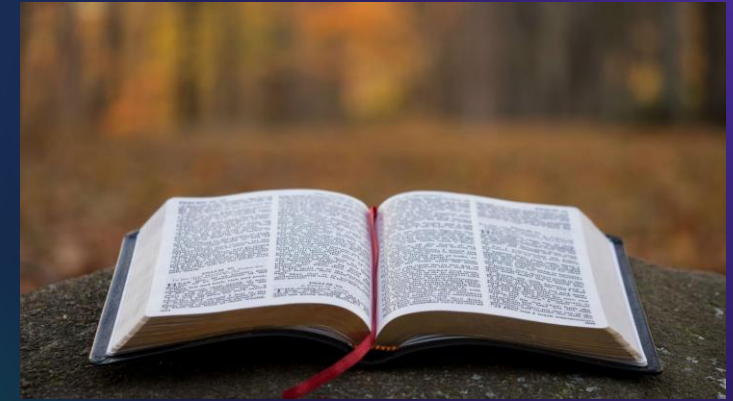


Thinking Scriptural Authority and Christian Faith(s)

KINGSHILL PARISH CHURCH

28 FEBRUARY 2026

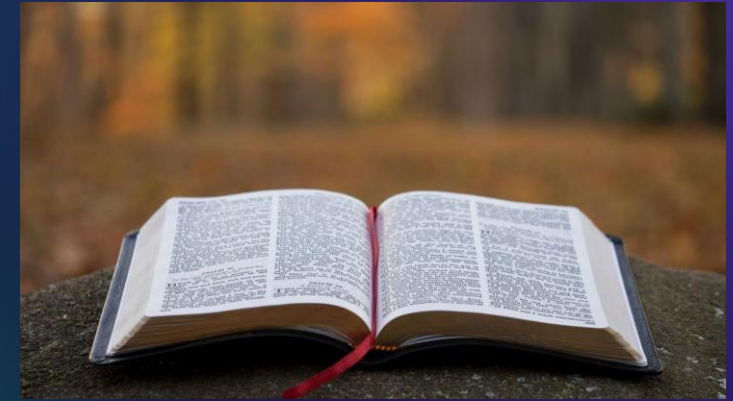
Preliminaries



- Why trust this ancient text to speak usefully or authoritatively on contemporary issues?
- What do we mean when we say the Bible is 'inspired'?
- How should we interpret the Bible? Do we have to believe *everything* in there?!
 - To what extent should we interpret the Bible 'literally'?
- Does/can scripture ever err?

← I don't like this question!!

Preliminaries



- Church Constitution, art. 1: "The Church of Scotland...receives the Word of God contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as its supreme rule of faith and life"
- Westminster Confession, art. 2: "[all 66 books] given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life."
- Art. 4 *WC*: "The authority of the holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself), the Author thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God."

"The Bible is infallible and teaches everything explicitly at face value."

"While the Bible is a sacred text, we acknowledge that it is an ancient human document, full of all the contradictions and inconsistencies of humanity. We seek in Scripture spiritual inspiration, historical grounding for our faith, the teachings of Jesus and of the Hebrew prophets before him, and guidance for our own life of prayer and service."

"The Bible is authoritative and inspired only insofar as it witnesses to Jesus as God's decisive self-revelation."

"The Bible is a fallible snapshot of God's conversation with our ancestors about his dreams for humanity. This conversation continues today."

"The words of Scripture are God's very own, and teach only literally true things."

Not considering this type of view here

Full Dictatorial
Literalism

Affirmationism

Partial Inspiration

Jesus-centrism

Spiritual Heritage
View

Strength of inspiration

"The words of Scripture are God's very own, and teach only literally true things."

"The Bible is infallible in everything it *explicitly* affirms."

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Full Dictatorial Literalism

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Strength of inspiration

Why affirm inspiration at all?



- 2 Timothy 3:16: "every [sacred] writing is **God-breathed** and profitable for instruction, for conviction, for correction, and for training in righteousness"
 - Greek *theopneustos* → Latin *divinitus inspirata*
- Divine authorship of OT Law
- Hebrews 1:1: "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets"
- Can we hear the voice of God today?
 - Hebrews 3:7: "as the Holy Spirit says..." [quotes Psalm 95] - see also Heb. 4
- * Hebrews 4:12: "The Word of God is living and active..." - not about scripture *per se*

Why affirm inspiration at all?



