

CHAPTER SEVEN

HOW THEN SHOULD WE THINK OF BIBLICAL INSPIRATION?

In the preceding chapters we have attempted to reconstruct and analyse James Barr's view of biblical inspiration in the light of recent exegetical and theological developments. The goal for this thesis, right from the outset, has been not to simply measure Barr against a stereotype, conservative, evangelical orthodoxy, but rather deliberately let him challenge that orthodoxy. We concede that the biblical and theological reflections of the kind Barr characteristically offers invite us to re-examine (and sometimes adjust) our positions even though we may not ultimately embrace all his propositions. W.A. Strange in his review of Barr's *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* (1983) is absolutely correct when he comments on Barr's invaluable contribution to theology:

Two great strengths of Prof. Barr's writing are the depth of insight he brings to bear on the problems he discusses, and the ability he has to draw the reader to see familiar matters in a new light. In consequence, the reader will find something stimulating on almost every page, provoking new thought about the Bible, the way it came to be, and its function in the church. In spite of the denial that there is any 'programme' in this book, a reader who has not yet encountered Prof. Barr's thought could do not better than to begin here. Even where he does not agree with the author, he can only benefit from pondering the important issues which Prof.

Barr here places before us.¹

Though this statement touches directly on only one of Barr's books, it is true of all of his other works. Barr has a way of putting a genuine reader into a self-criticism mode. Every exegete and student of the Bible needs to approach the Holy Scriptures in a manner that does justice to God's divine revelation. For this to take place, certain factors must be put into consideration. Biblical interpretation, as an art, demands a thorough assessment. Such an assessment is not 'an inspired' process as was the process that led to the production of the Bible. Difficult as it may be for us to accept it, theology and all its related disciplines (hermeneutics, exegesis, homiletics, exposition, et cetera), have a subjective human factor, a personal experience that is affected to greater or lesser extent, by personal opinion. Our ongoing struggle as we attempt to establish a proper methodology and be good students of the Holy Scriptures is to minimize subjectivity.

Newbigin highlights the significance of a proper methodology in biblical studies. He reasons:

Unfortunately it is very difficult to be aware of the models which one is using for the grasping and organizing of evidence. In fact it is impossible to be aware of them while in the act of using them—just as one cannot see the lenses of the spectacles through which one is surveying the landscape. To do this one

¹ W. A. Strange, *Book Reviews*. Anvil Vol. 1, No. 1, 1984, 71-72.

must forget the landscape for a moment, take off the glasses, and look at them instead of through them. This exercise of critically examining our own cultural presuppositions in turn requires some experience of some other possible ways of grasping experience in order to gain a point of view for critical scrutiny.²

The disciplines of biblical hermeneutics and theology have a way of reminding us of our limitations as students of the Bible. We can never claim to know things in the Bible exhaustively. The more we discover God's truth as recorded in His Word, the more we discover there is more to discover. Indeed, the Bible has bottomless truth. A few Bible texts come to mind here: (1) I John 4:1 "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; . . ." Here, John is warning the community of faith, the Christians, to be on the lookout for false teaching. The threat of false teachers is not only from outside the community of faith but also from within the community. Hence the need to discern was critical. Even those who teach and preach from God's inspired word under the influence of the Spirit of God have to be examined in accordance with the Word, the Holy Scriptures. (2) Matthew 22:29 "Jesus replied, 'You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.'" Jesus' response to the Sadducees shows that ignorance of the Scripture can lead to wrong interpretation and application of God's word. (3) Luke 24:45 "Then he opened their minds

² Lesslie Newbigin, "Text and Context: The Bible in the Church," Theological

so they could understand the Scriptures.” Here Luke highlights the fact that Jesus helps his followers (disciples) to grasp the meaning of the written Word ((, (D" μμX<" , *what has been written*). (4) Acts 17:11 “These Jews were more noble-minded than the ones in Thessalonica who received the word with all readiness, daily examining the Scriptures to see whether these things were so.” Luke characterizes the Berean believers as , Û(, <XFJ, D@4 *more noble-minded*. These believers tested the truth of the apostle Paul’s teaching by referring to the Scriptures, “rather than judging it by political or cultural considerations.”³ Another point we observe in these believers is that they were examining the Scriptures daily to check what Paul was teaching was really true to God’s revelation. (5) II Corinthians 2:17 “For we are not peddlers of God’s word like so many; but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence.” (6) I Corinthians 2:14 “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and cannot understand them because they are spiritually discerned.” Here, Paul is referring to the unsaved person who is not being guided by God’s Spirit in discerning biblical truth. There is a sense in which those who are born again by the Spirit of God, ‘the children of God’ (John 3:3; 1:12) are in a better position to understand the Scriptures than those who are not born again. Obviously, this has nothing to do with one’s level of spiritual maturity as a born again believer.

In addition, there are other Scripture passages that also enlighten us

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³ Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 9 (John-Acts). Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981, 471.

to the realities and awesomeness of interpreting Holy Scripture as we attempt to formulate a biblically sound doctrine: Hebrews 5:13-14 “Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.” II Peter 3:15-16 “Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do other Scriptures, to their own destruction.”

As evangelical Christians, we are convinced that the Bible is an authoritative document. Our understanding of such an authority of the Bible is not something that we developed recently but rather something derived from what the Bible says about its origin, that is, *it is* ‘God-breathed.’ We believe that the Bible is our final authority in matters of doctrine (what to believe about God and how to approach Him) and practice (how we should conduct ourselves). Thus we agree with the statement that the Bible “as a divine product possesses absolute authority over the minds and hearts of believers.”⁴ Indeed, the Bible offers us knowledge of God and His will for us as human beings created in His image. Consequently, our theology must be founded upon Scripture if it is to be sound and credible. The point we are emphasizing here is that we

⁴ Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982, 7.

ought to establish a doctrine by searching the whole counsel of God's Word rather than topical investigations that usually suppress the author's intent. One of the major problems with topical investigations is that the Bible can be used as a proof text. Topical investigation is one of the products of the Euro-centric approach to theology (vis-à-vis the Afro-centric approach) where sometimes there is an undue emphasis or a preoccupation with packaging things neatly independent of the whole. Rather than listen to the voice of God as recorded in the Scriptures, we pretend to be searching for God's opinion on a given topic while satisfying our curiosity. The evangelical high view of Scripture leads us to believe that the Bible is a unified narrative. This is one reason we deliberately avoided trying to establish our critique of Professor Barr's view of biblical inspiration primarily on the two passages of Scripture, namely, II Timothy 3:16-17 and II Peter 1:19-20, he uses in his argument for his preferred view of biblical inspiration. We have endeavoured to establish a view of the doctrine of inspiration that tries to encompass the whole counsel of God, that is, looking at both the OT and NT passages as we try to understand what the Scriptures say about their nature and how they came into being.

We have pointed out that although the word 'God-breathed' is a hapax legomenon, it is poor exegesis to argue for or conclude that the doctrine of biblical inspiration is a marginal one. Thus we have attempted to find out from within the Scriptures, both the Old and New Testament, what they say about themselves. We have already established this truth from our analysis of various Scripture texts in this

study. Indeed, we concur that the Bible has bottomless truth. Any student of God's Word knows that the more we delve into the world of the text, the more he/she discovers there is still more to discover.

The following conclusions about biblical inspiration have been formulated from a textual analysis of what we have found from within the Scriptures. We believe this is a crucial starting point because the centrality of God's Word, in the true sense, prevents subtle nuances and the whole concept of making theological conclusions out of our private ideas of the Bible. We must hasten to mention that some of these conclusions challenge (d) or contrast our conventional presuppositions about biblical inspiration. What then should we think of biblical inspiration? Given some of the findings from recent theological and exegetical studies, is there a better or healthier way of understanding biblical inspiration? Assuming that these recent studies contribute to a better understanding of biblical inspiration, how best can we explicate biblical inspiration?

