

# On the Inspiration and Authority of Scripture

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## Introduction

This paper came about as the result of an assignment in one of my graduate classes. I then had several occasions to pass it on to others because it explained my position on the topic (and therefore kept me from rewriting the content of the paper in response to questions, comments, etc.). Finally, I decided that it ought to be edited to remove references to class and weeding out some of the over-the-top material that would have been necessary to get a good grade on the grad paper but serves little purpose in everyday discussions. The assignment required that we interact with a book called *Inspiration and Authority: Nature and Function of Christian Scripture* by Paul J. Achtemeier<sup>1</sup>. You will find many references to this book. I found that I simply couldn't remove them without losing the continuity of the paper. Perhaps in the future I'll totally rewrite this position paper, but for now it will serve its purposes to clarify my position. I hope it gets you thinking about yours!

## Let's Get Our Terms Straight First!

Various terms are used (thrown about might be a better term here) to describe different positions on the inspiration and authority of Scripture. These terms are used in conversation, teaching/preaching and in writing. As such, it is important for understanding this paper to know how I will be using the terms.

fundamentalist (class) = conservative (Achtemeier) = inerrantist (others)  
evangelical (class) = critical scholar (Achtemeier)  
liberal (class and Achtemeier)

## An Atheist Who Believes in Inerrancy?

Having read Achtemeier and selected portions of two other books<sup>2,3</sup> on the topic of inerrancy and participated in many discussions with people ranging from a highly respected professor of theology to seminary students to pastors and lay leaders, I find that I am not far from the position at which I started. When I was an atheist, I knew that those who believed in the Bible could not have the luxury of "picking and choosing" which words in the Bible they would believe (and therefore incorporate as part of their lives)

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<sup>1</sup> Paul J. Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority, Nature and Function of Christian Scripture*. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishing, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> John W. Haley, *Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977.

<sup>3</sup> Norman L. Geisler, ed., *Inerrancy*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980. Esp. Chapter 9, "The Meaning of Inerrancy" by Paul D. Feinberg.

and which they would choose not to believe. Without devoting one's life to studying at a depth few are willing and able to undertake, who is qualified to determine that some of Scripture is valid and some is not? Either the book is the Word of God or it is not. For many years I believed it was not.

### **Coming to Know Christ**

Then I came to know Christ. Achtemeier makes the statement that "The Christian faith...is not the response to a holy book" (p 78). Coming to know Christ happens, in every case, as a person has an experience with the Living God in some way. Most often, that experience is through hearing or reading His Word. It is the Word which reveals Christ (through the power of the Holy Spirit), both initially and throughout one's walk with the Lord. We go to the Scriptures to learn more of Him and His ways. As such, having confidence in its reliability is paramount. Where does such confidence come from? If we come to faith and increase in our faith through the Word, we are very much responding to a "holy book," albeit through the inner witness given by the Holy Spirit. Yes, our faith is in Christ, but that faith is initiated and sustained through the Bible. Just as I believed as an atheist, I find that as I grow in Christ, I cannot "pick and choose" which instructions for living to incorporate into my life.

### **Scripture – God Breathed and Instructive for Life!**

In developing/refining my position on the inspiration and authority of the Bible, I cannot escape what has been a precious verse to me, that Scripture (all Scripture) is *God-breathed*. How awesome is that? That God has been involved in the life of His people since creation, meeting them at their level yet transforming them into more than they were – by breathing life into them, both literally and figuratively through His creation, His interactions with them and His Word. Any doctrine of inspiration and authority that waters down the "WOW" factor of that statement cannot be consistent with all of Scripture. Such doctrine must also consider the following, however:

1. Scripture contains details relating to science and history that are not true as we understand them.
2. Scripture contains doctrines that are unclear and seemingly contradictory.
3. The formation of the canon was a process, not a "God-breathed" event.
4. Some (or all) books in the Bible may have been the result of a process of review and rewriting.

None of these points challenge my faith in God's Word as truth and/or its place of authority in a believer's life. Whether there are details that are inaccurate or not is somewhat irrelevant. In many cases, I think we're building mountains out of mole hills. Whether they are the result of scribal errors (conservative view) or errors by the original authors (evangelical view), and even whether they truly exist (evangelical view) or we just don't understand the world of science and history as God does (conservative view) isn't worth arguing over. We have the Bible we have today because God enabled, allowed and ensured that we have it. I know Him to be a God of integrity, faithfulness and love, wanting more than I what is best for me. As such, the Bible I study today is valid and worthy of my study and confidence.

### **Inerrantists – Not So Rigid as Achtemeier Portrays Them**

Having said that, I fall just a smidgeon left of the inerrantist position. I found myself quite frustrated reading Achtemeier's book because I have spent my Christian life around people who would call themselves inerrantists, but I don't believe any of them would take the strong position that Achtemeier attributes to them (Achtemeier, pps 36-63 and throughout the book). I am not doubting that he is refuting the positions put forth by scholars, rather that he is taking the extreme right end of the position. Extreme positions on either side are rarely typical of the mainstream. All that I have known would agree that God makes what is often referred to as "accommodations" in order to communicate both to and through the culture of the writing. Haley puts it this way: "In the comparatively unenlightened times in which many of the Old Testament saints lived, many faults and errors of theirs may have been mercifully and wisely passed by... Nothing could be more unjust or unreasonable than to try the patriarchs by the ethical standard of a later age" (Achtemeier, pps 4-5).