Reason 1: Scripture claims inspiration for itself

- If scripture is not 'inspired' or in some sense 'authored' by God, it is wrong on several key points
- Circular reasoning?
 - Not "we should affirm inspiration because scripture says so and scripture is inspired" but
 - "We should affirm inspiration because the alternative is deep internal error"

Why affirm inspiration at all?



Other reasons

- Access to Jesus - Matthew 24:35: "heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words will never pass away."
 - How do we know what Jesus' words are but through scripture?
- Christian norms
 - How can Christians meaningfully discuss questions of ethics, theology, worship without reference to a God-ordained authority?
- 95+% of our understanding of Christ and Christianity comes from... the Bible! Do we have Christianity without a doctrine of inspiration?

Discussion

“The Bible is the inspired Word of God.”

How would you articulate this claim to someone who asked what it meant?



Inspiration: Three Separate Questions

In what respect is the text inspired? (mode)

- Does inspired mean 'literally' true without qualification (full inerrancy)?
- Or: true, but with due consideration of genre? Are some things only metaphorically true?
- Or: catalogues human wrestling with God's revelation?

How far does the inspiration reach? (strength)

- Is *everything* inspired?
- Are only things 'taught' or 'affirmed' inspired?
- Are only moral/theological affirmations inspired?

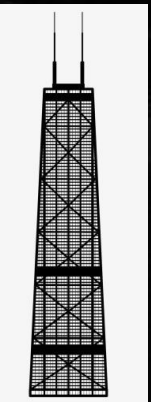
How is the text inspired? (mechanism)

- Does God put thoughts in writers' heads as they write?
- Does God put general themes into writers' heads and leave the rest to the individual?
- Is it a normal writing process, only strongly predestined?

Influential Models: Chicago Statement

"Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of *infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches*: it is to be believed, as God's instruction, in *all that it affirms*; obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God's pledge, in all that it promises."

"Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is *without error or fault in all its teaching*, no less in what it states about God's acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God's saving grace in individual lives."



Influential Models: Chicago Statement

In what respect is the text inspired? (mode)

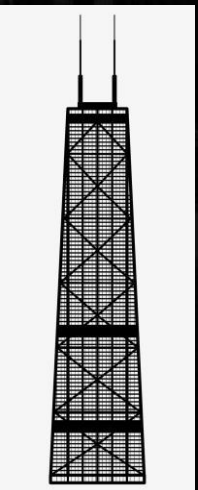
Inspired means *infallible*, errorless, faultless *when rightly interpreted*

How far does the inspiration reach? (strength)

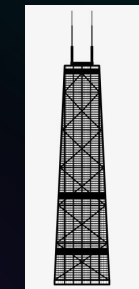
"all that [scripture] affirms"; "all its teaching"; "all matters upon which it touches"

How is the text inspired? (mechanism)

"written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit"



"The words of Scripture are God's very own, and teach only literally true things."



"The Bible is infallible in everything it explicitly affirms."

"The Bible is authoritative and infallible in matters of faith and morals, but might have historical or scientific errors."

"The Bible is authoritative and inspired only insofar as it witnesses to Jesus as God's decisive self-revelation."

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Full Dictatorial
Literalism

Affirmationism

Partial Inspiration

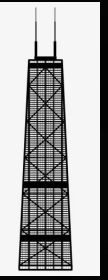
Jesus-centrism

Spiritual Heritage
View

Strength of inspiration

Testing Chicago's Plausibility

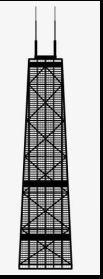
Some positives



- Neat and tidy
 - Maximal epistemic certainty – safeguards revelation, integrity of all scripture
 - Easy application: Scripture says x, we [do, believe, teach, etc.] x
 - Avoids the difficulties involved in the affirmation that scripture can err
- Encourages Christian unity: debates left to proper interpretation, not application
- Historical precedent
 - Aquinas: "It is heretical to say that any falsehood whatever is contained either in the Gospels or in any canonical Scripture."
 - Augustine: It seems to me that the most disastrous consequences must follow upon our believing that anything false is found in the sacred books
 - Calvin: Scripture is the "certain and unerring rule."

