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QUESTION #10 - What is meant by the term "Inspiration"?

The doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible is one that most people would be willing to admit in the arena of theology, but it is a doctrine that very few truly understand. Dr. Charles Ryrie observed: "While many theological viewpoints would be willing to say the Bible is inspired, one finds little uniformity as to what is meant by inspiration." (Ryrie, Basic Theology, p.67)

The inspiration of the Bible is one of the key doctrines of the Bible and one that has of late come under great attack. For example, years ago most doctrinal statements would affirm: "We believe in the inspiration of the Bible." Certain individuals surfaced who undermined this doctrine by saying they did not believe the Bible was inspired to the very words. So sound theologians developed a new doctrinal statement which "We believe in the verbal inspiration of the Bible." Then other individuals surfaced who said they did not believe all portions of the Bible were inspired. Some of it was and some of it wasn't. Again, sound theologians developed another doctrinal statement which affirmed- "We believe in the verbal, plenary inspiration of the Bible." Other individuals surfaced shortly thereafter and challenged this position by saying they did not believe that all of the Bible could be written without containing some errors. As may be suggested, another doctrinal statement concerning the Bible was formed which said: "We believe in the verbal, plenary, infallible and inerrant inspiration of the Bible." Then another group surfaced who started to question the degree of Biblical infallibility (not capable of error) and Biblical inerrancy (containing no error). This naturally led to another statement which affirmed: "We believe in the verbal, plenary, infinite, unlimited, infallible and inerrant inspiration of the Bible."

On the positive side, these attacks against the inspiration of the Bible forced serious students of the Bible to carefully study to determine a correct doctrine of inspiration. On the negative side, most believers in the church have been lost in a maze of theological terms and definitions and remain in total darkness as to what inspiration really means.

The primary purpose of this section is to give a clear, concise, precise understanding of the true Biblical doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible. The concept of the inspiration of the Bible was not a doctrine invented by men, it is a doctrine clearly revealed by God.

God is the One who gives us clear data concerning the inspiration of His Word. He is the One who states: "All Scripture is inspired by God" (II Tim.3:16). Even though there has been somewhat of a denial of the doctrine of inspiration, what cannot be denied is that the Bible claims that it is inspired. Dr. Chafer said: "That doctrine of inspiration, which the church has held in all her generations, abides, not because its defenders are able to shout louder than their opponents, nor by virtue of any human defense, but because of the fact that it is embedded within the Divine Oracles themselves." (Vol.1, p.64) As we already observed in previous studies (p.13 of these notes), the word "inspiration" literally means all Scripture is "God-breathed." This claim permits us to an interpretation which believes- all Scripture has the very life and breath and perfections of God.

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When we study the doctrine of inspiration as it relates to the whole Bible, we discover that there are various vocabularies and styles of writing which do exist in the various books of the Bible. We must, therefore, have an understanding of "inspiration" that includes this idea. Based on Biblical evidence, we define inspiration this way:

God, by His SPIRIT, moved various men to WRITE, His PERFECT Word, with their vocabularies and styles and personalities. God did this in such a remarkable way that "every word" may be classified by God as being His pure word (Prov. 30:5). Human writers were moved by God to write His perfect, pure word without any errors.

Human authors were directed by the Holy Spirit to write down the Word of God. They wrote in their own vocabularies, they wrote with their own personalities, yet God saw to it that not one error was made and what was recorded was, in fact, His perfect, holy word.

When the actual process of writing God's word was taking place, both God and a human being were involved. This combined production is properly termed in theology "Dual Authorship." This term refers to the fact that God used men to write and record His perfect, inspired word.

It may also be observed that when Scriptures were being written, the whole process of inspiration involved both the writer (II Pet. 1:21) and the writing (II Tim.3:16). However, once the Scriptures were written, it is very clear that what is inspired is the writing and not the men who did the writing (II Tim.3:16; Rev.22:18-19). Inspiration, doctrinally speaking, refers to what is written. It is the Bible that is inspired, not the men. It is true that the Holy Spirit moved men in the precise direction He wanted, but it is also true that in the final analysis what is actually inspired is the written Bible.

What was initially inspired was the original document or manuscript, termed autographs or autographa. Inspiration in its purest form specifically refers to that original manuscript or document which God moved His chosen men to write.

God saw to it that every single word which was written in that original text was inspired. Inspiration to the very word is called verbal Inspiration.

God saw to it that all of the original manuscripts were equally inspired. One book of the Bible was not more or less inspired than another. This is called Plenary Inspiration.

By virtue of the fact that God inspired every word to the point that He can evaluate every word as being pure (Prov.30:5), means that none of the words in inspired writing can contain error. This is called Inerrancy. By virtue of the fact that the Bible is the very breath of God and God is perfect, we realize the Bible is not capable of error. This is called Infallibility.

