

Sunday, December 6, 2015—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*  
Lesson 11: Understanding the Various Theories of Inspiration

### **Introduction**

- In Lessons 6 through 10 we sought to establish an understanding of the following basic terminology: revelation, inspiration, illumination, and preservation. Now, with that accomplished, we can turn our attention to a detailed study of God’s written revelation and the process whereby that was accomplished, namely inspiration.
- We saw in Lesson 7 that inspiration is the Bible’s claim for itself (II Timothy 3:16, II Peter 1:21). Moreover, we observed that God exercised the same supernatural force to inspire His word that He utilized when He created heaven, earth, and mankind. This understanding of inspiration helps one to understand how the word of God can be “quick and powerful” (Hebrews 4:12-13). God literally breathed His own life into His word just as He did into mankind and all of creation.
- In short, we defined inspiration as the supernatural process whereby God recorded in writing (*graphē*) those aspects of His revelation that He wanted mankind to possess forever (Isaiah 30:8).
- In this lesson we want to begin an exploration of the ideas that various people and theological systems have developed to try to explain what inspiration is and is not. These theories are varied and sundry and they come from theology, which unfortunately is often nothing more than merely human viewpoint.
- Today our objective is to survey the views of inspiration covered by Pastor Richard Jordan in Grace School of the Bible and use the writings of other theologians for elaboration or clarification where needed. These views include the following five:
  - Natural View
  - Dynamic View
  - Partial View or Spiritual-Rule-Only View
  - Existential View
  - Plenary Verbal View

### **Natural View**

- The *Natural View* says that the Bible is inspired in the same manner as William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, or Homer’s *Odyssey*, or Dante’s *Inferno*. In other words, the Bible is just a high level of human achievement written by gifted men but it was not written by God.
- This would be equivalent to the inspiration you felt when writing love notes, poems, and sonnets for your husband or wife when they first struck your fancy.

- Revelation 1:10—people that believe the *Natural View* are talking about the Bible being written in the spirit. You are inspired; you are in the spirit. It is just a poetic sort of elevated human spirit.
- II Peter 1:21—natural inspiration comes via the will of men and finds its origin in the heart of man. A man’s soul may be stirred to write wonderful and sweeping prose but this is a very different thing from a human being speaking because he is thusly moved by God the Holy Spirit.
- The following is a sampling of what leading Evangelical theologians have said regarding the *Natural View*.
  - Lewis Sperry Chafer—“As there have been exceptional artists, musicians, and poets who have produced masterpieces which have not been excelled, it is contended by the proponent of this theory that there have been exceptional men of spiritual insight who, because of their native gifts, were able to write the Scriptures. This is the lowest notion of inspiration and emphasizes the human authorship over the divine.” (Chafer, 70)
  - Charles C. Ryrie—“This view understands the writers of the Bible to be men of great genius who did not need any supernatural help in writing the Bible.” (Ryrie, 73)
  - Paul Enns—“This view teaches that there is nothing supernatural about biblical inspiration; the writers of Scripture were simply men of unusual ability who wrote the books of the Bible in the same way that an individual would write any other book today. The writers were men of unusual religious insight, writing on religious subjects in the same way like Shakespeare or Schiller wrote literature.” (Enns, 160)
  - Charles F. Baker—“This is the lowest concept of inspiration. It places the inspiration of Scripture on the same plane with so-called inspiring writings of the great authors and poets of history. But, as already noted, Biblical inspiration refers to the fact the Scriptures are God-breathed, not that they are inspiring to the reader.” (Baker, 38)

