
Chapter 8.11

The Flexibility of Scripture

A Critique of Verbal Inspiration

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Primary Points

- *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* on verbal inspiration: "All the words and all the verbal relationships [grammar] are inspired by God. This includes all seemingly peripheral [personal] statements. Even historical accounts known beforehand by the writers from other sources are inspired in the same verbal way for inclusion in the Bible."
- Such a claim is unnecessary to maintain the authority of Scripture.
- Packer: "Words are not magic. To be so tied to particular words such that no other words could possibly express the same meaning is superstition."
- Lutzer: "In some instances God endowed the biblical authors with ideas that they were allowed to write in their own words."
- The different wording of the speeches of Christ recorded in the Gospels, the flexibility with which NT authors quoted the OT, and the very personal prayers and anecdotes in Scripture, argue against *verbal inspiration*.
- God intended to reveal *ideas* in Scripture, not just individual and specific or unique words and grammar that must be maintained with perfect precision or the meaning is lost.
- Thank God, in fact, that *verbal inspiration* is a farce, and that therefore, Scripture's full meaning can be conveyed in all human languages using an "idea-for-idea" translation approach rather than a "word-for-word" approach by which significant meaning would be lost.
- Christ's statement that not even a "jot or tittle" would disappear from the OT (Matt 5:18) referred to its authority, not its text or wording.
- Paul's claim to speaking "**words** [*logois*] **taught by . . . the Spirit** (1 Cor 2:13) is not evidence of *verbal inspiration* because *logos* generally meant "the expression of thought. . . . as embodying a conception or idea," not a specific word.

A) Defining *Verbal & Plenary Inspiration*

The concept of *verbal inspiration* is described in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* as follows:

All the words and all the verbal relationships [grammar] are inspired by God. This includes all seemingly peripheral [personal] statements as well as those more obviously germane to the matter under consideration. . . . Even [historical] accounts known beforehand by the writers from other sources are inspired in the same verbal way for inclusion in the Bible. Thus the totality of Scripture partakes of uniform verbal inspiration. ¹

Such a perspective on how Scripture was created is not new. It would be presumptuous to think that Origen (c. 220) was exaggerating his belief when he wrote:

With complete and utter precision the Holy Spirit supplied the very [words of Scripture] through His subordinate authors, so that you might ever bear in mind the weighty circumstance of their writing, according to which the wisdom of God pervades every divinely inspired writing, reaching out to each single letter. Perhaps it was on account of this that the Savior said: "Not one iota nor even a serif thereof shall be lost from the word until all is accomplished." ²

Related to *verbal inspiration* is the idea of *plenary inspiration* which essentially means all of Scripture is *verbally inspired*, not just parts of it. Accordingly, the "Chicago Statement of Biblical Inerrancy" puts the two together in article XI:

"We affirm that the whole of Scripture and all its parts, down to the very words of the original, were given by divine inspiration."

We deny that the inspiration of Scripture can rightly be affirmed of the whole without the parts, or of some parts but not the whole. ³

Along these lines, J. I. Packer writes:

The point that plenary and verbal [inspiration] make is that the biblical words themselves (in Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek) are to be seen as God-given. Men were not left to articulate information about, and interpretations of, God's ways with men apart from His superintending providence. On the contrary, the Lord who gave the Word also gave the words. It was not just the writers' thinking but "all Scripture," the

written product, that is inspired by God (2 Tim. 3:16; cf., 2 Peter 1:21).⁴

We have pointed out elsewhere the contradiction that occurs when proponents of *verbal inspiration* insist they are not speaking of dictation.⁵ On the contrary, there is no other way to view or understand it. If God, in fact, provided the biblical authors with every word of Scripture to be written, then it is impossible to distinguish that from any understanding of what dictation is.

Obviously, good men have invented the theory of *verbal* and *plenary inspiration* to protect the divine authority of God's word. While this is a commendable perspective, the theories are not necessary to uphold the authority of Scripture, nor do they bear up under scrutiny. Even B. B. Warfield (1851-1921) who practically invented the current theories of "inspiration" wrote:

Let it not be said that thus we found the [authority of the] whole Christian system upon the doctrine of plenary inspiration. We found the whole Christian system on the doctrine of plenary inspiration as little as we found it on the doctrine of angelic existences . . .

