

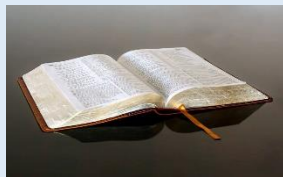
## **Study Guide #16: What is Biblical Inspiration?**

### **Introduction**

Biblical inspiration concerns the process of *how* God used prophets to convey His messages to His people. How did He guarantee that His messages would be delivered to His people accurately? Or did He do that? Biblical inspiration was barely mentioned in Christian history until the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Protestant Reformation placed great emphasis on “the Bible and the Bible only” as the believer’s source of truth from God and the different discovered Greek manuscripts of the New Testament began to be compared with each other in earnest. The rise of Higher Criticism (see Explorer I, Study Guide #15) increased discussions about inspiration as a topic. In reaction to it, the rise of Fundamentalism about the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century emphasized a very conservative view that has dominated conservative evangelical Protestant Christianity ever since. We would add that the rise of postmodernism after World War II, and especially since the 1960s, only served to intensify the debate about inspiration.

### **Question #1: Would you briefly outline what the debate about Biblical inspiration is all about today?**

**Answer:** Although there are more than 2 perspectives, the issue over Biblical inspiration essentially boils down to 2 fundamental positions, (a) Verbal Inspiration and (b) Thought Inspiration. Briefly put, Verbal



The Holy Bible

Inspiration is the view that the very words of Scripture were inspired by God, and that the prophets themselves weren’t inspired as such. Thought Inspiration, on the other hand, is the view that God inspired the prophets with messages, and the prophets selected their own words with which to convey His messages. Both views disagree with the more liberal theologians who tend to view Biblical inspiration as the same kind of inspiration that comes from a beautiful song, poem, or story that a good human musician or author creates by himself. There

are 2 specific positions which reflect a Verbal Inspiration view: (1) Absolute Inerrancy and (2) Limited Inerrancy.

### **Question #2: What is the difference between Absolute and Limited Inerrancy?**

**Answer:** Absolute Inerrancy ultimately became the major reaction against Higher Criticism. It was articulated most thoroughly by the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy conducted by the International Council of Biblical Inerrancy in Chicago in 1978. Essentially, Absolute Inerrancy is the proposition that God supervised all of the specific words of Scripture so that there are absolutely no errors of any kind in the original documents (called autographs). Therefore, the Bible is viewed as inerrant in so far as it reflects the original documents, and it’s the only infallible source of truth on any subject upon which it speaks.

Limited Inerrancy, although based on Verbal Inspiration, is the view that the Bible is inerrant in matters pertaining to spiritual and doctrinal issues but *not* in matters of history and science.

### Question #3: What are the major reasons used to support Absolute Inerrancy?

**Answer:** There are 3 primary reasons cited by supporters to champion Absolute Inerrancy. First is their interpretation of II Timothy 3:16-17:

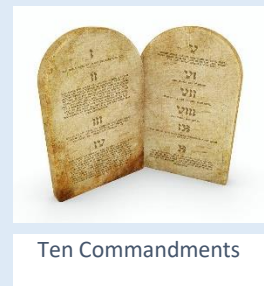
**All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. (NKJV)**

In the Greek, one compound word meaning “God-breathed” represents the translation “**is given by inspiration of God.**” The argument is that since all Scripture is “God-breathed,” and Scripture consists of words, then the actual words must have been God-breathed (or inspired). A second major argument is that since God cannot lie (Numbers 23:19; Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18), then the Bible must be inerrant, that is, free from all error in every word that it says. Finally, Bible texts such as the following representative samples are interpreted as teaching that God gave the prophets the exact words to use:

**Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. (Matthew 5:17-18, NKJV)**

**And I [the Lord] have put My words in your mouth... (Isaiah 51:16, NKJV)**

**Then the LORD put forth His hand and touched my mouth, and the LORD said to me, ‘Behold, I have put My words in your mouth.’ (Jeremiah 1:9, NKJV)**



### Question #4: Is Absolute Inerrancy the correct position on Biblical inspiration?

**Answer:** We don’t think it’s correct for several reasons. *First*, if the Bible is *verbally* inspired—whether God dictated every word or whether He simply supervised the process so that the prophets chose exactly the words that God wanted them to—why would Christians view *translations* of the Bible as the Scriptures? In other words, if the prophets used the exact words that God wanted them to use, and since a translation of anything obviously uses different words from other languages, why would those translations be considered as Scripture? Yet nearly all Christians agree that translating the Bible into other languages is a good thing.

