

The Divine Spiration of Scripture - A Review by Dr J R de Witt

The Divine Spiration of Scripture: Challenging Evangelical Perspectives

by A.T.B. McGowan

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In this slender volume Dr. McGowan has given us much to consider. He offers historical and theological surveys: of the Enlightenment, the rise and fall of liberal theology, the influence of the great Princeton divines, fundamentalism, evidentialist and presuppositionalist apologetics, neo-orthodoxy, conservative evangelicalism, the recent debates regarding the doctrine of Scripture, the relation between Scripture and the confessions, and expository preaching.

The sub-title, 'Challenging Evangelical Perspectives,' hints at what is to follow in the book itself. Then, on the very first page of the opening chapter ('Introduction') Dr. McGowan tells us that the purpose of his book is 'to contribute to discussions about the nature and function of Scripture in evangelical Christianity' (p. 9). He argues 'that the traditional evangelical doctrine of Scripture requires some reconstruction' (p. 17); and he also has in mind 'a reconstructed doctrine of the church' (p. 179). No doubt evangelicals have much to learn from the continuing study of the Bible. It is more than a little surprising, however, that he takes as his target the doctrine of Scripture as understood not only by more-or-less modern evangelicalism but by the whole Christian church for the past two thousand years. That he himself recognizes the audacious character of his objective becomes clear in the paragraphs he devotes to 'anticipating the critique' (pp. 210-212).

Obviously in a review I cannot take up every strand in Dr. McGowan's argument. A survey will have to suffice.

1. McGowan wants to shift the discussion of Scripture from its usual position as introductory to the various *loci* of systematic theology and place it instead within theology proper (the doctrine of God), and specifically pneumatology (the doctrine of the Holy Spirit).

The work of the Holy Spirit is also the key both to recognizing Scripture as Scripture and also to understanding its meaning and significance. The writing of Scripture, then, ought to be seen as an aspect of the work of the Holy Spirit, and this ought to be reflected in the place Scripture is given in our theological formulations. This means that Scripture ought not to be placed at the beginning of the theological system, to provide an epistemological basis for what follows, but rather ought to be placed under the doctrine of God — more specifically, under the work of the Holy Spirit. (p. 29)

When McGowan criticizes the idea that 'the Scriptures must come first in the theological system, because until we have established the authority of the Scriptures we cannot say anything about God or about anything else' on the ground that it 'does not stand up to close examination,' he has undertaken to attack a straw man. The Westminster Confession does not — our theological writers in general have not — attempted to 'establish' the

authority of the Scriptures. What they have done is to posit that authority. The difference here is of considerable importance and must not be overlooked. In their work theologians are addressing believers, the church. As they begin to do that, it is entirely fitting that they should make clear where they stand, on what ground they mean to proceed in their work: namely, the Bible, Holy Scripture.

2. Dr. McGowan proposes that in our theological language 'divine spiration' be substituted for 'inspiration' (pp. 38-43); that 'recognition' be employed instead of 'illumination' (pp. 43-46); and that 'comprehension' take the place of 'perspicuity' (pp.46-48). Against 'spiration' as a translation of *theopneustos* one need not protest too vigorously, though one may fairly wonder (1) why McGowan is so eager to employ 'spiration' against the judgment of the standard Greek dictionaries ('inspired by God') and (2) whether, given the long usage of 'inspiration', the change is really an improvement.

'Recognition' and 'comprehension' strike me as more problematic. These words appear to recast what is meant by 'illumination' and 'perspicuity' in a somewhat troublesome way, by stressing the human side rather than the divine and biblical ones.

The author cuts away the ground from under his own feet when he writes: 'The Scriptures do not need to be illuminated but rather the human mind, which has been damaged by the noetic effects of sin, needs to be given understanding' (pp. 43,44). This, surely, is precisely what is meant by 'illumination.'

Again, in relation to perspicuity, he concedes the widely accepted use of the word: namely, that the Bible can be read and understood without the aid of priests and specialists. His intention in preferring comprehension, he says, 'is to underline the fact that only God the Holy Spirit can give us understanding (comprehension) of the Scriptures' (p. 47).

I am unable to understand why Dr. McGowan wishes to change the terminology here and blur truths already given expression in language sufficiently plain. It strikes me that he seems to be establishing the credentials of the terminology he means to set aside, rather than providing cogent grounds for replacing it. Novelty for its own sake has little to commend it.