Inspiration is not the most fundamental of Christian doctrines, nor even the first thing we prove about the scriptures. It is the last and crowning fact as to the Scriptures. These [Scriptures] we first prove authentic, historically credible, generally trustworthy, [i.e. authoritative] before we prove [really theorize] them inspired. And the proof of their authenticity, credibility, general trustworthiness would give us a firm basis for Christianity prior to any knowledge on our part of their [or our theory of] inspiration.⁶

Nonetheless, the theories of *verbal* and *plenary inspiration* have become a test of Evangelical orthodoxy, as the "Chicago Statement of Biblical Inerrancy" implies. First, however, we have pointed out that historically, the Church has never had an orthodox specific view on *how* Apostles and Prophets wrote the word of God.⁷ Secondly, when proponents of such theories encounter legitimate critiques of their theories, they begin to add significant qualifications to their view making it less dogmatic. Thirdly, many Evangelicals have recognized the weaknesses in such theories and have begun to say so.

Maybe we could begin by stating our own view on this matter. First, for reasons given elsewhere, we don't like the word "inspiration" at all. Regardless of how one understands the "verbal" and "plenary" part of the theories, they are still dependent on language that Scripture itself never uses and that requires divine

revelation through a kind of *divine/human mental telepathy* for which we have no biblical examples of. It is the unbiblical notion of God directly manipulating people's minds and planting thoughts, even specific words, into people's minds as a mode of divine revelation, that is the most fundamental error of the theories of *verbal* and *plenary inspiration*.

Secondly, if *plenary inspiration* were understood as plenary *authority*, we would be in agreement. All of Scripture is divinely authoritative as the human recording of divine deeds or revelation. But to claim that all of Scripture is the result of some sort of *divine/human mental telepathy* in which God virtually dictated it word for word is ludicrous, and unnecessary to maintain the plenary authority of Scripture.

B) Evangelical Disclaimers & Critiques Regarding Verbal Inspiration

Along these lines, James Strong (1822–1894) and John McClintock (1814–1870) in their well regarded *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* wrote:

Within the bounds of the orthodox view of inspiration, as above stated, there are two epithets currently employed which seem to border too closely upon the extravagant, and are equally unnecessary and incorrect [*verbal* and *plenary inspiration*]. "*Plenary Inspiration*" is a phrase nowhere warranted by the Scriptures as predicated of themselves. Christ alone was plenary inspired (John 3:34) of all human beings. The term plenary *authority* would be far more scriptural and definite.⁸

Likewise, others have been skeptical of these theories as well, the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* noting:

[I]n recent years, as evangelicalism has grown and lost something of its siege [*fundamentalist?*] mentality, there are many voices within the movement advocating a rethinking of inspiration. And even among scholars who profess to wish to maintain verbal inspiration and inerrancy, many appear to be adopting a sophisticated posture in relation to the language and literary forms of Scripture.⁹

Don't misunderstand us. We love "fundamentalism" apart from it legalistic and anti-intellectual tendencies. More specifically, we love the effort of "fundamentalism" to defend the divine authority

and inerrancy of Scripture against liberal scholars. We just don't think they need the theory of *verbal inspiration* to do so.

Accordingly, while Dr. Packer has certainly been a foremost proponent for *verbal inspiration* as discussed elsewhere,¹⁰ he has enough good sense to write elsewhere on a different matter:

Words are not magic. They are the raw material of language, God-given tools for conceptualizing and communicating. . . . But to be so tied to particular words as to think that no other words could possibly express the same meaning is superstition. Focusing on words must not be allowed to bog us down in that. . . .

[W]e have to remember that words (apart from publicly defined technical terms) are regularly flexible, and gain their precise meaning each time they appear only as part of larger units of sense [context] - sentences, paragraphs, lines of argument, chapters, books. Most words carry a cluster of possible meanings and nuances (see the dictionaries), so that you have to check the context each time to see which precisely is meant.¹¹

Accordingly, if we are saying that God needed to reveal the whole context of a truth instead of just the words in order to ensure the correct meaning, then we are right back to saying that He revealed *ideas* and messages, not just words.

We have stated that Dr. Packer seems contradictory to us on this matter.¹² Likewise, Erwin Lutzer seems slightly the same way, but says much to support our own critique of *verbal inspiration*:

[I]n some instances God endowed the [biblical] authors with ideas that they were allowed to write in their own words. This freedom allowed Paul, for example, to not only write with his own style, but to transition from doctrinal to personal matters. In his second letter to Timothy he could speak with authority about God's knowledge of us in eternity past (2 Timothy 1:9) and yet later say, "When you come bring the cloak which I left at Troas with Carpus, and the books, especially the parchments" (2 Timothy 4:13). God's ideas were written in Paul's style and in line with his interests and ability.¹³

Elsewhere, Dr. Lutzer has written:

[W]e must understand that the very words of Scripture are important. We cannot say, as some have, that the ideas are inspired but the words are not. Linguistic analysis has demonstrated that every genuine word carries a genuine meaning; a wrong word, therefore, carries a wrong meaning. No wonder Christ said, "For truly I say to you, until heaven

and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished" (Matthew 5: 18).

