

# “Holy and Divine Scriptures”

## Sermon on Article Three of the Belgic Confession.

*Texts: Exodus 34:27-35; 2 Peter 1:16-21*

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### Article 3 - The Word of God

We confess that this Word of God did not come by the impulse of man, but that men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God, as the apostle Peter says (2 Pet 1:21). Thereafter, in His special care for us and our salvation, God commanded His servants, the prophets and apostles, to commit His revealed Word to writing<sup>1</sup> and He Himself wrote with His own finger the two tables of the law.<sup>2</sup> Therefore we call such writings holy and divine Scriptures.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ex 34:27; Ps 102:18; Rev 1:11, 19 <sup>2</sup> Ex 31:18 <sup>3</sup> Tim 3:16

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When we speak of the Bible as “inspired,” we do not mean that the Bible is “inspirational.” When we speak of the Bible as inspired, we mean that the Bible is given to us by God as part of his self-revelation so that we have knowledge of his will (the law) as well as knowledge of how to be delivered from the guilt of our sins (the gospel).

When discussing the previous article, we made the case that as our post-Christian culture becomes increasingly hostile towards Christianity in general and Reformed Christianity in particular, one way in which we are to respond to the unbelief of modern America is to personally believe those things revealed to us by God in his word and then publically confess these doctrines as a church before the watching world around us.

One of the most important things we must confess to the unbelieving world is that the Bible is a divinely-inspired book, given by the direct revelation of God through the agency of various human writers. Because God has spoken to us in his word, we have a sure and certain foundation for our knowledge of our Creator and Redeemer. God has not left us in the dark, with only our own pious opinions about religious matters. In the words of Holy Scripture, God speaks to us, even this very day.

But as Christians, our commitment to God’s word written (the Bible) sets us apart from both the secularists (who deny that any knowledge of God is possible) and the pagans and non-Christian religions in which God is supposedly known through means other than his word (i.e., intuition, and personal opinion). Yes, we believe that God speaks in his word (because he is the living God), which he breathes forth (inspiration). But as we will see, because Scripture is inspired by God, only Scripture is authoritative in matters related to doctrine and practice (a topic we will address in article five of our confession). Since God speaks to us in his word, and only in his word, Scripture is also said to be sufficient. We need no other authoritative source for doctrine such as tradition (as in Roman Catholicism) or continuing revelation (as with the Anabaptists at the time the *Belgic Confession* was written in 1561, and as with Pentecostals of today). This matter is addressed in article seven, while the

collection of these inspired books is addressed in articles four and six which deal with the subject of the Canon of Scripture (why we accept some books and reject others).

Article two of our confession deals with the two ways in which God makes himself known, general revelation and special revelation. General revelation is the revelation of God in and through the natural order. According to the opening chapter of Paul's letter to the church in Rome, all men and women receive this revelation and understand it. But because of human sinfulness, we attempt to suppress this truth in unrighteousness. We even go so far as to exchange God's truth for a lie (Romans 1:18-25). Because the general revelation of God in nature is inevitably distorted by sinful men and women, it cannot lead us to a saving knowledge of God. We do not learn of the gospel nor the saving work of Jesus by contemplating the beauty of the earth.

But general revelation is sufficient to leave all men and women without excuse before the tribunal of God. On the day of judgment, no one can say, "I didn't know God exists." It is the sinful suppression of this general revelation which explains why people are so incurably religious and why people invent false religions almost as easily as they breathe.

Special revelation, on the other hand, is God's revelation of himself as recorded in Scripture. General revelation is continuous and given through natural means. Since special revelation is comprised of both God's acts of redemption and his explanatory speech it is necessarily supernatural and connected directly to redemptive history. Unlike general revelation, which is designed to leave us without excuse for failing to worship and serve God as we should, special revelation is designed to reveal the person and work of Jesus Christ on behalf of sinners. Thus Jesus is the Bible's central character, even in the Old Testament, where he is revealed in type and shadow.

While article two of our confession speaks of the two ways in which God reveals himself, article three focuses upon the second way in which God reveals himself, namely through the inspiration of Scripture. God speaks to us in and through his word.

Entitled simply, "The Word of God," article three of our confession is quite succinct and reads as follows: "We confess that this Word of God did not come by the impulse of man, but that men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God, as the apostle Peter says (2 Pet 1:21). Thereafter, in His special care for us and our salvation, God commanded His servants, the prophets and apostles, to commit His revealed Word to writing and He Himself wrote with His own finger the two tables of the law. Therefore we call such writings holy and divine Scriptures."