3. Then, and this is the principal burden of *The Divine Spiration of Scripture*, Dr. McGowan argues that we should substitute 'infallibility' for 'inerrancy.' Here the discussion becomes far more controversial.

The argument for 'infallibility' is that the final authority for the Christian is the authority of God speaking in and through his Word and that the Holy Spirit infallibly uses God's Word to achieve all he intends to achieve. It is, therefore, a more dynamic (or organic) and less mechanical view of authority.

In choosing 'infallibility' over against 'inerrancy' [he assures his readers], I

am advocating an equally 'high' but yet somewhat different theology of Scripture (p. 49).

These sentences give an indication of what is to follow in subsequent chapters. We are alerted to the author's intention to describe Scripture as 'infallible' rather than 'inerrant'. He understands 'infallibility' in a much narrower sense than has been the case not only during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries but, as he seems to admit, throughout the whole history of the Christian church (p. 85). For Dr. McGowan, infallibility means that God through his Word accomplishes what he intends to achieve. This is certainly an aspect of infallibility, but far from the whole; and the fact is that, with the excision of the core content of 'infallibility' (that the Scriptures do not err, that they teach the truth), the term 'infallibility' itself is largely emptied of its historic significance. Moreover, even in this prefatory statement, he deliberately casts an aspersion on the church's doctrine of inspiration. Inerrancy, in his opinion, involves a 'mechanical view of authority'. This is, of course, a preposterous assertion. To compromise the witness of the Bible to itself in such a manner and then to assert that he advocates 'an equally "high" but yet somewhat different theology of Scripture' appears to this reviewer a stunning contradiction in terms.

McGowan believes that 'any discussion of the idea of "inerrancy" must be set in the context of the Enlightenment and the resulting liberal theology', because it was the repudiation by liberal theology of the older orthodoxy that evoked 'an evangelical response and the development of the inerrantist position' (p. 50).

In Chapter 3 he offers a rapid but comprehensive survey of philosophical and theological thought, beginning with the Enlightenment and its principal savant, Immanuel Kant; the liberal theology (Friedrich Schleiermacher, Albrecht Ritschl, Adolf von Harnack, and Wilhelm Hermann); the neo-orthodox response to that theology (Karl Barth, J. K. S. Reid and Thomas F. Torrance); and then Conservative Evangelicalism (J. Gresham Machen and Cornelius Van Til). These pages (50-83) are integral to his case.

An essential step in the presentation of his argument is McGowan's conviction that the philosophy of the Enlightenment produced liberal theology with its rejection of the 'traditional doctrine of Scripture', which in turn led to the rise of neo-orthodoxy and conservative evangelicalism (p. 83). This line of thought, though quite widely adopted by professing evangelicals and others, raises serious questions and cannot be allowed to remain unchallenged.

It is not true that the doctrine of an inerrant Bible emerged as a conservative evangelical reaction to the Enlightenment. In a somewhat oblique way McGowan acknowledges this (p. 85), though the weight of his discussion is on the other side. Christian thinkers ancient and more modern can easily be cited as holding to biblical inerrancy: Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Robert Haldane, Thomas Chalmers, James Bannerman, Louis Gaussen, J. C. Ryle, and many others who wrote before A. A. Hodge and Warfield. The neo-orthodox theologians attempted to extrapolate from the writings of John Calvin some support for their own interpretation of Scripture, but their efforts do scant justice to the Genevan reformer.^[1]

E. Brooks Holifield, a careful student of American theology, establishes the point that the Princeton theologians were in no sense pressed to develop inerrancy as a wall of defense against rising liberalism.^[2]

Such views about biblical inspiration have often defined the Princeton theology, but the Princetonians were only repeating commonplace distinctions. Seventeenth century scholastics had distinguished between the copies and the *apographa* (the earliest accessible Greek and Hebrew texts), and antebellum theologians have long been accustomed to asserting the distinction between errorless autographs and later manuscripts.