Often the writers of Scripture were free to choose their own words, as long as the meaning of those words was within the bounds of truth. This explains why different words might be used to explain the same event. Matthew, when describing the reaction of the disciples to Christ's walking on the water, used the word *proskuneo*, meaning "to worship" (14:3 3). Mark recording the same event, used the word *existimi*, which means "to be amazed" (Mark 6:5 1). Each word gives a different meaning, but both are accurate.¹⁴

The "fundamentalist" James Orr (1844–1913) essentially rejected the idea of *verbal inspiration* and wrote:

A very evident illustration of the untenableness of this theory is in the reports of the Lord's own sayings in the Gospels. It is well known that in the reports of Christ's words in the Synoptic Gospels there is often a very considerable variation in expression—a difference in phraseology—while yet the idea conveyed in all the forms is the same. At most one side or another of the truth is brought out with slightly different emphasis. In illustration, let the version of the Lord's sayings in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew be compared with that in Luke, and the wide divergence in expression, with identity in idea, will at once be seen.

Here the advocates of verbal inspiration are themselves compelled to recognize that absolute literality is not of the essence of inspiration—that the end is gained if the meaning of the saying is preserved, though the precise form of words varies. There may be compression, combination, change of construction even (as in John) interpretation; but the truth is purely given.¹⁵

In other words, the different wording used between Gospels recording the words of Christ lead to some possible solutions: 1) Only some of the Gospels accurately communicate what Christ said, 2) The Holy Spirit chose to "inspire" each Gospel writer with different words, or 3) *Verbal inspiration* was not continually operating, nor was needed. We would prefer the latter view.

Finally, we can quote Bernard Ramm (1916-1992), a respected authority in twentieth century Evangelicalism particularly on the issue of Scripture's "inspiration" and inerrancy. Writing specifically about John Calvin's view, Dr. Ramm wrote:

The authority of the Bible as God's Word and the source of indisputable truth is never called in question by Calvin, and he assumes that his readers share this assurance. Yet he is not concerned to assert what in later controversy has been spoken of as "verbal inerrancy." His whole emphasis is thrown on the message or content of Scripture rather than on the words. It began in the oracles and visions that God imparted to the patriarchs, whose minds were so impressed with their truth that they passed them down orally to their descendants, until at length God brought it about that the revelations were recorded for the use of later generations.

The human writers are not automatons but persons whose minds and hearts have embraced the truth of what they write. Even when he is stressing the point of the authority of the sacred writings, he usually appears to have in mind the writer, and he seeks to expound the message itself, not merely the words that convey it. Thus in the oft-quoted description of the apostolic writers as "sure and genuine scribes" (in the French text, "sworn notaries") of the Holy Spirit, the context does not bear upon the Scripture words as such but refers rather to the inspired teaching they express. He has, in fact, no systematic treatment of the manner of inspiration.¹⁶

Nonetheless, there are, and have been, many more in the last century who have demanded that the theory of *verbal inspiration* is necessary. Rene Pache (1904-1979) has written: "We shall never feel certain of what the Spirit of God means in the Scripture unless we can be sure that the words of the text were expressly given by him."¹⁷ On the contrary, we are quite content to believe that the human authors of Scripture were merely working with concepts of new divine revelation and putting things in their own words, although accurately communicating God's meaning.

Support for *verbal inspiration* began in earnest particularly from the rightly respected "Old Princeton" theologians including Alexander, Hodge, and Warfield. Archibald Alexander (1772-1851) at least distinguished between the writing of doctrine and history. In terms of the former he wrote: "It is necessary to suppose that the words as well as ideas were immediately suggested by the Holy Spirit." However, he continued:

[I]n the narration of well-known facts, the writer did not need a continual suggestion of every idea, but only to be so superintended, as to be preserved from error; so in the use of language in recording such familiar things, there existed no necessity that every word should be inspired; but there was

the same need of a directing and superintending influence as in regard to the things themselves.¹⁸

In our opinion, it is true that for the reception and knowledge of "new doctrine" a supernatural act would be necessary, but not for recording it. And like many proponents of *verbal inspiration* Dr. Alexander seems contradictory to require some sort of mystical "superintending influence" by God on the writer, but not a "continual suggestion of every idea." How else in his view could God ensure the writing was "preserved from error?" Proponents of these theories want to claim the writers had freedom because this is evident in their writings, but to also claim God controlled them. Which one is it? They cannot clearly explain how both can be true.

C) Answering Arguments for *Verbal Inspiration*

C.1) Humans are able to accurately record revelation, but sometimes God dictated to them.