### Dynamic View

- The *Dynamic Viewpoint* says that the content and the concept are important. You hear the word “dynamic” a lot when discussing Bible translations. The dynamic theory says that only the main thought of a particular writing is inspired. In other words, inspiration consists of ideas and thoughts; and it’s the central message that is important. The dynamic viewpoint indicates that it is not just words, but what are important are the thoughts, the ideas, the flow, and the meaning behind the words.
- Matthew 24:35—the problem with the *Dynamic View* is that Christ said, “Heaven and earth shall pass away, **but my words shall not pass away.**” So, it is not just the thoughts and the flow that are important, but it is the words themselves.
- In the coming weeks, as we study the issue of inspiration, you will see that there are times when single letters in words make all the difference in how one understands a passage of Scripture. An entire argument will hang on one letter and one word. This highlights the importance of words themselves in inspiration. With the dynamic viewpoint, it’s the idea and the content that are important i.e., just the thoughts and the flow and not the words.

- In Grace School of the Bible, Brother Jordan equates the Dynamic View of inspiration with Neo-Orthodoxy's approach to Scripture.
  - “Neo-orthodoxy tells you that whether Adam was a real historical person or not is not what counts. It is the teaching of the passage that counts. Whether Cain and Abel were real individuals is not important, but it is the supra history – the thing that’s above the actual details. It is the thought, the meaning, and the concept that is trying to be conveyed that is important.” (Jordan, *MSS 101*-Lesson 2)
- Regarding the *Dynamic View* theologians have written the following:
  - Lewis Sperry Chafer—“This hypothesis attempts to conceive of thoughts apart from words, the theory being that God imparted ideas but left the human author free to express them in his own language. Quite apart from the fact that ideas are not transferable by any other medium than words, this scheme ignores the immeasurable importance of *words* in any message. Even a legal document which men execute over trivial matters may depend wholly upon the words therein.” (Chafer, 69)
  - Charles C. Ryrie—“Some are willing to acknowledge that the concepts of the Bible are inspired but not the words. Supposedly this allows for an authoritative conceptual message to have been given, but using words that can in some instances be erroneous. The obvious fallacy in this view is this: how are concepts expressed? Through words. Change the words and you have changed the concepts. You cannot separate the two. In order for concepts to be inspired, it is imperative that the words that express them be also.” (Ryrie, 74-75)
  - Paul Enns—“This view suggests that only the concepts or ideas of the writers are inspired but not the words. In this view God gave an idea or concept to the writer who then penned the idea in his own words. According to this view there can be errors in Scripture because the choice of words is left to the writer and is not superintended by God.”
  - Charles F. Baker—“Proponents of this theory (Concept Inspiration) state that God placed concepts of truth in the minds of the Bible writers but left it to them to give expression to these concepts. If this view were true it would be inconsistent to call the Bible the Word of God, for it would be only the word of man. . . Further, it is questionable whether it is possible to convey a concept apart from words. Concepts become meaningful only as they are framed in words.” (Baker, 39)

### **Partial View or Spiritual-Rule-Only View**

- In Grace School of the Bible Pastor Jordan separated the *Partial View* and *Spiritual-Rule-Only View*. Due to their close connection I have elected to combine the two views and cover them together in one section.
- Partial Inspiration says that only certain parts of the Bible are inspired. This is the Modernist's view, and the Liberal's view. They only accept parts of the Bible. They talk about love and brotherhood, and they reject the part that deals with sin, and righteousness, and judgment.
  - II Timothy 3:16—“**All scripture** is given by inspiration of God, . . .”

