The sword of the Spirit: the meaning of inspiration

Donald Bloesch

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Once again the church is being compelled to re-examine its position on the authority and inspiration of the Bible. We are told in 2 Timothy 3:16 that 'all scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness'. The Greek word for 'inspired' is theopneustos, which means 'breathed out by God'. The writers of Scripture were not simply assisted by the Spirit in the task of sharing their spiritual insights. Instead, they were elected by God as his instruments to ensure a trustworthy witness to his revelation in the events of biblical history culminating in Jesus Christ. 2 Peter says that 'no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God'(2 Pet. 1:21; cf. 2 Sa. 23:2).

When it is said that 'all scripture is inspired by God', the reference is not only to the Old Testament documents but also to those of the New Testament, some of which were even then circulating in written form. This is confirmed in 1 Timothy 5:18 where citations are made of 'the written words of the prophetic writings'. To be sure, the canon of the sacred writings had not yet been determined, but the church has wisely interpreted 2 Timothy 3:16 as covering the whole of the canon.

But if the purpose of inspiration is made clear in verses 15-17 of 2 Timothy 3:16 to lead people to Christ and to instruct them in the way of Christ. God inspired the Scriptures in order to give sound teaching concerning the faith and to equip the people of God to bear witness to their faith (cf. 20:31).

Because the Holy Spirit superintended the writing of the Scriptures, he has been regarded in the tradition of the church catholic as the primary author of Scripture, and the prophets and apostles the secondary authors. But the Spirit is not only a past author but a present teacher, for it is he who opens our eyes and guides us to the truth attested in Scripture (cf. Jn. 16:13; 1 Cor. 2:12-16).

Under the impact of the Spirit, the word of God becomes sharper than a two-edged sword, piercing the marrow of our souls (Heb. 4:12; cf. Is. 49:2; Eph. 6:17; Rev. 1:16). Like a blade with two sharp edges, it always cuts with one side or the other, that is, in a saving or judging manner (cf. Jn. 23:28). The Lord chastises and afflicts his people, however, only so that they might return to him in repentance and faith. He reproves in order to strengthen, he kills in order to make alive (cf. Is. 51:17-23; Ho. 6:1; Pr. 3:11; 12; Heb. 12:5, 6). The wrath of God is in the service of his love; his word of judgment prepares the way for his word of grace (cf. Ps. 30:6-12; La. 3:31, 32; Is. 54:7-8; Rom. 5:20, 21).

On the basis of the scriptural testimony with regard to its own inspiration, the church has been led to affirm the inerrancy of Holy Scripture. By this is meant that Scripture gives a sure and certain word concerning the will and purpose of God made known in Jesus Christ. These sacred writings, it is said, are inerrant in the sense of 'provided with the precise expression of all that God has clearly revealed in the world' (ibid.). The inspiration of Scripture means to believe that Scripture does not lead astray, and that what is revealed in it is what God has revealed. Its witness is compelling and decisive, for it proceeds from God and is mightily used by God to save those who believe (cf. Is. 55:10-11; 1 Cor. 1:21; Heb. 4:12-13; 1 Pet. 1:23).

We must not infer from this that Scripture gives exact knowledge of mathematics or biology or any other science. Neither does it present a history of Israel or a biography of Jesus that accords with the standards of historical science. What we do have is a record of God's redemptive works, an incisive portrayal of the divine plan of salvation. What we receive is true but not exhaustive knowledge of divinity, for divinity remains enveloped in mystery even in the act of revelation. This is why the truth given in revelation concerning the being of God, the most profound and transcendent, and the eschatological fulfilment can be only dimly perceived (cf. 1 Cor. 13:12). Though it can be grasped in the decision of faith, it will always elude rational comprehension. This note appears again and again in the writings of the church fathers of the sixteenth century but also among the church fathers.

