

THE INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE IN HISTORIC ORTHODOXY & IN MODERN BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

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Introduction

Historically, English-speaking Christians have always read in their Bibles that the Scriptures are divinely inspired or given by inspiration of God (2 Timothy 3:16). Creedal statements have usually said the same thing. The *Westminster Confession of Faith*, for example, in its majestic opening chapter, "Of the Holy Scripture," refers to the inspiration of Scripture three times (in sections 2, 3 and 8). Since the publication of the *New International Version (NIV)*, however, the situation has changed. At 2 Timothy 3:16, the user of this very popular version reads: "All Scripture is God-breathed ..." The same expression is used in *The Interlinear Bible* and is often thought to explain, clarify or correct the older terminology.

The tendency of this kind of change is to cut cherished biblical and confessional terms adrift from their scriptural moorings and rob them of their former authority. The purpose of this article is to suggest that there is abundant reason to retain the traditional terminology regarding inspiration. We will also argue that the new rendering raises more problems than it solves.

Inspiration in Historic Orthodoxy

If any usage deserves to be called 'catholic,' in the true sense of that term – the sense in which the Westminster Confession four times describes the universal church as such (in chapter 25, sections 1–4) – calling the Scriptures 'inspired' certainly merits this description. Not only has the term been present in the English Bible since the appearance of the first Wycliffe edition late in the 14th century, it has also been present in the Latin Bible from the first, and in translations into all European languages with Latin roots. At the beginning of the 3rd century, Tertullian used what was already apparently the established terminology, calling Scripture *divinitus inspirata*, 'divinely inspired' [*De Culta Feminarum*, 1.3.3]. Calvin, in his Latin commentary on 2 Timothy, used the

same expression, as did his successor at Geneva, Theodore Beza, in his own Latin translation of the New Testament (1556).

The degree of unanimity is remarkable. Whether patristic, medieval, Reformation or post-Reformation writers are consulted, whether Reformed, Lutheran or Anglican, Presbyterian, independent or Baptist, all agree in calling the Scriptures 'inspired.' Even languages not greatly indebted to Latin sources, such as Dutch and German, use terms closely reflecting "inspired" and meaning in-breathed or in-given by God.

This agreement illustrates a common understanding of the meaning of the Greek word used in 2 Timothy 3:16 (*theopneustos*) and especially of its meaning in the context of the verse. The use of 'divinely inspired,' that is, 'in-breathed by God,' to translate *theopneustos* shows that the word was understood to refer to a breathing of the Holy Ghost in or into the human authors of Scripture, by virtue of which they were enabled to give forth the Word of God. The word was not understood to teach merely a divine breathing-out of the Scriptures. In this case, the rendering in Latin would have been *divinitus spirata*, 'divinely breathed.' The Fathers, Reformers and post-Reformation writers judged that the intended meaning related to the divine in-breathing, even if the 'in' was implicit rather than explicit in the term itself.

In this, historic orthodoxy was only following the understanding of those whose native idiom was Greek. Athenagorus of Athens, who died in about 177 AD, expresses the understanding of the Greek Fathers concerning inspiration clearly. He writes that Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah and the rest of the prophets, "as the divine spirit moved them, uttered what they had been inspired to say, the Spirit making use of them as a flautist might blow into a flute" [*Legatio sive supplicatio sive deprecatio pro Christianis*, 9.1].

The Protestant dogmatists of the 17th century took up and employed the same interpretation of the underlying Greek term, using *theopneustos* to refer to the Scriptures and their writers alike. Both the men and their writings were inspired. This was certainly John Owen's interpretation of the word: "Suppose a man were *theopneustos*, 'divinely inspired,' and should so profess himself in the name of the Lord, as did the prophets of old... A person, then, who was truly *theopneustos*, was to be attended unto because he was so... The Scriptures being *theopneustoi*, is not the case the same as with a man that was so?" ["Of the Divine Original of the Scripture," *Works*, vol 16, pp 315, 316; see also

p 355]. It is obvious that the Greek term used in 2 Timothy 3:16 is not understood to mean 'breathed out by God' but 'divinely inspired.' A man cannot be "God-breathed;" he may be 'divinely inspired.'

The Historic View Under Attack

That this is the interpretation of historic orthodoxy, as expressed in the Reformed Confessions, is confirmed in Richard Muller's *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* [Baker Book House, 1985] in which *theopneustos* is said to be "used to describe both the human authors of Scripture as acted upon by the Spirit in their work of writing and the character of the resulting written text as Word of God." Today, however, this view is regarded as an error in some fundamentalist circles. W J McRae says: "The term Paul uses speaks nothing of inspiration, but only of spiration... God did not 'breathe into' the Scripture, nor did He 'breathe into' the authors... Have you ever heard someone speak of the 'inspired apostle' or the 'inspired writers'? Do you see the error here? It is not Paul but Paul's writings that are inspired" [*The Birth of the Bible*, Everyday Publications Inc, 1984, p 41]. Historic orthodoxy would have replied that both Paul and his writings could properly be called inspired.