Like Dr. Alexander, Charles Hodge (1797-1878) supported the theory of *verbal inspiration* in his *Systematic Theology*. The five arguments he gave are the same used today and include: "A mere human report or record of a divine revelation must of necessity be not only fallible, but more or less erroneous."¹⁹ As argued in the previous chapter (8.10), we believe this is unnecessary skepticism about the ability of a Prophet or Apostle to record the supernatural revelation he had received.

Secondly, Dr. Hodge wrote:

The very form in which the doctrine of inspiration is taught in the Bible assumes that the organs of God in the communication of His will were controlled by Him in the words which they used. "I have put my words in thy mouth" (Jer. 1:9). "It is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you" (Matt. 10:20). They spake as the Spirit gave them utterance" (Acts 2:4). "Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter 1:21). All these and similar modes of expression with which the Scriptures abound imply that the words uttered were the words of God.

This, moreover, is the very idea of inspiration as understood by the ancient world. The words of the oracle were assumed to be the words of the divinity, and not those selected by the organ of communication. And this, too, as has been shown,

was the idea attached to the gift of prophecy. The words of the prophet were the words of God, or he could not be God's spokesman and mouth.²⁰

Then why not admit that there is dictation in Scripture? Because this is precisely what Dr. Hodge is describing. As for us, we have argued that dictation does exist in parts of Scripture, but we would not contend that all of it was written in this way, nor that the above verses describing specifically prophetic revelation apply to how all of Scripture was written.²¹

C.2) Scripture does not reflect *verbal inspiration*

When the psalmists frequently ask God a question like: **"I say to God my Rock, "Why have You forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?"** (Ps 42:9), is it likely that they were "controlled by [God] in the words which they used" and "the words uttered were the words of God" as Dr. Hodge claimed? Weren't they simply and completely speaking out of their own heart and experience? Did they need God to give them the exact words they spoke as the theory of *verbal inspiration* insists?

When the Apostle wrote Timothy the following, was God "inspiring" Him?:

Do your best to come to me quickly,¹⁰ for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia.¹¹ Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry.¹² I sent Tychicus to Ephesus.¹³ When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments. (2 Tim 4:9-13)

This was simply a man of God, who had been given knowledge of divine revelation, writing some personal remarks to his ministry partner.

C.3) God did not design Scripture to depend on *verbal inspiration*

In the previous chapter we wrote:

God intended to reveal *ideas* in Scripture, not just individual and specific or unique words and grammar that must be

maintained with perfect precision or the meaning is lost. God's word is more flexible than that, because there is normally more than one way to communicate the intended meaning of the ideas God desired to communicate.

This is certainly demonstrated in the translations of Scripture. We are not aware of anyone claiming any kind of "singular care and providence of God" over the translation committees who put the Bible in languages we can understand. We, and God, for that matter, rely on their expert knowledge of these languages and their God-fearing and loving concern to accurately translate the meaning of Scripture. And thank God that meaning is not dependent on individual, specific words themselves, but on ideas communicated with a cluster of words, and that even those words normally have a number of suitable synonyms.

What we are trying to say is that because the message of Scripture is bound up in *ideas* rather than *words*, it is even easier to preserve its meaning through copying and translation, because while a single word might be missed or mistaken, a whole idea likely would not. Because God knew Scripture would be handled by humans He did not create any of its message to depend on one little word, and even repeated the messages and ideas of Scripture several times in several places.²²

C.4) Did Christ & the Apostles depend on *verbal inspiration* in the OT?

Thirdly, Dr. Hodge wrote:

Christ and His apostles argue from the very words of Scripture. Our Lord says that David by the Spirit called the Messiah Lord, i.e., David used that word. It was in regard to the use of a particular word that Christ said (John 10:35) that the Scriptures cannot be broken: "if he call them gods unto whom the word of God came, and the Scripture cannot be broken." The use of that word, therefore, according to Christ's view of the Scripture, was determined by the Spirit of God. Paul in Galatians 3:16 lays stress on the fact that in the promise made to Abraham a word used is singular and not plural, "seed," "as of one," and not "seeds, as of many." Constantly it is the very words of Scripture which are quoted as of divine authority.

