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Defending the Doctrine of Verbal Plenary Inspiration *The First 1500 years*

The last two weeks we have started our study of Bibliology looking at the doctrine of inspiration. We've considered the two main texts in the New Testament. 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:21. 2 Timothy 3:16, "All Scripture is God-breathed." 2 Peter 1:21, "Men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." The reason we are starting here in our 3 year Grace Bible Institute is because what you believe about Scripture determines what you do with Scripture. The doctrine of Scripture is absolutely fundamental and essential because it identifies the only true source for all Christian truth.

I'd like to begin with a quote by John Walwood on the importance and meaning of inspiration so that we are all on the same page:

John Walvoord on the importance and what we mean by the inspiration of Scripture, "The importance of the inspiration of the Scriptures, while tacitly denied by some in modern times, is easily demonstrated...A proper statement of the meaning of inspiration, is, therefore, that God so supernaturally directed the writers of Scripture that without excluding their human intelligence, their individuality, their literary style, their personal feelings, or any other human factor, His own complete and coherent message to man was recorded in perfect accuracy, the very words of Scripture bearing the authority of divine authorship."

Tonight I want to introduce you to a description of inspiration that some of you are familiar with but some of you may not be familiar with. **It's called verbal plenary inspiration.** What do we mean by verbal plenary inspiration? Verbal has to do with the words of Scripture. Verbal means that every word of Scripture is inspired by God - The words of Scripture, the writings of Scripture. Plenary has

to do with the entire Bible. Plenary has to do with the totality of the words of Scripture.

God through His Spirit inspired every word penned by the human authors in each of the 66 books of the Bible in the original documents.

Let's start with a few quotes beginning with Gregg Allison:

"The church has historically acknowledged that "all Scripture is God breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16) and that in the writing of Scripture the biblical authors "spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). Technical terms such as *verbal* and *plenary*, though coined in the midst of modern debates about this doctrine, accurately represent the historical position of the church that Scripture is fully inspired (plenary inspiration), even to it's very words (verbal inspiration). Only in the modern period has this critical doctrine come under attack, yet for the most part evangelicals have clung to and defended the divine inspiration of all Scripture."

Rodney J. Decker, who is with the Lord now, a brilliant conservative New Testament Scholar, helps us with this and this is important for laying the groundwork for what the church has actually stood for the past 2,000 years.

Rodney J. Decker, "Verbal inspiration refers to the fact that the very words of the text are inspired, not just the concepts. That is why we refer to the Bible as the "Word of God": the Bible says in words what God wants said—it accurately communicates God's truth. Plenary inspiration affirms that all the words of the text are inspired and equally so. The words of Jesus in the text are inspired (even though he himself wrote none of them), and so are those of James, Habakkuk, and Moses. (For that matter, even the words of Balaam's donkey are inspired in that they form part of the biblical text!)"

Alva J. McClain provides a little more light on verbal-plenary inspiration, **"There is but one kind of biblical inspiration, and that is verbal inspiration. For no**

matter what your particular theory may be, it has to do with words. The Bible is a book of words! Take away the words and you have nothing left but the paper."

I hope this helps us all get on the same page. John Frame, in his systematic theology book, reminds us that "God's speech through the mediation of human speakers and writers has the same power and authority as the divine voice." Sometimes we talk about coming to God on His terms. How do we know His terms? We know God's terms by studying God's Word. His terms are laid out clearly and powerful in Scripture beginning with Prophets in the Old Testament and moving to Apostle's in the New Testament.

Now, let's spend the rest of the time looking at how the church has defended this doctrine. Tonight I want to take you through the first 1500 years of church history and introduce you to some men who understood and taught verbal plenary inspiration.

This is really important - **Just because these guys defended what Scripture teaches about inspiration doesn't mean their interpretation of the Bible was always right.** Don't look these guys up and start following their sermons because much of what they taught doesn't line up with what we teach here at Grace Bible Church. Most of them didn't follow a literal, grammatical historical hermeneutic. But we can still learn from them in the area of verbal plenary inspiration.

1. Verbal Plenary Inspiration in the Early Church

Let's start with a man named Clement of Rome. He lived toward the end of the first century. After Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome Clement became a key figure in the church. He, too, was eventually martyred for his faith. Everyone I talk about in this first section on the early church died as a martyr.

