

Analyzing Different Understandings of the Inspiration of the Bible

Reading the faith statements formulated by leaders at various Christian colleges across the country reveals some interesting differences with respect to what they say about the inspiration of the Bible. Even more revealing is examining what they say in their entire statements of faith about their beliefs about God, Jesus, salvation, the Bible, etc. But in this exercise you are to examine what the following colleges say about inspiration. Look carefully at these statements and come to class prepared to answer the questions posed about them.

However, you might not be familiar with some of the terms used in these statements of faith, so you might find the following definitions to be helpful for understanding them.

Autographs: the original manuscripts of the biblical books. They no longer exist, but text critics seek to determine as closely as possible what these manuscripts said.

Inerrancy: the belief that the Bible is without error in its original autographs. According to this view, God prevented the biblical authors from making any factual errors about salvation, science, history, etc. Interestingly, advocates of this position apply the concept only to the *writing* of the books, not to their *transmission* (copying by scribes). Thus, they think that God insured perfect originals but has not preserved them so that they can be used.

Infallibility: the belief that the Bible is absolutely trustworthy. For some Christians this term is a synonym for inerrancy, but other Christians use it to mean that the Bible infallibly teaches what God intended for it to teach. In this view, Scripture is absolutely authoritative because the Holy Spirit confirms this in our minds and emotions. Thus, they focus on the confirming work of the Spirit, not on solving textual problems that challenge inerrancy.

Christian College Statements on the Inspiration of the Bible

Wheaton College

“We believe that God has revealed Himself and His truth in the created order, in the Scriptures, and supremely in Jesus Christ; and that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are verbally inspired by God and inerrant in the original writing, so that they are fully trustworthy and of supreme and final authority in all they say.”

Calvin College (affiliated with the Christian Reformed Church)

“The beliefs and doctrine of the Christian Reformed Church are based on the Holy Bible, God’s *infallible written Word* contained in the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments. We believe that it was *uniquely, verbally and fully inspired by the Holy Spirit* and that it is the *supreme and final authority in all matters on which it speaks.*”

Biola University

“The Bible, consisting of all the books of the Old and New Testaments, is the Word of God, a supernaturally given revelation from God Himself, concerning Himself, His being, nature, character, will and purposes; and concerning man, his nature, need and duty and destiny. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are without error or misstatement in their moral and spiritual teaching and record of historical facts. They are without error or defect of any kind.”

Bryan College

“We believe that the holy Bible, composed of the Old and New Testaments, is of final and supreme authority in faith and life, and, being inspired by God, is inerrant in the original writings.”

Houghton College

“We believe that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are fully inspired of God and inerrant in the original writings, and that they are of supreme and final authority for faith and practice.”

Asbury College

“. . . the Scriptures of both the Old and New Testaments constitute the divinely inspired Word of God, that they are inerrant in the original writings, and that they are the final authority for truth and life.

Eastern Mennonite University

“We believe that all Scripture is inspired by God through the Holy Spirit for instruction in salvation and training in righteousness. We accept the Scriptures as the Word of God and as the fully reliable and trustworthy standard for Christian faith and life. Led by the Holy Spirit in the church, we interpret Scripture in harmony with Jesus Christ.”

George Fox University (Quaker Church affiliation)

“We believe that God inspired the Bible and has given it to us as the uniquely authoritative, written guide for Christian living and thinking. As illumined by the Holy Spirit, the Scriptures are true and reliable. They point us to God, guide our lives, and nurture us toward spiritual maturity.”

Messiah College

“*God* gives us the Bible as the inspired, trustworthy and authoritative Scripture to reveal God’s ways and purposes, to nourish our minds and souls, and to instruct us in how we ought to think and to live.”

Questions for evaluation and reflection:

1. How do the statements made by Eastern Mennonite, George Fox and Messiah differ from the other colleges in the list with respect to what is emphasized about the Bible?
2. Which statements of belief are the closest to those held by the church in which you were raised or became part of following your conversion?
3. Which make the most sense to you at this particular time? Why?