As you no doubt noticed, our confession simply summarizes several biblical texts which affirm that Scripture (as law and gospel), has its origins in the revelation of God. This means that the Bible does not contain God's word, nor is the Bible merely an account of God's dealings with certain people in the past who observed God's actions and recorded their reflections upon them. Rather, the Bible is God's word written, and while grounded in redemptive history, the Bible is God's authoritative declaration of both his will (the law) and the saving work of Jesus Christ (the gospel). This means that God speaks to us today in the pages of his word, every bit as much as when it was first written.

While we will turn to the first biblical text cited by our confession (2 Peter 1:21) in some detail in a moment, we begin our discussion of the inspiration of Scripture with a key Old Testament text—Exodus 34:27-28. We read,

*then the LORD said to Moses, 'Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.' Moses was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant-the Ten Commandments.'*

Unlike the *Code of Hammurabi* or the *Magna Carta*, the law of God does not have its origin in human reflection about what should be right and wrong. The Ten Commandments are given by God directly to Moses, so that these “ten words” are the words of God recorded by Moses. This very point is made clear in a text such as Exodus 31:18, where we are told that “*when the LORD finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the Testimony, the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God.*” When we speak of the fact that Scripture has its origin in God’s self-revelation, this brings us to the subject of the inspiration of Scripture.

Understanding the nature and authority of Scripture is essential to provide us with a foundation from which to confess our faith. As one aspect of God’s self-revelation, inspiration is defined as follows in the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*, published under the auspices of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (organized and headed by James Boice):

God, who is Himself Truth and speaks truth only, has inspired Holy Scripture in order thereby to reveal Himself to lost mankind through Jesus Christ as Creator and Lord, Redeemer and Judge. Holy Scripture is God's witness to Himself. 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. The Holy Spirit, Scripture's divine Author, both authenticates it to us by His inward witness and opens our minds to understand its meaning. 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. The authority of Scripture is inescapably impaired if this total divine inerrancy is in any way limited or disregarded, or made relative to a view of truth contrary to the Bible's own; and such lapses bring serious loss to both the individual and the Church.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the most important biblical text which affirms the Bible’s own inspiration is 2 Timothy 3:16.<sup>2</sup> In this verse Paul writes, “All [πᾶσα - *pasa*] Scripture [γραφή - *graphē*] is God-breathed [θεόπνευστος - *theopneustos*] and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness [NIV].” Paul not only affirms the divine origin of the Scripture - they are “God-breathed,” but because the Scriptures are of divine origin, they are profitable for divine purposes.

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<sup>1</sup> According to B. B. Warfield, “Inspiration is that extraordinary, supernatural influence exerted by the Holy Ghost on the writers of the Sacred Books, by which their words were rendered also the words of God, and, therefore, perfectly infallible...[Inspiration is] a doctrine which claims that by a special, supernatural, extraordinary influence of the Holy Ghost, the Sacred writers have been guided in their writings in such a way, as while their humanity was not superseded, it was so yet dominated that their words became at the same time the words of God, and thus in every case and all alike, absolutely infallible.” B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1948), pp. 420-22.

<sup>2</sup> There is a great deal of literature dealing with this most vital text. Deserving first mention is Warfield's massive article “God-inspired Scripture,” in *Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (pp. 245-296) which still is the definitive study of the passage.

Paul chooses two very specific and technical terms in this verse to make this point. The term *graphe* or 'The Scriptures'<sup>3</sup> is used in verse 16, and is related to the more technical term *grammata* that Paul used in 2 Timothy 3:15 in reference to the fact that Timothy has been instructed from his earliest youth in the things of God from the Old Testament. The term *grammata* is not found anywhere else in the New Testament.<sup>4</sup> "The *grammata* are the Books of Moses or the Pentateuch. Presupposed is the conviction of the early Church, which underlies all the Gospels, that the *grammata*, the authoritative Scriptures established among the Jews and accepted as Mosaic, bear witness to Christ."<sup>5</sup> These sacred writings [the Old Testament], which Timothy has had from his youth, were able to make him wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, precisely because they were breathed forth by God for this very purpose.

