

“Holy and Divine Scriptures”

An Exposition of Article Three

Article 3 - The Written Word of God

We confess that this Word of God was not sent nor delivered by the will of men, but that holy men of God spoke, being moved by the Holy Spirit, as Peter says.¹ Afterwards our God—because of the special care he has for us and our salvation—commanded his servants, the prophets and apostles, to commit this revealed Word to writing. He himself wrote with his own finger the two tables of the law.² Therefore we call such writings holy and divine Scriptures.³

¹ 2 Pet 1:21; Ex 34:27; Ps 102:18; Rev 1:11, 19 ²Ex 31:18 ³2 Tim 3:16

When we speak of the Bible as “inspired,” we do not mean that the Bible is “inspirational.” What we do mean by the term “inspired” is that the Bible is given to us by God as part of his self-revelation for the purpose of giving us a knowledge of his will (the law) as well as knowledge of how to be delivered from the guilt of our sins (the gospel). That said, we’ll address the limits of the term “inspired” momentarily.

When discussing Article Two, we made the case that as our post-Christian culture becomes increasingly hostile towards Christianity in general, and Reformed Christianity in particular, one way in which we are to respond to the unbelief around us is to personally believe those things revealed to us by God in his word and then publically confess these doctrines as a church before the watching world.

One of the most important things we must confess to the unbelieving world is that the Bible is a divinely-inspired, self-revelation of God, through the agency of various human writers. Because God has spoken to us in and through his word, we have a sure and certain foundation for our knowledge of our Creator and Redeemer. God has not left us in the dark with only our own pious opinions about religious matters. Through the words of Holy Scripture, God speaks to us, even this very day.

As Christians, our commitment to God’s word written (the Bible) sets us apart from secularists (who deny that any knowledge of God is possible). It also sets us apart from pagans and non-Christian religions in which God is supposedly known through means other than his word (i.e., intuition, personal opinion, subjective feelings, religious gurus or teachers). The living God speaks to us in his word which he breathes forth—a process we call “inspiration.” Yet, since Scripture is inspired by God, only Scripture is authoritative in matters related to doctrine (what we are to believe) and practice (how we are to live as Christians). The authority of Scripture is a topic we will address in more detail when we come to Article Five.

Since God speaks to us in his word about matters of faith and practice—but only in his word—Scripture is said to be sufficient. That is, we need no other authoritative source for doctrine such as tradition (as in Roman Catholicism) or through continuing revelation (as with the Anabaptists at the time the *Belgic*

Confession was written in 1561, or with many Pentecostals of today). The sufficiency of Scripture is addressed in Article Seven, while the collection of these inspired books is addressed in articles four and six which deal with the subject of the Canon of Scripture (why we accept some books as “inspired” and why we reject others).

Article Two of our confession deals with the two ways in which God makes himself known, general revelation and special revelation. General revelation is God’s act of revealing his eternal power and divine attributes in and through the natural order. According to the opening chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans, all men and women receive this revelation and understand it—as we saw previously, God has made us capable (the *imago Dei*) of receiving and understanding his word. Because of human sinfulness, we all attempt to suppress this truth in unrighteousness. We even go so far as to exchange God’s revealed truth for a lie (Romans 1:18-25).

Because the general revelation of God in nature is inevitably distorted by sinful men and women, it cannot lead us to a saving knowledge of God. We do not learn of the gospel, nor do we learn of the saving work of Jesus by contemplating the beauty of the earth or the wonder of human life. Natural revelation is sufficient to condemn but not sufficient to save. On the day of judgment, no one will be able to say, “I didn’t know God exists.” It is the sinful suppression of God’s general revelation which explains why people are so incurably religious and why people invent false religions almost as easily as they breathe.

Special revelation, on the other hand, is God’s revelation of himself through act and speech as recorded in Scripture. General revelation is continuous and given through natural means. Since special revelation is comprised of both God’s acts of redemption and his explanatory speech it is necessarily supernatural and connected directly to redemptive history (specific public and historical events which secure our redemption from the consequences of human guilt and sin). Unlike general revelation, which is designed to leave us without excuse for failing to worship and serve God as we should, special revelation is designed to reveal the person and work of Jesus Christ on behalf of sinners. Jesus is the Bible’s central character, even in the Old Testament, where he is revealed in type and shadow.

While Article Two of our confession speaks of the two ways in which God reveals himself, Article Three focuses upon the second way in which God reveals himself, namely through the inspiration of Scripture. God speaks to us in and through his word.