In a letter called letters of the Romans to the Corinthians, Clement reaffirms what Paul had written about 30 years before in 1 Corinthians, "You have searched the Scriptures, which are true, which were given by the Holy Spirit." That confirms what 1 Corinthians 2:12-13 says, where Paul writes.

Look with me at 1 Corinthians 2:12-13, "**12** Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, **13** which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual *thoughts* with spiritual *words*." **Through the process of inspiration spiritual thoughts were turned into spiritual words.** Clement affirmed that.

He encouraged the Corinthians, "Take up the epistle of the blessed Paul the apostle. What did he first write to you in the beginning of the gospel? Truly he wrote to you in the Spirit." Clement affirmed the verbal plenary inspiration of Scripture.

The next example is Justin Martyr. You can probably tell where his life ended up by his last name. He lived from 100 AD-165. Around 130 AD his life was transformed. He writes about this experience, "A fire was suddenly kindled in my soul. I fell in love with the prophets and these men who had loved Christ; I reflected on all their words and found that this philosophy alone was true and profitable. That is how and why I became a philosopher. And I wish that everyone felt the same way that I do."

One of his main challenges was to try and help pagans understand that Christians were not subversive to the government or to society. There were a lot of rumors being spread about Christians and about the church that weren't true. One thing Justin tried to do was to help people understand the church better and what the church focused on when believers gathered for worship:

"On the day called Sunday there is a gathering together in the same place of all who live in a given city or rural district. The memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits. Then when the reader

ceases, the president in a discourse admonishes and urges the imitation of these good things. Next we all rise together and send up prayers.

When we cease from our prayer, bread is presented and wine and water. The president in the same manner sends up prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people sing out their assent, saying the 'Amen.' A distribution and participation of the elements for which thanks have been given is made to each person, and to those who are not present they are sent by the deacons.

Those who have means and are willing, each according to his own choice, gives what he wills, and what is collected is deposited with the president. He provides for the orphans and widows, those who are in need on account of sickness or some other cause, those who are in bonds, strangers who are sojourning, and in a word he becomes the protector of all who are in need."

What does that sound like to you? After Peter preached the gospel and the Spirit rode in on the wings of the gospel and convicted and converted thousands of people to Christ it says in Acts 2:42-47:

Acts 2:42-47

- 42** They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and ^ato prayer.
- 43** Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles.
- 44** And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common;
- 45** and they *began* selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need.
- 46** Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart,
- 47** praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Justin affirmed that. After being arrested for his faith in Rome, Justin was told to renounce his faith and to make a sacrifice to the gods. What did he say? He

said, "No one who is rightly minded turns from true belief to false." Eventually, he was beheaded for his views and that is why we refer to him as Justin Martyr.

Then there was a man named Origen. He lived from 185-254. He was an interesting fellow. He gave up his job, slept on the floor, ate no meat, drank no wine, fasted twice a week, owned no shoes, and reportedly castrated himself because of his misunderstanding of Matthew 19:11-12. In Matthew 19:11-12, Jesus talks about people who are made eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom. Origen made himself a Eunuch believing that this would be a better way to serve Christ. We can admire his view of inspiration but we probably wouldn't want to learn how to study Matthew from Origen.

Origen grew up learning the Bible and the meaning of commitment. In 202 when his father, Leonidas, was beheaded for his Christian beliefs, Origen wanted to die as a martyr, too. But his mother prevented him from even leaving the house—by hiding his clothes. He was an interesting guy, but here is what he wrote about the inspiration of Scripture:

"Origen urged that great pains and labor are to be employed, until every reader of Scripture reverentially understands that he is dealing with divine and not human words inserted into the sacred books."

Another example from the early church was a man named John Chrysostom. He is called the preacher with the golden tongue. **He is widely known as one of the first expositors of Scripture.** Chrysostom's preaching was marked by the diagramming and breaking down of sentences. Such a grammatical approach to Scripture was new in his time. Tiago is looking forward to meeting him in glory because of his love for greek grammar. He took grammar serious explaining the importance of verbs, nouns and sentence structures. He lived from 349-407. He encouraged other students of Scripture to follow the guidance of Scripture and pointed people to the plain meaning of the text. He shared in the belief of the early church fathers the direct authorship of Scripture by the Holy Spirit.

He encouraged daily meditation on the divine word for every believer:

I also always entreat you, and do not cease entreating you, not only to pay attention here to what I say, but also when you are at home, to *persevere continually in reading the divine Scriptures*.