The present controversy

The two sides in the present controversy concerning scriptural authority are becoming increasingly polarized. On the one hand, there are those who view the Bible as only edifying religious literature and Jesus Christ as the most profound and most decisive of all human prophets. Inspiration in these circles connotes nothing more than a general illumination that all spiritually sensitive people share to some degree. It is therefore not uncommon to hear it alleged that some Corinthian classics or even devotional masterpieces in other religions are inspired by the Spirit of God in the same sense as Scripture.

On the other hand, there are those who in their zeal to safeguard the divine authority of Scripture define inspiration in such a narrow, legalistic fashion that it leaves no room for what appears to be scriptural dictation. In this view the Bible becomes a celestial tape recorder, and its true humanity is thereby denied. The inerrancy of Scripture is affirmed in the sense of mathematical or scientific precision which allows for no inexactitudes in the details of what is reported. The focus is no longer on the divine content but on the mode of expression by which Scripture comes to us. The language of the evangelist is regarded as flawless as historical science understands it.

There is an important sense in which the Scripture does not err: it does not err in what it affirms concerning the law and gospel, the two sides of the revelation that is meant to be the sum of all the truths that the Spirit intends to teach us in and through the biblical text, and this teaching extends to the truth about man and the world as well as the truth about salvation. The Psalmist declares: 'The sum of thy word is truth' (Ps. 119:160; cf. Is. 45:19; Jn. 17:17). Paul insists that he is 'speaking the truth in Christ, I am not lying' (Rom. 9:1). In the pastoral epistles the truth handed down by the apostle is described as trustworthy (pistos) and deserving of full acceptance (Tit. 1:1; 3:1; 4:9; 2 Tim. 2:11; Tit. 3:8). Similarly in the fourth gospel we read: 'This is the disciple who is bearing witness to these things...and we know that his testimony is true' (Jn. 21:24; cf. 19:35).

Scripture does give a wholly reliable and trustworthy account of God's dealings with man in biblical history. Yet this does not mean that everything in Scripture must be taken at face value. Nor does it mean that the human authors of Scripture were taken out of their cultural and historical context and thereby rendered free from human limitations. They were both children of their times and prophets to their times.

Inspiration should be understood as the divine selection of the writers and their writings for the purpose of conveying in salvation God's own righteousness. It does not mean that the Holy Spirit overruled the personalities of the human authors; instead he worked in and through them. Our Reformed fathers referred to the accommodation of the Spirit to the language and concepts of that time. This means that there is something of the provisional and relative in the Bible, even though its message and teaching derive from God himself.

In this light we should understand that the Bible in and of itself is not revelation, but revelation is given in the Bible. It is not the letter that is the truth but the Spirit acting upon the letter (1 Cor. 2:4; 2 Cor. 3:6). The criterion for faith is the Spirit speaking in and through the text of Scripture. As Augustine of Hippo wrote, 'The more we study the Scripture, the more there must be a judge, "The Spirit of God out of Holy Scripture itself is the judge" (The New Cambridge Modern History: The Reformation 1520-1559, II, p. 106).

In order to hear and know the veritable Word of God, in order to perceive the Spirit-intended meaning of the words, we must search the Scriptures. We must 'dig out' the truth that is contained in the Scriptures (Dwight L. Moody). We must seek the message of Scripture in and through the divine and spiritual truths (1 Cor. 2:9-16). As the Psalmist declares: 'Open my eyes, so that I may see the wonderful truths in your law' (Ps. 119:18; 119; cf. Ps. 119:33). 'The Word of God is likened to a rich treasure that one must find and uncover in the Scriptures (Ps. 119:162).