Geisler/Feinberg gives an excellent discussion of deductive and inductive reasoning (Geisler/Feinberg, pps 267-271). His discussion, written long before Achtemeier's book, illuminates the fallacy of much of Achtemeier's book. In Feinberg's terms, Achtemeier has described the position of inerrantists as one derived fully from deductive reasoning and then develops his own (critical scholarship) position on inspiration inductively. Feinberg states clearly that "There is no single methodology employed by

inerrantists” (Geisler/Feinberg, p 271). He goes on to describe three different methods used by inerrantists to arrive at their position on inerrancy.

Both Achtemeier (pps 49-50) and Feinberg (pps 289-292) discuss the definition of error. While their discussions differ slightly (Achtemeier: error as incorrectness vs. error in doctrine; Feinberg: error in terms of intentional vs. unintentional), both reach a conclusion that Scripture teaches truth.

### **Achtemeier & Inspiration**

Achtemeier describes liberals as “denying the unique inspiration of Scripture,” conservatives as holding so strongly to an inerrancy position that they deny “the nature of Scripture,” and critical scholars as taking a third option – “Aware that most views of inspiration that claim for Scripture some unique authority are incompatible with the view of Scripture with which they work, critical scholars have opted for silence on the problem” (Achtemeier, pps 84-85). How is this different from the liberal view? To have no position (i.e., to say nothing) is very much akin to “denying the unique inspiration of Scripture.”

Achtemeier argues “against” inspiration because he finds the prophetic model inadequate (Achtemeier, pps 85-90). Whether or not Scripture was written by individual authors hearing the Word of God and/or inspired by the Holy Spirit or was the result of the “processing” of the Word of God through generations and various revisions, I have no idea and it’s not important to my faith and practice. The final product is inspired. I believe inspiration can happen through the process as easily as it can happen through an individual.

The process of determining which books would appear in the canon included as a requirement that each book have a proven history of impacting people positively toward living out the gospel – that there was an internal witness of the Spirit and an external witness of transformed lives. This is an essential proof of inspiration. *How* it happens is no more important to me than understanding how aspirin works.

Having said that, I hold to a position of “original and sustained inspiration,” a term of my own making. I believe that God spoke to individuals. Whether audibly, through visions or dreams, or through strong impressions in their minds and spirits is unimportant. Those individuals, whether called prophets or not,

communicated God's message to God's people. This initial hearing and communicating represents the "original inspiration." I can easily accept that the final message we have in our present day Bible is the result of a long process, if for no other reason than that it was copied and translated. It may well be the result of reworking of texts by many people over time. Regardless of how it happened, I believe God protected the inspiration of His Word. This is what I'm calling "sustained inspiration." Achtemeier seemed to come to a similar conclusion on page 118, but I reject the basis on which he drew his conclusion (i.e., his discussion of community, tradition and situation). The strong role he gives to community and tradition waters down the influence of God in the "breathing" of Scriptures.

Achtemeier clearly emphasizes the role of community: "Inspiration, in short, occurs within the community of faith and must be located at least as much within that community as with an individual author." (p 102) I totally disagree with this statement. Let's look at the issue of Gentile Christians being allowed into the church, recorded in the book of Acts. We would all agree that the writers of the book were inspired. I say writers because I can agree that it might not be the work of an individual author, but by an author later "edited" by others so that the document we have today is not the words written by the first author. But simply because the author(s) were inspired does not mean the community in which they wrote was inspired. In Acts 10, Peter, clearly prompted by the vision He had received from God, witnessed to Gentiles and they came to Christ. Jewish Christians didn't like this. A council in Jerusalem was called. During that council, it was determined that Gentiles could become Christians and that they did not have to become Jews first. I would agree that the council was "inspired." I would not, however, say that the entire community was inspired, nor that the apostles were inspired when they were rejecting the Gentile Christians. There continued to be friction among Gentile and Jewish Christians and I would not in any way call that inspired. Inspiration did not occur within the community except to the extent that the individual authors of Acts and the apostles lived in a community. Living next door to an inspired man of God doesn't make me an inspired woman of God any more than living next door to a Muslim makes me a proponent of Islam.

As an aside, I do agree with Achtemeier's later point (Achtemeier, p 103-104) that Scripture must be lived within a community – that Christianity cannot be lived in isolation, but I don't think that relates to inspiration, rather to living out one's faith.

I find Achtemeier's discussion of the role of tradition and situation (Achtemeier, pps 109-116) to seem totally devoid of God. The reworking of tradition to meet each new situation in which the Israelites found themselves sounds like justification and the machinations of "man's wisdom" rather than the working of God in the lives of His people, in the past, present and future of their lives.

**Conclusions:** While I agree with evangelicals on the potential for inspiration to occur in the writing and re-writing of Scripture, I concurrently stand firmly with conservatives who hold strongly to the God-breathed nature of Scripture. This may seem contradictory, but in God it reconciles as easily as predestination and free will. The way these two points work themselves out hermeneutically is in balance with the heavier weight given to what Scripture means to say, a point the inerrantist Feinberg strongly agrees with (Geisler/Feinberg, pps 297, 301). And I agree with all the authors I read that Scripture is deserving of serious study by all without bringing pre-suppositions to the text that force conclusions about what it says.

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