In Chapter 4, 'Fundamentalism and Inerrancy', we have an overview of nineteenth and twentieth century church history in relation to the doctrine of inerrancy (pp. 84-122). A key document is the article entitled 'Inspiration' by B. B. Warfield and A. A. Hodge (1881) which has had a profound and deservedly enduring influence among evangelicals. McGowan leads his readers through subsequent developments: the publication of *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth* (1910-1915), the rise of fundamentalism and its distinctive characteristics, departures from fundamentalism, and then the 'modern inerrancy debate'. Once again Dr. McGowan introduces us to some of the participants in that debate: Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim (who challenge the historic position), John D. Woodbridge (who defended inerrancy against Rogers and McKim), Donald G. Bloesch (who is likewise critical of Rogers and McKim but adopts a mediating posture), J. Ligon Duncan III (who has convincingly demonstrated that the influence of Scottish commonsense realism on the Princeton theologians was not determinative for their views on inerrancy), and the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (which met in 1978 and produced 'The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy').^[3]

Against that backdrop McGowan takes up 'arguments against inerrancy'. 'Most biblical scholars', he assures us, 'reject the inerrantist position for one reason or another'. He lists three categories: (1) Those who believe that the 'assured results' of the higher critical approach to the Bible make such a position intellectually impossible (he mentions C. H. Dodd and Rudolf Bultmann); (2) Evangelicals who affirm the authority of Scripture but would not use the word 'inerrancy' (e.g., G. C. Berkouwer and Donald G. Bloesch); and (3) Evangelicals uncomfortable with 'inerrancy' who believe that 'they are being presented with a false dichotomy' and argue that 'inerrancy' is not a biblical term, that the confessional documents do not require it, that it is a category introduced relatively recently, and that it is theologically mistaken. McGowan tells us that the 'strongest proponents' of this view are James Orr and Herman Bavinck. He even ventures to claim that 'a good case can be made for saying that it is consistent with the view of Calvin'. The third position is the one with which he identifies himself (pp. 105,106).

What, then, are these arguments? He lists several: (1) The difficulty of defining adequately what is meant by 'inerrancy' (pp. 106-109); (2) The emphasis placed by inerrantists on the *autographa* (pp. 109-112); (3) Textual variations (pp. 112,113); and (4) The rationalistic 'implication' of inerrancy (pp. 113-119).

That inerrancy requires careful definition no one could deny. It is another matter entirely to say, as I. Howard Marshall has done, that the word 'needs

so much qualification, even by its defenders, that it is in danger of dying the death of a thousand qualifications' (quoted on p. 106). Some have, to be sure, written less than carefully on this matter, and McGowan cites examples in his book. The truth is, however, that the great theologians have addressed the point and dealt with it in a manner that does justice to the Scriptures. No one has written with greater clarity and force on this issue than Prof. John Murray:

In all questions pertinent to the doctrine of Scripture it is to be borne in mind that the sense of Scripture is Scripture; it is what Scripture means that constitutes Scripture teaching. We cannot deal, therefore, with the inerrancy of Scripture apart from hermeneutics. In connection with any text we must ensure that it is the intended import that is brought into consideration and not some import which it may, at first sight, appear to convey, or an import which we arbitrarily attach to it.^[4]

With regard to the *autographa*, it is only necessary to point out that the original manuscripts of the Bible in the nature of the case have a place entirely their own. This is so self-evident as to require very little demonstration. The writers of Scripture were inspired by the Holy Spirit; copyists were not. Clearly, one must speak of the difference between an autograph and a copy. In the nature of the case, when the transmission of written materials could only take place through the painstaking process of copying by hand, the copies had to be at least in some degree imperfect.

It is important to be careful here, and accurate. McGowan tells us: We cannot bury our heads in the sand and ignore the fact that the Bibles we use are translations based on Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic texts, and that these texts themselves vary considerably. For example, no two manuscripts of the New Testament, of which we have around 5,000, are identical. Scholars are forced to compare texts and decide on the 'best and most probable' reading. The fundamentalist inerrantist often gives the impression that the Bible fell down from heaven intact and that no textual criticism is or has been necessary. (pp. 103,104)

Dr. Warfield was keenly aware of the value of 'lower' or 'textual criticism'; in fact, his first important book, an *Introduction to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (1886), addressed this very subject. Some proponents of inerrancy may have gone too far in their assertions regarding the autographs, but our great divines were far more responsible. When we assert that the original manuscripts — for example, from the apostolic writers — were alone inspired, we do not denigrate the value of the copies (more than five thousand of them). On the contrary, we hold that these copies bear the authority of the originals in the extent to which they conform to the autographs. It is of the greatest possible importance, for the ordinary reader of the Bible and for scholars as well, to remember that almost all of the variant readings are of little substance and that no single doctrine is in the least degree affected by any of them. When we give someone the English Bible, in a faithful translation, we do not say: 'I should like to present you with a copy of a translation of what in not inconsiderable degree — thanks to the work of textual scholars — quite closely approximates God's Word'. We say simply this: 'Here is a copy of the Word of God'; and we do this because we believe, on substantial grounds, that the version in all essential matters conforms to what was given through the biblical writers in the *autographa*.

