

# The Inspiration of Scripture - Trinitarian Bible Society

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This article addresses three matters concerning the vitally important subject of the inspiration of Scripture. In the first place, it insists that Scripture is the inspired Word of God. Secondly, it shows that Scripture came through the instrumentality of men, and that not by a process of dictation. And thirdly, it demonstrates that the view of human instrumentality here advocated is nothing other than the Reformed consensus over the centuries.

Scripture is the inspired Word of God

Inspiration is *divine*. 'All scripture is given by inspiration of God' (2 Timothy 3.16). So much is Scripture of God that it is His breath, for the word translated 'inspiration' means 'breathed out'. The words of the Bible have been breathed onto its pages by the Most High. The writers of Scripture wrote out what was breathed out by God.

Scripture itself emphasizes this: 'Holy men of God spake *as they were* moved by the Holy Ghost' (2 Peter 1.21). Inspiration is a divine process, for the human writers of Scripture spoke only '*as they were* moved by the Holy Ghost'. When the Spirit moved, they spoke; when He did not move, they did not speak. The Bible is the Word of God, for there is nothing in it but that it is there by His moving.

The Greek word here translated 'moved' appears also in Acts 27.15,17 for the ship that was 'driven' in the wind. The sailors no longer tried to steer the ship, but simply let her be driven by the wind. It was no longer their will trying to direct the ship, but it was the will of the wind that determined her direction. So with inspiration, 'For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man' (2 Peter 1.21). In this sense then, the Bible is not a production of the will of man but a production of the will of God. It is God-breathed in such a sense that God's determination is the wind that has driven it and directed it and moved it. It is God's Word, and His servants were 'borne along' upon the breath of His own irresistible purpose.

One is reminded of Ezekiel's vision, where the wheels moved only when the spirit of the living creature moved: 'And when the living creatures went, the wheels went by them: and when the living creatures were lifted up from the earth, the wheels were lifted up. Whithersoever the spirit was to go, they went, thither *was their* spirit to go; and the wheels were lifted up over against them: for the spirit of the living creature was in the wheels. When those went, *these* went; and when those stood, *these* stood; and when those were lifted up from the earth, the wheels were lifted up over against them: for the spirit of the living creature *was* in the wheels' (Ezekiel 1.19–21). How clearly this illustrates the process of inspiration! The holy penmen wrote only as they were moved by the Spirit of inspiration.

Inspiration is *plenary*. The *whole* Bible is inspired of God and breathed out by Him. Which Scripture is given by God? Just some part of it? No, 'All scripture is given by inspiration of God'. What a rebuke to the neo-orthodox men, who think that they can discern in the Bible what is God's Word and what is merely man's word. They are willing to admit that God's Word is *contained* within Scripture but not that Scripture is—in its entirety—God's Word. How wrong they are! The Bible is the Word of God, the whole of it, from its beginning in Genesis 1.1 to its end in Revelation 22.21.

Inspiration is *verbal*. It extends to the very words used in Scripture. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: 'Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth' (1 Corinthians 2.13). It is not simply that the writers were given inspired doctrines, thoughts and ideas, and then left free to express those doctrines, thoughts and ideas in their own unaided words. On the contrary, inspiration is so verbal that it extends to every jot and tittle, every least dot and shortest stroke.

Anything less than this divine, plenary and verbal inspiration is not the inspiration of the Bible. There is one Author throughout Scripture, a Divine Author who determined the very words as well as the thoughts. In the fullest possible sense, Scripture is the Word of God. It is God who speaks to us through it. Therefore we are to receive the Bible, 'not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God' (1 Thessalonians 2.13). This is why the Westminster Confession speaks of 'the majesty of the style' pertaining to the whole of Scripture. The majestic style of divinity pervades the whole.

But does this mean that men were not involved? Far from it.

Scripture came through the instrumentality of men

Divine inspiration was by human instrumentality. 'Holy men of God spake ...' *Men* spoke. We said that God speaks in Scripture. Indeed, and He so speaks as if no man spoke at all. But the Bible also says that men spoke. As just one example of many, the Saviour said that Psalm 110 is spoken by David, 'And David himself saith in the book of Psalms' (Luke 20.42). But the book of Psalms is God's book! It is God's Word! In it, and throughout it, God speaks! Even the very words and expressions are God's! Nevertheless, 'David himself saith'. God saith—and David saith. Thus saith the Lord—and thus saith David. How

wonderful is the Bible, in which both God and men speak! Inspiration was supernatural; it was miraculous. In a glorious and incomprehensible manner, men wrote not simply their own word, but the Word of God. Nevertheless, they, the men, wrote that Word, for it came through human instrumentality.

