thus an earlier contemporary of Irenaeus.

Commonly quoted is Justin’s description of the inspiration of “the holy men” who would “present themselves pure to the energy of the Divine Spirit, in order that the divine plectrum itself, descending from heaven, and using righteous men as an instrument like a harp or lyre, might reveal to us the knowledge of things divine and heavenly. Wherefore, as if with one mouth and one tongue, they have in succession, and in harmony with one another,

taught us both concerning God, and the creation of the world, and the formation of man," etc.³³ Note that this quotation not only gives an illustration which is by no means a part of our doctrine but also points out that the product is divine and true, without contradictions. This last point is made more explicit in another passage: "I am entirely convinced that no Scripture contradicts another; I shall admit rather that I do not understand what is recorded, and shall strive to persuade those who imagine that the Scriptures are contradictory to be rather of the same opinion as myself."³⁴ To this end he was arguing with the unbeliever Trypho.

A final quotation from Justin's first *Apology* tells of the rise of the Old Testament: "There were, then, among the Jews certain men who were prophets of God, through whom the prophetic Spirit published beforehand things that were to come to pass, ere ever they happened." These prophecies, he says, were "carefully preserved when they had been arranged in books by the prophets themselves in their own Hebrew language."³⁵ Justin then presents two or three pages of Old Testament citations predicting Christ's coming and work. A great deal of this material is equal to much that is written on the subject today, and it is all from the point of view of one who accepts without question the supernatural inspiration of the authors of Scripture so that it can be trusted entirely even in small details.

During the immediately following period of the third century our witnesses are abundant. Sanday says, "Indeed on both sides, the side of doctrine and the side of practice, the authoritative use of Scripture — the New Testament equally with the Old — underlies the whole of the Christian literature of this period. Not only might we quote it for page after page of Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Origen . . . but — what is of even more importance — the method is shared alike by orthodox writers and heretical."³⁶ We may summarize the matter by citing a quotation from Augustine a bit later, who says

of the canonical Scriptures that he "firmly believes that no one of their authors has erred in anything, in writing."³⁷

Sanday strangely tries to add a caveat that side by side with this high view was a lower opinion which he imagines to be "in closer contact with the facts."³⁸ This lower view of Scripture he finds in the fragments of Papias, the preface to Luke's Gospel, and the Muratorian Canon. His main substantiation for this idea is apparently a willful misunderstanding of what is involved in verbal inspiration. He assumes that verbal inspiration involves that the authors did not study or use sources for their work.

No one who reads his Bible at all would wish to claim that the human authors were entirely passive in the process of inspiration. God did not lay hold of a Persian to write Hebrew nor of a mystical John to write the logical Epistles of Paul. God chose John to write according to his nature, but superintended his writing. Paul, trained in the schools of Jerusalem, reflects his background, but writes only God's truth. If human industry in preparation of material precludes inspiration, then no one from Moses to the Apostle John was inspired. Of course Moses counted the Israelites before he wrote the Book of Numbers. The census was not a matter of revelation to Moses, but it is none the less true and a part of God's Word. Of course Mark took care to gather his material carefully from Peter just as Papias says, and Luke worked industriously, as he outlines in Luke 1:1-4. But hard labor is not antithetic to usefulness for God! God would probably not have chosen Paul as a vessel of inspiration and an author of Scripture if he had not been one who would labor more abundantly than all. Very few have been the theologians who have held that verbal inspiration involved a trancelike receptivity and mechanical dictation of the Word without human activity. None of the great creeds so define it. To liken the Fundamentalist view to a mechanical thing such as Mohammed claimed is only to evidence a lack of knowledge of what one's opponents believe and what the Church has so widely

held. These misconceptions are so unnecessary and yet frequent that they can only be called willful. They have been considered above.³⁹

Others have objected that such incidental details as the apostle's asking for his cloak left at Troas (II Tim. 4:13) or requesting lodging (Philem. 22) surely cannot be considered as inspired because they are too mundane. Of course this is not a positive argument, but merely an appeal to propriety in what one thinks to be a fit object of divine superintendence. And presumably the answer is that we are not the measures of the divine interest in our mundane existence. In the Old Testament the interest of God descended to ailments of the body and the handling of unclean vermin and animals in the Hebrew home. The view perhaps forgets that the God who cares for sparrows is much more concerned about warm clothing and lodging for His aged apostle. If God could superintend the arrow drawn "at a venture" which smote King Ahab "between the joints of the harness" in fulfillment of Micaiah's prophecy (II Chron. 18:33), surely He is interested in our little problems, too, for in the life of a prophet or apostle, just as in our own, it is very difficult to separate the little from the big. It was a little thing that Paul happened to be in Jerusalem the day that Stephen was stoned and held the coats of his attackers, but it left an indelible impression which God doubtless used in the apostle's conversion. As a matter of fact, the little detail about the coat left at Troas, if it be accepted as genuine and believed, furnishes the clue to the later history of Paul. It proves correct the view that he was delivered from the first Roman imprisonment, then traveled about—at least to Troas—before being captured a second time for his execution a short time after Second Timothy was written. Let us not despise the small things in the Bible or in any of God's work. Even the jots and tittles have their place. By verbal inspiration we merely mean that God superintended the process of writing so that the whole is true—the histor-

ical, the doctrinal, the mundane, the minor, and the major. The genealogies are not so ennobling as the Passion narratives, for instance, but they truly give the antecedents of Him who was the Seed of David according to the flesh, but the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ, the central subject of the whole sacred volume.

This, under various names, has been the doctrine of the Christian Church from the earliest times, such unwilling witnesses as Sanday, Brunner, and Alan Richardson being proofs. Christ and the apostles believed it. So has the Church, with the rarest of exceptions, until the rise of Modernist theology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This doctrine is by no means the hard and mechanical view it has been said to be. It has held before the Church a Book with the message of God. In a dark and sinful world the Book has rebuked kings, comforted the poor, encouraged learning, freed the downtrodden, brought peace of heart, and ennobled men for missions of service and evangelism. Its rediscovery has brought new life and power. Its neglect has resulted in darkness, war, and sin. Of course we do not worship the Bible. The caricature of "Bibliolatry" is manifestly unfair. We worship not the Book but the Christ of the Book. But the Book is the gracious instrument God has given us for the spread of His Gospel. And to that Book we do well to return for new supplies of grace and power.

Holy Bible, book divine,
Precious treasure, thou art mine;
Mine to tell me whence I came,
Mine to teach me what I am.

Christianity has always been a book religion!