

“Inspiration”
2 Timothy 3:16-17
09.19.21

Introduction

I was in the second grade when my parents took me to get my eyes examined for the first time. Everyone in my family already had glasses, and so it kind of seemed inevitable that I would need to wear them too.

After visiting the optometrist, we not only discovered that I needed glasses, but also that my vision was the most impaired out of everyone in my family. So, we went next door to Sears and picked out a pair of gold frames that were rectangular in shape.

The day my new glasses arrived in the mail my mom called for me to come inside the house and try them on. When she put them on my face, she did what all good moms do—she made a fuss over how handsome I looked. I, on the other hand, was more concerned with what the kids were going to say at school on Monday. Would they call me four-eyes? Would they call me a geek?

But suddenly, my greatest concern wasn't the names I would be called. Instead, I was getting a headache caused by my strong prescription. It was causing a major strain on my eyes.

So, my mom allowed me to take the glasses off for a few moments to give my eyes a rest; and that's when I experienced real panic. I couldn't see! Or at least I couldn't see very well. All I saw were blurry shapes and fuzzy colors. Nothing was clear or distinct.

My first thought was that my prescription was so strong that it was causing me to go blind. I really believed that my new glasses were permanently damaging my eyesight. Then my parents explained to me that that was the way I had always seen the world. I had just never known anything different until I was forced to see things through a different lens.

The truth is that we all perceive the world through a particular lens regardless of whether we realize it or not. In other words, none of us see things objectively. We are all shaped by experiences, relationships, and culture in ways that significantly impact our understanding of reality. Therefore, we are only able to appreciate other perspectives when we are willing to look through another set of lenses.

When we step back and look at the last 2,000 years, it gives us an important perspective. Studying history allows us to identify the various lenses that have influenced our thinking.

In the 16th century, a new era began that has forever changed the way we see the world in the western hemisphere. We call this era the “Enlightenment.”

The Enlightenment birthed the modern scientific method, and major advancement was made in the areas of biology, physics, chemistry, and astronomy. Human reason became the greatest value of the day, and people began to think about everything in life in terms of how it could be weighed, measured, and quantified.

Unlike the Renaissance, the Enlightenment wasn't as focused on art, music, and beauty; rather, it was focused on answers. Instead of seeing life and the world as expansive and mysterious, the Enlightenment caused people to reduce the meaning of everything to what could be observed through a black and white lens of "objectivity."

Needless to say, the Enlightenment had a significant impact on Christianity and faith in general. Some people read the stories about the parting of the Red Sea and the sun standing still in the book of Joshua, and they couldn't square it with their understanding of the material world. Therefore, they threw the baby out with the bathwater and walked away from religion completely.

On the other side of the same coin, many Christians became motivated to demonstrate that everything in the Bible could be proven as a scientific or historical fact. This same pursuit continues with us today and is often the prevailing way the Bible is approached in America.

But it is important to remember that it hasn't always been this way. Prior to the Enlightenment, Church Fathers in the earliest centuries of Christianity interpreted Scripture allegorically and through the lens of mysticism. Leading up to the Reformation they began to employ critical historical methods to demonstrate that the Bible is filled with a variety of literary genres—many of which are meant to be understood figuratively.

However, those who felt the burden to prove that the Bible was reporting facts were backed into a corner and were forced to argue that if the Bible was going to be regarded as a reliable source for reconstructing history, it was also necessary to contend that the Bible was without error in every sense. Thus, the doctrine of "biblical inerrancy" was born.¹

Closely associated with biblical inerrancy is the idea that the Bible is divinely inspired, or "God-breathed." The logic that followed is that if the words of Scripture came directly from the "mouth of God," then the Bible cannot contain human errors. Otherwise, it would imply that God is less than perfect.

In many ways, we have reached an impasse. People in the western world are walking away from organized religion at an alarming rate, and much of it has to do with the fact that they have been made to believe that they must interpret the Bible literally or they are not "real Christians." They have also been told that if they ask questions or try to see things from another perspective, that they are doubting God and need to have more faith.

¹ The idea that the Bible is without human error was born in America and is almost uniquely American in terms of Christian thought.

It is time for us to come back to the table and have a new conversation. Last week we talked about what it means for the Bible to be the “Word of God.” This week we’re going to explore what it means for the Bible to be inspired by God.

Digging Deeper

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul says, “all Scripture is inspired by God.” The Greek adjective that Paul uses is *theopneustos*. It is a combination of two words, “Theos” (God), and “*pneumatōs*,” which can be translated “wind,” “breath,” or “spirit.” As a result, some English translations of the Bible (e.g., The NIV), translate it as, “All Scripture is *God-breathed*.”

Although both translations are equally valid, we must ask, “What does Paul mean?” After all, a word does not generally have meaning based upon its roots or the way it is constructed. Rather, the meaning of a word is almost always dependent upon how it is used in a particular context.