1. Biblical Inspiration Highlights that the Bible is Co-authored:

We must answer important questions concerning biblical inspiration. For instance: (1) Is inspiration an hypostatic property or attribute of God which can then be communicated to things, texts, or people? (2) Is inspiration a relationship, a claim about how one thing (Scripture) is related to another thing (God)? Is inspiration a metaphor, or analogy, taking a more well known occurrence, like breathing and its relationship to speaking, and relating this ratio to another one, the way in which God is

thought to be involved in the writing of Scripture?

From our analysis and reconstruction of Barr's understanding of biblical inspiration in this study, we have identified that the fundamental category shaping his thought is that of the community of belief. Barr's highest point of reference in theology is the community of faith. In other words, according to Barr, the community of faith generates, out of its own processes, the Bible as an end result. It is this community of faith that determines the meaning of the Bible. Barr concludes:

The Bible takes its origin from within the life of believing communities; it is interpreted within the continuing life of these communities; the standard of its religious interpretation is the structure of faith which these communities maintain; and it has the task of providing a challenge, a force for innovation and a source of purification, to the life of these communities.⁵

Barr explains further:

Traditional doctrines of scripture suggested to Christians over many centuries that the Bible was a message *from* God *to* the community. And of course we can still say this, but we can say it only more indirectly: in the sense, perhaps, that scripture grew out of the tradition of the believing community but, having so grown, became in its turn the Word of God to the community.⁶

These two selected quotations, among others, give us insight into the deficiency of Barr's view of biblical inspiration.

⁵ James Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980, 111.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 113.

However, although Barr correctly places tremendous emphasis on the anthropological element in the formation of origin the Scriptures, he also acknowledges, though indirectly, the divine origin when he says, “And more important, *scripture was not created by a totally special act of God through a very small number of inspired writers*: it came to be through the crystallization of the tradition of the people of God.”⁷

Our study of II Timothy 3:16-17 “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work,” (and other Bible texts like II Peter 1:21 “For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit”) has led us to the understanding of the human and divine collaboration in the inspiration process. God and human beings produced the Bible. A healthy conception of biblical inspiration does not imply that there is a choice between divine and/or human where the origin of the Bible is concerned. Thus we hereby assert that the Bible is God-breathed, ‘inspired by God,’ that is, and within the same breath we also acknowledge that God guided the human authors through the Holy Spirit to record their experiences (employing their literary skills, personalities, perceptions, speculations, cultural values, *et cetera*) so that the final outcome was exactly what God wanted to be recorded in the Scriptures. In other words, the human authors gave shape to the text (the Bible) under the direction or influence of God’s Spirit. The Scriptures in their final form (both the Old and the New Testament)

⁷ Ibid., 114. Italics is mine.

stand written as the Word of God to human beings. Schneiders echoes the same viewpoint when she highlights the uniqueness of the Bible (the Scriptures) as a sacred book. She comments:

The predication of revelation to scripture is a faith affirmation that the contents of the Bible are, or in some sense are related to, divine communication. Strictly speaking, the relation of the text to revelation is the ground and content of the affirmation that the scriptures are the word of God, that is, what God has 'to say' to humanity.⁸

We can comfortably conclude that biblical inspiration displays God's grace by involving the community of faith to take part in the writing of the Scriptures. According to II Peter 1:20-21 "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation . . . but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." Thus God and the human beings (individuals and/or communities of faith) interacted in the inspiration process. Indeed, God took the initiative in this process. Pinnock is correct when he concludes:

It is probably best to think of inspiration as a divine activity accompanying the preparation and production of the Scriptures. We are not privileged to observe how in hidden and mysterious ways the Spirit worked alongside the human agents in the creative literary work, but we can plainly see what was done.⁹

⁸ Sandra Marie Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture - Information or Transformation*. San Francisco: Harper, 1991, 44.

⁹ Clark H. Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle*. San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1984, 63.

This inspiration process, occurring over long periods of time, involved different individuals and communities of faith under God's guidance. The end result, we are asserting, was the production of a normative text, that is, the believers' final authority in matters of doctrine and practice. The Bible becomes the believers' constitution (criteria) for knowing who God is, what God expects of His creation, how human beings ought to approach God, et cetera, since this unique book is ultimately His revelation to human beings.

II Peter 1:20-21 addresses the issue of the origin of prophecy not the resultant writings of the Scriptures. However, prophecy in the biblical context is part of God's method of communicating his oracles or will to mankind. Prophecy has been an integral part of God's revelation. In an attempt to be true to the text, II Peter 1:20-21 highlights the co-authorship of the Scriptures, the Bible. Human beings were "carried along by the Holy Spirit" as they communicated God's Word to the people. The presence of the human factor is so real in the process of biblical inspiration.

Inspiration must not be viewed as a commodity, stuff or substance, and cannot therefore be hypostatized, thought to have a being independent of every other being. We propose that inspiration be viewed as a kind of relationship, in so far as where it is said to occur, there two or more things are comprehended by its working or its power, but it is not merely outside of the things it relates. Inspiration does change what it touches, even if only so long as it touches it. There is a relational involvement, but inadequate. The value of this metaphorical approach, apart from its

theological orthodoxy (for God does not in fact breathe, as God possesses no body and respiratory system), is that it enables the notion of inspiration to have a wider application.

The dual authorship of the Scriptures helps us to see that “the human authors of the various biblical books have given shape to the biblical texts under the influence not only of God’s Spirit, but also under the influence of their communities and cultures. They have shaped the biblical texts to reflect the beliefs and serve the needs of their religious communities.”¹⁰ Luke, the apostle, shows us this anthropological reality as he interacted with selected accounts and documents already extant:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4)

Thus, “the insights and values contained in the Bible are not simply the creation of human beings, but are the expression of human beings under the influence of God’s spirit.”¹¹ Ultimately, the Bible, as a collection of human insights and values, is really God’s normative and definitive document. This type of understanding biblical inspiration makes the Bible in its definitive form, always relevant, and something that is our

¹⁰ Brennan R. Hill, Paul Knitter, and William Madges, *Faith, Religion, and Theology: - Approaches to Scripture and Tradition - A Contemporary Introduction*. Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1990, 279.

standard for measuring divine truth. Vogels seems to argue for this approach to Scripture in his “Interpreting Scripture in the Third Millennium.”¹²

Thus any conception of biblical inspiration that posits a dichotomy between the anthropological and divine involvement is deficient because it does not recognize the theological implications of the union of God and human beings in the production of the Bible. A better understanding of the process of biblical inspiration calls to embrace the reality that God, in his economy, employed various people within the communities of faith, to write the Scriptures. At the same time, we must acknowledge that God is really the final author of Holy Scripture. In other words, God superintended the writing process so that the Bible stands written specifically and exactly according to what He had in mind. We cannot deny that the Bible has a social milieu. Indeed, every text has a context within the community of faith. Perhaps, we can still accept the thought that the Bible is man’s word and God’s word¹³ provided we rise to the level of acknowledging that the Bible is ultimately God’s Word. When we rise to this level of theological understanding we recognize that the

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Walter Vogels, *Interpreting Scripture in the Third Millennium: Author-Reader-Text*. Ottawa: Novalis, Saint Paul University, 1993. In this book Vogels shows that the Bible, should be the final judge when doing theology.

¹³ Hill, Knitter, and Madges say that “the Bible contains not only God’s word, but also human words,” p. 279. This view of the Bible implies a hierarchy of authority within Scripture. Basically, it encourages the reader to make a distinction between God’s word and man’s word. This is not a healthy way of approaching Holy Scripture according to II Tim. 3:16-17 because it undermines the ultimate origin of Holy Scripture.

