

## The Reformed Doctrine of Inspiration - what it is.\*

By Hugh M. Cartwright

The title refers to the inspiration of the Bible, the holy book from which the Christian faith is derived and in which it is expounded. The Reformed doctrine of inspiration explains how we are justified in regarding the Bible in its entirety as the Word of God, so that we can be sure that, wherever we turn in this book, God is speaking to us.

### 1. Why is this teaching described as the Reformed Doctrine of Inspiration?

By the *Reformed* doctrine is meant the doctrine of the Churches of the Reformation, particularly the doctrine of the Reformed Churches found, for example, in our *Westminster Confession of Faith* and other Confessions related to it. The term *Reformed* distinguishes this doctrine from that of Romanism and from those of what may for convenience be called liberal Protestantism and liberal Evangelicalism. We claim that the Bible's own doctrine concerning its inspiration is found in the Reformed statements and not in Romanism, liberal Protestantism or liberal Evangelicalism.

It may be alleged that the credal statements of Romanism teach the inspiration of the Bible, with whatever measure of ambiguity the Council of Trent dealt with the subject. But as in the case of other doctrines held by Romanism, the truth is perverted and effectively denied by the error associated with it. The definitive place given to the Roman Church and to tradition, even if it were confined to an alleged interpretation of Scripture, denies in effect the unique authority, clarity and sufficiency belonging to Scripture in virtue of the fact that it alone is the inspired Word of God.

A variety of views may be found in liberal Protestantism and Evangelicalism. Some deny completely any divine revelation or inspiration - the Bible is just a record of some men's search for God or the ultimate reality. Others admit that God revealed himself to chosen men but claim that He left them to communicate that revelation, or the fruit of their reflection on it, as best they could themselves. Others allow for varying degrees of inspiration, some suggesting that parts of the Bible are inspired by God and other parts are the products of the research or reflection of the writers. Some distinguish between the Word of God and the Bible and claim that the Bible is not the Word of God, though it may testify to the Word of God and things written in the Bible can become the Word of God to readers - there may be a kind of "inspiration" for the reader though not for the writer.

People holding some of these views may subscribe to the formula that the Word of God is *contained* in the Scriptures, meaning that it can be found there along with other elements which are not the Word of God. It is clear from the teaching of the Westminster Divines that, when the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (answer 2) uses the expression "the Word of God, which is contained in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments", it means that only in the inspired Scriptures can we hear the infallible word of God - that it is not found in the Apocrypha or tradition of the Romanist, in the inner voice of the mystic or in any extra-biblical "revelation". In all of these cases man sits in judgement on the Bible; and what, if anything, is the Word of God is determined either by the "infallible" Church, the critical scholar or the inward consciousness of the reader.

The Reformed doctrine of inspiration is in keeping with the whole scheme of Reformed doctrine, which is centred upon God, who is "a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth" (*The Shorter Catechism*, answer 4) - whose sovereignty finds expression in the revelation of Himself as a God of mercy to His people. God not only purposed their redemption but has done everything necessary for its accomplishment and application. This includes providing the infallible Word through which, by regeneration and the teaching of His Holy Spirit, they come to know Him and the truth concerning Him. The inspiration of men to record infallibly the revelation of God's grace is as much a fact in the scheme of redemption as any other revealed fact. Like every other fact in the scheme of redemption it emphasises that salvation is of the Lord, that the initiative and the power in every aspect of salvation belong to Him. The doctrine of inspiration fits in with the supernatural, God-centred character of the Reformed Faith. It is perhaps significant that, as a matter of historical fact, it was within the Reformed, or Calvinistic, wing of the Reformation Church, rather than the Lutheran, that prominence was given to

Scripture alone "as an objective standard of truth and source of authority" (James Bannerman, *Inspiration*, p.136).

## 2. What is the Reformed Doctrine of Inspiration?

Two closely related but separate works of God must be noted at this point - revelation and inspiration. We are dependent upon God's *revelation* of Himself for all the knowledge we have of God. And we are dependent upon God's *inspiration* of the writers of Scripture for the infallible and unerring communication of that revelation to us. James Bannerman summed up the relation between revelation and inspiration: "A supernatural communication of truth from God is a *revelation*; the supernatural transference of the truth to the spoken or written word is *inspiration*" (*Inspiration*, p.151).