Testing Chicago's Plausibility

Potential issues

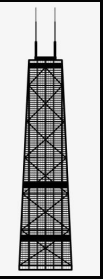


- Which 'scripture'?
 - We don't have *any* 100% original Old or New Testament book (98% or so)
 - Which manuscript is inspired?
 - If a manuscript, it's arbitrary; if the original, it seems odd God would not have preserved it
- Matt 5:22: "whoever becomes angry with his brother [**without cause**] will be liable..."
- John 8:1-11: woman caught in adultery
- Matt. 1:21: "he will save [**his people OR the world**] from sin"
- Motivation: not biblical but rationalist



Testing Chicago's Plausibility

Without error in all scripture affirms



Standard ones: "Jared lived a total of 962 years, and then he died" (Gen. 5:20)

"He set the earth on its foundations; it can never be moved. You covered it with the watery depths...the waters stood above the mountains" (Ps. 104)

"The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day" (Josh. 10:13)

"Every living thing that moved on land perished" (Gen. 7:21)

"A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet" (1 Tim. 2:11-12)

"Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him?" (1 Cor. 11:14)

Census of Quirinius - historical inaccuracy?

Gal. 4:29 - did Ishmael persecute Isaac? (see Gen. 21:9)

Jairus in Matt. 9 vs. Mark/Luke

Influential Models: Neo-Orthodoxy



- Strong emphasis on Jesus as locus of revelation
 - Rejection of natural theology
 - Rejection of autonomous reason - reaction to 19th century theological liberalism
 - **No knowledge of God at all but through Jesus**
- Jesus, not scripture is Word of God
- Bible inspired insofar as it witnesses to the Word of God; *becomes* word of God
- "The Bible has proved and will prove itself to be a true and fitting instrument to point man to God and his work and his words, to God who alone is infallible. Since the Bible is a human instrument and document, bound and conditioned by the temporal views of nature, of history, of ideas, of values, it to that extent is not sinless, like Jesus Christ himself, and thus not infallible, like God."

Influential Models: Neo-Orthodoxy

In what respect is the text inspired? (mode)

Inspired means it successfully points to the revelation of God in Christ (or, inspired *to that extent*)

How far does the inspiration reach? (strength)

It depends: does the subject encounter the real Christ in a given text? (in this sense *subjective*)

How is the text inspired? (mechanism)

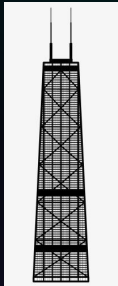
The text is inspired by interactions—real or imagined—with God and especially Jesus



"The words of Scripture are God's very own, and teach only literally true things."

Full Dictatorial Literalism

"The Bible is infallible in everything it explicitly affirms."

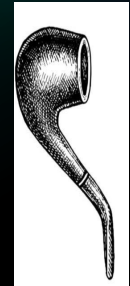


Affirmationism

"The Bible is authoritative and infallible in matters of faith and morals, but might have historical or scientific errors."

Partial Inspiration

"The Bible is authoritative and inspired only insofar as it witnesses to Jesus as God's decisive self-revelation."



Jesus-centrism

"The Bible is a fallible snapshot of God's conversation with our ancestors about his dreams for humanity. This conversation continues today."

Spiritual Heritage View

Strength of inspiration

Testing Neo-Orthodoxy's Plausibility

Some positives



- Strong emphasis on *Jesus* as locus of revelation
 - No danger of divinizing the Bible
 - Very biblical (e.g., 1 Jn. 1:1: "that which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim")
- Can easily deal with problem texts (like those reviewed above)
 - Claim: "There was no global flood."
 - Response: "So what? What does that have to do with Jesus?"
 - Claim: "Luke introduces a historical fiction to frame the birth of Jesus."
 - Response: "So what? He's using it to make a true theological or historical point about Jesus."
- Takes seriously the human elements which we find abundantly in scripture
- No interpretive gymnastics (whether biblical, historical, scientific)