But just *how* did the men write God's Word? No full explanation can be given, any more than it can for the process by which the Saviour turned water into wine. Like that, inspiration was a miraculous process. It is sad that a rare few have attempted to detract from this miracle by taking a very mechanical view of human instrumentality, whereby the writers are rendered nothing more than mindless and characterless machines. They are viewed not as men but as automatons, and not as penmen but as mere pens. This is called the dictation theory, for its advocates argue that the process is like the company executive dictating a letter to the secretary, or the schoolteacher dictating an exercise to his pupils. The secretary or pupil simply writes down word-for-word what the executive or teacher says. The final result has nothing of the secretary or the pupil about it at all. Even an impersonal machine could do the same. This dictationist view is totally unacceptable.

It is unacceptable because the writers wrote as men, not as machines—'Holy men of God spake'. God could have written the whole of Scripture with His own finger, as He did the Ten Commandments upon the tables of the law, but the fact is that He did not. He chose rather to use men as instruments. And He used men as men, so that they wrote as rational beings, with faculties of understanding and affection. Sometimes they received revelations that they did not fully understand. Even then, when they came to record those revelations by the process of inspiration, they wrote as responsible, rational, thinking, feeling men.

The dictation theory is unacceptable because inspiration *involved* the human writers in a way that simple dictation never could. As an instance, a mere machine or a secretary could never write as the psalmist did in Psalm 45.1, 'My heart is inditing a good matter: I speak of the things which I have made touching the king: my tongue *is* the pen of a ready writer'. The psalmist's own heart was boiling or bubbling up with the good matter of the psalm. This was no mere dictation, but the expression of the psalmist's own exercises of heart. He was not a mere secretary! Even more pointedly, the psalmist asserted that he was speaking of the things which he—himself—had made. Never—ever—could a mere secretary or pupil speak of making anything. This one text is sufficient to silence all the holders of a dictation theory, and leave their theory broken upon the anvil of Scripture itself.

The dictationist view is unacceptable in the light of 2 Peter 1.21, when it says, '*as they were* moved', or borne along. At first sight the reference to the ship in the storm might seem to support the idea of dictation. But on a more careful examination it does not. For although Paul's ship was moved and borne along only as the wind moved it, whereby God who was in control of the wind was in complete control of the ship, nevertheless the ship moved *as a ship*. It was borne along as itself, and according to its nature. It moved from side to side in the powerful waves as *it* would move, not as a piece of driftwood would have

moved. It was likewise with inspiration. Yes, the breath of the Spirit of God was in complete control of the writers as *they* were borne along, but they were borne along as they would be borne along, according to their nature. The penmen of Scripture were moved as rational creatures, in accordance with the faculties of their own humanity. They were moved as free agents; they wrote freely, yet God controlled them fully. They wrote only as moved by God, but nevertheless they wrote as men.

In addition, the dictation theory is unacceptable because each writer wrote not only as a man, but also as his own man. Inspiration employed the human personalities as well as the human faculties of the writers. Although human error was suppressed, human personality was not suppressed in the process. Thus the different *styles* of the different writers are apparent to every reader. Paul writes as Paul, with Paul's character and personality, all coloured by Paul's background and experiences, and fully using Paul's gifts and graces. And then Peter writes with his own style, not with Paul's; and Peter's character, background, experiences, gifts and graces are evident, and not Paul's. This tells us immediately that inspiration's use of the instrumentality of men was no mere dictation. For if an executive used two secretaries for dictation purposes, the resulting pair of letters would bear exactly the same style—the executive's. There would be nothing of either secretary in it at all, and no distinction in the style of the writing. The only style impressed on the result would be the executive's. Likewise with two competent pupils—their exercises would reflect no difference of style. Yet Scripture, although it bears the impress of divinity throughout its pages, nevertheless bears also the different impresses of the different human writers. They were not mere secretaries or pupils writing only dictated words.