Christian Understandings of the term “Revelation”

Christians often assume that the understanding of divine revelation taught in their own churches is *the* correct viewpoint. Few know that Christians from other traditions have different beliefs

about God's role in the writing of the Bible. The actual word "revelation" means an unveiling of truth. Here are four different Christian understandings of the meaning of this divine unveiling:

1. *Divine self-disclosure* occurs as God encounters people through personal experience. According to those who hold this view, the Bible is a record of such encounters (here we might think of Job's encounter in Job 38—42) and facilitates continuing experiences with God today. The word "existential" is often associated with this approach. This focus on Scripture as a means of facilitating encountering God means that these Christians are not concerned with whether or not the Bible is true with respect to historical detail, science, etc.
2. Unveiling not only of God but also of *truth about God*. From this perspective, the Bible is not only a means of facilitating encounter with God but also a revelation of facts about God. The Bible tells us what God is like and how God relates to the created universe. However, from this perspective, the Bible is not a historical or scientific textbook; so it is unreasonable to expect that everything it says about such matters is accurate. Primarily the Bible is God's tool for communicating theology, not science. Biblical authors wrote with the perspectives of their own times and cultures. God did not intervene to help them understand the "truth" about everything they address in their writings.
3. Unveiling of *divine truth about anything addressed in the Bible* (history, cosmology, science, geography, numbers of people, etc.). In this view, the Bible must be absolutely true in every respect or else we cannot trust it to communicate truth about God. Advocates often say that if the Bible says wrong things about science or history, it is false, and we cannot trust it. If we cannot trust *everything* it says, how can we trust particular parts of it? If we cannot trust what it says about geology, how can we trust what it says about God? If we as fallible human beings must decide which parts of the Bible are true and which are false, then our own limited views have more authority than the Bible, and we are left with a subjective faith that has no absolutely verifiable basis in truth. They claim that God has given us the TRUTH in the Bible, and our job as Christians is to show how what the Bible says is true, not to have the audacity to claim that any part of it is incorrect with respect to anything.
4. *Human insights* that have been tested by time and experience and are considered to be divine. From this perspective, the Bible is a book of time-tested insights. We might use the book of Proverbs as a paradigm for this view. It contains the wisdom of generations of Israelite people that were written down to provide direction for those in the faith community.

Inspiration of the Bible

Christians hold various views on God's role in bringing about what is written in the Bible. Some hold a view that almost understands some form of divine dictation, while others see God as far less concerned with selection of the actual words written in biblical books. Here are three viewpoints for you to consider.

Verbal inspiration: God gave the very words of Scripture. From this viewpoint, God selected every word and gave them to the human authors. The word "dictation" is sometimes associated with this view. Advocates of this perspective frequently say that the Bible shares God's perfection because God, not people, ultimately is the author.

Plenary inspiration: Scripture is completely inspired by God but primarily results from God working on the minds of the human authors as they write. From this perspective, God did not choose every word but gave the messages to human authors which they then expressed in their own words.

Dynamic inspiration: Scripture results from a historical interaction between human authors and God's Spirit. Advocates of this position maintain that the clarity of God's salvation message is given in the Bible, but the biblical authors wrote from their own cultural perspectives, using their own vocabulary and expressing their own beliefs. Thus, God is seen as being mysteriously involved in the overall historical process of the production and collection of biblical books. Those who hold this position typically believe that, because biblical authors wrote from their own historical and cultural settings, their words reflect the understandings current in their day and can therefore be better understood by reading all the available literature from that time period.

Biblical Authority: Three Christian Views

Viewpoints on the authority of the Bible usually coincide with viewpoints on inspiration. The following three beliefs show some of the wide range of Christian understandings.

Bible is the eternal Word of God written. Those who advocate this position claim that the Bible is authoritative in and of itself as the instrument the Holy Spirit uses to call people to repentance and salvation. It judges all theologies and all Christian traditions and has divine and direct authority without being mediated through anyone but the Holy Spirit.

Bible is the Church's expression of faith. Proponents of this perspective assert a higher view of the role of the church than that held by advocates of the previous position. They claim that the Bible's authority is derived from the church, which God produced and directs. They believe that the divinely guided church gives authoritative teachings through specially selected leaders who explain and expand upon what is said in the Bible. Thus, God maintains proper beliefs among Christians through the traditions of the true church.

Bible is authoritative primarily as a historical document of Christian origins. Advocates of this position believe that we should think in continuity with Scripture but not be bound by it. They maintain that over the centuries Christians have improved on biblical thought in a divinely approved progression of understanding. We know more today about human rights, for example. Whereas biblical writers did not condemn the evils of slavery, today we have a more advanced appreciation of freedom and self determination. From this perspective, we build on the teachings of the Bible and advance upon its messages.

Questions for review and reflection—come prepared to discuss these in class.

1. In light of the selections from the Bible that we have read so far this semester, which understanding of the meaning of "revelation" makes the most sense to you? Why? (give specific examples from our readings to justify your answer)
2. Which view on inspiration makes the most sense to you? Why?
3. Which understanding of biblical authority do you find most compelling? Why?