The second technical term used by Paul is *theopneustos*, which is commonly translated "inspired," but which, according to B. B. Warfield,

very distinctly does not mean 'inspired of God'....The Greek term has, however, nothing to say of inspiring or inspiration; it speaks only of a 'spiring' or 'spiration.' What it says of Scripture is, not that it is 'breathed into by God' or is the product of the Divine 'inbreathing' into its human authors, but that it is breathed out by God, 'God-breathed,' the product of the creative breath of God. In a word, what is declared by this fundamental passage is simply that the Scriptures are a Divine product, without any indication of how God has operated in producing them. No term could have been chosen, however, which would have more emphatically asserted the Divine production of Scripture than that which is here employed.<sup>6</sup>

As Colin Brown points out, "it is wrong to omit the divine element from the term implied by *theo*....The expression clearly does not imply that some Scriptures are inspired, whilst others are not."<sup>7</sup> In 2 Timothy 3:16, Paul is making the point as clearly as words allow, that the Old Testament is not the product of the prophets' of Israel personal reflection upon the things of God, but that the words of the Old Testament were breathed forth by God, for the express purpose that we might know God and his will.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "The noun *graphe* is used 51 times in the NT, nearly always absolutely in either the sing. or plur. In the NT it is used exclusively of Holy Scripture." See C. Brown, *DNTT*, 3.490, s. v. "Scripture".

<sup>4</sup> Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority*, p. 133.

<sup>5</sup> Gottlob Schrenk, *TDNT*, 1.765, s. v. *gramma/pneuma*.

<sup>6</sup> Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority*, pp. 132-33. Warfield also notes the very significant Old Testament background to the concept of God's breathing-out in creation. "The 'breath of God' is in Scripture just the symbol of his almighty power, the bearer of His creative word....God's breath is the irresistible outflow of His power. When Paul declares, then, that 'every Scripture,' or 'all Scripture' is the product of the Divine breath, is 'God-breathed,' he asserts with as much energy as he could employ that Scripture is the product of a specifically Divine operation" (p. 133). See Psalm 33:6 for example.

<sup>7</sup> C. Brown, *DNTT*, 3.490, s. v. "Scripture."

<sup>8</sup> Another important point, is the extent of the "all" of V. 16. This point is a hotly debated one. As Warfield notes, "There is room for some difference of opinion as to the exact construction of this declaration. Shall we render 'Every Scripture' or 'All Scripture'? Shall we render 'Every [or all] Scripture is God-breathed and [therefore] profitable,' or 'Every [or all] Scripture, being God-breathed, is well profitable'? No doubt both questions are interesting....To say that every part of these Sacred Scriptures is God-breathed, is, for the main matter, all one....In both cases these Sacred Scriptures are declared to owe their value to their Divine origin." Warfield concludes by indicating the preferred translation: 'Every Scripture, seeing that it is God-breathed, is well profitable.' In that case, what the apostle asserts is that the Sacred Scriptures, in their every passage - for it is just "passage of Scripture" which "Scripture" in this case distributive use of it signifies - is the product of the creative breath of

Based upon Paul's assertions here, we can reach the following conclusions.

- (1) The production of Scripture is a divine activity. Specifically it is a divine breathing forth of what is identified as the *graphe* and probably the *grammata* of v. 15. It is Scripture because it is divinely breathed forth.
- (2) This divine breathing forth extends to all or to every Scripture. The extent of the canon of Scripture (the *graphe*), is determined by identifying which books have been divinely produced in this fashion. Accordingly the Old Testament is seen as the *grammata*, the "Holy Scriptures."
- (3) Because Scripture has been given by God, it is therefore, profitable for teaching, etc.
- (4) This text does not describe the mechanics of divine "breathing forth"—only the fact of the matter.

Another very important text which deals with the inspiration of Scripture is 2 Peter 1:19-21, cited by our confession. Unlike the 2 Timothy text, Peter describes the nature of the process of inspiration, or breathing forth, of the Scriptures. Beginning in verse 16, Peter describes the essential nature of the Gospel account as follows: "*We did not follow cleverly invented stories (muthos)...but were eyewitnesses of His majesty....We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with Him on that Sacred mountain*" (v. 18). Peter flatly denies that he followed myths or fables, but forcefully maintains that he was an eyewitness to the ministry of Christ, and that he even saw the transfiguration and heard the voice from heaven. Because of this, says Peter, "*We have the word of the prophets (prophetikon logon) made more certain*" (v. 19). Thus when we speak of the Bible as inspired, we mean, in part, that the Bible is factually true.