*Second*, in the statement in II Timothy 3:16, “**All Scripture is God-breathed,**” the word “**Scripture**” means “writing,” not “word” or “words.” Of course, Scripture is written down in words. But it could just as easily mean that the *messages* of Scripture are God-breathed as it does the words. Thus, this verse is not conclusive.

*Third*, the texts used to support Verbal Inspiration have reasonable alternative explanations. Jesus’ reference to a jot and tittle not passing away until heaven and earth do could be understood that even the

smallest application of God's Law cannot be destroyed. After all, in the context of the following numerous verses (Matthew 5:19 onward), Jesus expanded the meaning or application of God's Law. He was not focusing on the individual words in His Law. Furthermore, Absolute Inerrancy makes the assumption that anything that contains errors of any kind cannot be authoritative. But that's simply not true. For example, a court doesn't invalidate an official document because of a typo or other insignificant error. And the full truth of any written statement is not questioned simply because one word is used in place of another, as long as the meaning of the statement has not been changed.

*Fourth*, texts used to support Verbal Inspiration don't necessarily support that view. For example, Isaiah 59:21 reads that **"My [God's] words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your descendants, nor from the mouth of your descendant's descendants...from this time and forevermore"** (NKJV). Surely, God is not saying that all of the exact words will be remembered forever. Rather, the point is that the **"words"** must refer to God's *messages* that will be remembered.

### **Question #5: Is there any evidence in Scripture that God inspired the prophets rather than the words themselves?**

**Answer:** Yes. Let's look at II Peter 1:21:

**for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. (NKJV)**

The verb **"were moved"** here is used in Acts 27:15-17 to describe a stormy wind driving a ship along as if it were being *driven*. In other words, just as the wind had complete control of the ship, so did the Holy Spirit take complete control of the prophets. In this, the Holy Spirit is being compared to the wind. In this way, the prophets were God-breathed even though the compound word "God-breathed" is not used in II Peter 1:21. This means that the Scriptures were "God-breathed" precisely because the prophets who wrote them were "God-breathed" (inspired). Therefore, the primary emphasis in Biblical inspiration is on



Sailboat in a Storm

the prophets themselves, not their exact words.

### **Question #6: I assume that you reject Limited Inerrancy also. Why?**

**Answer:** Yes. *First*, we reject it because it's based on Verbal Inspiration, which we have already explained is both an unnecessary and incorrect position. See Questions #4 and #5. *Second*, it yields too much to the secular worldview in matters of science and history. Why should a Christian feel compelled to do that when historical research and Biblical archaeology have proven the Bible's history to be right over and over? The secular worldview with regard to the origin of the universe and life on earth directly contradicts the Scriptures. See Explorer I, Study Guide #4. There simply is no need to accommodate the secular mindset on these matters and still remain Christian. *Third*, Limited Inerrancy violates the clear teaching of II

Timothy 3:16 that declares that “**All Scripture is given by inspiration of God**” (NKJV), not just some or most. If that’s true, then it must be reliable and accurate in everything it teaches regardless of the subject matter, assuming that one correctly interprets it, of course. *Finally*, Limited Inerrancy opens the door to historical-critical methods of placing the reader of Scripture in control of deciding what is true and what is false in its pronouncements about history and science. But if Scripture is “God-breathed,” then Scripture should judge its readers, not the other way around.

### **Question #7: Is there any other popular, incorrect view of Biblical inspiration?**

**Answer:** Yes. The Incarnational View of Inspiration and Revelation takes as its premise that the Bible is both a divine and a human book, just as Jesus is both divine and human. We don’t quarrel with that. However, the conclusion of the Incarnational View of Inspiration and Revelation is that since the Bible is also a human book, and humans are imperfect and fallible beings, the Bible must also be an imperfect and fallible book (that is, subject to being wrong about certain things). This view further states that Scripture is fallible because (1) at times it allegedly contradicts itself or doesn’t correctly represent God’s character; (2) it sometimes contradicts secular history; and (3) it sometimes contradicts secular science.