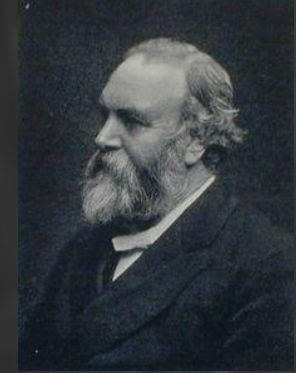
Testing Neo-Orthodoxy's Plausibility

Potential issues

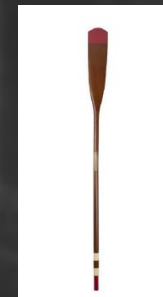


- Specter of arbitrariness
 - Who gets to say which texts we accept as inspired or reject as fallible? And why?
 - Which bits witness to Jesus? Are these whole bits inspired, or just bits within them? Says who? And what about bits not witnessing to Jesus? Are they disposable?
- Dismissive
 - Of historical theology
 - Of biblical writers
 - Of the Bible's own claims about itself
- Self-undermining?
 - Which Jesus is the one revealed by the biblical text? Is there a 'real' 'Jesus behind the text'?
 - Seems to presuppose the biblical text adequately renders the *real* Jesus. Why presuppose this?
- Too wide? Allows for radically different overall worldviews, even if some central agreement on Christ

Influential Models: A Reformed View



- Scriptural inspiration to be set in context of revelation generally
 - “Revelation and inspiration go together, and conjointly give to the written word a quality which distinguishes it from any product of ordinary human wisdom”
- The general ‘whole gospel’ plainly revealed in scripture
 - Creation, entanglement in sin, God’s response to sin and death
 - Climax the mission, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, Spirit to believers
 - “verifiable presence” of *this* “vital evangelical element” is where the inspiration resides
- Written by people who possess the Spirit of this revelation in abundance
- Inspiration and providence: latter supplies rightly situated individuals
 - *Individual* is the primary receptor of inspiration



Influential Models: A Reformed View



In what respect is the text inspired? (mode)

Inspired means it is a generally accurate witness to the unfolding of the 'whole gospel'

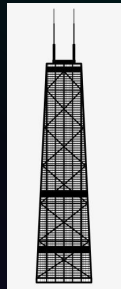
How far does the inspiration reach? (strength)

To every bit of scripture (because written by the inspired person). But inspiration does not necessarily entail truth: some things incidental to the 'whole gospel' may have been 'merely human'.

How is the text inspired? (mechanism)

The text is inspired by 'participation', by being the product of suitably inspired people

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Testing A Reformed View's Plausibility

Some positives



- Even stronger than Neo-Orthodoxy on Jesus
 - Gives overall worldview content to Jesus
 - Doesn't fall prey to the 'which Jesus?' concern
- No problem *in theory* dealing with difficult texts
 - Will partly depend on how far 'sin' concept will stretch
 - Claim: "Matthew contradicts Luke and Mark on Jairus."
 - Response: "So what? How does this minor detail in the story affect the 'whole gospel' revelation?"
- All scripture remains inspired (2 Tim. 3:16) - consistent with scripture's claims about itself
- Avoids (allegedly) farfetched theories about mechanism of inspiration: 'natural' account

Testing A Reformed View's Plausibility

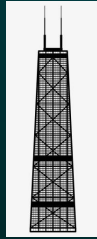
Potential issues



- Similar to Neo-Orthodoxy: who gets to say when a given text relevantly involves 'the whole gospel'?
 - Opens the door to disobedience?
- What about those bits that don't seem to deal with the 'evangelical element'?
- Clearly incomplete
 - Narrows the scope for disunity from Neo-Orthodoxy, but still allows for *some* worldview divergence
- Potential issue for 'external' theories of inspiration
 - What *if* we found out a biblical book wasn't written by a rightly situated individual? (2 Tim. ?)
 - Implausible to suggest this alone would suffice to make the book non-inspired (completeness)
 - Why not other writings? Why not Apostolic Fathers? Why not theologians today? (closed canon concern)

Test Cases

- Deuteronomy 7:1-6



- Romans 1:18-32



Genesis 2:15-25



- How might your theory influence the way you apply this text?
- How might employing one of the other theories change this application?

ASK
ANT WRIGHT
ANYTHING

