

Doctrine of Scripture-Key Elements

I. The Characteristics of Scripture

A. Revelation

1. Key Texts—Psalm 19; Romans 1:18-32; 2:12-29
2. *Definition*: the act of God whereby He communicated to men a knowledge of Himself and His will.
3. General revelation is that which comes through the creation, including the conscience of man. It is general with respect to its *audience* and its *content*. It is sufficient to render man guilty and so to condemn him but not sufficient to save.
4. Scripture, as *special* revelation, is addressed to a special *audience* and has a special *content*.
5. General and special revelation are mutually interdependent. The priority of special revelation over general revelation is principally due to the fact that its content is, relative to general revelation, more *explicit*.

B. Inspiration

1. Key texts—II Timothy 3:16, 17; II Peter 1:20; 3:15, 16
2. *Definition*: the supernatural process and influence by which God worked upon, in, and through the minds of selected human authors in such a way as to render them the organs of God for infallible revelation and ensure that He is the ultimate author of the Bible and that its words are truly His Word, possessing all of His authority and trustworthiness.
3. Orthodox understanding of inspiration speaks of it as *verbal*, *plenary*, and *organic*.
4. The doctrine of *verbal* inspiration asserts that not only the *concepts* or *ideas*, but the actual words of the Bible are exactly what God intended and inspired (Jeremiah 1:19). This is because one cannot separate ideas from the words which convey them. To change the words is to change the ideas.
5. The doctrine of *plenary* inspiration states that the inspiration is “full.” This is to say two things: one, that *all* of the ideas, everything that the Bible asserts, in every area of knowledge, come from God, including the historical, psychological, scientific, etc., as well as the theological and spiritual, and both the primary and the secondary features of Scripture—it cannot be distinguished into parts that are “human” and parts that are “divine”—and two, that the inspiration extends to all of the books of Scripture, Old Testament and New Testament, from Genesis to Revelation.

6. The doctrine of *organic* revelation clarifies that the method of inspiration was not mechanical, through dictation or some other wooden process which suspended the mental activity of the biblical writers (except what was necessary for the mechanical transcription of words supernaturally introduced into their consciousness), but that instead God acted on the human writers, using them in harmony with the laws of their own inner being. He used them just as they were, with their character and temperament, their gifts and talents, their education and culture, their vocabulary, diction, and style, illumining their minds, prompting them to write, repressing the influence of sin on their literary activity, and guiding them in the choice of their words and in the expression of their thoughts (Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine*, p. 42). The Spirit's inspiring of the writing of Scripture was that of "accommodation," which means that "God completely adapted His inspiring activity to the cast of mind, outlook, temperament, interests, literary habits, and stylistic idiosyncrasies of each writer. The doctrine asserts that the Bible is both a fully human and fully divine composition (Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, p.81)." To quote Finlayson,

[In Scripture] both a divine and a human agency are recognized. While God is the moving Agent and responsible Author, the human writer is his free and conscious instrument, so that the words of Scripture are at one and the same time the consciously self-chosen words of the human writer and the divinely inspired words of the Spirit of God. Thus Scripture is all human and all divine, and this perfect harmony between the divine authorship and the human authorship is secured by inspiration (*Contemporary Ideas of Inspiration*, p. 223).

Other common terms for organic inspiration are *dynamic inspiration*, the *accommodation theory*, and the *confluent theory*.

7. It is this fact of the Bible's inspiration, not the Church's reception and sanction of the Bible, that establishes its authority.

C. Illumination

1. Key texts—Psalm 119:18; Luke 24:45; I Corinthians 1:18-24; 2:6-16
2. *Definition*: the divine quickening of the human mind in virtue of which it is able to understand the truth so revealed and communicated. It is the work of the Holy Spirit in opening the regenerated person's mind to understand the meaning and significance of the written word (Finlayson, *Contemporary Ideas of Inspiration*, p. 222).

Revelation has to do with the *disclosure* of truth, inspiration with its *communication*, and illumination with its *understanding* and *interpretation* (Finlayson, p. 223).

D. Infallibility

1. Key texts—Deuteronomy 8:3 (cf. Matthew 4:4); Psalm 19:7-9; Isaiah 40:8; 55:10, 11; John 10:35; Matthew 7:24-27
2. *Definition*: the quality of never deceiving or misleading, thus wholly trustworthy, and reliable. It means that Scripture cannot fail to accomplish its purpose.
3. This term is older than “inerrancy” and is sometimes understood synonymously with it.
4. Because it is possible to conceive of Scripture as never failing to accomplish its purpose but still containing erroneous information, this term is sometimes affirmed by theological liberals as a means of disguising a low view of the truth of Scripture. An orthodox and evangelical view of Scripture asserts that it is infallible because it is inerrant.