- This view maintains that the Bible is an infallible rule in terms of faith and practice, matters of religion, ethics, and in matters of spiritual value, but not in its historical and scientific statements.
- In other words, if you want to know about creation, forget about going to the Bible. But, if you want to know about ethics or morality it's fine to go to the Bible. As long as it's a spiritual, religious, or ethical question, the Bible has good information. But, if you want anything above that (if you are looking for historical accuracy), forget it! If you are looking for scientific statements, forget it! The Bible said that the sun stood still, but do not worry about that, because that is a way of looking at something back before man had better sense. The *Spiritual-Rule-Only View* maintains that just the ethical and spiritual content of the Bible is important.
- The problem here is that this is not what the Bible claims for itself.
  - John 17:17—the Lord Jesus Christ did not place a limit upon the truthfulness of his word.
  - John 3:12—if the Bible cannot be trusted in terms of the earthly things it reports then how can it be trusted in terms of the spiritual things that it reports?
- Leading Evangelical theologians have stated the following regarding the *Partial View*.
  - Lewis Sperry Chafer—"According to this conception, inspiration reaches only to doctrinal teachings and precepts, to truths unknowable by the human authors. Thus the objective in all inspiration—to secure inerrant writings—is denied to certain parts of the Bible." (Chafer, 69)
  - Charles C. Ryrie—"Partial inspiration teaches that some portions are, in fact, not inspired at all. Usually the parts that are inspired are those which convey information otherwise unknowable (like the account of Creation or prophecies). Historical portions, on the other hand, which could be known from contemporary documents, do not need to be inspired. The contemporary expression of this view of inspiration teaches that the Bible is inspired in its purpose. That means we can trust the Bible when it tells us about salvation, but we may expect that errors have crept into other parts." (Ryrie, 74)
  - Paul Enns—"The partial inspiration theory teaches that the parts of the Bible related to matters of faith and practice are inspired whereas matters related to history, science, chronology, or other non-faith matters may be in error. In this view God preserves the message of salvation amid other material that may be in error. The partial theory rejects both verbal inspiration (that inspiration extends to the words of Scripture) and plenary inspiration (that inspiration extends to the entirety of Scripture)." (Enns, 161)
  - Charles F. Baker—"A certain bishop is purported to have said that he believed the Bible to have been inspired in spots. When asked for the authority for such a statement, he quoted Hebrews 1:1, stating that this meant that God spoke at various times in varying degrees. Thus some spots were fully inspired, others were only partially inspired, and still other not inspired at all. The bishop was embarrassed when a layman asked: "How do you know that Hebrews 1:1, the one Scripture upon which you based your argument, is one of those fully inspired spots? . . . Who is to judge which parts of the Bible are to be accepted as truth? . . . Why should God guide a man to state the truth in one sentence and allow him to state error in the next? If He was able to guide him in the first case, why should He not also guide him at other times?" (Baker, 38-39)

- Charles F. Baker—“Some claim that the spiritual or doctrinal truth in the Bible is inspired but that the historical, geographical and scientific references are not, and are therefore liable to error. . . while inspiration pervades all parts of the Bible, it guarantees only the accurate communication of spiritual truth, and that in matters of historical, geographical, and scientific detail the writers employed only such information which they had at their natural disposal. Which may or may not have been in error.” (Baker, 39-41)

### Existential View

- The *Existential View* says that the only parts of the Bible that are inspired are the parts that speak to you. A lot of Modernists and Liberals believe this kind of thing.
- Soren Kierkegaard developed what is called Existential Philosophy. He said that only the truth that edifies is truth for thee. In other words, the only time something is really truth is when it speaks to you and builds you up. So, the only parts of the Bible that are really true, and really God’s word, and really inspired are the parts that really speak to you on a personal subjective level.
- This view says that when it speaks to you, it is the Bible; and when it does not speak to you, it is not the Bible.
  - Romans 3:4—God is true and that’s all there is to it.
  - John 17:17