According to Peter, the entirety of the Old Testament is prophetic. Says Peter,

*no prophecy of Scripture (pasa propheta graphais) came about by the prophet's (prophatia) own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried [φερόμενοι - pharamenoi] along by the Holy Spirit (v. 20-21).*

Unfortunately, the NIV obscures the force of the Greek [*pasa*] - "all," or "every Scripture." As Warfield observes,

what Peter has to say of this 'every prophecy of Scripture' - the exact equivalent, it will be observed, in this case of Paul's 'every Scripture' (2 Tim. iii.16) - applies to the whole of Scripture in all its parts."<sup>9</sup>

This means that no prophecy (remember that Peter likely considered all of the Old Testament to be "prophecy" in a broad sense), came about by the prophet's own private interpretation. That is, prophecy is not the result of human investigation into the nature of things, or the product of its writer's own

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God, and because of this Divine origination, is of supreme value for all holy purposes. See, Warfield, Inspiration and Authority, p. 134.

<sup>9</sup> Warfield, Inspiration and Authority, p. 136.

reflection about his personal religious aspirations.

This is as much to say it is of Divine gift....There is, first of all, the emphatic denial that prophecy - that is to say, on the hypothesis upon which we are working, Scripture owes its origin to human initiative.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, the source of all true prophecy is God. Says Warfield,

there is the equally emphatic assertion [by Peter] that its source lies in God; it was spoken by men, indeed, but the men who spoke it `sp[o]ke from God.' And a remarkable clause is here inserted, and thrown forward in the sentence that stress may fall on it, which tells us how it could be that men, in speaking, should speak not from themselves, but from God: it was `as borne' - it is the same word which was rendered `was brought down' above, and might possibly rendered `brought' here - `by the Holy Spirit' that they spoke. Speaking thus under the determining influence of the Holy Spirit, the things they spoke were not from themselves, but from God. Here is as direct an assertion of the Divine origin of Scriptures as that of 2 Tim iii.16. We are advanced somewhat in our understanding of how God has produced the Scriptures.<sup>11</sup>

Thus in 2 Peter 1:18-21, we get a clearer sense of what it means for Scripture to be "God-breathed."

It was through the instrumentality of men who `spake from Him.' More specifically, it was through an operation of the Holy Ghost on these men which is described as `bearing' them....What is `borne' is taken up by the `bearer' and conveyed by the `bearer's goal, not its own. The men who spoke from God are here declared, therefore, to have been taken up by the Holy Spirit and brought by His power to the goal of His choosing. The things which they spoke under this operation of the Spirit were therefore His things, not theirs. And that is the reason which is assigned why `the prophetic word' is so sure.<sup>12</sup>

The reason that the message of the prophet is so certain is because it is God who gives the prophet his message, and takes him to God's appointed goal.

Therefore, based upon 2 Peter 1:16-21, we can make the following conclusions:

- (1) All true prophecy is given by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, true prophecy is authoritative, infallible and inerrant. True prophecy is without error.
- (2) All true prophecy of Scripture, while given by God, does not efface the personality or faculties of the prophet.
- (3) Prophecy [likely in context - all of Scripture] is therefore given by God to humanity. In fact, the distinguishing characteristic of true prophecy, is that it does not have its origin in the "will of man" but comes from God.

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<sup>10</sup> Warfield, Inspiration and Authority, p. 136.

<sup>11</sup> Warfield, Inspiration and Authority, pp. 136-37.

<sup>12</sup> Warfield, Inspiration and Authority, p. 137.

While the divine element in the inspiration of Scripture is clear in 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:18-21, we also need to be equally clear that the human element is not seen to be effaced by this process, as the prophet is said to be “carried along,” not “carried away”! This is why we speak of inspiration as “organic” or “confluent” which is an old geographical term which refers to two streams or rivers which merge so as to form a single stream or river. God is giving us his words through human agency, in such a way as to ensure that what men who are “carried along” record, is the “word of God” without eliminating or sublimating the personality traits of the prophet-writer.