First of all, this phenomena is actually quite rare. What is much more common is that the NT writers *ignore* or *change* the wording of the OT when quoting it. Louis Gaussen (1790-1863) in his classic text, *The Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures*, relates what all modern NT scholars know:

[There are] eighty-eight verbal quotations [in the NT] that agree with the [Greek Septuagint] Alexandrine translations [not even the Hebrew Bible!]; sixty-four more that are borrowed from them, but with some variations; thirty-seven [NT quotations] that adopt the same meaning with [the Septuagint translation] without employing their words; sixteen that differ from them in order to agree more nearly with the Hebrew; and, finally, twenty that differ from both the Hebrew and the Septuagint, but in which the sacred authors have paraphrased the Old Testament, in order that the sense in which they quote it may be better understood.²³

In other words, in the vast majority of instances in which the NT writers are quoting or referring to an OT text, the exact wording of the original Hebrew *did not matter*, but rather, the meaning is what mattered, regardless of the wording used. Accordingly, any theory of "inspiration" that is to apply to all of Scripture cannot promote the examples that seem to support their theory and ignore others that do not.

Perhaps an example will help. In Ephesians 4:8 the Apostle Paul quotes Psalm 68:18 as follows: "**Therefore it [OT Scripture] says, 'When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives, and He gave gifts to men'**" (Eph 4:8 NASB). This is considerably different than the actual statement in Psalm 68:18 which reads: "**You have ascended on high, You have led captive *Your* captives; You have received gifts among men"** (Ps 68:18 NASB). Whatever the explanation of the Apostle's departure from the original OT wording,²⁴ it demonstrates some of the "flexibility" that NT authors commonly used when quoting the wording of the OT. Which, again, is evidence *against* the need or occurrence of *verbal inspiration*. Others have made the same point.

Dr. Orr wrote:

Another palpable illustration of this freedom in regard to the letter, while the sense is accurately conveyed, is found in the New Testament quotations from the Old Testament. In these, it is again well known, great variety in the method of quotation prevails. Sometimes, where the end is better served, the quotation is taken directly from the Hebrew (e.g., Matt. ii. 15); occasionally the translation is free (Matt. ii. 6); ordinarily the quotation is made with more or less exactness

from the Greek version, this even where the Hebrew is somewhat widely departed from (Matt. xii. 17-21 ; Rom. ix. 33; 1 Pet. ii. 6; Heb. x. 5-7, etc.). Inspiration here again must be held compatible with a want of literality in the words.
25

Likewise, more recently, Dr. Packer has written:

The freedom with which New Testament writers quote the Old Testament (following the Septuagint, Targums, or an ad hoc rendering of the Hebrew, as best suits them) has been held to show that they did not believe in the inspiredness of the original words. But their interest was not in the words, as such, but in their meaning; and recent study has made it appear that these quotations are interpretative and expository~a mode of quotation well known among the Jews. The writers seek to indicate the true (i.e., Christian) meaning and application of their text by the form in which they cite it.
26

As for the use of particular words from the OT by NT writers, there are other possibilities other than *verbal inspiration*. It could be that both Christ and the Apostles were simply taking the OT text as they had it, as they had even memorized it, and used specific words from the accepted texts to make points. The examples above may prove nothing more than that they confined themselves to the accepted, current text of the OT to make their points.

C.5) Does meaning depend on specific words?

Fourth, Dr. Hodge wrote:

The thoughts are in the words. The two are inseparable. If the words priest, sacrifice, ransom, expiation, propitiation, purification by blood, and the like, have no divine authority, then the doctrine which they embody has no such authority.²⁷

On the contrary, as argued elsewhere regarding modern Bible translations, "expiation," and "propitiation" have no authority for most twenty-first century Americans because the meaning of such words is fairly unclear to most. Accordingly, neither the meaning or the authority *can* be tied up in one particular word because often times English does not have one word that corresponds to the original Greek or Hebrew word. This is precisely why a more dynamic "thought-for-thought" translation philosophy is superior to a more "literal" "word-for-word" philosophy. This is the nature of

the human languages that the word of God must come in, in order to accomplish God's purpose for it.²⁸

If the full meaning of the divine revelation given to Apostles and Prophets is completely tied to a specific Greek or Hebrew word then we must settle for the rather alarming statement by Larry Walker: "No translation can replace the original languages of the Bible in primary importance for conveying [the meaning] and perpetuating divine revelation."²⁹ This had better be nonsense, or only the autographs fully convey divine revelation. And even with the best copies we can muster, only those having an expert understanding of ancient Hebrew and Greek will possess the full meaning of God's revelation to His people. *Verbal inspiration* had better be nonsense as well because there are a number of particularly Hebrew words that no one living can dogmatically claim to understand. Likewise, if translation necessitates losing meaning than the fact that the Apostles used the Septuagint Greek translation for the great majority of their quotes, means they were not using a text that fully conveyed the word of God either. And in fact, modern scholars have found many translation errors in the Septuagint, compared with the ancient Hebrew manuscripts we now possess.