E. Inerrancy

1. Key texts—Psalm 19:7-9; 119:160; John 17:17; II Timothy 3:16, 17
2. *Definition*: the quality of being utterly and completely true and without error.
3. Inerrancy must be affirmed with several important qualifications:
 - What is affirmed to be inspired and thus inerrant is the *original manuscripts* (the “autographa”) of Scripture only. A providential care in the preservation of the text is assumed. The sciences of textual criticism and translation ensure that our Bibles are *substantially* and *virtually* inerrant.
 - Inerrancy, like infallibility, is relative to the *intentionality* of Scripture and its authors, and an artificial standard must not be imposed. The degree of precision is determined by the cultural milieu. Round numbers, phenomenological language, colloquial grammar, recording indirect discourse as direct, and the like are used intentionally without compromising the level of accuracy intended and assumed by the authors. The assessment of alleged errors in Scripture must be made in the context of a study of the culture, language, and thought of the human authors.

“The biblical authors wrote...using such modes of speech about the natural order and human experience as were current in thier days, and in a language that was common to themselves and their contemporaries. This is saying no more than that they wrote to be understood. Their picture of the world and things in it is not put forward as normative for later science, any more than their use of Hebrew and Greek is put forward as a perfect model for composition in these languages. They do not claim to teach either science or grammar (Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, pp. 96, 97).”

- “...we must distinguish between what the sacred writers themselves thought or believe, and *what they teach*.” (Systematic Theology, p. 170) The doctrine of inerrancy is not held apart from a certain understanding of what it means to approach Scripture responsibly in interpretation. If we fail to consider the parameters that Scripture itself assumes, errors might appear to occur.
- Accordingly, the infallibility and inerrancy of biblical teaching does not, however, guarantee the infallibility and inerrancy of any interpretation, or interpreter, of that teaching (Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, p. 96).

II. The Perfections of Scripture

A. Authority

1. *Definition*: only Scripture is the ultimate authority for the Christian’s belief and that which can bind his conscience (*sola Scriptura*). “The holy scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God, the *only* rule of faith and obedience (Westminster Larger Catechism, answer to question #3).”
2. The Bible does not ultimately derive its authoritative status from the Church or from empirical and logical considerations but is *self-authenticating*. The Reformers emphasized the *autopistia* of Scripture, the doctrine that Scripture has authority in and of itself as the inspired Word of God. The Church does not *establish* the Bible as authoritative; it *receives* it as the authoritative Word of God on the basis of Scripture’s inherent and observable qualities as the product of the Holy Spirit speaking to illuminated hearts and minds.

B. Necessity

1. *Definition*: God’s revelation in Scripture is necessary to acquaint men with the message of salvation and what is involved in living a life pleasing to God.
2. Without the truth it reveals, men are lost. General revelation is not enough to save men.

C. Perspicuity

1. *Definition*: this refers to Scripture’s *clarity*. The Christian does not need the Church or a high priestly caste to interpret the ordinary meaning of Scripture for him. What must be understood and is essential for salvation may be understood by any person of ordinary intelligence using ordinary means.
2. This is not to deny a learned ministry or the propriety of ordained and trained teachers, but rather to admit that God gave *his people* his Word. It is addressed from first to last to the rank-and-file Christian, not the teaching office of the

Church. Furthermore, God will primarily hold the individual accountable for his heeding its message, not the Church.

3. This does not mean that everything in Scripture is equally clear, or that there are not some hard to understand and profound things in it.

D. Sufficiency

1. *Definition:* a corollary of necessity, this means that everything necessary to believe for salvation is found in it.
2. This position, like that of the perspicuity of the Bible, was taken in opposition to Rome, which taught that Scripture is incomplete and requires the traditions of the Church in order to complete it.
3. This doctrine, along with the necessity of Scripture, is often challenged by the practice of the charismatic movement, which tends to deemphasize Scripture in favor of alleged immediate new revelation by the Spirit to individuals.
4. Thus, the Westminster Confession of Faith asserts, “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.”

Resources for Further Study:

The Shape of Sola Scriptura, by Keith Mathison (Canon Press)

Fundamentalism and the Word of God, by J.I. Packer (Eerdmans)

Inerrancy, by Norman Geisler (Zondervan)

The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God, by John Frame (Presbyterian and Reformed)