Bible has a unique function and position as it “stands written” in its final shape, its canonical composition. This view of Holy Scripture sees Scripture as the normative, authoritative Word of God. By virtue of the origin of Holy Scripture, that is, God-breathed, it is logical to conclude that it is normative insofar as who God is, how to approach God, and how we ought to conduct ourselves in this world. In other words, God’s greatness, his personality, spirituality, infinity, purity, immanence, transcendence, sovereignty, the sinful condition of human beings and their need for a redeemer, *et cetera*, has been clearly revealed in the Scriptures so that we can know what he requires of us. The Scriptures reveal God to mankind and point mankind to God.

The Christian faith stands out as a divine revelation from God and not as a human speculation about God. Christianity affirms that God has revealed himself to human beings. This God is knowable. Thus, we see that the authority of Scripture is derived from its origin, God. Scripture, as the Word of God, becomes a central element in understanding biblical inspiration. After all, inspiration really boils down to the claim that God having originated the Word, he spoke it via human authors, and that this Word bears the veracity and constancy in accordance with what He wanted written in it.

Thus, a healthy theological understanding of the doctrine of biblical inspiration should espouse the notion of the co-authorship of the Bible. The human experiences recorded in the Bible reflect human literary skills, depicting a human theoretical or cultural framework from which they were able to rationalize, analyse, and interpret those

experiences and make meaning out of them under the influence of the Spirit of God. We admit and deliberately acknowledge that the human stories or experiences recorded in the Bible reflect a specific, limited cultural perspective of its human agents, and yet not restricted to that one particular culture. The Sovereign God chose to speak to all peoples of the earth from one specific culture, Jewish culture. There is no other doctrine of the Bible that can help us to see the union of the divine and the human features than the doctrine of inspiration. Packer comments:

Inspiration did not necessarily involve an abnormal state of mind on the writer's part, such as a trance, or vision, or hearing a voice. Nor did it involve any obliteration or overriding of his personality. Scripture indicates that God in His providence was from the first preparing the human vehicles of inspiration for their predestined task, and that He caused them in many cases, perhaps in most, to perform that task through the normal exercise of the abilities which He had given them. We may not suppose that they always knew they were writing canonical Scripture, even when they consciously wrote with divine authority.¹⁴

Furthermore, according to our analysis of II Timothy 3:16-17 and other Scripture texts, we must ultimately appeal to the Bible as God's Word because God is the author, "all Scripture is God-breathed..." This view sums up the 'evangelical' understanding of Scripture established upon the authority of Scripture. Bloesch is correct when he says, "Evangelical theology appeals to the authority of Scripture because it sees Scripture as

¹⁴ James I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983.

the written Word of God.”¹⁵ The final shape of Scripture, as it stands written in its canonical structure, is, indeed, the Word of God.

It is from such a high view of the Scriptures that the ‘evangelical’ camp appeals to the authority of Scripture with the understanding that God speaks the same message to all people groups in the world. God, in His sovereignty, chose to disclose His revelation first to the Jews but is not restricted to Jews. In other words, the whole Bible is *for us* but *not to us*. There is a sense in which authority of Scripture can be understood as a completely isolated and autonomous notion attached to Scripture because it is God-breathed.

Furthermore, the co-authorship of Scripture is also tied to three significant terms used in the evangelical understanding of inspiration, *verbal*, *plenary*, and *confluent*. Biblical inspiration is *verbal* in that the actual words of the canonical text, although created or crafted by various writers, are the product of the Holy Spirit’s influence on the human authors. Our analysis of II Timothy 3:16-17, especially the emphasis on ‘all Scripture is God-breathed,’ gives us textual evidence for such a view of Scripture.

Biblical inspiration is *plenary*, that is, it extends to all parts of the canonical text as recognized throughout Church history, from Genesis to Revelation. In other words, evangelical theology does not embrace a partial inspiration of Scripture which seeks to consider some parts of the canon as authentic while considering others to be inauthentic. We believe

¹⁵ Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology: God, Authority, and Salvation*. San Francisco Harper & Row Publishers, 1978, 51.

that “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work,” II Timothy 3:16-17. We affirm the authority of all Scripture, Old and New Testaments, though we acknowledge that the author of II Tim. 3:16-17 had the Old Testament in mind. The key issues in the canonization of certain books revolved around whether a biblical book met the “standard” not whether biblical books were inspired. In other words, canonization of Scripture highlighted that “all Scripture” was regarded inspired.

Biblical inspiration is *confluent*, that is, the human and the divine element work hand-in-hand. A healthy view of biblical inspiration should acknowledge that God and the human authors and/or the believing communities interacted in the inspiration process. Although God used the different authors of Scripture to produce what He wanted them to write, He did not suppress their personalities and literary styles. Consequently, the individual personalities and skills of the Bible authors are displayed overtly in the different books.

Indeed, although the human activity involved the historical research and logical reasoning, God through his Holy Spirit superintended and directed the entire process so that the final product was what God wanted to be written. In other words, while we emphasize the divine origin of the Scriptures, we do not overlook or forget that the human authors used various sources, syntax, words, and media to convey their messages (“In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various way, . . .” Heb. 1:1; “. . . but men spoke

from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit,” II Pet. 1:21b). Stott is correct when he succinctly explains the relation between God and the human authors in the writing of the Scriptures:

On the one hand, God spoke, deciding what he wished to say, although without crushing the personality of the human authors. On the other hand, men spoke, using their human faculties freely, though without distorting the message of the divine author. This double authorship of Scripture naturally affects the way the evangelical reads his Bible. Because it is God’s Word, he reads it like no other book, paying close attention to the context, structure, grammar, and vocabulary.¹⁶

Therefore, we affirm that the Scriptures came into existence as a direct result of God’s will. This is very pivotal in understanding the nature and authority of the Bible. We believe that God has revealed himself through the Scriptures so that human beings will know his will for their lives. As a book written by human beings under the influence of the Spirit of God, the Bible was written at different time and places; it is effected by a variety of personal styles and thought patterns with certain emphases and perspectives; and it is expressed in human words, phrases, and sentences that reflected the worldview of their contemporary world.

An affirmation of the dual authorship of the Bible does not lead inevitably to the position that, because human beings are fallible, all works which they produce are also fallible. We must recognize, on the one hand, the finite (that is, limited) dimensions at work in Scripture (these writers of Scripture did not know everything about everything); yet

¹⁶ John R.W. Stott. “Are Evangelicals Fundamentalists?” Christianity Today 22, (1978) 44-46S.

the guiding hand of the Spirit of God was also actively involved in the production of these works, (cf. II Peter 1:21 “For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”).

As the Word of God, the Bible is trustworthy in all it affirms. God guided the human authors so that their words would convey the thoughts he wished conveyed. All Scripture is important and profitable for God’s people, though not all is directly applicable. However, two key implications of a healthy understanding of biblical inspiration are (1) the reliability and authority of Scripture. We need to trust and obey the Word of God; and (2) the importance of the very words of Scripture. We need to study the Scriptures exegetically, with an eye for detail. It is this written text, the Scriptures, which we need to pay attention to as we listen to the voice of the Spirit of God now guiding us to understand the text.

2. Biblical Inspiration Does Not Guarantee or Imply Inerrancy:

Before we get into the actual nitty gritty of this point it is expedient that we clarify the difference between ‘inerrancy’ and ‘infallibility,’ two important terms often employed in the context of the nature of scriptural authority.

These terms are believed by some to be on the same etymological grounds, although applied differently. According to Elwell, to the ordinary reader infallibility and inerrancy are “virtually synonymous.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Walter A. Elwell, ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984, 142

Ostensibly, The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy is rather ambiguous in its definitions of these two terms: '*Infallibility* signifies the quality of neither misleading nor being misled and so safeguards the truth that Holy Scripture is a sure, safe, and reliable rule and guide in all matters. Similarly, *inerrant* signifies the quality of being free from all falsehood or mistake and so safeguards the truth that Holy Scripture is entirely true and trustworthy in all its assertions.'