The new view was apparently first defended at the beginning of the 20th century by Professor B B Warfield of Princeton Theological Seminary, though the expression 'God-breathed' had been used earlier, for example by Robert Young, in his *Literal Translation of the Holy Bible*, first published in 1862. Warfield described the traditional rendering as 'discredited' in an article published in the *Presbyterian & Reformed Review* in 1900 ["God-Inspired Scripture," reprinted in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co, 1967, pp 245-296]. In 1915, he expressed himself even more decidedly, writing, ironically in an article on "Inspiration" in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, that the word 'inspired' remained in the *Revised Version* "by a distinct and even misleading mis-translation. For the Greek word... very distinctly does not mean 'inspired of God'... What it says of Scripture is... that it is breathed out by God, 'God-breathed'... In a word, what is declared by this fundamental passage [2 Timothy 3:16] is simply that the Scriptures are a Divine product, without any indication of how God has operated in producing them" [Ibid, pp 132, 133].

This view was popularised during the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy in the USA. It is expressed in *The Fundamentals*, the series arising out of that controversy (vol 7), and has eventually borne fruit in the displacement of 'inspired' and 'inspiration' from the NIV and other modern Bible versions. However, it was not the view of historic orthodoxy, nor of the Reformed Confessions. The logic of Warfield's contention, that 2 Timothy 3:16 declares that the Scriptures are a divine product without any indication of how God has operated in producing them, is only now being worked out. A new version, intended for children, the *New Century Translation*, renders this verse, "All Scripture is given by God." All trace of inspiration is thus eliminated.

The Historic View Defended

The appeal of the new view is understandable. It appears to be very literal and to 'take God at His word.' It seems to undercut the position of the modernists who laid great stress on the inspiration of the writers, in their sense of the term, in order to undermine the inspiration of their writings. But it fails to take seriously the historical understanding of inspiration reflected in the orthodox exegetical tradition from the Fathers, through the Reformers, to the post-Reformation dogmatists, the Reformed Confessions and the subsequent writers. It also fails to take account of the uses of the term *theopneustos* outside the New Testament, as discussed in the Greek lexicons.

Although all known occurrences of the word are later than the 1st century, it does not appear to be an exclusively Christian term. Writings attributed to Plutarch and Galen, citing the views of Herophilus who lived in the 3rd century BC, for example, use the word to characterise significant dreams, inspired by God. Another writer uses it to describe divine wisdom in the heart of man [Pseudo-Phocylides, 121]. Summarising the extant occurrences, it appears to be used to describe men or, metaphorically, things breathed into or inspired by God, effects produced in men by the divine in-breathing, and the works of men inspired by God. The most adequate single English expression for all these varied uses is 'divinely inspired.' 'God breathed' would not do justice to the richness and complexity of the Greek concept.

Therefore, although the principle of literal translation is important and to be pursued where possible, other considerations have to be taken into account. These include faithfulness to the meaning in context and to uses of the word in other contexts. The

judgment of those who have gone before us as to the meaning of a given term must also be given due weight. All these factors should incline us to retain the words 'inspired' and 'inspiration' in Bible translations, in confessional statements and in the witness of the church in general to the nature of Scripture. Interestingly, some lexicographers have suggested that *theopneustos* does strictly and literally mean 'God-inbreathed,' since they have traced its derivation to *empneo*, to breathe into or inspire, and not to *pneo*, to breathe or blow [Cremer: *Biblico-Theological Lexicon of New Testament Greek*, 2nd edition, Edinburgh, 1878; Zodhiates: *Complete Word Study Dictionary - New Testament*, Chattanooga, Tennessee, 1992].

A misconception about the older terminology should also be removed. Describing the Scriptures as 'inspired' does not imply that the writings were first produced, then breathed into by the Spirit of God. In this sense, McRae, cited above, is right to assert that, "God did not 'breathe into' the Scripture." What the language of historic orthodoxy affirms about the Scriptures is that God caused them to be written by breathing into the human authors who were thus enabled to give forth the Word of God. The misconception referred to would have been avoided if some relevant distinctions made by the 17th century Lutheran dogmatist, John Conrad Dannhauer, had been borne in mind. Dannhauer says in his *Hodosophia Christiana sive Theologia Positiva* (1649) that the inspiration of Scripture is more than merely the Spirit's *a*-spiration or general command, and more than merely His *post*-spiration, as if He were a teacher correcting or approving what His disciples had done. The Scripture is rather the product of His *in*-spiration, according to which the Spirit, by His present grace revealed things above human understanding [cited by R Preus: *Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, vol 1, pp 275, 276].