Entitled simply, “The Written Word of God,” Article Three of our confession is succinct and reads as follows: “We confess that this Word of God was not sent nor delivered by the will of men, but that holy men of God spoke, being moved by the Holy Spirit, as Peter says. Afterwards our God—because of the special care he has for us and our salvation—commanded his servants, the prophets and apostles, to commit this revealed Word to writing. He himself wrote with his own finger the two tables of the law. Therefore we call such writings holy and divine Scriptures.”

Our confession summarizes several key biblical texts which affirm that Scripture (as law and gospel), has its origins in God’s self-revelation. The Bible does not contain God’s word, nor is the Bible merely an account of God’s dealings with certain people in the past who observed God’s actions and recorded their reflections upon them—*mere* observation. Rather, the Bible is God’s word written, and while grounded in redemptive history, the Bible is God’s authoritative declaration of both his will (the law) and the saving work of Jesus Christ (the gospel). This means that God speaks to us today in the pages of his word, every bit as much as when it was first written.

While we will turn to the first biblical text cited by our confession (2 Peter 1:21) in some detail in a moment, we begin our discussion of the inspiration of Scripture with a key Old Testament text—Exodus 34:27-28. There we read, “*the LORD said to Moses, ‘Write these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.’ So he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights. He neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments.*” God revealed and then ensured the publication of his will.

Unlike the *Code of Hammurabi* or the *Magna Carta*, the law of God does not have its origin in human reflection about what *should* be right and wrong. The Ten Commandments are given by God directly to Moses, so that these “ten words” are the words of God recorded by Moses. This very point is made clear in a text such as Exodus 31:18, where we are told that God “*gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.*” Scripture has its origin in God’s self-revelation, which brings us to the subject of the inspiration of Scripture.

Understanding the nature and authority of Scripture is essential to provide us with a foundation from which to confess our faith. One aspect of God’s self-revelation, inspiration, is defined in the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* (1978) as follows:

God, who is Himself Truth and speaks truth only, has inspired Holy Scripture in order thereby to reveal Himself to lost mankind through Jesus Christ as Creator and Lord, Redeemer and Judge. Holy Scripture is God's witness to Himself. Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: It is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it affirms; obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God's pledge, in all that it promises. The Holy Spirit, Scripture's divine Author, both authenticates it to us by His inward witness and opens our minds to understand its meaning. Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God's acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God's saving grace in individual lives. The authority of Scripture is inescapably impaired if this total divine inerrancy is in any way limited or disregarded, or made relative to a view of truth contrary to the Bible's own; and such lapses bring serious loss to both the individual and the Church.¹

Perhaps the most important biblical text which affirms the Bible’s own inspiration is 2 Timothy 3:16.² In this verse Paul writes, “*All Scripture [πᾶσα γραφὴ - pasa graphe] is breathed out by God [θεόπνευστος - theopneustos] and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.*” Paul affirms the divine origin of the Scripture. They are “God-breathed.” Because the Scriptures are of

¹ According to B. B. Warfield, “Inspiration is that extraordinary, supernatural influence exerted by the Holy Ghost on the writers of the Sacred Books, by which their words were rendered also the words of God, and, therefore, perfectly infallible...[Inspiration is] a doctrine which claims that by a special, supernatural, extraordinary influence of the Holy Ghost, the Sacred writers have been guided in their writings in such a way, as while their humanity was not superseded, it was so yet dominated that their words became at the same time the words of God, and thus in every case and all alike, absolutely infallible.” B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1948), 420-22.

² There is a great deal of literature dealing with this most vital text. Deserving first mention is Warfield's massive article “God-inspired Scripture,” in *Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (245-296) which still is the definitive study of the passage.

divine origin, therefore they are profitable for divine purposes.

Paul chooses two very specific and technical terms in this verse to make this point. The term *graphe* or 'The Scriptures'³ is used in verse 16, and is related to the more technical term *grammata*, which Paul used in 2 Timothy 3:15 in reference to the fact that Timothy had been instructed from his earliest youth in the things of God from the Old Testament. The term *grammata* is not found anywhere else in the New Testament.⁴ "The *grammata* are the Books of Moses or the Pentateuch. Presupposed is the conviction of the early Church, which underlies all the Gospels, that the *grammata*, the authoritative Scriptures established among the Jews and accepted as Mosaic, bear witness to Christ."⁵ These sacred writings (the Old Testament), which Timothy possessed from his youth, were able to make him wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, precisely because they were breathed forth by God for this very purpose.