Thank God, in fact, that *verbal inspiration* is a farce. Thank God that He designed His revelation to be communicated in *ideas* rather than specific words, so that its full meaning could be conveyed in all human languages using dynamic translation. Thank God that He revealed *ideas* rather than mere words so that we need not be alarmed by the fact that copyists throughout the centuries have made some mistakes in copying those words and there are places where we cannot be certain of the wording in the original. But nonetheless the meaning is clear. Thank God that He did not use *verbal inspiration* to create Scripture so that, in fact, the NASB translation is just as much the word of God as the NIV, even though they use different wording. Do you see the unnecessary trouble that the theory of *verbal* and *plenary inspiration* gets us into? Thank God that the following from Dr. Packer is true, and dispels the need for a theory of *verbal inspiration*:

[A]t a deeper level, there is the magic-word mentality, which insists that revealed truths can only be affirmed by using particular familiar words for them. Logicians and theologians know that no single verbal formula is necessary for expressing a particular truth, as long as the point is made.³⁰

Admittedly, Dr. Packer is discussing the fact that particular traditional words are not necessary in the Church's liturgy and its wording can be updated. Nonetheless, if this is true of liturgy, than

it is true for any communication to humans including the word of God.

C.6) Did Christ teach *verbal inspiration*? Matt 5:18; John 10:35

Many advocates of *verbal inspiration* quote the following in support. Jesus said:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ I tell you the truth, until Heaven and Earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. ¹⁹ Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven. (Matt 5:17-19)

For this statement to provide any support for *verbal inspiration*, its proponents must admit that Jesus was actually saying that not only the specific *words* of OT Scripture were “inspired,” (dictated), but every **“stroke of a pen.”** Does anyone really want to claim that? If not, then they need to agree with us that Jesus is using hyperbole to describe the enduring authority of the OT, not the nature of how it was written.

Likewise, it is not the text or wording of Scripture that Christ is speaking of, but its *authority* when we read:

Jesus answered them, “Is it not written in your Law, ‘I have said you are gods’? ³⁵ If He called them ‘gods,’ to whom the word of God came—and the Scripture cannot be broken— ³⁶ what about the One Whom the Father set apart as His very own and sent into the world? (John 10:34-36)

As we have argued above, Jesus was quoting from the accepted text of OT Scripture, what was **“written in your Law.”** And what **“cannot be broken”** is the *authority* of that law, not what words are used to convey it. We realize that many use this very example as proof that every word of Scripture must be exactly the word given in the original autographs or the meaning that God wants to communicate is lost. However, all that Christ’s argument proves is

that He used the wording of the accepted text of Scripture in His day.

C.7) Did the Apostle teach *verbal inspiration*? 1 Cor 2:7-13

Finally, Dr. Hodge wrote in support of *verbal inspiration*:

It has also been shown that in the most formally didactic passage in the whole Bible on this subject (1 Cor. 2:10-13), the apostle expressly asserts that the truths revealed by the Spirit are communicated in words taught by the Spirit.³¹

In this passage, the Apostle writes:

[W]e speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory; ⁸the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory; ⁹but just as it is written,

"THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM."

¹⁰ **For to us God revealed *them* through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God.**

¹¹ **For who among men knows the *thoughts* of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the *thoughts* of God no one knows except the Spirit of God.** ¹² **Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit Who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God,** ¹³ **which things we also speak, not in words [*logois*] taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual *thoughts* with spiritual words. (1**

Cor 2:7-13)

Again, the claim is that when God revealed, and the Apostle spoke or wrote that revelation, that the Spirit gave the Apostle the exact *words* to be spoken or written, apparently through some sort of divine/human mental telepathy. But the whole argument for *verbal inspiration* here falls apart with a proper understanding of the Greek word *logos*.

Vine's give the meaning of *logos* as: "the expression of thought. . . . as embodying a conception or idea a saying or statement discourse, speech, instruction."³² The meaning of *logos* is widely varied, NT scholar Anthony Thiselton remarking: "the

semantic scope of *logos* is vast and needs to be contextually determined in most cases.”³³ Accordingly, *logos* typically meant much more than a single word, but an idea that might require several words to express, much like the common OT word *debar*.³⁴ This is demonstrated in John’s use of *logos* to refer to Christ (John 1:1). Jesus was more than just a word. In fact, if the Apostle had wanted to express that the Spirit gave him revelation with specific words that needed to be maintained, it is likely he would have used the Greek *rhēma*, of which William Mounce relates:

Although *rhēma* overlaps semantically with *logos* even in the LXX, the terms in the NT can have distinct nuances depending on context. “Whereas *logos* often designates the Christian proclamation as a whole, *rhēma* usually relates to individual words and utterances” (*NIDNTT-A*, 509).³⁵

Commenting on Paul’s use of *logos* in 1 Corinthians 2:13, Gordon Fee rightly relates: “‘Words’ of course does not mean simply language itself, but the meaning, or message, contained in the words as they give expression to the gospel.”³⁶ Such a meaning is conveyed a few verses earlier in 1 Corinthians when the Apostle writes: **“For the message [*logos*] of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing”** (1:18). By using “*logos*” Paul is not referring to the specific word “**cross**” but the “**message**” or ideas it conveys. Accordingly, translating *logos* in this passage as merely “words” is not a good English translation (cf. NIV, NASB, NLT, etc.), nor does this passage give any support for the theory of *verbal inspiration*.