### Plenary Verbal View

- The fifth view of inspiration is the *Plenary Verbal View* and this is the one that you want to subscribe to. The word *Plenary* means “all” and the word *Verbal* means “words”. The *Plenary Verbal View* of inspiration says that all of the **words** are inspired by God.
- Matthew 24:35—what’s important is not just the ideas, the content, what it says about spiritual things, or when it speaks to you, but the words themselves are the issue in inspiration – “my words.” It is not just the concepts, the message, or the thought, but the fact that the words that I speak to you shall not pass away.
  - I Corinthians 14:37
- According to Brother Jordan, The *Plenary Verbal View* used to just be referred to as “Verbal Inspiration,” but Plenary Verbal is the full title. You will never hear anybody refer to it as Plenary Inspiration, but you will occasionally hear somebody say that they believe in Verbal Inspiration. In time, other views came along, like the *Partial View*, and sought to modify people’s understanding of inspiration. As we saw above, The *Partial View* maintains that only some of the words are inspired. So, in order to counteract the *Partial View*, theologians added the word “Verbal” to inspiration. Likewise the *Existential View*, which maintains that the words are inspired when they speak to you, caused theologians to add the term “Plenary” to their definition of inspiration. Consequently, you will now see inspiration discussed in Systematic Theology books under the full descriptor of “Plenary Verbal Inspiration.” So occasionally, especially in older books on the subject, you will encounter someone who just calls it Verbal Inspiration.

- II Timothy 3:16—the doctrine of inspiration is primarily concerned with the words that were written down, not what happened to the writers themselves. You must remember that the Bible never says that the men were inspired. The Bible always says that what they wrote was inspired. All scripture, (*graphē*, that which is written down), was inspired. It is not the men that were inspired. Now, something happened to the men, “Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit” (II Peter 1:21—we will study what happened to them as well), but the issue in inspiration is what is written down on the page, not just what happened to the men.
- All of the theological writings we have been surveying in this lesson, along with the additional inclusion of Norman L. Geisler, adopt the *Plenary Verbal View* as the correct view of inspiration.

- Lewis Sperry Chafer—“By *verbal* inspiration is meant that, in the original writings, the Spirit guided in the choice of the words used. However, the human authorship was respected to the extent that the writers’ characteristics are preserved and their style and vocabulary are employed, but without the intrusion of error.

By *plenary* inspiration is meant that the accuracy which verbal inspiration secures, is extended to every portion of the Bible so that it is in all its parts infallible as to the truth and final as to divine authority.” (Chafer, 71)

- Paul Enns—“The strongest defense of verbal plenary inspiration of the Scriptures is the testimony of Jesus Christ. He testified to the inspiration of the entire Scriptures, the various books of the Old Testament and the actual words of Scriptures as they had been originally recorded. The fact that He based His arguments on the precise wording of Scriptures testifies to His exalted view of Scripture. In addition, Paul acknowledged that all Scripture is God-breathed; man was the passive instrument, being guided by God in the writing of Scripture. Peter’s statement was similar in emphasizing that, in their passivity, men were carried along by the Holy Spirit in the writing of Scripture. The testimony of each of these witnesses draws attention to the verbal plenary inspiration of Scripture.” (Enns, 166)
- Charles F. Baker—“Verbal means that inspiration extends to the very words which the writers used in the original writings. This does not mean that God dictated the words, but that He so guided men to write in their own language, with their own words, and in their own style that when they had written they had said exactly what God wanted said. . . Plenary is usually taken to mean that inspiration is full, extending to all parts of the Bible. Paul did not say, “Some Scripture is inspired of God,” but ALL Scripture. Since there are no degrees of inspiration, a writing is either inspired of God or it is not inspired.” (Baker, 42)
- Norman L. Geisler—“Numerous passages make it evident that the locus of revelation and inspiration is the written word, the Scriptures (*graphē*), not simply the idea or even the writer. . . So it wasn’t simply God’s message that men were free to state in their words; the very choice of the words was from God. . . Biblical inspiration is not only verbal (located in the words), but it is also plenary, meaning that it *extends to every part of the words and all they teach or imply*. Inspiration does guarantee the truth of all that the Bible teaches, implies, or entails. . . The inspiration of God, then extends to every part of Scripture, including everything God affirmed (or denied) about any topic. It is inclusive

of not only what the Bible teaches explicitly but also with it teaches implicitly, covering not only spiritual matters but factual ones as well.” (Geisler, 174-175)

#### **Works Cited**

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