

The sword of the Spirit: the meaning of inspiration

Donald Bloesch

Donald Bloesch is Professor of Theology at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, and has for some time given valuable stimulus and aid to the work of the Theological Students Fellowship in the USA.

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 drawn from New Testament scriptures. 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.

The purpose of inspiration is made clear in verses 15-17 of 2 Timothy 3: 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. Jn. 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. Je. 23: 29ff., Jn. 12: 47-48; 2 Cor. 2: 15f.). 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 said, 'are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus' (2 Tim. 3: 15, NIV). They unfailingly lead to Christ and to the salvation that he offers. To affirm the infallibility of Scripture means to believe that Scripture does not lead astray, it does not deceive (cf. Ps. 119: 86; Pr. 8: 8). 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 in 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 miracle of the incarnation, 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 not only among the Reformers 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 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 Christian 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 terms that approach mechanical 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 inconsistencies 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 text is regarded as *flawless* as historical science understands this term.

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 of God. It does not err in what the Holy 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' (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 (1 Tim. 1: 15; 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 milieu 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 instruction in salvation and training in 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 Zwingli retorted when John Faber declared that there must be a judge, 'The Spirit of God out of Holy Scripture itself is the judge' (*The New Cambridge Modern History: The Reformation 1520-59*, II, p. 101).

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 spiritual discernment necessary to apprehend 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.* Lk. 24: 45). 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 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 and direction of the Spirit. John Chrysostom observed 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 anchored not in itself but in its divine Author and divine centre, Jesus Christ. 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 'carriage of the Spirit'. He also referred to Scripture as the 'swaddling 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 whom the Bible attests; 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 through human authors; 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 'unerring rule of faith and practice'. 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 a mistake to appeal to external evidences 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 convict because 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 sinful humanity.

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 or historical science establish the divine 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. The inspiration of the text of Scripture is in the service of 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 witness to Christ 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 KJV).

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 beautiful structure, it may even have historical 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 can be spoken of in this way because it is employed by the Spirit to drive out the demons that oppress the people of God (*cf.* Rev. 12: 11). It is used by the Spirit to reform and purify the church (Acts 2: 14–18; Rev. 2: 16–17). It is used by the Spirit to regenerate and deliver lost sinners (*cf.* 2 Cor. 4: 5–6; 1 Pet. 1: 23). 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. This power was already at work in the two 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 without the mediation of the written or proclaimed 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). He also heard the gospel from the lips of 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 say was, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting’ (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 a desperate attempt to suppress the truth that his innermost being cried out to acknowledge. He himself later confessed that faith comes only by hearing, and hearing by the preaching of the word of the cross (Rom. 10: 17).

One of the early church fathers whose life was decisively altered by an encounter with the Scriptures was Augustine. It was he who recalled 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 an unbeliever. He refused to marry even though he had fathered 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, the desert hermit who had 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, seemed to hear a voice, ‘Take up and read’. Finding a Bible he happened to open it at Romans 13, and he gazed at the passage on which his eyes first fell: ‘Let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness . . . But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires’ (Rom. 13: 13–14 RSV). The truth that he had been yearning for suddenly struck him like a bolt of lightning (cf. Ps. 29: 7 NIV). He said in his *Confessions*: ‘No further would I 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 take up the cross and follow Christ as a humble disciple.

Luther, too, cannot be understood apart from his conversion through a confrontation with the Scriptures. Although he had embraced 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 been misled by the then current theology into 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 conventual tower, 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’ (NEB). It then dawned on Luther that the righteousness of God is not a prize that can be earned by works of love 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 alone. One is accepted by God not because of one’s own moral worthiness 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 multitude of his sins.

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 of his ‘evangelical discovery’. It 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 principalities and powers of his time. The 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 witness, forcing him into temporary exile. Luther 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 exploded his own theories and led him to the pathway of church reform.

Similarly John Wesley, another luminary of

evangelical faith, experienced a dramatic change of heart by being confronted with the truth of God attested in the Scriptures. Although he had been baptized, confirmed and ordained to the gospel ministry, Wesley was, in his own eyes, still not a born-again Christian. He continued to harbour the illusion that religion meant keeping the law, attaining holiness by spiritual exercises. Even though he had been involved in a missionary excursion to America, Wesley was constantly bedevilled by a passion to prove himself worthy before God. Peace and joy eluded him, and his ministry was bearing little fruit. Then some of his friends invited him to a Moravian meeting on Aldersgate Street in London, and there he heard Martin Luther's Preface to the Romans being expounded. In this case it was not the reading of Scripture but hearing the message of Scripture that moved him to surrender his own claims to righteousness and give himself wholly to the Christ of New Testament Christianity. He confessed that his 'heart was strangely warmed'; for the first time the apostolic proclamation concerning God's unconditional grace found a lodging in his soul. Previous to Aldersgate, he maintained, he was 'almost a Christian', but it was there that he became inwardly convinced that Christ had died for him personally. As he noted in his *Journal*: 'An assurance was given me that He had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.' He now knew not merely the form of religion but its justifying and sanctifying power (cf. 2 Tim. 3: 5).