Extras & Endnotes

Gauging Your Grasp

- 1) What is a typical Evangelical definition of *verbal inspiration*?
- 2) Why do we claim that such a theory is unnecessary to maintain the authority of Scripture? Do you agree or disagree and why?
- 3) What evidence against *verbal inspiration* do we find in the Gospels? Do you agree or disagree and why?

- 4) What evidence against *verbal inspiration* do we find in the NT authors' quotes of the OT? Do you agree or disagree and why?
- 5) What evidence against *verbal inspiration* do we find in the personal prayers or anecdotes in Scripture? Do you agree or disagree and why?
- 6) What God-intended attribute of Scripture do we also think denies the need for *verbal inspiration* to maintain the accuracy with which Scripture communicated divine revelation? Do you agree or disagree and why?
- 7) What evidence against *verbal inspiration* do we find in the process of translating Scripture? Do you agree or disagree and why?
- 8) What is our interpretation of Matthew 5:18? Do you agree or disagree and why?
- 9) What is our interpretation of John 10:35? Do you agree or disagree and why?
- 10) What is our interpretation of 1 Corinthians 2:13? Do you agree or disagree and why?

Publications & Particulars

¹ I. S. Rennie, "Verbal Inspiration," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Baker, 1984), 1139.

² Origen, *Commentaries on Psalms*, Ps. 1, no. 4; online at www.ccel.org.

³ "Chicago Statement of Biblical Inerrancy"; online at <http://www.spurgeon.org/~phil/creeds/chicago.htm>.

⁴ J. I. Packer, "The Adequacy of Human Language", in *Inerrancy*, Norman Geisler ed. (Zondervan, 1979), 211.

⁵ Regarding contradictions in popular theories of "inspiration" see sections 8.8.D.4-5.

⁶ B. B. Warfield, "The Real Problem of Inspiration", in *Revelation & Authority*, Vol. 1 of *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* (Baker, 2000), I.210.

⁷ Regarding the fact that historically, the Church has never had an orthodox specific view on *how* Apostles and Prophets wrote the word of God see section 8.8.B.

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- ⁸ John McClintock and James Strong, "Inspiration" in the *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, CD-ROM (Ages Software, 2000).
- ⁹ Rennie, 1140.
- ¹⁰ Regarding J. I. Packer's support of *verbal inspiration* see quotes in chapter 8.8 sections D.3, D.5, and especially D.6
- ¹¹ J. I. Packer, *God's Words: Studies of Key Bible Themes* (Intervarsity, 1981), 10-11.
- ¹² Regarding the contradictions we see in Dr. Packer's view of "inspiration" see section 8.8.D.5.
- ¹³ Erwin Lutzer, *Seven Convincing Miracles* (Moody, 1999), 22-3.
- ¹⁴ Erwin Lutzer, *Seven Reasons Why You Can Trust the Bible* (Moody, 1998), 28.
- ¹⁵ James Orr, *Revelation and Inspiration* (Eerdmans, 1952), 212.
- ¹⁶ Bernard Ramm, *Special Revelation and the Word of God* (Eerdmans, 1961), 54-55.
- ¹⁷ Rene Pache, *The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture* (Moody, 1969), 74.
- ¹⁸ Quoted by B. B. Warfield in *Studies in Theology* (Oxford, 1932), 320.
- ¹⁹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols., reprint (Hendrickson, 2003), I:84-6.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Regarding dictation in the creation of Scripture see chapter 9.5.C.
- ²² Excerpt from section 8.10.D.5.
- ²³ Louis Gaussen, *The Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures*, trans. David D. Scott (Kregel, 1971) 163-4.
- ²⁴ As Harold Hoehner points out regarding Paul's use of Psalm 68:18 in Ephesians 4:8:
 Basically, there are two [changes]: (1) he has changed the second person singular "you ascended" to the third person singular "he ascended"; and (2) he has changed the action from the receiving of gifts from among the . . . defeated foes (in Psalm 68), to the giving of gifts to the people, the believers. (*Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* [Baker, 2002], 525)
 The best explanation is that the Apostle simply didn't use the standard Hebrew (Masoretic Text-MT) or the standard Greek translation (Septuagint-LXX) available at the time. But rather, an ancient Jewish translation referred to as the Targum. NT scholar Peter O'Brien writes in his well-regarded commentary on Ephesians:

The key clause, 'and he gave gifts to men,' is a notorious crux. . . . The major difficulty, is that both the Hebrew text and the LXX read 'you received gifts' rather than 'gave gifts,' and it appears at first glance that Paul has turned the original meaning of the Psalm on its head. . . .