¹⁸

There are at least two major issues that arise among Christians from any attempt to distinguish between the meanings of these two (infallibility and inerrancy) terms. On the one hand, there are those who believe that anything said or stated in the Bible must be true and reliable because the Bible is God's inspired Word. The fundamental premise or understanding of this argument is that God cannot and does not lie "therefore whatever he says in the Bible must be true, and hence the Bible must be infallible and inerrant."¹⁹ This is often referred to by some as 'the inerrancy of Scripture only in the original autographs.' Warfield attempts to delineate the issue:

The present controversy concerns something much more vital than the bare "inerrancy" of the Scriptures, whether in the copies or in the "autographs." It concerns the trustworthiness of the Bible in its express declarations, and in the fundamental conceptions of its writers as to the course of the history of God's

¹⁸ Norman L. Geisler, ed. *Inerrancy*, Appendix. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980, 500.

¹⁹ I. Howard Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration*. London: Hodder and Stoughton Limited, 1982, 51.

dealings with his people. It concerns, in a word, the authority of the Biblical representations concerning the nature of revealed religion, and the mode and course of its revelation. The issue raised is whether we are able to look upon the Bible as containing a divinely guaranteed and wholly trustworthy account of God's redemptive revelation, and the course of his gracious dealings with his people, or as merely a mass of more or less trustworthy materials, out of which we are to sift the facts in order to put together a trustworthy account of God's redemptive revelation and the course of his dealings with his people.²⁰

On the other hand, there are those who have concluded that the Bible is the Word of God, and that it does contain errors and contradictions. For this group of scholars the very nature of the Bible is believed to argue against inerrancy. In a word, this group attempts to place side by side the divine book with its human features. Although the Bible is the inspired Word of God to human beings, this group says that there are passages in the Bible where human beings are speaking to God. It has been argued that "the Bible functions not just as a record of God's teaching to man, but also as a record of how people have thought about God and responded to him."²¹

With views like these in mind, others have consequently concluded and argued for the entire inerrancy of Scripture.²² Bahnsen reasons:

Nevertheless, according to the attitude of the biblical writers, who could and did

²⁰ Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Inerrancy of the Original Autographs," reprinted in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, vol. 2, ed. John E. Meeter (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 581-82.

²¹ Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration*, 56.

²² Greg L. Bahnsen, "The Inerrancy of the Autographa" in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman Geisler, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Books, 1980, 151-193.

distinguish copies from the autographa, copies of the Bible serve the purposes of revelation and function with authority only because they are assumed to be tethered to the autographic text and its criteriological authority. The evangelical doctrine pertains to the autographic text, not the autographic codex, and maintains that present copies and translations are inerrant to the extent that they accurately reflect the biblical originals; thus the inspiration and inerrancy of present Bibles is not an all-or-nothing matter. . . . The importance of original inerrancy is not that God cannot accomplish His purpose except through a completely errorless text, but that without it we cannot consistently confess His veracity, be fully assured of the scriptural promise of salvation, or maintain the epistemological authority and theological axiom of *sola Scriptura* (since errors in the original, unlike those in transmission, would not be correctable in principle).²³

Others view inerrancy as applying “equally to all the parts of the Bible as originally written. This means that no present manuscript or copy of Scripture, no matter how accurate, can be called inerrant.”²⁴

It becomes clear that the debate between infallibility and inerrancy is far from being resolved. In fact, statements like the one Bahnsen raise difficult theological issues. Does biblical inspiration imply inerrancy and/or infallibility? What does infallibility mean? What does inerrancy mean? Is there exegetical evidence for inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture?

In this study we have already underlined the importance of formulating a theology that is rooted in the text. We have constantly argued that the text, the Bible, is and should be, our final judge in what to believe about God and how we ought to conduct our lives as Christians.

²³ Ibid., 192.

²⁴ Walter A. Elwell, ed. *Evangelical Dictionary*, 142.

So, what does the Bible tell us about ‘inerrancy’ and ‘infallibility?’

Elwell’s definition of inerrancy is worth noting especially as we try to grasp what is considered to be the evangelical position. He explains:

Inerrancy is the view that when all the facts become known, they will demonstrate that the Bible in its original autographs and correctly interpreted is entirely true and never false in all it affirms, whether that relates to doctrine or ethics or the social, physical, or life sciences.²⁵

Usually, there are three arguments presented in support for inerrancy of Scripture²⁶:

(1) Biblical Argument - the belief that inerrancy is really the heart and testimony of Scripture. The argument flows as follows (a) the Bible’s teaching on inspiration requires inerrancy (II Timothy 3:16); (b) Absolute truthfulness is the mark of a divine message (Deut. 13:1-5; 18:20-22); (c) the Bible teaches its own authority, and this in turn calls for inerrancy (Matt. 5:17-20; John 10:34-35); (d) Scripture employs Scripture in a manner that espouses its inerrancy Matt. 22:32; Gal. 3:16); and (e) the doctrine of inerrancy is believed to have been derived from what the Bible says about God, that is, He can not lie (Num. 23:19; I Sam. 15:29; Titus 1:2).

(2) Historical Argument - this is the understanding that biblical inerrancy has been the church’s position throughout its history. This is normally dated back to the two Reformers, Martin Luther and John

²⁵ Ibid., 142.

²⁶ Ibid., 142-143.

Calvin, who bore witness to the infallibility of Scripture.

(3) Epistemological Argument - this position is formulated on the understanding that knowledge claims must be 'indubitable or incorrigible' to be justified. A belief must move beyond doubt and question. Thus inerrancy warrants biblical incorrigibility. Indeed, all these arguments for biblical inerrancy have been challenged by some and alternate views have been presented.²⁷

The concept of rationally establishing inerrancy implies that we possess a standard *independent* of Scripture by which to determine or judge that Scripture is the unerring standard for all knowing, feeling, experiencing, understanding, and reasoning which purports to be about God.

Traditionally, reason has been regarded as one such standard, though it was never conceived as entirely independent of Scripture, since tradition is a form of handed on rationality, which as such shapes our critical instincts and habits of mind before we come to apply these to Scripture. The relation, if it is to work in the context of the life of faith, must be reciprocal, but one in which the precedent of Scripture, and the acts in history whose meaning it delineates, has greater authority. Authority is clearly what Calvin sees in the question of inspiration,

²⁷ Ibid. For a detailed discussion on objections to inerrancy see pages 144-145.

particularly, authority as attaching to the origin of the Scriptures.²⁸ The author's identity, God, is what gives Scripture its authority. It is not, therefore, its intrinsic constitution, but its relationship to God which gives Scripture its place of privilege in our lives.