Think again of the storm in the Mediterranean, but think of two different ships caught in exactly the same wind and storm. Both are borne along in the wind, and neither can resist it, both being in its absolute control. Nevertheless, the one ship would manifest different characteristics as it was borne along from the other. It would be moved as it would be moved, according to its bulk and shape and condition, and so on. And the other would be moved as it would be moved, according to its various characteristics. Although both ships would be moved in the wind's total control, yet they would still manifest their own styles of moving. This is all we contend for when we reject the theory of dictation. The wonderful miracle of inspiration is that God moved Paul to write as Paul would write, and Peter as Peter would write, not as impersonal machines, but according to their own personalities. And so the result bears out their human characteristics, except for sin and error. Their own individuality, far from being stifled and suppressed, has been allowed to manifest itself.

The advocates of the dictation theory fear that to speak of the personal styles of the human writers detracts from the majestic style of divinity. But does the employment of the human writers' personal characteristics detract from the divine character of the Scriptures? No it does not. Lying behind the dictationist's fear is a too simplistic view of God's dealings. For example, whilst we hold entirely to divine sovereignty, we rightly condemn all forms of hyper-Calvinism which deny human responsibility. Does human responsibility detract from

divine sovereignty? Not at all; and neither does human instrumentality detract from divine inspiration. In the mystery of divine providence, men think and act freely, yet every thought and deed is predetermined and governed by God so as to accomplish His will. The use of human instruments does not take away from the marvel of providence; on the contrary, it magnifies it. So with inspiration.

Says Gausson, 'The abundance of humanity to be found in the Scriptures, far from compromising their divine inspiration, is only one farther mark of their divinity'.<sup>1</sup> To adapt Warfield's well-known illustration, the light of the sun streaming through a stained-glass window does not cease to be light because it is now coloured by the different panes of glass. So God's Word does not cease to be His Word because it is coloured with the different styles of the human writers.

The dictation theory fails to acknowledge that not only the actual writing of Scripture, but also the whole lives of the writers until that point, were all under the sovereign disposition of God. For example, it was always the will of God that the Epistle to the Romans should be written in the very style in which it was written. For that purpose then, in all the great events and smallest details of Paul's life and experience, the Lord was preparing him to be that very writer. Thus E. J. Young writes, '[God's] work of providence and His special work of inspiration should be regarded as complementing one another'.<sup>2</sup> Warfield reasons: 'What if the colours of the stained-glass window have been designed by the architect for the express purpose of giving to the light that floods the cathedral precisely that tone and quality it receives from them?'<sup>3</sup> It is this marvellous designing and accomplishing work of God that the dictation theory denies.

#### The Reformed consensus

The consensus among Reformed theologians has always been against the dictation theory. To quote Charles Hodge, 'The Church has never held what has been stigmatized as the mechanical theory of inspiration'.<sup>4</sup> Another author states, 'Some Lutheran divines might be given as appearing to countenance the dictation theory, but it is unfair to charge orthodox Reformed divines with such a theory'.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless it has been suggested by some that the older Reformed writers did hold dictationist views. Now we acknowledge that some of them, such as Calvin, Turretin, Owen, Boston and Haldane, used the word 'dictation'. However, we absolutely deny that they held to a purely mechanical concept of the process of inspiration. Rather, they were using the word 'dictation' simply to emphasize that there is nothing in Scripture but what God willed to be there, that is, it is all there by His authoritative dictate. Although not mechanically dictated, the resulting words are as much the words of God as if they had been mechanically dictated. They were speaking of the result, not the process, of inspiration.

One passage alone from Calvin's *Institutes* proves that he accepted that the different styles of the human writers are found in Scripture:

Indeed, I admit that some of the prophets had an elegant and clear, even brilliant, manner of speaking, so that their eloquence yields nothing to secular writers; and by such examples the Holy Spirit wished to show that he did not lack eloquence while he elsewhere used a rude and unrefined style. But whether you read David, Isaiah, and the like, whose speech flows sweet and pleasing, or Amos the herdsman, Jeremiah, and Zechariah, whose harsher style savours of rusticity, that majesty of the Spirit of which I have spoken will be evident everywhere.<sup>6</sup>

According to Calvin, the idea of accepting human styles does not in the least take away from the divine style of Scripture.

Calvin's introductory comments to Paul's Epistle to Philemon are incompatible with the dictation theory:

The singular loftiness of the mind of Paul, though it may be seen to greater advantage in his other writings which treat of weightier matters, is also attested by this Epistle, in which, while he handles a subject otherwise low and mean, he rises to God with his wonted elevation ... He discourses about Christian forbearance with such ability ... He demeans himself so modestly and humbly, that nowhere else is the meekness of his temper painted in a more lively manner.