From Aldersgate Wesley emerged to become one of the greatest evangelists in Christian history. Through his itinerant preaching ministry the spiritually as well as economically impoverished masses in England were reached for the gospel and that country was consequently spared the kind of social upheaval that devastated France at the end of the eighteenth century.

Yet another noted convert to evangelical Christianity, was César Malan, who lived in early-nineteenth-century Switzerland. Of Huguenot ancestry he was ordained to the gospel ministry and became pastor of a congregation in Geneva. Yet, as he himself later admitted, he had no gospel to preach because he had not yet committed himself to Christ as Saviour from sin and as Lord and Master of life. Intellectually he was an ethical humanist, viewing Jesus as only a great teacher or prophet. 'During my four years of theology,' he explained, 'I never heard a single word which could lead me to a belief in Christ's divinity. They taught me only the dogmas of natural religion' (in Ernest Gordon, *A Book of Protestant Saints* Prairie Bible

Institute, 1968, p. 189). For the next several years he continued to dwell in spiritual darkness, confessing that he was 'an entire stranger to the evangelical doctrine of salvation by grace'. Then Malan began searching the Scriptures. One evening it seemed that he was directed to read Romans chapter 5, and the following day as his Latin school class was busy in study, he pored over Paul's epistle to the Ephesians. It was this passage in Ephesians 2 that brought illumination to his soul: 'For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works, lest any man should boast' (verses 8–9). The veil was suddenly taken from his eyes. For the first time he perceived not just intellectually but experientially that the reason Jesus Christ came into the world was not to teach people how to be good but to save people who because of sin could no longer be good, that is, good enough to satisfy the requirements of God's holy law. He compared his conversion to the feeling of a child awakened by his mother's kiss.

Malan then destroyed all his old sermons and with them his prized collection of classical works, which he felt had led him astray. This action could be judged unduly rash, but for Malan Christ was now the overwhelming first in his life, and all potential rivals had to be banished. On Easter Sunday, 1817, he preached in the Church of the Madeleine in Geneva and took this occasion to announce his new-found faith. His parents, who were liberal humanitarians (his father was an admirer of Diderot), turned against him, and his wife was deeply grieved. When he persisted in preaching the gospel of free grace, his fellow clergymen reprimanded him and finally barred him from preaching in the pulpits of the Reformed church in Geneva. He then left the city for Ferney-Voltaire, the former home of the great antagonist of the faith; there he erected a mission chapel that attracted scores of his compatriots as well as visitors from other lands, people who were thirsting to hear the simple gospel of salvation through the atoning death of Christ on the cross. His subsequent preaching sparked a revival that was instrumental in preserving the evangelical voice in the Reformed churches of Switzerland, the land of Calvin and Zwingli.

What is important to understand is that it was not the Bible as paper and ink, not the letter as such, but the Spirit of the living God reaching out through the letter who worked the change that resulted in the salvation of these men and others. It is not moral education, even if it includes Bible study and memorizing Scripture verses, that makes

people members of the kingdom of God. Nor is it personal reformation, a road travelled by Luther and Wesley in their early years. Instead, it is supernatural regeneration brought about by the Holy Spirit but always in conjunction with the reading or hearing of the word of the gospel as given in Holy Scripture. The Bible saves and converts not even because of its unique inspiration but because it is the sword of the Spirit. As the Word of God made alive by the Spirit, it is the sword that slays the demon of pride, it is the fire that consumes the old nature.

The divine author of Scripture is an ever active divine agent who reveals the truths that he imparted in the biblical past to people of every age. This work of illumination by the Spirit in the history of the church attests and confirms the divine inspira-

tion of Scripture. Indeed, what the Spirit reveals is not a new word but the truth already proclaimed in Holy Scripture. Yet this truth would remain buried in the past unless the Spirit were active now bringing it to light in the consciousness of men and women.

The Bible is a lamp that illumines the pathway of people who dwell in spiritual darkness (Ps. 119: 105; 2 Pet. 1: 19). It is the one Word from God that gives meaning to those who live without purpose. It is the earthen vessel that contains the treasure of eternal salvation, the gospel of reconciliation and redemption through the shed blood of Jesus Christ on Calvary. It is the sacrament of the written word by which we are united to Jesus Christ through faith by the power of his Spirit.