God can only be known in so far as He reveals Himself. Man cannot find out God by his own searching. *Revelation* of God's goodness, wisdom and power, sufficient to leave man without excuse, has been given in the light of nature and in the works of creation and providence, but that revelation is not sufficient to give the knowledge of God and of His will which is necessary for salvation. If men are to know God as Saviour, it is necessary that He make Himself known. God made known to chosen men what He intended to reveal of Himself. (See *Westminster Confession* 1:1)

*Inspiration* is God's method of ensuring that those, to whom He revealed Himself and the mystery of His saving purpose, communicated that revelation precisely as He wished it to be communicated. It is something very different from the "inspiration" felt by poets. It is something other than the gracious enlightenment which is given by God to all whom He purposes to save. Recording what God revealed was not left to the natural, or even the gracious, abilities of men. God took steps to ensure that not only were His revealed thoughts conveyed to us in a generally accurate way, but in words which precisely communicated what was in His mind. "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man; but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Pet 1:20,21). They were not left to interpret as best they could what God revealed to them, but God moved them - carried them along - in such a way that the words they used give the precise record of His revelation which God intended.

Had good men been left to themselves to communicate the revelation God gave them, we would have a human, fallible account and could not be sure of the divine truth of what was written. But God gave them not merely the thoughts, but also the words, which convey these God-given thoughts in the best possible way, so that when we read their words we are reading the very words of God. They were the mouth through which God spoke His own words. The Holy Spirit of God so controlled the writers of Scripture that their words were the words spoken by the Holy Spirit. All of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation - in its words as well as its thoughts - is the product of a supernatural work of God which ensures that it is inerrant, infallible, wholly trustworthy.

The Bible was written by men, not by machines. The circumstances, experiences and characteristics of these men come through in many of their writings. Even the style of one is different from that of another. When they wrote they were generally exercising their own faculties, although there were times when they wrote things by the direction of God which were well beyond their own comprehension. That is why Peter could speak about "the salvation of your souls, of which salvation the prophets have inquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you: searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow. Unto whom it was revealed, that not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister the things, which are now reported unto you by them that have preached the gospel unto you with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven; which things the angels desire to look into" (1 Pet 1:9-12).

But the men, their circumstances, characteristics, experiences and faculties were prepared by God. God made Moses what he was, and used Moses to write the law. God made Paul what he was, and used Paul to write his various epistles. God took these men whom He had prepared and carried them along supernaturally so that they wrote exactly what He intended them to write. It was their writing, but it was God's words that were written.

God the Holy Spirit brought directly to bear on the writers of Scripture a divine influence which ensured that, as long as they thought and spoke and wrote under this influence, all their statements accurately conveyed what God revealed to them of His mind. Thus we have the thoughts of God infallibly communicated to us in what are the words of God as well as the words of men. "All scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Tim 3:16) - it is God-breathed - the exact formulation of what God wished us to know. Inspiration preserved the writers from error, which would be natural to them as sinful men, and guided them in their expression of thoughts and use of words so that what they wrote is God's own Word - "making the voice of God speak to us in a human accent, and His Word to address us in our own tongue", as Bannerman puts it.

It is one thing to say what inspiration is - it is something else to explain the divine mode of inspiration. The Bible defines inspiration but does not explain what we might call the mechanics of it. The exercise of their own faculties was harnessed and controlled by the Holy Spirit, so that the human authors spoke the pure truth of God. The manner in which the Spirit's activity and the writer's faculties combined in this work has not been revealed to our finite minds. Even on the human level we can be influenced by others in ways which affect our thoughts and utterances.

How presumptuous it is for man to think that God cannot, without doing violence to the nature of the penmen, influence His own creatures so as to ensure that they will convey precisely what is in His mind in the terms in which He wishes it to be conveyed. "He that planted the ear, shall He not hear? He that formed the eye, shall He not see?" (Ps 94:9). Shall He who made man and gave him his faculties be unable to work through these faculties in a way which ensures that the outcome is exactly as He intends? God's grace and wisdom and power are manifested in providing us with a record of His revelation which comes in thoughts and experiences and words that speak to us as human beings, but which is no less His own infallible word to us. It is therefore entirely appropriate that we should, for example, say, "Let us read the Word of God. Let us read the Epistle of Paul to the Romans."

\* This article is based on an address to a Trinitarian Bible Society meeting in Belfast in 1999 entitled *The Reformed Doctrine of Inspiration - Its Relevance Today* and a paper given at the 2004 Theological Conference entitled *Recognising Divine Inspiration: A Study in the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 1*. This article, after noting why this teaching is described as the Reformed doctrine of Inspiration, has briefly outlined the doctrine. Future articles (DV) will consider the reason we have for believing this doctrine and how it is that a sinner comes to recognise the divine inspiration of the Bible. A final article will draw attention to the importance of this doctrine, its significance and relevance for today. The article is taken by permission from the Free Presbyterian Magazine, October 2005, edited by K.D. Macleod. Website of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland: [www.fpchurch.org.uk](http://www.fpchurch.org.uk)

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