A healthy understanding of the inspiration of Scripture affirms the anthropological activity in bringing the present form of the Bible while at the same time coordinating this with its divine origin, God. It is also helpful to remember that inspiration is a metaphor, as God, thought living, is not respirating. The meaning of II Timothy 3:16-17 is fairly clear. Scripture is from God, God-breathed, and that warrants its normative use in Christian living. We have considered other Scripture passages including II Peter 2:20-21, to show that God is, indeed, the ultimate author of Scripture. Although the actual details of this human-divine relationship is not delineated in the texts under consideration. Actually, this study is a reflection of the extent of this on-going attempt to understand the relationship between the divine and the human activity in the shaping of the text. However, we can still conclude that Scripture is

²⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary on II Corinthians, I & II Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* transl. T.A. Smail. Volume 10 of the New Testament Commentaries. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1964. On II Tim. 3:14, "This passage teaches us that we should exercise the same care both to avoid false assurance in matters that are uncertain, that is, all the things that men teach, and hold the truth of God with unshaken firmness. . . . There is nothing more alien to faith than an easy credulity that bids us accept everything indiscriminately no matter what source may be, for the chief foundation of faith is to know that it has its origin and authority in God," (p.329). A little later, commenting on II Timothy 3:16, Calvin is somewhat firmer than we would expect, given the heuristic tone of the just quoted passage. He speaks of inspiration as implying that the Holy Spirit "dictated" what they said. He seems to have an illumination in mind, since he speaks of the teachings of Scripture as "not produced by men's minds as their source," (p. 330).

true, wisdom-forming words, and able to lead people to salvation through Jesus Christ. But again, we should realize that human redaction (like Luke's studying up before composing his account of the Gospel, Luke 1:1-4) does render possible the fundamentalist view that the Bible is objectively, and this can only mean without recourse to the testimony of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and minds here and now, a divine commodity. The Bible, in and of itself is God's Word, mind and will, just like the tree is what it is quite apart from any human perception or consideration of it. However, we must be careful not to personify the Bible or to equate it with God himself.

In this respect, it is important that we legitimately separate the questions of inspiration and infallibility from those of inerrancy. Inerrancy is indefensible. In keeping with our emphasis on appealing to and deriving theological truths from the Scriptures, we must painfully conclude that there is no verse (text) that says explicitly Scripture is inerrant. Biblical inerrancy is a product of implications by or simply follows from several things believed to be grounded in the Bible. As already mentioned, despite all the numerous books and articles written to support the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, there is no exegetical evidence for it. It is merely a theological deduction.

Infallibility, however, is what we mean when we claim that the Scriptures can and do unfailingly lead us to the knowledge of salvation (not physics, calculus or geometry), and inspiration, which claims that living witnesses were taken up by the Spirit of God and in such a state received knowledge and insight into God's will and purpose. Thus out of

this, the human agents wrote and spoke with God's divine authority. Packer explains 'infallibility' as "the quality of never deceiving or misleading, and so means 'wholly trustworthy and reliable.'"²⁹ In other words, what the Scriptures say is to be considered infallible because God is infallible. We can accept the fact that the Bible is the Word of God, it is true and reliable, without meaning that it is literally true in all its parts. Yes, the Bible is inspired. The insights and values contained in the Scriptures are human creations under the influence of the Spirit of God. Although biblical inspiration is God initiated, in actual fact, it really unites the believing community and God. In this understanding of biblical inspiration there is no hint to 'inerrancy.' In all fairness to the key biblical passages on inspiration we have analysed in this study, reference to inerrancy of scientific and historical data is neither mentioned nor implied. For any exegete to push for inerrancy from texts like II Timothy 3:15-17, II Peter 1:20-21, and/or others is really a result of bringing pre-conceived notions concerning the nature of biblical inspiration and merely citing these texts to undergird one's own particular approach to Scripture. Such an approach to theology leaves a lot to be desired with respect to the authority of Scripture. There is no reference to inerrancy and/or infallibility of scientific and historical data.

In his book, *Evangelicals at an Impasse: Biblical Authority in Practice*, Johnston classifies various conservative theologians into four categories:³⁰

²⁹ Packer, 'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God, 95.

³⁰ Robert Johnston, *Evangelicals at Impasse: Biblical Authority in Practice*. Atlanta: Knox Press, 1979, 19-34.

(1) *Detailed Inerrancy* - This position was advocated and popularized by Francis Schaeffer, Harold Lindsell (as depicted in his book, *Battle for the Bible*) and others who argued that all Christians must adhere to a total doctrine of Scripture's full inspiration and perfect testimony in the areas of faith, practice, and all matters of science as well as history. These advocates refuse any form of fellowship to anyone who does not embrace this position.

(2) *Irenic Inerrancy or Flexible Inerrancy* - Theologians like Clark Pinnock (as argued in his book, *Set Forth Your Case: A Defense of Biblical Infallibility and Biblical Revelation*) and Daniel Fuller propose that we must view the text (the Bible) as infallible, that is, incapable of deception, and inerrant, that is, without error in what it says or affirms. However, there is one qualification here. We must admit that the biblical writers' views of science and history differ from ours, so what might appear to us as errors are not really errors, especially given their context. Consequently, they conclude that items which are incidental are not part of what the Scriptures intend to teach; they are simply non-revelatory matters.

(3) *Complete Infallibility* - This position is embraced by theologians like David Hubbard, Paul Jewett (both of Fuller Theological Seminary) and others. They prefer to avoid the use of the word "inerrancy" and use only *infallibility*. The idea here is to try to enable the theologians to read the Bible in order to address the problems faced by the Church today. Technically, the message of the text is to be seen beyond the cultural limitations of that era.

(4) *Partial Infallibility* - Individuals like Dewey Beegle (*Inspiration of Scripture and Scripture, Tradition and Infallibility*) and Stephen Davis (*The Debate About the Bible*) vehemently attack the position of biblical inerrancy as rationalistic, obscurantistic, obsessed, and docetic. These theologians conclude that the Bible has some errors in matters of scientific and historical detail, but it is infallible in matters of faith and practice.

Partial Infallibility is certainly the category that best suits what we have advocated and argued for in this study. However, we would not employ the use of such strong words like ‘rationalistic, obscurantistic, obsessed, and docetic,’ for those who argue for inerrancy.

As already highlighted in the beginning of this subheading ‘2. *Inspiration Does Not Guarantee Inerrancy*,’ our position is that the Bible does have some errors in scientific matters and historical detail, but it is infallible in matters pertaining to what we need to know about God, the way of salvation, eschatological details, et cetera, and how we ought to conduct our lives. Therefore, we conclude that a healthy understanding of the doctrine of biblical inspiration leads us to the realization that inspiration does not guarantee inerrancy. The Bible is not to be used as a text for all academic disciplines. When we read in Joshua 10:13 that “The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day,” we can conclude that there is no element of deception in the text. We know scientifically that the sun is not moving, in actual fact it is the earth that is rotating around the sun. Therefore, we can say that the text is infallible, we can trust the text with the knowledge that science has

given us better tools to know better. This does not in any way undermine or nullify the credibility of the Bible. The Bible is a divine revelation from God, a standard for measuring theological truth and its practical implications in life of the believer.

3. Biblical Inspiration is Different from Illumination: There are at least four views³¹ on biblical inspiration that have risen in connection with illumination:

(1) The intuition theory: Basically, this makes biblical inspiration a high level of insight; a high gift, like that of an artist. In this theory, the human authors of the Scriptures are simply geniuses, those with special aptitude for languages and writing. Consequently, the Bible is basically a religious document that reflects the spiritual experiences of the believing community. In this theory, inspiration rests on the writers not the text. The human authors are no different from any other religious or mystic thinkers like Buddha, Plato, et cetera.

(2) The illumination theory: This view recognizes that there was an influence of the Holy Spirit on the human authors of Scripture. However, this influence involved only a heightening of their senses. Basically, these writers became increasingly sensitive and perceptive to spiritual matters because the Holy Spirit heightened their consciousness.

(3) The dynamic theory: This view recognizes the combination of the two parties, God and man working together in the production of the

³¹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991, 206-207.

Bible. Here, the understanding is that God directed the writers to the ideas they were to have but the writers creatively crafted and expressed these notions in their own distinctive ways. In other words, each of the Bible authors had the freedom to express their God-given thoughts in a manner that manifested their individual personality.

(4) The verbal theory: This view highlights that the Holy Spirit's influence on the writers resulted in their choosing the exact words God wanted them to use in order to communicate His message. Although this view holds that was not dictation, the intensity of the Holy Spirit is believed to have resulted in the use of the exact words or expressions God desired to communicate His word to human beings.