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Since the doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible is so critical to establishing what the Bible actually is- God's inspired word, we may expect that there will be blatant and subtle attacks against it. There have been many false theories which have surfaced concerning inspiration and this section examines those theories:

(False Theory #1) - The Concept Theory of Inspiration.

This particular theory is one that basically states that the thoughts and concepts of the Bible are inspired, but not the actual words. There are many weaknesses with this theory foremost of which is **without true words there cannot be true concepts**. Concepts are derived words and if the words are not true and inspired, then the concepts cannot be true and inspired. Furthermore, the Scriptures nowhere state that God only inspired concepts, but in many texts it is stated that God gave inspired words- Prov.30:5; John 6:63; 17:8.

(False Theory #2) - The Mechanical or Dictation Theory of Inspiration.

This particular theory of inspiration is one that basically states God dictated His word to men who simply wrote down what He dictated. According to those who postulate this theory, the men who recorded God's word were nothing more than a secretary who mechanically recorded Divine dictation from a Divine Employer. Again there are many weaknesses with this theory, the most obvious being that this theory cannot account for the various differences in styles of writing and in the various personalities of the various writers. Dr. Chafer accurately observed: "Had God dictated the Scriptures to men, the style and writing would be uniform. It would be the diction and vocabulary of the divine Author, and free from the idiosyncrasies of men." (Vol 1, p.68)

We would not deny that there are passages of Scripture which could be classified as having been dictated by God. Passages that specifically state "Thus saith the Lord", or "and God said" or a command to copy down specific words (i.e. Ex.34:27; Jer.36:1-3; Rev.2:1,8,12,18; 3:7,14). These kinds of passages would be very close to dictation. However, as Charles Baker observed in his theology, "The major portion of Scripture...cannot be classified as dictation. It is evident that the style and vocabulary differ from one writer to the next. Surely when the Apostles wrote letters expressing their feelings in the first person singular, this could not be classified as dictation from God." (Charles Baker, Dispensational Theology, p.40)

(False Theory #3) - The Degree Theory of Inspiration.

This particular theory states that some parts of the Bible are more inspired than other parts. Those who hold this position say the Bible is inspired, but not to the same degree. For example, some might suggest that the writings of Paul or Isaiah are much more inspired than the writings found in Proverbs or Chronicles. There are many weaknesses and errors with this thinking:

- 1) This theory contradicts what the Bible does say- "all" Scripture is inspired and profitable - II Tim.3:16
- 2) It completely misses the inspiration point that it is not the writers who are inspired, but words.

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- 3) It ultimately means that finite, sinful humans must use their finite, sinful minds to determine which part of the Bible is more or less inspired. This creates a major problem for situations in which there are differences of opinion on the level of inspiration of a particular text, whose opinion is correct? The issue boils down to an argument between one person's finite, sinful view, versus another person's finite, sinful view.

(False Theory #4) - The Partial Theory of Inspiration.

This theory is in close proximity to the Degree Theory of Inspiration. The partial theory of inspiration is one that states some parts of the Bible are inspired by God and some parts are not inspired. For example, those who postulate this position might suggest that the doctrinal portions of the Bible and information that was written which was beyond the knowledge level of a human were inspired by God, but the historical facts and information which could be known from contemporary research was not inspired. The main difference between the degree theory of inspiration and the partial theory of inspiration is that the degree theory admits that all of the Bible is inspired, but to various degrees, whereas the partial theory states that not all of the Bible is inspired.

Charles Baker cites an interesting illustration from a certain bishop who held to the partial theory of inspiration. Apparently, this bishop appealed to Hebrews 1:1 as a support for his belief, stating that he believed this verse allowed for a partial inspiration view. The bishop ended up being completely embarrassed when a layman asked: "How do you know that Hebrews 1:1, the one Scripture upon which you base your argument, is one of those inspired spots?" The layman truly hit at the crux of the issue, if only parts of the Scripture are inspired, how does one determine which parts are inspired and which parts are not inspired? (Baker, p.38)

In some cases, "Red Letter Editions" of the Bible have promoted a partial inspiration mentality. There are some, for example, who think the words of Jesus are much more inspired than the words written by Moses or Paul. Still others believe the spiritual truths and doctrinal teachings are inspired but not historical, geographical or scientific references.

There are many weaknesses with this theory:

- 1) It clearly contradicts II Tim.3:16.
- 2) It leaves one finite, sinful man to subjectively judge with his own finite, sinful mind, which passages are actually inspired.
- 3) It opens the door for a variety of uninspired mistakes and errors to exist in the Bible.
- 4) It is not logical that God would give men a writing in which he must try and decipher which parts are inspired parts and which parts are not inspired parts.

(False Theory #5) - The Natural Theory of Inspiration.

This theory is one that postulates the belief that the Bible was nothing more than a production of men who were extremely spiritual and gifted. This theory suggests that the men who wrote the