Given the divine and human properties of Scripture, a number of theologians have made comparisons between the divine and human elements in the Bible with the incarnation of our Lord, who was fully man and God, a subject to which we will turn in some detail in articles 18 and 19 of our Confession which deal with the incarnation and the two natures of Christ. While the analogy between the human and divine elements in the Bible and the incarnation of our Lord can be pressed too far, nevertheless, it is important for us to be clear that even as our Lord was fully human and fully divine, so too, when we speak of the Bible as God-breathed, we do not mean that the Bible was given through some form of mechanical dictation in which the individual personalities and historical circumstances of the biblical writers was somehow overridden by God. God speaks through the means of human agency so that what the biblical writers produce is not only divinely inspired, but is produced in such a way that we can say that the Bible is truly a human book. The Bible did not fall from heaven, bound in leather with gold leaf on the edges. It was breathed forth by God, through the agency of human writers with different personalities and under vastly different historical circumstances. Although the Bible is God-breathed, it is also a truly human book.

**T**herefore, if we do not mean by the term “inspired” that the Bible is an “inspirational book,” what then do we mean when we speak of the “inspiration of Scripture”?

Based upon the Bible’s repeated assertion of its own divine inspiration, we can assert that the Biblical doctrine of inspiration contains the following elements:

- 1). Inspiration is one mode of revelation. God speaks in his word, not in a sunset.
- 2). Inspiration is a divine activity of God the Holy Spirit. Scripture has its origin in God’s self-revelation, not in human religious aspirations.
- 3). Inspiration extends to the very words [not just the ideas] of Scripture. Inspiration is, therefore, said to be verbal. God speaks in the words and propositions of Holy Scripture.
- 4). Inspiration extends to all parts of all the canonical books. It is said to be “plenary,” or fully inspired. The Bible does not merely contain the word of God. It is the word of God written. The boundary of the canon is not set by the church, but by God. Only those writings which are God-breathed are Scripture, and therefore, “canonical.”
- 5). Inspiration is monistic in the sense that Scripture itself denies a sacred/secular dualism in terms of its own inspiration—that is, the Bible is only inspired when speaking of matters of faith and practice. The Bible never affirms that only certain things it contains are inspired, but that all parts of all the canonical books are inspired.
- 6). The personalities and faculties of the human writers are not effaced in the process of

inspiration, but are supernaturally guided, so that the words the writers produce are not their own words about God, but God's words to man through the faculties, and reflecting the personalities of these same human writers.

7). Because these are the words of God, they come to us with the authority of their Author. Inspiration necessitates authority—a point made in article five of our confession and our subject for next time.

8). Because God cannot err, and the Bible is the very word of God, the Bible cannot err in all that it affirms, whether that be matters of history, geography or science. Inspiration necessitates inerrancy. If the Bible errs, God errs. While our confession does not speak of inerrancy—no one living during the 1560's when our confession was written challenged the factual accuracy of the Bible as they do today—when the confession speaks of Scripture coming from God, inerrancy is at the very least implied.

9). The English term “inspiration” ultimately fails to do justice to the process by which God produces the Biblical text. Nevertheless, because inspiration is the accepted theological term for the divine production of the sacred text, it is the term that we will use. The NIV does us all a favor by rendering *theopneustos* in 2 Timothy 3:16 as God-breathed, not “inspired.”

10). Jesus Christ, as God Incarnate, affirmed the divine origin and therefore, the authority, infallibility and inerrancy of the Sacred Scriptures.

As Reformed Christians we simply affirm the same view of Scripture that Jesus did. As B. B. Warfield has wisely counseled us,

We believe this doctrine of the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures primarily because it is the doctrine which Christ and his apostles believed, and which they have taught us. It may sometimes seem difficult to take our stand frankly by the side of Christ and his apostles. It will always be found to be safe.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, it should be abundantly clear from our very brief discussion that the Bible represents itself as the very “oracles of God.” What the Bible says, God says, because God speaks in his word. He still speaks today in his word. He reveals his will, exposes our sin, and shows us a savior in the person and work of Jesus Christ. We must therefore believe that God speaks in his word, because it is God-breathed, and we must confess this wonderful truth before the unbelieving world around us. In the Bible—but only in the Bible—we have the sure and certain self-revelation of God. As our confession states “We confess that this Word of God did not come by the impulse of man, but that men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God, as the apostle Peter says (2 Pet 1:21). Thereafter, in His special care for us and our salvation, God commanded His servants, the prophets and apostles, to commit His revealed Word to writing and He Himself wrote with His own finger the two tables of the law. Therefore we call such writings holy and divine Scriptures.”

This is what we must believe and what we must confess to the unbelieving world around us. For it is in only this book that we learn of Jesus Christ (the word incarnate), the only savior of sinners and the only

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<sup>13</sup> Warfield, Inspiration and Authority, p. 128.

mediator between sinful men and women and the holy God.