The second technical term used by Paul is *theopneustos*, which is commonly translated "inspired," but which, according to B. B. Warfield,

very distinctly does not mean 'inspired of God'....The Greek term has, however, nothing to say of inspiring or inspiration; it speaks only of a 'spiring' or 'spiration.' What it says of Scripture is, not that it is 'breathed into by God' or is the product of the Divine 'inbreathing' into its human authors, but that it is breathed out by God, 'God-breathed,' the product of the creative breath of God. In a word, what is declared by this fundamental passage is simply that the Scriptures are a Divine product, without any indication of how God has operated in producing them. No term could have been chosen, however, which would have more emphatically asserted the Divine production of Scripture than that which is here employed.⁶

As another writer points out, "it is wrong to omit the divine element from the term implied by *theo*....The expression clearly does not imply that some Scriptures are inspired, whilst others are not."⁷ In 2 Timothy 3:16, Paul makes the point as clearly as words allow that the Old Testament is not the product of the prophets of Israel personal reflection upon the things of God, but that the words of the Old Testament were breathed forth by God, for the express purpose that we might know God and his will.⁸ Throughout

³ "The noun *graphe* is used 51 times in the NT, nearly always absolutely in either the sing. or plur. In the NT it is used exclusively of Holy Scripture." See C. Brown, DNTT, 3.490, s. v. "Scripture".

⁴ Warfield, Inspiration and Authority, 133.

⁵ Gottlob Schrenk, TDNT, 1.765, s. v. *gramma/pneuma*.

⁶ Warfield, Inspiration and Authority, 132-33. Warfield also notes the very significant Old Testament background to the concept of God's breathing-out in creation. "The 'breath of God' is in Scripture just the symbol of his almighty power, the bearer of His creative word....God's breath is the irresistible outflow of His power. When Paul declares, then, that 'every Scripture,' or 'all Scripture' is the product of the Divine breath, is 'God-breathed,' he asserts with as much energy as he could employ that Scripture is the product of a specifically Divine operation" (133). See Psalm 33:6 for example.

⁷ C. Brown, DNTT, 3.490, s. v. "Scripture."

⁸ Another important point, is the extent of the "all" of V. 16. This point is debated. Warfield notes, "there is room for some difference of opinion as to the exact construction of this declaration. Shall we render 'Every Scripture' or 'All Scripture'? Shall we render 'Every [or all] Scripture is God-breathed and [therefore] profitable,' or 'Every [or all] Scripture, being God-breathed, is well profitable'? No doubt both questions are interesting....To say that every part of these Sacred Scriptures is God-breathed, is, for the main matter, all one....In both cases these Sacred Scriptures are declared to owe their value to their Divine

the Old Testament, Israel's prophets repeated spoke of bringing words from God to his people (i.e., Isaiah 20:1-6; Jeremiah 7:1-8:3; Hosea 1-3),

Based upon Paul's assertions here, we can make the following conclusions:

- (1) The production of Scripture is a divine activity. Specifically it is a divine breathing forth of what is identified as the *graphe* and probably the *grammata* of v. 15. It is *Scripture* because it is divinely breathed forth.
- (2) This divine breathing forth extends to all or to every Scripture. The extent of the canon of Scripture (the *graphe*), is determined by identifying which books have been divinely produced in this fashion. Accordingly the Old Testament is seen as the *grammata*, the "Holy Scriptures."
- (3) Because Scripture has been given by God, it is therefore profitable for teaching, etc.
- (4) This text does not describe the mechanics of divine "breathing forth"—only the fact of the matter.

Another very important passage which deals with the inspiration of Scripture is 2 Peter 1:19-21, also cited by our confession. Unlike 2 Timothy 3:16, Peter describes the process of inspiration, or the breathing forth of the Scriptures. Beginning in verse 16, Peter describes the factual nature of the gospel account as follows: "*we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.*" Peter flatly denies that he followed myths, but forcefully maintains that he was an eyewitness to the ministry of Christ. He had even seen the transfiguration and heard the voice from heaven. Because of this, says Peter, "*we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed*" (v. 19). When we speak of the Bible as inspired then, we mean, in part, that the Bible is factually true.