(5) The dictation theory: This view teaches that God dictated to the writers what He wanted them to write. In other words, there is no credit given to the human authors. Actually, Scripture passages like Jeremiah 30:1 “. . . Write in a book all the words I have spoken to you;” Jer. 36:2 “Take a scroll and write on it all the words I have spoken to you concerning Israel, . . .” and others where God instructed someone to write things down are understood to be referring to the writing of the entire Bible.

In evangelical theology, the doctrine of illumination is understood to be “that ministry of the Holy Spirit that helps the believer understand the truth of Scripture.”³² Elwell explains:

In relation to the Bible, the doctrine of revelation relates to the unveiling of truth in

³² Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary*, 545.

the material of the Scriptures; inspiration concerns the method by which the Holy Spirit superintends the writing of Scripture; and illumination refers to the ministry of the Spirit by which the meaning of Scripture is made clear to the believer.³³

Donald Bloesch clarifies further the difference between inspiration and illumination when he says:

Inspiration, which pertains basically to the verbal witness of the prophets and apostles and which is completed, is to be distinguished from illumination, which denotes the ongoing action of the Spirit in awakening men and women in every age to the truth of what is given in Scripture.³⁴

There are several texts in the Bible that seem to support the doctrine of illumination. Only but a few texts will suffice this point:

I Cor. 2:14 “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

I Cor. 3:1-3 “Bothers and sisters, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men?”

Ephesians 1:18-19 “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology: God, Authority & Salvation*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1978, 55.

you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.”

John 16:12-15 “I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you.”

In his book, *Basic Theology*, Ryrie highlights six important facts about the biblical concept of illumination:³⁵ (1) the Spirit is the teacher, and His presence in the believer guarantees the availability of this ministry to all believers; (2) unbelievers, therefore, cannot experience this ministry; (3) the Spirit’s teaching encompasses “all the truth,” including that of “things to come,” that is, prophecy; (4) carnality in the believer can thwart this ministry; (5) the purpose of the Spirit’s ministry is to glorify Christ; and (6) the Spirit will use those who have the gift of teaching to carry out His ministry.

It is important to note that there is no indication that illumination is equivalent to a direct revelation from God. In fact, illumination is an ongoing process and essential experience of the church and of the individual believer. God continues to illumine his people as they walk with him. This may occur from an interaction with the Scriptures or simply as God’s Spirit prompts the human heart. The Holy Spirit gave and continues to give understanding to the community of faith and to

³⁵ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*. Wheaton: Victor Books, 1986, 116.

individuals so that they can interpret the Scriptures. Consider the wise words of Packer on the activity of the Holy Spirit in guiding believers as they interact with the Scriptures:

There is no such thing as an exhaustive exegesis of any passage. The Holy Spirit is constantly showing Christian men facets of revealed truth not seen before. To claim finality for any historic mode of interpretation or system of theology would be to resist the Holy Ghost; there is always more to be said, and the Church of each age should echo John Robinson's confidence that the Lord has more light and truth yet to break out of His holy Word. Our point here is simply that the Church must receive all teaching that proves to be biblical, whether on matters of historical or of theological fact, as truly part of God's Word.³⁶

Indeed, this is part of the ongoing hermeneutics in theology. This theological discipline should not be confused for inspiration, that process that led to the formation and crystallization of the Scriptures as we have them today. Clark Pinnock succinctly explains the evangelical view of the connection between illumination and the Scriptures:

The Spirit works to bring each generation of believers as close to the Lord as the first apostles were and enables them to penetrate the same truth in relation to their different context. It is not that a new message will be given, but that the old message will continue to be made effective by the Spirit, as he helps us to reinterpret and apply the truth once delivered to meet new challenges.³⁷

There seems to be a clear distinction between biblical inspiration and

³⁶ Packer, *"Fundamentalism" and the Word of God*, 89.

³⁷ Pinnock. *The Scripture Principle*, 13.

illumination. Inspiration is that process by which the Holy Spirit moved in the community of faith and individual believers to produce the Scriptures, while illumination is the Holy Spirit's work of assisting those reading the Scriptures to understand what is written and apply it to their lives today. In one sense, the ancient communities of faith illumined as they employed their perceptions and speculations as they gave shape to the biblical texts. However, today we experience a similar illumination as the Holy Spirit communicates with us through the completed Scriptures. In other words, we are not being illumined in order to 'write' or 're-write' the Bible, but rather to comprehend what 'stands written' in the Bible. All the illumination and clarification we receive as we exegete the Scriptures ought to be weighed by what has already been disclosed to us definitively and conclusively in the Scriptures. This is true because, as evangelicals, our study of the Scriptures has led us to the conclusion that the will and purpose of God have been fully revealed and fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the final and complete revelation of God.

4. Inspiration Means the Bible is Authoritative: A lot of the current theological discussions and heated arguments arise from 'the authority of the Bible.' It has become increasingly apparent that the real battleground in most theological circles, especially the difference between evangelical and liberal scholarship, is biblical authority. Does the Bible have *authority*? And if the Bible has authority, what kind of authority does it have? Does the authority rest in the Bible or the people of God who gave shape to the Scriptures?

In evangelical circles, to affirm that the Bible is inspired leads to the conclusion that the Bible is an authoritative book. Most evangelical churches and Christian organizations affirm in their Articles of Faith (Statement of Faith) that the Bible is the Word of God and that it is their final authority in matters of faith and conduct. This is the camp from which this entire study was borne. We agree with Grenz who says:

Properly understood, biblical authority must be affirmed as wide in scope, even all-encompassing for our lives as believers. Evangelicals are in basic agreement that biblical writers claim authority in what we often call “matters of faith and practice.” The Bible’s authoritative status radiates outward from any narrow conception of this phrase, however, until it encompasses all of life. This phenomenon is a function of the all-encompassing nature of religious conviction.³⁸

In a word, this commitment to the Bible, for the evangelical, is really crucial because it establishes the foundation for our worldview. The Bible forms that framework from which we can analyse, interpret and make meaning out of our human experiences and search for truth. We believe that biblical inspiration attests to God’s work in the community of faith to produce a text (the Bible) that is normative for the community of faith. Basically, the Bible becomes that standard for measuring truth about who God is and how believers in this God ought to conduct their lives. Thus, we affirm that the Bible is our final authority in matters of faith and practice. This is our presupposition about the Bible and we do not apologize for being evangelical. We do not, however, claim that the Bible

³⁸ Stanley J. Grenz. *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993, 134.

is the only essential source for knowledge about God and the universe. That would be absolute foolishness on our part to take such a naive position. There are numerous truths we can learn about God and the universe when we analyse the amazing order of complex things in the world, the rigorous ways of natural law, the ancient world(s), the nature of living things, the early history of all mankind, the puzzling role of the stars and galaxies, and other disciplines. Surely, the Bible is not the only way one can know the truth about God and the universe. Paul, the apostle, declared, “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that human beings are without excuse,” (Romans 1:20).

However, we must also hasten to mention that the Bible was never meant to be a scientific textbook. It is a theology textbook. Theology is a science; it deals with knowledge. There are some historical and quasi-scientific statements in the Bible. We have already discussed this point in detail and concluded in this chapter, under paragraph # 2 above, that biblical inspiration does not guarantee inerrancy, but rather infallibility. So, we agree with Spong who says:

The medical understanding among biblical writers was the common wisdom of their time and place, not remotely close to our understanding of medical science. Studies of plant life, animal life, and human life available in centuries past were primitive, to say the least. Concepts commonplace today in the world of physics, subatomic physics, astrophysics, and cosmology would have drawn from Matthew,

Mark, Luke, and John, to say nothing except blank stares of incredulity.³⁹

Barr is also correct when he concludes:

The Bible contains statements that are not factually accurate and statements that are discrepant with other biblical statements; and it contains, at the very least, theological assertions that differ in tendency and emphasis from others within the Bible. As has been said, no doctrine of inspiration is of any use if it does not take account of these realities, for they are the realities of the Bible itself.⁴⁰

However, all this does not undermine or nullify the authority or supremacy of the Bible as a normative document for Christians or the Church. Furthermore, even though the Scriptures emerged from the tradition of the believing community, the nature of Scripture, that it is *God-breathed*, calls for its supremacy over the believing community. This is why we have argued throughout this study that inspiration rests within the text. It is the text, the written text, that is God-breathed. II Timothy 3:16-17, among other biblical passages we have mentioned in this study, declares that “All Scripture is God-breathed (inspired) and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” Although by “Scripture” Paul was thinking about the collection of Hebrew Scripture, the Protestant evangelical Christianity has, over the past hundreds of years, come to understand that “this Scripture” includes

³⁹ John Shelby Spong. *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism: A Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991, 25.