The Bible is not a systematic set of rules that can be immediately perceived and then applied. It is more like a uranium mine that yields its precious metal only after a careful and painstaking search. The interpretation of Scripture is a work of faith; it is not intended for those who refuse to exert themselves and submit themselves to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In his study of the Old Testament, W. P. Martin has observed that the meaning of the scriptural text often 'lies buried at a great depth'; indeed, only
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Under the impact of the Spirit, the word of God becomes sharper than a two-edged sword, piercing the marrow of our souls (Heb. 4:12; cf. Is. 49:2; Eph. 6:17; Rev. 1:16). Like a blade with two sharp edges, it always cuts with one side and the other, that is, in a saving or judging manner (cf. Je. 23:29; Je. 12:48; 2 Cor. 2:15). God's Word is also likened to a fire which devours all that stands in its path and to a hammer 'which breaks the rock in pieces' (Je. 5:14; 23:29). The Lord chastises and afflicts his people, however, only so that they might return to him in repentance and faith. He reproves in order to strengthen, he kills in order to make alive (cf. Is. 51:17-23; Ho. 6:1; Pr. 3:11; 12; Heb. 12:5; 6). The wrath of God is in the service of his love; his word of judgment prepares the way for his word of grace (cf. Ps. 30:6-12; La. 3:31; 32; Is. 54:7-8; Rom. 5:20; 21).

On the basis of the scriptural testimony with regard to its own inspiration, the church has been led to affirm the infallibility of Holy Scripture. By this is meant that Scripture gives a sure and certain word concerning the will and purpose of God made known in Jesus Christ. These sacred writings, it is suggested, are therefore a divine assurance of God's grace available by faith (cf. P. 119:86; Pr. 8:3). Its witness is compelling and decisive, for it proceeds from God and is mightily used by God to save those who believe (cf. Is. 55:10-11; 1 Cor. 1:21; Heb. 4:12-13; 1 Pet. 1:23).

But people of God are not to confuse this divine inspiration with divine infallibility. The fact that Scripture is a faithful account of God's redemptive works, an incisive portrayal of the divine plan of salvation. What we receive is true but not exhaustive knowledge of divinity, for divinity remains enveloped in mystery even in the act of revelation. This is why the truth given in revelation concerning the being of God, the most profound and most sacred of all human experiences, is necessarily communicated in sign and symbol, but does not exclude the possibility of historical understanding. The church, therefore, has a responsibility to interpret Scripture and to seek a fuller understanding of its mysteries. This understanding is possible because of the Spirit's guiding presence in the lives of all who have been united with Christ in faith, and thereby rendered free from human limitations. They were both children of his times and prophets to their times.

Inspiration should be understood as the divine selection of the writers and their writings for the purpose of communicating the principles of righteousness. It does not mean that the Holy Spirit overruled the personalities of the human authors; instead he worked in and through them. Our Reformed fathers referred to the accommodation of the Spirit to the language and concepts of their day. This means that there is something of the provisional and relative in the Bible, even though its message and teaching derive from God himself.

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In order to hear and know the veritable Word of God, in order to perceive the Spirit-intended meaning of the words, we must search the Scriptures. We must 'dig out' the truth that is contained in the Scriptures (Dwight L. Moody). We must seek the meaning of these words in the light of the whole of Scripture and the whole of spiritual truths (1 Cor. 2:9-16). As the Psalmist declares: 'Open my eyes, so that I may see the wonderful truths in your law' (Ps. 119:18: GNB; cf. Jb. 28:12). The Word of God is likened to a 'rich treasure' that one must find or uncover in the Scriptures (Ps. 119:162 GNB).

The Bible is not a systematic set of rules that can be immediately perceived and then applied. It is more like auranium mine that yields its precious metal only after a careful and painstaking search. The interpretation of Scripture is a work of faith; it is not intended for those who refuse to exert themselves and submit themselves to the guidance of the Spirit. But as the Spirit guides us in this task, we find that his guidance is not without fruit. We observe that the meaning of the scriptural text often lies buried at a great depth; indeed, only
special enlightenment from the Holy Spirit can enable one to apprehend it. The authority of the Bible is derivative: it is not derived from the divine Author and yet possesses divine authority and inspiration. It is a signpost that points to Jesus Christ, and at the same time it is a vessel that carries the truth of Jesus Christ. Luther described it as the ‘carrage of the Spirit’. He had also referred to the Bible as the ‘Wedding clothes’ in which the Christ-child is laid.