When I have been with each of you in private, I have not stopped giving you the same advice. Do not let anyone say to me those vain words, worthy of heavy condemnation, "I cannot leave the courthouse, I administer the business of the city, I practice a craft, I have a wife, I am raising children, I am in charge of a household, I am a man of the world; reading the Scriptures is not for me, but for those who have been set apart, who have settled on the mountaintops, who keep this way of life continuously."

What are you saying, man? That attending to the Scriptures is not for you, since you are surrounded by a multitude of cares? Rather it is for you more than for them. They do not need the help of the divine Scriptures as much as those do who are involved in many occupations. The monks, who are released from the clamor of the marketplace and have fixed their huts in the wilderness, who own nothing in common with anyone, but practice wisdom without fear in the calm of the quiet life, as if resting in a harbor, enjoy great security; but we, as if tossing in the midst of the sea, driven by a multitude of sins, always need continuous and ceaseless aid of the Scriptures. They rest far from the battle, and so they do not receive many wounds; but you stand continuously in the front rank, and you receive continual blows. So you need more remedies.

Our final example from the early church was Augustine. He lived from 354-430. In a letter to a friend he describes his view of Scripture:

For I confess to your Charity that I have learned to yield this respect and honour only to the canonical books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error. And if in these writings I am perplexed by anything which appears to me opposed to truth, I do not hesitate to suppose that either the manuscript is faulty, or the translator has not caught the meaning of what was said, or I myself have failed to understand it.

As to all other writings, in reading them, however great the superiority of the authors to myself in sanctity and learning, I do not accept their teaching as true on the mere ground of the opinion being held by them; but only because they have succeeded in convincing my judgment of its truth either by means of these canonical writings themselves, or by arguments addressed to my reason.

I believe, my brother, that this is your own opinion as well as mine. I do not need to say that I do not suppose you to wish your books to be read like those of prophets or of apostles, concerning which it would be wrong to doubt that they are free from error ... (82.3)

One of the early church creeds is called the Creed of Constantinople. Or the Nicene-Constantinople Creed. It was written in 381. **It represented the church's consensus after coming through a few hundred years of heavy intense persecution.** The Nicene-Constantinople Creed, in a statement about the Holy Spirit says, "He spoke by the prophets."

Gregg Allison sums up the teaching of the church through the first few hundred years, "The early church clearly and unanimously affirmed the plenary and verbal inspiration of Scripture."

Now let's move into the middle ages.

2. Verbal Plenary Inspiration in the Middle Ages

William Webster, Anna Crawford's dad, wrote an excellent book called *Holy Scripture, the Ground and Pillar of our Faith* where he goes into what the church has taught regarding the doctrine of inspiration.

He writes in his book, "Throughout the Middle Ages the biblical perspectives of the fathers on the supremacy, authority and sufficiency of Scripture were reiterated by the leading theologians of the Western Church."

Moving into the middle ages we meet a man named Photius who lived from 810-895. He preached and taught about the Spirit's inspiration of the Biblical authors. He writes about David's writings in the Old Testament being inspired by God and referred Paul as the Trumpet of the Spirit.

Fast forward a about a hundred years and we meet an Irish theologian named John Scotus Eriugena. He defended the doctrine of inspiration by the Holy Spirit as the reason Scripture presents Jesus Christ to his followers. In a prayer he prayed, "O Lord Jesus, no other reward, no other blessedness, no other joy do I ask, than a pure understanding, free of mistakes, **of your words which were inspired by the Holy Spirit**...nowhere else are you sought more effectively than in Your Words."

Peter Abelard, born in 1079 and died in 1142, had some very interesting sayings. Some are very unhelpful. But he did link the biblical author's with "the Spirit whose agency these writings were written and dictated, and communicated directly by it (the Spirit) to these writers."

Anselm of Canterbury lived from 1033-1109. He wrote, "of sacred Scripture made fruitful by the Holy Spirit." He claimed that sacred Scripture contains the authority for all rationally derived truths."

One of the more important names to know in the middle ages is Thomas Aquinas. He lived from 1225 to 1274. He insisted that the author of holy Scripture is God. Thus revelation is the basis for sacred Scripture or doctrine. For holy Scripture looks at things in that they are divinely revealed...it is in the Holy Scriptures through which the divine will is revealed to us. He also upheld the inerrancy of Scripture, something we will consider in a few weeks. He said, "I firmly believe that none of their authors have erred in composing them" and that Scripture is "unfailing truth."