⁴⁰ James Barr. *Beyond Fundamentalism: Biblical Foundations for Evangelical Christianity*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984, 129.

the Christian books that make up the sixty-six (66) books of the modern Protestant Christian Bible. This position definitely sets our point of departure from other theological camps insofar as how this body of “God-breathed/inspired” literature is to be handled or understood. Grenz sums it up when he says:

In addition to the centrality of biblical authority in the broader evangelical tradition, contemporary “card-carrying” evangelicals continue to set forth the concern for biblical theology and the defense of biblical doctrine inherited from the older fundamentalism out of which we emerged. As evangelicals we adamantly maintain that not only at its core but also at every juncture, systematic theology must remain true to the doctrine of the apostles and prophets and that biblical teaching must be applied to life as the standard for Christian conduct.⁴¹

Evangelicals have always endeavoured to take the Bible as God’s Word for mankind. Thus, the Bible has a special place in the formulation of the evangelical ethos and practice. Hence, there is that dual emphasis on commitment to orthodoxy (what we believe) and orthopraxis (practising what we believe).

II Timothy 3:16-17, among other passages, is definitely an important passage in the discussion about biblical inspiration, and we have analysed it in greater detail in chapters 3 and 4. Our exegetical analysis of the biblical data has led to the conclusion that the Scriptures, that canon of the Bible which contains both the Hebrew and Christian books in their definitive form, must be considered normative. We have argued consistently that inspiration rests with the text (*“All Scripture is*

⁴¹ Grenz, *Evangelical Theology*, 105.

God-breathed . . .”), not the writers. Thus, we place a lot of weight on the text, the Bible, as we have it in its final compositional canonical form. We put such emphasis on the Scriptures (the Bible) as an authoritative document for two reasons:

(1) Although there is a co-authorship (God and human beings) in the production of the Scriptures, II Timothy 3:16 declares openly that God is the author. Thus, the Bible is a special book, “*All Scripture is God-breathed . . .* ;” written according to what God wanted recorded. Yes, the human authors gave shape to the biblical texts as they compiled and arranged data under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

(2) If God is the author of Scripture, and we believe he is, then human beings ought to listen up, pay attention to what God has revealed and communicated. Because their resultant origin, the Scriptures become like the owner’s manual. Perhaps this why II Timothy 3:16-17 says “*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful* for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” God being the Creator and has spoken (revealed himself to us, human beings) through Scripture, we would be wise to heed his message. Such an understanding, among evangelical Christians, gives the Bible an authoritative position insofar as knowing God and living lives that honour him is concerned.

The issue we must address at this juncture is whether there is textual evidence for elevating the Bible to such an authoritative position. Does the Bible teach that it is to be regarded as a final authority in matters of what to believe about God and how people ought to conduct

their lives? Does the evangelical understanding of biblical authority hold water either theologically or exegetically? Is there theological support for considering normativity of Scripture?

The evangelical notion of biblical inspiration affirms that Scripture is, indeed, normative for theology. Theology is a human endeavour and it has limitations. The wise words of Schneiders are worth noting as we attempt to understand task and complexity of theology. She says:

Theology is not the business of describing accurately (not to mention exhaustively!) the nature, attributes, operations, and designs of God, which are finally unknowable to humans. It is a disciplined reflection of the Holy Mystery that attempts to say, in coherent ways, what (little) it can see, in the hope of guiding the vision of others. . . surely we must acknowledge that the mystery of God so far transcends our relational capacity that our knowledge will never be exhaustive or even relatively commensurate with the mystery.⁴²

What we think (our presuppositions) about the Bible will, by and large, determine how we use or apply biblical truth. Furthermore, our presuppositions form our notion of biblical authority. There are at least nine (9) unbalanced views toward the Bible which are unhealthy.⁴³ We will discuss briefly each one of these unhealthy views about the Bible and their flaws: (1) The Bible as a “Road Map to Heaven.” This is the Bible of some evangelist. Basically, the Bible is viewed to be a map, showing us how to get to heaven and how we are to live on our way to heaven.

⁴² Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 57.

⁴³ Kenneth W. Shoemaker, Lecture Notes & Discussion “Hermeneutics TH 503” at Prairie Graduate School, Three Hills, Alberta, Canada. July 1991.

This approach places tremendous emphasis on salvation and especially the Gospel. It does not give adequate attention to the context of a given text. One who reads a map seeks specific personal application to an immediate issue (finding out how to get from point A to B) and is hardly concerned with background issues, like who created the map and for what purposes. All that really matters in this approach is that the map should be accurate and dependable whenever we need to refer to it as we journey through.

(2) The Bible as a book of Mystery of Magic. This is the Bible of the mystics. This view of the Bible begins with the premise that since the Bible is the Word of God, it is somehow supernatural. It then proceeds to the position that the ‘supernatural’ dimension must be expressed in deep, mysterious ways when speaking of the true meaning of reality. Mystical, here, is the notion of having a spiritual meaning or reality that is neither apparent to the senses nor obvious to the intelligence; it is based upon intuition insight, or similar subjective experience. Instead of trying to find meaning in the text through rational, exegetical means of studying God’s Word, this approach holds that the Bible was written in a type of spiritual code, a mystery which must first be understood before true meaning can be perceived. Often times, according this view, the “deeper spiritual meanings” of Scripture are lost on those who are not “spiritually attuned” or who do not know the secret keys which unlock the mysteries of God’s Word.

The problem with this approach is that it is highly subjective, speculative, and whimsical. It presumes that there “is a code” to be

discovered, and that someone has actually discovered the key to the code needed to unlock the mysteries. One can prove almost anything from the Bible in this approach. This is why some Bible scholars have come up with biblical numerology, theometrics/theonomics, allegorical interpretations, and the Jewish Kabbala.⁴⁴

In his well written article “A Cracked Code”⁴⁵ Witherington correctly argues that the present day preoccupation with Bible codes is erroneous. He says, “It is not the form of the Scriptures or the sequence of its letters that conveys its truth, but rather the content of the book.”⁴⁶

(3) The Bible as a Devotional Book. This is the Bible of the personal pietists. This approach usually is concerned about one’s personal relationship with God, and one’s development of Christian character. Personal holiness and fervent devotion for the Lord are very high priorities. Often times, the Bible is treated like a personal love letter from God to the individual believer. Hence, personal application of biblical truth is a preoccupation of this approach.

The problem with this approach is that one ends up, usually,

⁴⁴ Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary*, 598. “An esoteric mystic lore of Judaism, passed as secret doctrine to only the chosen few. . . What is most distinctive is the hermeneutical principle of finding hidden meanings in the texts of Scriptures. Human language in Scripture is examined not only allegorically and analogically, but also through the interpretation of words and letters according to their numerical equivalents, and by interchanging numerical equivalents new letters and words could be created, thereby allowing for new interpretations.”