The most potent symbol for the Word of God is not the book itself but the cross of Christ shining through the pages of the open Bible. For it is Jesus Christ who gives the Bible its authority. It is his salvation that the Bible proclaims and conveys. According to Calvin the promises of God are ‘sure and infallible only when we “resort always to Jesus Christ” (Sermons on Ephesians, Banner of Truth, 1973, p. 176).

We need to recognize again that the Bible has two sides: a divine and a human side. It is a human witness to divine revelation, for as 2 Peter says, men spoke from God (1: 21). But at the same time it is God’s self-revelation to men; as the Epistle to the Hebrews expresses it, God spoke to men (Heb. 1: 2). The Bible is the Word of God indirectly—in and through the words of men. Calvin rightly described the Bible as “the living miiracle of the Spirit”. The certainty of its truth, he said, is derived from the interior witness of the Spirit. The majesty of its doctrine also argues for its truth, though this can be perceived only by faith. It is not possible to appeal to external evidence to buttress or prove the divine authority and inspiration of the Scriptures, for the Bible authenticates itself. It carries its own credentials. This must not be taken to mean, however, that the claims of the Bible are persuasive because of their logical force or rational coherence. Instead they persuade and convince because of the Spirit of God inheres within the book that he inspired. The text of Scripture is the property of its divine author who alone can regenerate and renew those who read and hear it. I do not wish to imply that external evidences in support of Scripture are of no value whatsoever. They may indeed cast new light upon the Bible and confirm its claims concerning itself, but this confirmation is given only to those who already believe. Archaeology has shown the amazing accuracy of the Bible even in many of its historical details, but this does not and cannot prove its perfect accuracy in this regard. Neither can archaeology adduced to illustrate the authority and inspiration of Scripture. The authority of Scripture is rooted not in the manner of its writing but in the way it is applied by the Spirit to direct us to Christ. Its divine-human origin is subordinate to its salvific role or function. Scripture is a means to knowledge of God through the communication of its message. Scripture is best seen as a human medium, prepared by the Spirit, through which we come to know the benefits of Christ. It is not just a human document, but a divinely appointed means through which we receive saving knowledge of Christ. These writings were designed to make us "wise unto salvation" (2 Tim. 3: 15 κατά)

The Bible might be likened to a drinking fountain whose water is drawn from an underground spring. The water of life is hidden, and we therefore have access to it only by means of this fountain. Unless we go to the fountain and drink from it, our spiritual thirst will not be satisfied. It may still be a question of faith, of literary or scientific value, but it will not be the fount of salvation. It is not enough to appreciate the literary style of the Bible or even its doctrinal profundity: we must experience its life-giving power.

The salvific sword

In Ephesians 6: 17 Paul referred to the written Word of God as ‘the sword of the Spirit’, a metaphor popular with the Reformers. The Scripture is the spoken Word of God by which we are pierced and delivered. The sword of the Spirit is the inspiration of God by which we are made new creatures (2 Cor. 5: 17). It is the sword of the Spirit. It is the chosen instrument by which our Lord will bring in his eschatological kingdom (Is. 55: 11).

The power of the Bible in effecting human salvation is attested by the lives of the great saints of the church, many of whom were liberated from inner confusion and emptiness simply by being confronted with the truth of the gospel in Holy Scripture. Two such men were Römme and Rodbertus. Both were workings men who accompanied the risen Christ to Emmaus, whose hearts burned within them while he opened to them the Scriptures (Lk. 24: 32). It was manifest in the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch who was moved to seek for salvation by reading the book of Isaiah but who did not receive justifying faith until he heard the story of the cross from the lips of Philip (Acts 8: 26-40).