The view we are contending for is concisely expressed by Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones in his useful little book *Authority* [Banner of Truth Trust, 1984]: "... we should note that categorical statement, 'All Scripture is in-breathed by God.' He breathed into the men who wrote: hence the Scripture, and hence its authority" [p 53].

Problems Raised by the New Translations

By running counter to historic orthodoxy and failing to reflect the richness of meaning in the original Greek term, the substitution, of 'God-breathed' for 'divinely inspired' and 'given by inspiration of God' in Bible translations and in expositions of

Scripture, tends to impoverish the modern church without any real compensating benefit. But there are further problems and possible confusions associated with the new terminology which can be avoided by adhering to the old terms 'inspired' and 'inspiration.'

The property of being eternally breathed by God or being the breath of His mouth (Psalm 33:6) has always been understood by orthodox teachers to belong to the Holy Ghost, the Spirit or breath of God. A *Declaration of Faith* drawn up by Dr John Gill, for example, says: "The distinguishing character and relative property of the Third Person is to be breathed by the Father and the Son and to proceed from both, and He is very properly called the Spirit or Breath of both." [See also John Owen: *Works*, vol 3, p 55.] This property is called by the orthodox *spiratio* or 'spiration,' and is to be sharply distinguished from *inspiratio* or 'inspiration' which denotes the work of the Spirit in the giving of Scripture. Therefore, to call the Scriptures, without any qualification, 'God-breathed,' or even 'the breath of God,' as has been done under the influence of the new versions, seems calculated to cause confusion. To preserve clarity, we should reserve 'the breath of God' and 'God-breathed' for the Spirit, eternally proceeding by spiration from the Father and the Son [see Francis Turretin: *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, pp 308-310].

The second major problem arises from an analogy which is often used to explain the use of 'God-breathed' in 2 Timothy 3:16. This is clearly stated by J I Packer: "The thought here [in 2 Timothy 3:16] is that, just as God made the host of heaven 'by the breath of His mouth' (Psalm 33:6), through His own creative fiat, so we should regard the Scriptures as the product of a similar creative fiat - 'let there be Law, Prophets, and Writings' (the three divisions of the Jewish canon in New Testament times)" [*God Has Spoken*, p 98]. A similar view is expressed in the *New International Dictionary of the Bible*. But is this analogy really valid? The Scriptures were not created *ex nihilo*, without means or human agency, but through the agency of inspired men. If the new translation obscures this, is it not open to question on this ground alone? The older concept of inspiration keeps the agency of the human writers clearly in view.

A related fundamental problem concerns the meaningfulness of saying that God breathed out the Scripture. Scripture here can be understood either of the doctrine delivered or of the actual writing by which the doctrine was delivered [see Turretin, *op cit*, p 57]. Though it may be reasonable to say that God breathed out the

Scripture in the first sense (the doctrine delivered), it is untrue to say that He breathed out the actual writing by which the doctrine was delivered, since the writing was penned by men. But He did inspire the Scripture in both senses, imparting the doctrine itself and the desire and ability to write it or have it written. Therefore, the terminology of inspiration is more comprehensive and more suitable to express all that can be meant by the classic statement in 2 Timothy 3:16, whereas the term 'God-breathed' is, at best, one-sided and partial.

Conclusion

Those who still adhere to the Reformed Confessions and the historic orthodox faith they express, should avoid driving a wedge between the Holy Scriptures and those Confessions by using expressions which run counter to the "form of sound words" (2 Timothy 1:13) which we have received. In the case of 'inspired' and 'inspiration,' certainly, no one has yet given us reason to doubt that "the old is better" (Luke 5:39).

FREE OFFER CONTROVERSY *(Continued from page 5)*

chosen. For them that sweet smell is and will always be "the savour of death unto death."

They are like captives in a triumphal procession (the figure Paul is using in II Cor. 2:14 - note the word "triumph") on their way to slavery, the arena, or execution, to whom the sweet smell of the sacrifices, the flowers, the incense, all offered in commemoration of victory are but the smell of doom. When the Gospel is preached to them and the sweet smell of Christ is in their nostrils through the Gospel they are already doomed (a captivity led captive) by predestination and by the work of Christ on the cross. They are no different in that respect from the demons who are "reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day" (Jude, 6).

Mr. Wells suggests that our view of the Gospel is a new development in Reformed theology and an illegitimate development at that. We plead Calvin, Gill, Owen, and others, but especially the Scriptures, that we are only "standing in the (old) ways" and "asking for the old paths." May God in His mercy grant it.