A . . . serious attempt to solve the dilemma takes its starting point from a variant form of the old testament textual tradition. The Syriac Peshitta rendering of Psalm 68:18 is 'you have *given* gifts', and although there is a difference of scholarly opinion as to its value as evidence, it may reflect a textual tradition different from that represented by the NT and the LXX.

Furthermore the paraphrase of Psalm 68:18 in Aramaic Targums is remarkable, for like the Peshitta it reads 'you gave' rather than 'you received' (as in the MT). It is unlikely that the new testament wording of the passage has influenced the Targum, and even though the Targum on the Psalms is late, it reflects a tradition in text form that are much earlier.

M. Wilcox has cautiously concluded that the author of Ephesians 'was here quoting either from, or in the light of, and Old Testament textual tradition resembling that of the Targum, but disagreeing with the tradition preserved in the LXX and MT at this point.'

Accordingly, it has been claimed that Paul has taken over the textual tradition as reflected in the Targum ('you gave'), and employed a common technique of early Jewish hermeneutics known as *midrash peshet*, in which his exposition of the text in light of its fulfillment in Christ is integrated into the actual quotation. This procedure, which appears elsewhere in the New Testament use of the Old, would account for the differences present in Ephesians 4:8. (*The Letter to the Ephesians* (Eerdmans, 1999), 290. See also: F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (NICNT) (Eerdmans, 1984), 342-44; R. A. Taylor, "The Use of Psalm 68:18 in Ephesians 4:8 in Light of Ancient Versions," *Bsac* 148 (1991), 319-36, esp. 320-23)

²⁵ Orr, 212-14.

²⁶ J. I. Packer, "The Inspiration of the Bible", in *The Origen of the Bible*, ed. Philip W. Comfort (Tyndale, 1992), 34-5.

²⁷ Hodge, 85.

²⁸ For further on "dynamic" as opposed to "literal" Bible translation see chapters 15.1-15.2.

²⁹ Larry Walker, "Biblical Languages", in *The Origen of the Bible*, ed. Philip W. Comfort (Tyndale, 1992), 211.

³⁰ J. I. Packer, *Truth & Power* (Harold Shaw, 1996), 294.

³¹ Hodge, 86.

³² W. E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Nelson, 1996), 683.

³³ Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians (NIGTC)* (Eerdmans, 2000), 153.

³⁴ Regarding the meaning of *debar* and *logos* NT scholar Raymond F. Collins writes:

One must begin with the realization that "word of God" is a biblical concept. Our English expression renders the *logos tou theou* of the Septuagint and the New Testament as well as the Hebrew phrase *dabar Yahweh*. *Dabar* is not simply equatable with the notion of "word," in the sense of spoken or written words. Such a concept is somewhat inspired by Hellenistic philosophy. The Hebrew *dabar* (and, to a lesser degree, the Greek *logos* as well) bears the connotation of "reality." Occasionally the most appropriate translation of *dabar* is "event." Perhaps one might say that the expression "word of God" conveys an ambivalent notion. Ultimately the expression simply indicates God's self-communication. (*Introduction to the New Testament* [Doubleday, 1983], 349)

³⁵ William Mounce, *Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old & New Testament Words* (Zondervan, 2006), 803.

³⁶ Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Eerdmans, 1987), 114. Neither Thiselton nor Barrett really discuss the matter. Albert Barnes interpreted 1 Cor 2:13 in this manner:

Paul claims that his very words are inspired. Hence, inspiration is "verbal," extending to the very words chosen by the authors of Scripture under the direction of the Holy Spirit. This is not a "mechanical dictation" theory, nor does it nullify the personality of the author involved. On the other hand, Paul's affirmation does guarantee that when the Bible is heard, God is heard. (*Barnes' Notes on the NT*; online at www.ccel.org)

Likewise, Leon Morris comments:

The Spirit's activity extends to providing the actual words used, and is not confined to the supplying of general ideas (cf. Mk. 13:11). As Moule says, the expression 'is a very bold but quite unambiguous use of the Subjective Genitive' (IBNTG, P. 40); the Spirit teaches the words. (*1 Corinthians (TNTC)* (Eerdmans, 1985), 58)