It might appear that Paul’s conversion was wholly spontaneous, an act of his own volition, but he was thoroughly immersed in the Hebrew Scriptures which, as he belatedly admitted, teach that Christ would suffer and be the first to rise from the dead, bringing light to both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 26: 22-23). Paul was not unique in this, for Stephen and other victims of his harassment campaign against followers of the ‘Way’ (cf. Acts 9: 1-2; 22: 20). So when Christ revealed himself on the road to Damascus, all that was necessary for him to be saved was to hear and believe "cutting" (Acts 26: 15). The seeds of Paul’s conversion were planted when he heard the good news from the mouth of Stephen, and it is not unwarranted to surmise that his burning hatred of Christianity stemmed from his desire to suppress the truth that his inmost man was cried out to acknowledge himself. As the former Pharisee he was not disposed to allow any other the name of Saviour, and his spiritual blindness continued to the end of his days. Paul was not unique in this; in the second century there were Christians who had devoted lives to the destruction of the church, and who were not disposed to allow any other the name of Saviour. Paul was not unique in this; in the second century there were Christians who had devoted lives to the destruction of the church, and who were not disposed to allow any other the name of Saviour. Paul was not unique in this; in the second century there were Christians who had devoted lives to the destruction of the church. The point is that no one should be disposed to allow any other the name of Saviour. Paul was not unique in this; in the second century there were Christians who had devoted lives to the destruction of the church, and who were not disposed to allow any other the name of Saviour.
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It might appear that Paul's conversion was wholly 'natural': the transforming power of the word of God. Yet we must remember that Paul had been thoroughly immersed in the Hebrew Scriptures which, as he belatedly admitted, teach that Christ would suffer and be the first to rise from the dead, bringing light to both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 26:22-23). Paul contrasts Stephen and other victims of his harassment campaign against followers of 'the Way' (cf. Acts 9:1-2; 22:20). So when Christ revealed himself on the road to Damascus, all that was necessary for him to do was to say, 'Jesus, Master, what must I do?' (Acts 26:22). Paul's conversion was 'by grace' (Acts 26:15). The seeds of Paul's conversion were planted when he heard the good news from the mouth of Stephen, and it is not unwarranted to surmise that his burning hatred of Christianity stems from his desire to suppress the truth that his inmortal being was cried out to acknowledge. He himself later confessed that faith comes only by hearing, and by hearing the preaching of the word of the cross (Rom. 10:17).

One point is clear: the life of a person whose life was decisively altered by an encounter with the Scriptures was Augustine. It was he who revealed the church of his time to its biblical and apostolic foundations. Through his vigorous defense of the faith, he was able to counter various heresies of his time that sought to accommodate the faith to secular values and patterns of thought. He became a bold advocate of a monasticism based solidly on the gospel. Yet in his earlier days he was a profligate as well as a pagan. He fell not so much as he had failed an illegitimate son. Moreover, he was constantly seeking new and more adequate philosophies to explain the human predicament.

Through the fervent prayers of his mother Monica, the Spirit was nevertheless active in Augustine's life, pursuing him even into the darkness which was of his own creation. It was during a visit to Milan that Augustine heard about Anthony. He was much moved by what he had heard and devoted himself to a life of prayer. The story of Anthony's sacrifice pierced his soul. He then went out into the garden by his lodging and, engulfed in tears, screamed aloud that he was a sinner. He had lost his way. Finding a Bible he held it up to his eyes, and at Romans 13, and he gazed at the passage on which his eyes fell first: 'Let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery, or licentiousness ... But put on the Lord Jesus Christ; put on no other garment, no covering for the flesh, to gratify its desires' (Rom. 13:13-14 KJV). The truth that he had been yearning for suddenly struck him like a bolt of lightning (cf. Ps. 29:7: 'no cloud could contain'). From that moment he would read, nor did I need; for instantly ... all the gloom of doubt vanished away.' He then resolved to dedicate himself wholly and exclusively to the cause of the kingdom, and through the Spirit of God given to him at the time of his conversion he was enabled to break with his old way of living and to follow the cross and follow Christ as a humble disciple.