Peter adds to this that the entirety of the Old Testament is prophetic—it is, it is speech from God. Says Peter, "*no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation (pasa propheta graphais), no prophecy (prophatia) was ever produced by the will of man . . . For men spoke from God as they were carried along (φερόμενοι - pharamenoi) by the Holy Spirit*" (v. 20-21). As Warfield observes, "what Peter has to say of this 'every prophecy of Scripture' - the exact equivalent, it will be observed, in this case of Paul's 'every Scripture' (2 Tim. iii.16) - applies to the whole of Scripture in all its parts."⁹

This means that no prophecy—Peter likely considered all of the Old Testament to be "prophecy" in a broad sense—came about by the prophet's own private interpretation. Prophecy is not the result of human investigation into the nature of things, or the product of its writer's own reflection about his personal religious aspirations. "This is as much to say it is of Divine gift....There is, first of all, the emphatic denial that prophecy - that is to say, on the hypothesis upon which we are working, Scripture owes its

origin." Warfield concludes by indicating the preferred translation: 'Every Scripture, seeing that it is God-breathed, is well profitable.' In that case, what the apostle asserts is that the Sacred Scriptures, in their every passage - for it is just "passage of Scripture" which "Scripture" in this case distributive use of it signifies - is the product of the creative breath of God, and because of this Divine origination, is of supreme value for all holy purposes. See, Warfield, Inspiration and Authority, 134.

⁹ Warfield, Inspiration and Authority, 136.

origin to human initiative.¹⁰

The biblical writers affirm that the source of all true prophecy is God. Says Warfield,

there is the equally emphatic assertion [by Peter] that its source lies in God; it was spoken by men, indeed, but the men who spoke it `spoke from God.' And a remarkable clause is here inserted, and thrown forward in the sentence that stress may fall on it, which tells us how it could be that men, in speaking, should speak not from themselves, but from God: it was `as borne' - it is the same word which was rendered `was brought down' above, and might possibly rendered `brought' here - `by the Holy Spirit' that they spoke. Speaking thus under the determining influence of the Holy Spirit, the things they spoke were not from themselves, but from God. Here is as direct an assertion of the Divine origin of Scriptures as that of 2 Tim iii.16. We are advanced somewhat in our understanding of how God has produced the Scriptures.¹¹

In 2 Peter 1:18-21, we get a much clearer sense of what it means for Scripture to be “God-breathed.”

It was through the instrumentality of men who `spoke from Him.' More specifically, it was through an operation of the Holy Ghost on these men which is described as `bearing' them....What is `borne' is taken up by the `bearer' and conveyed by the `bearer's goal, not its own. The men who spoke from God are here declared, therefore, to have been taken up by the Holy Spirit and brought by His power to the goal of His choosing. The things which they spoke under this operation of the Spirit were therefore His things, not theirs. And that is the reason which is assigned why `the prophetic word' is so sure.¹²

The reason that the message of the prophet is certain is because it is God who gives the prophet his message, and takes him (carries him along) to God's appointed goal.

From 2 Peter 1:16-21, we can draw the following conclusions:

- (1) All true prophecy is given by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, true prophecy is authoritative, infallible, and inerrant. True prophecy is without error.
- (2) All true prophecy of Scripture, while given by God, does not eliminate the historical circumstances, unique personality, or the mental faculties of the prophet.
- (3) Prophecy—likely in context, all of Scripture—is given by God to humanity. The distinguishing characteristic of true prophecy is that it does not have its origin in the “will of men” but comes from God.

While the divine element in the inspiration of Scripture is clear in 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:18-21, we also need to be aware that the human element is not eliminated by this process. The prophet is said to be “carried along,” not “carried away.” This is why we speak of inspiration as “organic” or “confluent,”

¹⁰ Warfield, Inspiration and Authority, 136.

¹¹ Warfield, Inspiration and Authority, 136-37.

¹² Warfield, Inspiration and Authority, 137.

a geographical term which refers to two streams or rivers which merge so as to form a single stream or river. God is giving us his words through human agency in such a way as to ensure that what men who are “carried along” record is the “word of God” without eliminating or sublimating the personality traits of the prophet-writer.

Given the divine and human properties of Scripture, a number of theologians have made comparisons between the divine and human elements in the Bible with the incarnation of our Lord, who was fully human and fully God, a subject to which we will turn in some detail in Articles Eighteen and Nineteen of our confession which deal with the incarnation and the two natures of Christ. While the analogy between the human and divine elements in the Bible and the incarnation of our Lord can be pressed too far, nevertheless, it is important for us to be clear that even as our Lord was fully human and fully divine, so too, when we speak of the Bible as God-breathed, we do not mean that the Bible was given via some form of mechanical dictation in which the individual personalities and historical circumstances of the biblical writers was somehow overridden by God.