⁴⁵ Ben Witherington III, “A Cracked Code” in *Christianity Today*: July 12, 1999, 60. He points out that there are at least three fundamental problems with the Bible codes being popularized by writers like Michael Drosnin as discussed in his book, *The Bible Code*, 1997. These codes are arrived at by (1) quirky methods, (2) deliberate mistranslations, and (3) false representations.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

interested in finding God's will for their life for today; a focus on immediate relevance; and a focus on "What does the Bible mean to me?" The other problem with this approach is that, for those who passionately embrace this view of the Bible, an intellectual approach to Scripture, theology, and philosophy is suspicious and is something to be minimized, if not avoided. The highly personalized focus of the devotional method often leaves little room for serious exegesis, nor does it place adequate emphasis on the application of Scripture to social issues, politics, the sciences, the arts, et cetera.

(4) The Bible as a Great Inspiring Literature. This is the Bible of those who appreciate art. Basically, this approach holds the Bible in high respect for its literary achievements. The Bible is known around the world for its lofty thoughts of God, stories of real heroes and heroines who are also frail human beings like we are, the high ideals of faith and hope, and love, and its encouragement and consolation when one is wrestling with the difficult issues of life.

The problem with this approach is that it over-emphasizes the literary aspect at the expense of the divine element. It is true that much of the Bible should be categorized as great literature. However, although the Bible is all entirely "inspired," not everyone would agree that it is all "inspiring." Definitely, the genealogies are not all that "inspiring." The real major danger with this approach to the Bible is that the spiritual purpose, the authorial intention, of the Bible is often overlooked or minimized when viewed simply as great literature.

(5) The Bible as a History Book. This is the book of the historian.

This approach concentrates on the historical, cultural or archaeological materials of the Bible. Often those who view the Bible in this manner are most interested in seeing history as the recounting of what happened.

The problem of this view is that it overlooks the fact that there is much more to the Bible than history. Certainly much of the Bible is history in nature, but there is much more there as well, including theology, Christian living, *et cetera*.

(6) The Bible as a Book of Predictions. This is the Bible of the futurist. Here, the predictive sections of the Bible are highlighted and used to look into the future to see things which “the world of natural human beings” does not perceive. The predictions of the Old Testament prophets, Jesus Christ’s Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24), and the book of Revelation are given prominence in this approach to the Bible. There is more concern with the “then” of the future than with the “now” of today. In fact, when “today” is addressed by those who favour this approach, it is done with the clear focus on tomorrow. A good example of this is the evangelistic techniques found in some circles, “Jesus Christ is coming back soon! Will you be ready to meet him at he Rapture?”

There is a fundamental problem with this approach. It often minimizes the Bible’s relevance to the many other immediate needs of today, both personal and social. Furthermore, it also allows one to neglect a close walk with God and personal obedience to all of God’s commands.

(7) The Bible as a Doctrinal Textbook. This is the Bible of the dogmatist. Basically, the biblical content is regarded as propositional (assertive); as objective. The historical and cultural context of Scripture is

to be stripped away so as to reveal pure truth.

The problem here is that this view accentuates the mental, cognitive approach to Bible study. Usually, the spiritual dimension of Scripture is ignored.

(8) The Bible as a Rulebook. This is the Bible of the legalist or literalist. This approach sees the Bible as a book of Law. God's will is revealed in terms of commandments and prohibitions: "(Thou) You shall" and "Shall not."

The problem with this approach is that the Christian life is viewed as the strict obedience to these laws, and a good Christian is defined by how well he/she conforms to these standards. For the most part, the kind of standards advocated in this approach to Scripture end up not being really biblical ones, but rather man made standards. Performance, not heart attitude, becomes the measuring standard.

(9) The Bible as a Success Manual. This is the Bible of the spiritual achiever or the present day "name-it and grab-it" Christians. This is part of the "health and wealth gospel" floating around in some theological circles. This approach sees the teachings of the Bible as simply a blueprint for achieving happiness and material success in the world.

The problem with this view is that, while there is much Scripture to guide us toward happiness, success, and satisfaction, it is also clear that worldly fulfilment is temporary at best, and it is often gained only at the expense of compromising fundamental Christian values.

Two things are worthy noting here: (1) There is truth (to a greater

or lesser extent) in each one of these views about the Scriptures. However, no single view here accurately depicts the true nature of the Bible because different parts of Scripture emphasize different views. We must, therefore, try to find out what each of the authors of the Bible intended by their writings. Unfortunately, these authors are not around to respond to our queries and to have us observe their reactions. All we have before us is the text (the Bible) itself. We must, however, bear in mind that “even in the most optimal conditions of written communication, we will never be able to discover fully the precise intention of the author.”⁴⁷ Thus, the written text, the Bible in this case, is really “a reality unto itself.”⁴⁸ (2) The most serious danger is not having a holistic view of Scripture which allows for a multiplicity of true perspectives simultaneously. Once we lock ourselves into only one way of viewing Scripture and eliminate other true ways of viewing Scripture, we are guilty of distorting God’s Word. As a consequence, our interpretations can not help but be distorted also.

The Old Testament events were written “for our instruction,” “as example” - I Cor. 10:11 “These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come.” II Timothy 3:17 shows us that the Scriptures are to equip us “so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.” Thus, an unbalanced concentration on what the Bible says about the future, the past, or the present is unhealthy.

⁴⁷ Vogels, *Interpreting Scripture*, 77.

⁴⁸ Ibid. Vogels correctly argues that a healthy biblical interpretation is one that focuses on the world *within* the text.

What is needed is an appreciation and interest in what God says about the past, the present, and the future.

Once we have established (like we did in this study) that the Bible is the Word of God which has come to us through human authors, we must then face the tough issue of explaining how this Bible is to effect us today. In other words, we are advocating that the Bible possesses “authority” and evangelical Christians recognize this authority of the Bible because of its resultant origin, “God-breathed.” “Authority” is to be understood as power to guide and command, whether in thoughts, opinions, or behaviour. Thus, biblical authority is that innate power of the Scriptures (because they are the Word of the Sovereign God) to command the respect and obedience of human beings everywhere. We believe such an authority of the Bible is based on its claims of divine inspiration and on its claims of truth. In other words, because the ultimate source of the Bible is God, its authority is dependable and believed by evangelical Christianity to be binding upon all people. Thus, we affirm that the Bible is our standard for both faith in God and practice. It is our guide for truth and for how we should live our lives before God.

Even the Old Testament prophets, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, showed the authority of their God-given utterances; “But can I say just anything? I must speak only what God puts in my mouth,” (Numbers 22:38); “The Spirit of the Lord spoke through me; his word was on my tongue,” (II Samuel 23:2); “Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon me, and he told me to say, ‘This is what the Lord says: That is what you are saying, O house of Israel, but I know what is going through your mind,’”

(Ezekiel 11:5); and “As for me, this is my covenant with them,” says the Lord. “My Spirit, who is on you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will not depart from your mouth, or from the mouths of your children, or from the mouths of their descendants from this time on and forever,” (Isaiah 59:21). All this confirms the authority of the Word of God. Numerous times we hear the prophets uttering the expression, “Thus says the Lord . . .” as they communicated their prophetic oracles. This expression marked the beginning of an important message. It called the audience or recipient of the message to “Listen up! God is speaking to you.”

In this study, we are arguing for a view of Scripture that focuses on the canon of the Bible, that collection of Protestant (66) books as normative. We appeal to this authority of Scripture because we regard Scripture as the written Word of God. Such a view is not developed by zeroing on one or two Bible passages, but rather by studying Scripture as a unit. Hence, we have attempted to study the two important texts, namely, II Timothy 3:16-17 and II Peter 1:20-21, within the context of the rest of Scripture. We have established that there is ample exegetical evidence for the significance of biblical inspiration as well as the authority of Scripture from within Scripture itself.