

Sermon
10/16/22

Inspiration without Inerrancy
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Two weeks ago, we began what has become a series on 1st and 2nd Timothy as featured in the lectionary. Since the 18th century, interpreters have called 1st and 2nd Timothy as well as Titus the “pastoral epistles.” This is because they provide instruction for church leaders (i.e., *pastors*) on practical matters like church organization and the preservation of “sound doctrine.”

Scholars have long debated whether Paul truly wrote them. Most believe they were written in his name by someone else, possibly by a loyal student or follower of Paul’s, due to differences in vocabulary and style. The fact that they “presume a situation marked by the increasing institutionalization of the church and by heretical opposition,” moreover, “better fits a period well after the death of Paul, at the beginning of the second century CE” (*New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 3rd ed., p. 349).

Nowhere is the “increasing institutionalization” of the church more evident than in the view of 1 Tim. 2:11-14. Here we read that men should lead their flocks while women, who apparently brought evil into the world and can be saved only through childbearing, must keep silent and abstain from teaching.

Obviously, for any Christian who believes in the full equality of men and women, Timothy poses a challenge.

We met that challenge two weeks ago by showing how Paul, in the letters he indisputably wrote, promotes the equality of men and women in Christ (Gal. 3:28) and confirms it by naming male *and* female co-workers in Christ, as evident in Rom. 16.

Having acknowledged the trouble with Timothy, that is, the author’s culturally conditioned attitude toward women, we proceeded to recover its timeless treasure:

namely, the good news it contains of God’s victory over death in Christ (see 2 Tim. 2:9-10).

It’s this treasure that gives Timothy its authority and validity, as Martin Luther concluded nearly 500 years ago, not whether Paul or any other disciple wrote it.

Last week, we discovered treasure once again in 2nd Timothy’s claim that the “word of God cannot be chained” (v. 9). For this text, as for Ephesians, Colossians, Romans, and 1st Thessalonians, the word of God is not first and foremost the printed word.

It’s something spoken.

It’s something proclaimed.

It’s the gospel that one “sings and tells with gladness,” as Luther put it, the message of our salvation in Christ. This understanding of the Word of God, we discovered, is

rooted in Scripture even though it can't be *reduced* to Scripture. It can't be "chained" to Scripture, to borrow the language of 2nd Timothy.

Why? Because it's a Living Word. It refuses to be pinned down. Luther accordingly insisted that the Bible contains the Word of God, which again is the good news of our salvation in Christ—his victory over sin, hell, and death.

In the 20th century, the theologian Karl Barth echoed Luther perfectly when he insisted that the Bible becomes the Word of God in and through proclamation, that is, through the preaching and receiving of the gospel.

But what about our second reading for today, 2nd Timothy 3:14-4:5? It says, "All Scripture is inspired and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work" (vv. 16-17).

You heard that, right?

"All Scripture is inspired."

Is this not the proof we need to reject Luther's distinction, that the Word of God is not simply the message of salvation *in* the Bible but each and every word *of* the Bible? And if the Word of God is each and every word of the Bible, does this not tell us that there can be *no errors* in the Bible? After all, if God inspired every word of it, and if the writers acted as what John Calvin calls God's "holy secretaries," then how can it contain a single mistake?

These are my questions. Let me add a few questions now that might be yours: who cares? Why does this matter? Why is the distinction Luther makes important?

To answer all of these questions, we need to take a closer look at 2nd Tim. 3:16-17 to determine (in context) *what it actually means*.

Starting Out with Scripture

Let's begin with the word "Scripture."

Right away we have a problem.

Two weeks ago, I claimed that 1st and 2nd Timothy appeared in the last quarter of the first century. Both letters refer to "sound doctrine" which suggests that the gospel, the Living Word Paul originally proclaimed, had crystalized into something like a creed, the "truth" of which pastors had to defend against the emergence of competing religions and mystery cults.

Beyond that, of course, the writer of 2nd Timothy practically tells us when he wrote it. According to 1:5, the writer refers to Timothy as a third-generation believer. If his

grandmother came to faith somewhere in the mid-to-late 30s of the first century, I reasoned, that would mean Timothy came of age roughly 30 to 40 years later.

Now my ability to do math is not great, but if I add 30 years to 35 or 40 CE, I end up with a composition date of 65 or 70, which means 2nd Timothy would have been written at or shortly after Paul's death.

If 2nd Timothy appeared as early as 65 or 70, moreover, then what would the author have meant at the time by "Scripture"?

The answer is fascinating.

"Scripture" would have consisted of the Law and the Prophets (i.e., about two-thirds of what we now call the Old Testament). Why? Because the Jews had not yet closed the canon, which is a fancy way of saying they had not selected all the books that would eventually become the Hebrew Bible for them or the Old Testament for us. Indeed, not until around 90 or 100 CE did the rabbis formally accept the last chunk of the Hebrew Bible, which included books like the Song of Songs, Esther, and Ecclesiastes.

A clue in this morning's reading, however, compels me to offer a confession: I was wrong.

2nd Timothy was probably written *even later* than 65 or 70 CE, which changes what the author would have had in mind when he mentioned Scripture.

Here's how we know.

Take a look at 2nd Timothy 3:15. This verse refers to "the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." Now which writings could these be? Can you guess?

The answer is the original writings of Paul.

These were the first writings of what would become the New Testament that churches throughout the Mediterranean accepted as authoritative, probably around 100 CE. 2 Timothy 3:15, in turn, must have been written after 100 CE. For this author, "Scripture" would have accordingly meant *the entire Old Testament as well as the letters of Paul*.

That certainly expands what he would have meant by Scripture, even though it still falls short of what we consider "Scripture" today.