We recognize this grammatical rule in English with words like “trunk.” Trunk might refer to the snout on an elephant, the wooden chest at the foot of the bed used for keepsakes, the core of your body, the core of a tree, and the back compartment at the rear of a sedan. Although we might be able to make connections between all of these objects if we try hard enough, it is obvious that context determines the meaning of the word.

It is often assumed that “God-breathed” means that the words of Scripture came directly from God. However, if we open a Greek New Testament, we discover that the style of the various authors differs greatly from one to another. The style of 1 Peter and Hebrews is almost classical Greek, while the Gospel of Mark is written in *koinē* Greek—the common vernacular of the ancient world. Each biblical author has vocabulary that is unique to their writings, and they all employ different rhetorical strategies for getting their points across.

For these and other reasons, many biblical scholars have pointed out that Paul is not necessarily talking about the *nature* or origins of Scripture as much as he is describing the *function of Scripture*.² Listen to it again: ¹⁶ All scripture is inspired by God and is ***useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,*** ¹⁷ ***so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.***³

² L. Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, pp. 420-425.

³ In his commentary on 2 Timothy, I. Howard Marshall offers a thorough break down of the many interpretive challenges one faces when studying 2 Timothy 3:16-17. For example, the adjective “*theopneustos*” could be in the predicative or objective position. Therefore, equally valid translations include, “All Scripture is inspired by God...” as well as, “All God inspired Scripture...” Another major challenge is that it is impossible to know what Paul meant by “Scripture.” It is unlikely that there was an

Interestingly, this is the only place in the New Testament where the word “inspired” (*theopneustos*) explicitly appears, but I think that Paul is using the same concept elsewhere. In 1 Corinthians, Paul is telling a story about Moses and the Israelites wandering through the wilderness. While addressing a group of Gentile Christians in the ballpark of one thousand years after the alleged events take place, he says, “Now these things occurred as **examples for us, so that** we might not desire evil as they did” (1 Corinthians 10:6, NRSV).

For this reason, Walter Brueggemann, one of the foremost Old Testament scholars living, describes the events recorded in the Hebrew Bible as, “history re-imagined.”⁴ In other words, the people of God are passing on stories about things that have happened in the past, but the primary purpose is not to report history as we think of it in the modern sense; rather, it is to help us think about life, God, and our community on a deeper level.

Theological Reflection

When we start digging into the first few centuries of Christianity, we discover that the Church believed that bishops and teachers, as well as other aspects of the life of the Church, were inspired by God.⁵ It seems that the same idea is at play in each scenario: God has set aside certain people and instruments to bring about transformation among the people of God and to help equip them to carry out God’s mission in the world.

Far too often we assume that reading the Bible is mainly about retaining information when it is about experiencing transformation. Reading Scripture is about listening to God speak so that we might respond faithfully to the things that God is calling us to do.

Rowan Williams, a former Archbishop of Canterbury makes the following statement, “The Bible is, you might say, God telling us a parable or a whole sequence of parables. God is saying, ‘This is how people heard me, saw me, responded to me; this is the gift I gave them; this is the response they made...Where are you in this?’”⁶

Invitation

Old Testament canon (i.e., a fixed collection of writings) by the time 2 Timothy was written. We know that Paul is certainly not talking about the New Testament, since the New Testament canon was not fixed until the end of the fourth century. Furthermore, Marshall suggests that Paul might not even been thinking about a body or collection of writings as much as he is referring to a particular passage from the Hebrew Scriptures that is somehow implied in his teaching.

⁴ W. Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp. 9-15.

⁵ C. Allert, *A High View of Scripture?*, p. 59

⁶ R. Williams, *Being Christian*, p. 27

The fact that Scripture is inspired by God does not mean that we should not question the Bible when we read it. On the contrary, Scripture is an ideological text that was designed to prompt questions for deeper reflection.

Why does Abraham mindlessly follow God's command to sacrifice his son?

Why does God allow Job to endure such tragedy?

Why did Jesus have to die?

It is when we ask these questions that we find ourselves in the story, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, the scriptures become instrumental in correcting, rebuking, training, and equipping. God has used the words of humans to tell the story of God's relationship with humanity, and God has inspired Scripture to speak into our lives and invite us to experience the transformation that God wants for each of us. That is why it is so important for us to commit to disciplines of reading and studying Scripture, both privately and as a community of faith.

Reference Tools

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Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What is your all-time favorite T.V. game show/ game show host?

2. What kinds of “lenses” do you think shape the way you read Scripture? What assumptions and presuppositions do you have when you pick up the Bible and start reading it?
3. Does Pastor Jonathan’s explanation of inspiration give you freedom, hesitation, or some other feeling when you think about the nature and function of Scripture?
4. What passage or story might be easier for you to reflect upon if you stop approaching it with the lens of the enlightenment? How might you listen for its deeper truth and how God is speaking to you?
5. How have you experienced God lately?
6. How can we pray for you?