This position on Biblical inspiration and revelation distinguishes between supernatural sources of inspiration and natural ones. The bottom line for this view is that if the prophet received his message through a vision or prophetic dream or from a visitation by an angel, then it’s always accurate. But if the prophet received his message from his own historical research, strong impressions, or from his own experiences, then it is subject to being erroneous.



Luke doing research

### **Question #8: What should our reaction be to the Incarnational View?**

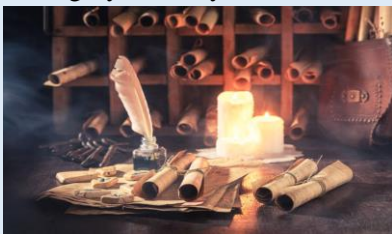
**Answer:** We should reject it. Although the Incarnational View of Inspiration and Revelation is based on Thought Inspiration (which is true), it’s a close cousin to the Limited Inerrancy view. The only other important difference is that while the Limited Inerrancy view excludes history and science from being infallible, the Incarnational view excludes the testimony of Scripture from certain sources of inspiration as being unreliable. *Second*, like the Limited Inerrancy view, this one also places the reader of Scripture in the driver’s seat in making the judgment of what is correct and what is erroneous in Scripture. *Third*, it places the reader’s own understanding of God’s character ahead of the Bible’s own description of that character. *Finally*, the Bible makes no such distinction between the methods of inspiration that God chooses and the reliability of the message. Besides, to a Christian, it makes no sense that God would not ensure that the prophet got all of the significant and essential facts correct before he finished writing and sending it out to God’s people—especially since the very purpose for inspiration in the first place was for God to get His message to His people!

## Question #9: Is there a positive case for Thought Inspiration that can be made?

**Answer:** Yes. In addition to everything else we have said, let's summarize the positive case for Thought Inspiration:

- *First*, the use of so many direct quotes from God in so much of the Old Testament suggests that when Bible writers were not directly quoting Him, they used their own words.
- *Second*, the different personalities, writing styles, and degrees of grammatical skill reflected in the Scriptures imply that the Holy Spirit allowed the Bible writers to select their own words to write God's messages down. We have a difficult time understanding that God selected or inspired every word, yet without interfering with the prophets' own vocabulary, personality, or grammatical skill level. If He did select every word, then God must have given poorer writing and grammar to the prophets who were already poor in these areas. And that doesn't make much sense to us.

- *Third*, the nature of some of the variant readings among the ancient manuscripts are such that they are highly unlikely to have been copyist mistakes. For example, when quoting Jesus' words in the same situations, why did the gospel writers sometimes use very different words? That shouldn't bother anyone because they all say *essentially* the same thing in terms of the meaning. But if the exact words were selected by the Holy Spirit, then we should expect precisely the same words be used by any gospel writer quoting from the same circumstance.



Ancient Manuscripts

- *Finally*, the use of human sources of information, as for the book of Luke for example (Luke 1:1-4), in which Luke says he put together “**an orderly account**” from “**eyewitnesses**,” implies that Bible writers used their own words. The idea that the Holy Spirit allowed some of them to do their own research and then gave them the exact words seems awkward and a redundant waste of time.

## Question #10: What is the difference between inerrancy and infallibility in regard to the Bible? What is the correct position on each of these topics?

**Answer:** Words take on the meaning according to how they are used by the speakers of the language. Accordingly, inerrancy is *usually* understood to mean that the very words of Scripture were inspired by God and are—in the original autographs—just as without error of any kind as God Himself is without error. On the other hand, Biblical infallibility usually refers to the belief that whatever the subject the Bible is actually teaching about (as opposed to incidental details that don't alter the teaching) are 100 percent accurate and reliable, regardless of the inspirational source for the prophet. Given these definitions, we conclude that the Bible is infallible but not inerrant. The bottom line is that it's an accurate, reliable source of information that can and should be trusted.