It Depends on "Is"

Back in the 1998, Bill Clinton "impressed" us all when he raised the question of what the word "is" means. "It depends on what the meaning of the word 'is' is," he said regarding whether he was presently having an affair. "If the — if he — if 'is' means is & never has been, that is not — that is one thing."

Our task this morning is a little easier.

We don't need to define the word "is." We simply need to point out that 2 Timothy 3:16 lacks this word in the original Greek. A literal translation accordingly reads, "All Scripture God-breathed and useful for teaching." That means it's up to the translator to determine where the word "is" goes in this sentence.

It could say, "All Scripture [is] inspired and useful for teaching."

Or it could say, "Every scripture inspired by God [is] useful for teaching."

You will know, in other words, whether a text is inspired if it assists you in leading others on the path of Christian discipleship.

Do you hear the difference?

It all depends on where we choose to put the word "is." The first translation makes us think that the author refers to what has already been determined to be Scripture. The second expands our understanding of Scripture. Whatever assists you in the ministry, it says, is God-inspired, which leads us to a crucial point.

The early church did not limit inspiration to the books it selected for inclusion in the Bible. That would have limited God, and it would have suggested that God no longer speaks.

Instead, the texts we have in the New Testament were *primarily* chosen as suitable for reading in worship, not because they – alone – were inspired. So, what about this word "inspired"? What does it mean?

God-Breathed

Unfortunately, the early church did not define concisely the meaning of "inspiration."

Even Luther, as the historian Justo Gonzalez explains,

had never dealt specifically with the question of the inspiration of Scripture. . . . For him, what was important was not the text itself of Scripture, but the divine action to which that text testifies. The Word of God is Jesus Christ, and the Bible is the Word of God because it leads to him (*The Story of Christianity*, vol. 2, p. 176).

About fifty years after Luther died, however, a movement called Lutheran Orthodoxy posed the question of how God inspired Scripture, and the answer most of them gave (according to Gonzalez) was simple: the Spirit told them what to write, which meant that Scripture contained no errors. Why? Because God wrote it. Roman Catholic appeals, say, to the authority of the pope could now be countered by Lutheran appeals to the authority of Scripture.

The Lutherans, in short, created what a famous a “paper pope.” In so doing, they yoked inspiration and inerrancy together. Now the focus was on how each word of Scripture somehow comes from God.

Indeed, at least according to the prevailing view of Lutheran Orthodoxy, “[i]nerrancy means that the Bible was dictated by God to human writers in a manner that overrode the human personality of the authors” (Hauer and Young, *An Introduction to the Bible*, 5th ed., p. 16).

If, therefore, it took Christianity sixteen *centuries* to equate “inspiration” with “dictation,” perhaps we should ask how the word “inspiration” has been defined before and since.

One answer comes from Karl Jacobson of Luther Seminary. He writes:

“Inspired” in Greek is *theopneustos*, which can literally be understood as something like God-breathed. As I read Timothy, and think about the promise “Paul” sings that “If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we are faithless, he remains faithful,” I cannot help but be reminded of the way God breathes in the Bible, and how that breath is creative, life-and-faith giving (*Living Preacher*, accessed 10/12/22).

Jacobson proceeds to mention Genesis, where God “inspires” the first human being by breathing into its nostrils the breath of life. He also mentions Jesus who, according to John 20:22, inspired or “breathed into” his disciples, giving them the Holy Spirit.

“All Scripture,” Jacobson concludes, offers a “means by which God can breathe life and faith and hope and love and forgiveness and resurrection, into people.”

Isn't that something? Sure, inspiration can mean that God through the Spirit somehow moved the authors of Scripture to write the words we now have in the Bible. But it can also point to the function of God's Word as *that which inspires, as that which gives life*, especially if we prefer the translation of 2 Tim. 3:16 that “Every Scripture [which is] inspired by God is useful for teaching, [etc.]”

Inspiration, in short, can mean different things.

To Summarize

We have now seen how a closer look at 2 Timothy 3:16-17 can yield startling results.

What did this author mean by “Scripture”?

Why did this author omit the word “is,” and how does that change the verses' meaning?

What did this author mean, finally, by inspiration? Beyond these questions, however, remains the most important of them all: why does this matter?

It matters – briefly – for three reasons.

First, if as Christians we wish to remain faithful to Scripture, we need to do the hard work of understanding what it says by reading a passage like 2 Tim. 3:16-17 closely and contextually.

In so doing, we might be surprised by how liberating a passage like 2 Tim 3:16-17 can be!

Second, we need an alternative to Bible-bullying.

Most of us have met people who weaponize Scripture by taking verses out of context and throwing them like stones at other people. Obviously, sure, there are passages in Scripture that call us (sometimes radically) to reorient our lives. But if Scripture is truly inspired, should not its primary function be to inspire *us*? To give *us* life? To raise *us* up, to strengthen us, and to encourage us with words of comfort, consolation, and reassurance? It should if we truly think of ourselves as people for whom the gospel is *everything*!

Third, we need to be aware of how easily we can turn the Bible into an idol, especially if we assume that “God-breathed” means “dictation.”

The Bible, after all, did not fall leather-bound from the sky. It was formed and shaped by human beings whose perspectives, even if they were influenced by the Spirit, were nevertheless conditioned by the culture in which they lived.

To ignore this, as well as the primary purpose the Bible has of leading us to Christ, we easily find ourselves on the wrong side of history as was the case, for example, among those who used the Bible as “God’s Word” to endorse slavery.

Yes, there is treasure even in a passage like 2 Tim. 3:16-17. We just need patience and care to find it.

Amen