There is no room for dictation here. Paul's own mind, ability and humility are all apparent in his writing. And this was no style given him for that time alone; it was the life character of the man.

Likewise, Turretin did not use the word 'dictation' to signify a purely mechanical concept whereby the personalities and styles of the human writers would be suppressed, as the following quotation makes clear:

Yea, it adds great weight and authority to the apostolic writings that they wrote in different places, for various reasons and on different occasions, in a different style and method to different persons and yet so consistent with each other.<sup>7</sup>

Owen's overriding emphasis was upon the divine nature and aspects of Scripture:

Thus is it from God—entirely from him. As to the doctrine contained in it, and the words wherein that doctrine is delivered, it is wholly his; what *that* speaks, *he* speaks himself.<sup>8</sup>

Did this lead Owen to adopt the dictation theory and so to deny the individual styles of the human instruments? Not at all. Although he said of the penmen,

They were so guided, that their words were not their own, but immediately supplied unto them,

Nevertheless he also said,

Their mind and understanding were used in the choice of words, (whence arise all the differences—that is, in their manner of expression ... ).<sup>9</sup>

Again,

We may also grant, and do, that they [the sacred writers] used their own abilities of mind and understanding in the choice of words and expressions: so the Preacher ‘sought to find out acceptable words,’ (Ecclesiastes 12.10). But the Holy Spirit, who is more intimate unto the minds and skill of men than they are themselves, did so guide, act, and operate in them, as that the words they fixed upon were as directly and certainly from him, as if they had been spoken to them by an audible voice.<sup>10</sup>

While he considered that ‘The variety [of styles] intended ariseth mostly from the variety of the subject-matters treated of,’ nevertheless,

The Holy Ghost in his work on the minds of men cloth not put a force upon them, nor act them any otherwise than they are in their own natures, and with their present endowments and qualifications, meet to be acted and used ... The words, therefore, which he suggests unto them are such as they are accustomed unto, and he causeth them to make use of such expressions as were familiar unto themselves. So he that useth diverse seals maketh different impressions, though the guidance of them all be equal and the same; and he that toucheth skilfully several musical instruments, variously tuned, maketh several notes of music.<sup>11</sup>

Owen would certainly not accept the use of Balaam’s ass to illustrate the process of inspiration. Men were used as men, their own men, not as machines contrary to their nature.

Boston wrote,

The writers were inspired by the Spirit, who guided their hearts and pens; he dictated, and they wrote; so that it is his word, and not theirs.<sup>12</sup>

Did he hold a mechanical view of inspiration then since he used the word ‘dictated’? Most certainly he did not. For he explains,

This inspiration was extended not only to the things themselves expressed, but to the words wherein they were expressed, though agreeable to the natural style and manner of each writer.<sup>13</sup>

Again,

He did not give them the matter to put in their own words, but put the words in their hearts too, but in a manner suited to their native style.<sup>14</sup>

According to Boston, God was not at the very moment of inspiration giving the writers a style altogether different or new from their own, but rather using their existing style. We insist upon this. See how incompatible with the dictation theory is the following statement of Boston:

The matter of their writing was from him ... Some things were matters of pure revelation, that could not be known otherwise ... These things they had by immediate suggestion. Some things they might have by other records, their own judgment, or memory. In these the Spirit of the Lord infallibly guided them what to choose and refuse, strengthened their judgment and memories, so that they could not mistake.<sup>15</sup>

Secretaries and pupils do not use their own judgment and memories, much less do machines.

Although Robert Haldane uses the word 'dictate' in the following quotation, evidently no mechanical theory is contemplated:

The style that God was pleased to employ was used, and the instruments were such as that style was natural to, flowing, like the words, with their full consent, and according to the particular tone of their minds. The style of the Scriptures is the characteristic style of the different writers; but God is the author of it. The style is as truly God's as the matter; for if he has employed the style of different writers, he has likewise employed their expressions, thought, reasonings, and arguments. God did not leave them to the operation of their own mind, but he has employed the operations of their mind in his word. The Holy Spirit could dictate to them his own words in such a way that they would also be their own words, uttered with the understanding.<sup>16</sup>

For while it is evident to all, that there is a certain characteristic distinction of style, that pervades the whole of the Scriptures, and sufficiently attests that they are the work of the same author, it is equally certain that each one of the writers is distinguished from the rest by a style peculiar to himself.<sup>17</sup>

A whole battalion of Reformed writers may be summoned to add their testimony as a bulwark against the dictation theory of inspiration. It will be noticed that as understanding of the doctrine has crystallized, against much opposition, the word 'dictation' has come to be studiously avoided, to prevent confusion. So we should avoid its use in our own day. That Warfield and Hodge were in full agreement with this Reformed consensus is plain enough from what has already been said.