God speaks through the means of human agency so that what the biblical writers produce is not only divinely inspired, but is produced in such a way that we can say that the Bible is truly a human book. The Bible did not fall from heaven, bound in leather with gold leaf on the edges. It was breathed forth by God, through the agency of human writers with different personalities and under vastly different historical circumstances. Although the Bible is God-breathed, it is also a truly human book.

Therefore, if we do not mean by the term “inspired” that the Bible is an “inspirational book,” what then do we mean when we speak of the “inspiration of Scripture”? Based upon the Bible’s repeated assertion of its own divine inspiration, we can assert that the Biblical doctrine of inspiration contains the following elements:

- 1). Inspiration is one mode of revelation. God speaks in his word, but a sunset merely points us to a creator.
- 2). Inspiration is a divine activity of God the Holy Spirit. Scripture has its origin in God’s self-revelation, not in human religious aspirations.
- 3). Inspiration extends to the very words (not merely the ideas) of Scripture. Inspiration is said to be verbal. God speaks in the words and propositions of Holy Scripture.
- 4). Inspiration extends to all parts of all the canonical books. It is said to be “plenary,” or fully inspired. The Bible does not merely contain the word of God. It is the word of God written. The limits of the Canon is not set by the church, but by God. Only those writings which are God-breathed are Scripture, and therefore, “canonical.”
- 5). Scripture denies a sacred/secular dualism in terms of its own inspiration—the claim that the Bible is only inspired when speaking of matters of faith and practice. The Bible never affirms that only certain things it contains are inspired. Rather, it asserts that all parts of all the canonical books are inspired.
- 6). The personalities and faculties of the human writers are not eliminated in the process of inspiration, but are supernaturally guided, so that the words the writers produce are not their own words about God, but God’s words to us through the faculties, and reflecting the personalities

and life experiences of these same human writers.

7). Because these are the words of God, these words come to us with the authority of their author. Inspiration necessitates authority—a point made in Article Five of our confession and our subject for next time.

8). Because God cannot err, and the Bible is the very word of God, the Bible cannot err in all that it affirms, whether that be matters of history, geography, or science. Inspiration necessitates inerrancy. If the Bible errs, God errs. While our confession does not speak of inerrancy—no one living during the 1560's when our confession was written, challenged the factual accuracy of the Bible as they do today. But when the confession speaks of Scripture coming from God, inerrancy is at the very least implied.

9). The English term “inspiration” ultimately fails to do justice to the process by which God produces the Biblical text. Nevertheless, inspiration is the widely accepted theological term for the divine production of the sacred text. Properly speaking, *Theopneustos* (2 Timothy 3:16) means God-breathed, not “inspired.”

10). Jesus Christ, as God incarnate, affirmed the divine origin and therefore, the authority, infallibility, and inerrancy of the Sacred Scriptures.

As Reformed Christians we gladly and boldly affirm the same view of Scripture that Jesus did. As B. B. Warfield has wisely counseled us,

We believe this doctrine of the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures primarily because it is the doctrine which Christ and his apostles believed, and which they have taught us. It may sometimes seem difficult to take our stand frankly by the side of Christ and his apostles. It will always be found to be safe.¹³

It should be abundantly clear from this very brief discussion that the Bible represents itself as the very “oracles of God.” What the Bible says, God says, because God speaks in his word. He still speaks today in his word. He reveals his will, exposes our sin, and shows us a savior in the person and work of Jesus Christ. We must believe that God speaks in his word, because it is God-breathed. We must confess this wonderful truth before the unbelieving world around us. In the Bible—but only in the Bible—we have the sure and certain self-revelation of God. As our confession puts it, “we confess that this Word of God was not sent nor delivered by the will of men, but that holy men of God spoke, being moved by the Holy Spirit, as Peter says. Afterwards our God—because of the special care he has for us and our salvation—commanded his servants, the prophets and apostles, to commit this revealed Word to writing. He himself wrote with his own finger the two tables of the law. Therefore we call such writings holy and divine Scriptures.”

This is what we must believe and what we must confess to the unbelieving world around us. It is in this book, and only in this book, that we learn of Jesus Christ (the word incarnate), the only savior of sinners and the only mediator between sinful men and women and the holy God.

¹³ Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority*, 128.