Luther, too, cannot be understood apart from his conversion through a confrontation with the meditations of van Leeuwen in the monastic life, and indeed had joined the strict order of the Augustinians in Erfurt, Germany, his heart was not at peace. His life in the monastery is generally acknowledged to have been exemplary, but he had begun to doubt the order of the Augustinians, and thinking that his ascetic and monastic works were meritorious in the sight of God, that they were sufficient to secure him from divine condemnation.

While wrestling with Paul's epistle to the Romans in the Scriptureonal form, Luther was suddenly struck by the words from the prophet Habakkuk cited by Paul in Romans 1:17: 'He shall gain life who is justified through faith' (v.3b). It then dawned on Luther that the righteousness of God is not a gift that can be acquired by works of charity, but a gift that enables man to do such works. Salvation is not a matter of working one's way into heaven but of being received into the favour of God through the perfect righteousness of Christ apprehended by faith, because of the sinner's desire, because of one's own moral worthlessness but because of God's grace revealed in Christ. Joy and peace flooded his soul as he gained the assurance that God's love poured out on Calvary covered the multitudes of mankind.

Although there is a lack of scholarly consensus concerning the exact date of Luther's tower experience, it is generally agreed that it took him some time to work out the theological and practical implications. Always an evolutionary thinker, Luther was several years later that Luther was compelled to leave the monastic order in which he had served so faithfully. He was now called by God to go forth into the world with a message that posed a threat to the powers and prerogatives of the pope. His evangelical proclamation of salvation by grace was no longer or only imperfectly perceived in that age, and ecclesiastical leaders as well as the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V proceeded to suppress Luther's Socinian teachings. All this was done in an official document, but it was claimed no credit for the rediscovery of the gospel of free grace. It was not his ingenuity in scriptural exegesis but the convicting power of Scripture itself that led him to the new way of life and led him to the pathway of church reform.

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We welcome a first contribution from Dr. D. R. Denton, a young Australian scholar who did some research at Palmer Theological Seminary. He is now teaching in South Australia.

Currently 'hope' is one of the most popular words in the biblical world. Everywhere the thought is in the air. Numerous books and articles have appeared on the subject. Two features are typical of this trend, however. One is the scarcity, indeed almost complete lack, of biblical studies. The biblical teaching is all but totally ignored. The other is that 'hope' is generally understood in a very broad sense, virtually equivalent to 'eschatology'.

In this article I propose to confine myself to the actual word 'hope'. I realize that the concept of hope has been called the 'word of itself', but to study the concept of hope would involve examining practically the whole of eschatology, which is impossible in such a short space. In addition, an examination of the term 'hope' in the context of the passages in which it occurs is essential if one is to understand the biblical teaching on hope. In fact, this is the basis for an understanding of the total concept. In addition, I shall confine myself to the biblical text, with emphasis on the New Testament.

Old Testament
Hope is a characteristic of man. It belongs to his very nature. 'While there is life there is hope,' wrote the Roman poets. 'He who is joined with all the living has hope' said the Preacher (Eccles. 9: 4). So it characterizes the living. While man is alive he can hope. But the question arises: Is there any real basis for hope? Can hope be certain?

The Old Testament asserts boldly and plainly that hope is rooted in God. For the Israelites hope is neither indefinite nor uncertain. It is not wishful thinking. It is sure, because of Yahweh their God. Therefore it is a confident expectation.

God is the basis of hope because of his known character, his past deeds of salvation, and his covenant with Israel. It is in his character on the nation's hope that Wheeler Robinson deals with the concept of covenant, opening with the statement: 'The basis of Israel's hope is the peculiar
The biblical basis of hope

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