Robert Shaw, in his standard work on the Westminster Confession, quotes Stevenson with approval:

Though the inspired penmen were under infallible direction, both in regard of the sentiments to be communicated by them, and the phraseology best adapted to express

those sentiments; yet the Holy Spirit, for wise reasons, seems to have accommodated his suggestions, so far as relates to mere style, to the age in which they wrote, and their respective talents for composition.<sup>18</sup>

Chalmers wrote,

It is thus that each prophet and historian and apostle of Scripture, preserves his own characteristic and complexional variety of style and manner.<sup>19</sup>

Cunningham, Bannerman and Candlish all followed the same path. Hugh Martin agreed;

The plan and condescension of God being such that He has accomplished or secured His own authorship of Holy Scripture through the instrumentality of the authorship of men, whom He reduced not to the level of machines, but made them real and intelligent fellow-workers with God.<sup>20</sup>

Ryle's view is most clear:

I abhor the 'mechanical' theory of inspiration. I dislike the idea that men like Moses and St. Paul were no better than organ-pipes, employed by the Holy Ghost, or ignorant secretaries or amanuenses who wrote by dictation what they did not understand. I admit nothing of the kind. I believe that in some marvellous manner the Holy Ghost made use of the reason, the memory, the intellect, the style of thought, and the peculiar mental temperament of each writer of the Scriptures.<sup>21</sup>

Berkhof agrees:

But in view of what we find in Scripture this [the dictation theory] can hardly be true. They ... impressed upon their writings their own particular style.<sup>22</sup>

Many others could be added, but we shall close with an altogether conclusive and especially beautiful quote from the Rev. Donald Beaton writing in the fourth volume of the *Free Presbyterian Magazine*.

The writers were no mere machines, but each faculty was in full exercise; so that Paul writes as Paul, and not as John, and *vice versa*, each retaining his individuality, though all inspired by the same Spirit. The Holy Spirit passing over them as a wind passing over a forest consisting of different kinds of trees—each tree gives forth its own sound, though it is the same wind that is passing over the forest.<sup>23</sup>

On this we take our stand: Scripture is by inspiration of God, but by the real instrumentality of men. 'Holy men of God spake as *they were* moved by the Holy Ghost'.

*First printed in Quarterly Record 532. Reprinted from the Free Presbyterian Magazine, with kind permission. Online edition last updated 12 June 2026.*

▼ Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> L. Gaussen, *The Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures* (Chicago, IL, USA: Moody Press, 1949), p. 57.

<sup>2</sup> E. J. Young, *Thy Word is Truth* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth, 1963), p. 70.

<sup>3</sup> B. B. Warfield, *Works* (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Baker Book House, 1981), 1.102.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 1.156f.

<sup>5</sup> J. R. M., *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 12, p. 417.

<sup>6</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, J. T. McNeill, ed., F. L. Battles, trans. (Philadelphia, PA, USA: The Westminster Press, 1960), I, VIII, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, J. T. Dennison, ed., G. M. Giger, trans. (Phillipsburg, PA, USA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1992), 1.61.

<sup>8</sup> John Owen, *Works*, W. H. Goold, ed. (Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth, 1967), 3.144.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.305.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.145.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.144f.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.19.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.22.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.59.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.58.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Haldane, *The Authenticity and Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures* (Edinburgh, Scotland: William Whyte and Co., 1832), p. 117.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Shaw, *The Reformed Faith* (Inverness, Scotland: Christian Focus, 1974), p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Chalmers, *Works* (Glasgow, Scotland: William Collins, n.d.), IV.377.

<sup>20</sup> Hugh Martin, *Inspiration of Scripture* (Inverness, Scotland: Free Presbyterian, 1964), pp. 33f.

<sup>21</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Is All Scripture Inspired?* (London, England: Wm. Hum, 1891), pp.36–39.

<sup>22</sup> L. Berkhof, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth, 1980), p. 17.

<sup>23</sup> Donald Beaton, 'The Inspiration of the Scriptures', *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 4, p. 95.