John Wycliffe is really one of the good guys of church history. Of all the guys I have mentioned so far if I could pick one out and learn from it would be him. He was a professor at Oxford, an English theologian who is best known for his work as a pre-reformer. He was highly critical of the papacy, and insisted that salvation does not depend on association with the visible Catholic Church. He attacked the doctrine of transubstantiation and other church practices that didn't measure up to Scripture. He broke with Catholic tradition by affirming Scripture as the supreme and final authority. He was the first to translate much of the Bible into the English language. He knew as he translated Scripture into English that he was different than men like Daniel or Matthew. They were inspired by the Holy Spirit. His goal was to make what the Spirit already inspired comprehensible to the English-speaking world.

John Wycliffe, "God and His Word are all one and they may not be separated."

41 years after John Wycliffe died Henry the 4th issued something called the de haretico comburendo in 1401. Henry the 4th called Wycliffe a heretic for his views that contradicted the traditions of the Catholic Church. Wycliffe's books were confiscated and burned. And then they did something interesting - they actually found where he was buried, dug up his bones, burned them and scattered his ashes. They may have scattered his ashes but the gospel groundwork had been laid.

Repeatedly condemned and burned by church authorities, copies of Wycliffe's Bible continued in use for over a century, until printed Bibles took their place. This work greatly influenced William Tyndale who made the first printed translation of the New Testament in English.

We'll close with William Tyndale. He was born in 1494. He earned a B.A. and M.A degrees from Oxford in 1512 and 1515 respectively, and spent several years at Cambridge where he "further ripened in the knowledge of God's word" (Foxye, 1877, p.115). Tyndale translated the New Testament for the first time from the original languages into English in 1526. He paid for this with his life. He was strangled and then burned at the stake at age forty-two.

Before he died a clergyman challenged Tyndale, "We had better be without God's Law's than the Pope's." To which Tyndale famously responded, "I defy the Pope, and all his laws; and if God spares my life, ere many years, I will cause the boy that driveth the plow to know more of the Scriptures than thou dost!"

Within a year of translation Tyndale's Bible's were smuggled unto England and within a few decades England became a Biblical culture. A man who was alive during that time wrote about the impact on Tyndale's translation of Scripture:

"It was wonderful to see with what joy the book of God was received, not only among the learned er sort and those that were noted for lovers of the reformation, but generally all England over among all the vulgar and common people; with what greediness God's word was read, and what resort to places where the reading of it was. Everybody that could bought the book and busily read it; or got others to read it to them, if they could not read themselves; and diverse among the elderly learned to read on purpose. And even little boys flocked among the rest to hear portions of the Holy Scriptures read."

What can we take away from the first 1500 years of church history? There could easily come a day where you and I are told to back away from the Bible. There could easily come a day when what we read about in church history could become a reality for us or for our children. The tide in America is turning rapidly against what the church stands for.

Please turn in your Bible to Hebrews 13:7. I want to close with this verse as a reminder that good role models are important for following after Christ the right way. Remember the believers to whom the author of Hebrews writes were going through intense persecution for their allegiance to Christ. Back in Hebrews 10:32-34 we read:

Hebrews 10:32-34

- 32** But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings,
- 33** partly by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated.
- 34** For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one.

These believers were literally taking it on the chin for following Christ. The author of Hebrews helps them throughout this letter by reminding them that maintaining faith in Christ no matter what is worth it because of who Jesus is and what He has accomplished for us at the cross and what He is doing right now for us in heaven. Then we come to Hebrews 13 and the author starts giving counsel about practical Christian living.

Hebrews 13:7-8

- 7** Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith.
- 8** Jesus Christ *is* the same yesterday and today and forever.

The word “remember” possibly refers to leaders who were dead, perhaps martyred, and should not be forgotten. Warren Wiersbe, "How easy it is to forget the courageous Christians of the past whose labors and sacrifices make it possible for us to minister today. But while we do not worship people or give them the glory, it is certainly right to honor them for their faithful work."

These leaders probably led the readers to Christ because the leaders had spoken the Word to them. **When you recall that few Christians then had copies of the Scriptures, you can see the importance of this personal ministry of the Word.** Now they are gone, but their word is still with them and someone remains the same - Who is it? Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever. Teachers come and go but Jesus remains the same.

May we learn from men from church history and appreciate their labor but may our focus always be on the Living Savior to whom the the Scriptures point. He is the same and His word endures forever.