Perhaps a reference to the Westminster Confession is in order here. The wise and faithful men who wrote it, themselves no strangers to textual complexities, gave us this remarkable statement:

The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time of the writing of it, was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God, and, by his singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical; so as, in all controversies of religion, the church is finally to appeal unto them (I/viii).

Dr. McGowan makes much of what he calls the 'rationalist implication' involved in the doctrine of inerrancy: namely, that 'the inerrantists make an unwarranted assumption about God'. The assumption, he confidently tells us, 'is that, given the nature and character of God, the only kind of Scripture he could "breathe out" was Scripture that is textually inerrant' (p. 113). He alleges further:

In the inerrantist argument, truth is largely viewed in propositional terms and theological method is conceived of in scientific terms. Thus the impression is often given that the whole Bible can be reduced to a set of propositions that can then be demonstrated to be 'true'. (p. 116)

Their [Warfield's and Hodge's] reasoning was essentially simple: in order to develop a solid epistemology, we must have propositional truth that can be guaranteed with scientific accuracy. We must then handle that truth by using a scientific method. The result is thus a belief in the inerrancy of the *autographa* and a theological method that reduces Scripture to a set of propositions under the theologian's control. (p. 117)

Such assertions come very close to bearing false witness. This reviewer finds the reiterated accusation that defenders of biblical inerrancy are scholastics and rationalists both unconvincing and more than a little tiresome.^[5] That some inerrantist theologians have accorded greater weight to the side of reason than others have done is no doubt true. I think here of the evidentialist apologetic advocated by the Princeton men. At the same time, if one compares the writings of B. B. Warfield and John Murray with *The Divine Spiration of Scripture*, one startling fact very quickly becomes apparent. Warfield, Murray, and many others give painstaking attention to the study of the Scriptures themselves, to exegesis. In Dr. McGowan's book one looks in vain for a single exegetical syllable. He compares and contrasts theological writers — chiefly modern but to some degree older ones as well — and engages in dialogue or debate with them, but his thinking is plainly formed under the influence of a school which seems bent upon jettisoning the 'church doctrine of inspiration' and exchanging it for something very different, far less forged on the anvil of an effort to understand what the Bible claims for itself.

In Chapter 5, 'Infallibility: An Evangelical Alternative', McGowan describes the work of two European theologians — both, he says, 'infallibilists' — who, in his view, offer a better way than that of Princeton and the American inerrantists, James Orr and Herman Bavinck. We are reminded that both were on cordial terms with Warfield, and that both gave the Stone Lectures at Princeton Seminary.

Dr. McGowan makes a good deal of Prof. Orr who, he tells us, 'held a high view of Scripture but did not believe that it was wise, or even possible, to

speaking of inerrancy' (p. 126). Orr must be regarded as an altogether questionable witness. It was he who publicly (in the opinion of this reviewer, given the consequences for the doctrine of Scripture, shamefully) defended the right of George Adam Smith, his colleague on the faculty of the United Free Church College in Glasgow, to teach higher critical views of the Old Testament (Wellhausenism). 'In this business,' wrote Principal John Macleod, 'a man like him [Orr], of whom better was to be expected, was held by many to have virtually sold the pass'.^[6]

He is even more detailed in his references to Bavinck, whose four-volume *Reformed Dogmatics* (1895-1901), only recently translated into English, is one of the most significant works of its kind. By any standard, Bavinck was a great divine. It is by no means evident, from McGowan's own discussion, that he is justified in introducing Bavinck as a witness in behalf of his 'reconstruction' of the doctrine of Scripture. For example, he concedes that both Abraham Kuyper and Bavinck, as Richard Gaffin demonstrates, 'had a high view of Scripture very close to that of Warfield' (p. 138). While 'formally' some difference can be ascertained between Bavinck's infallibility and Warfield's inerrancy, the truth is — as McGowan himself comes very close to admitting — that 'materially' the two men essentially occupied the same ground (pp. 211,212). For Bavinck, as for most Reformed theologians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the two words (infallibility and inerrancy) were understood to have the same truth in view. We are not well served by those, among them Dr. McGowan, who seek to drive a wedge between men who were in fundamental agreement with each other.

Several observations should be made in conclusion.

1. We must acknowledge Dr. McGowan's desire to cast additional light upon an issue of the greatest possible consequence, not only in Great Britain, Europe, and North America, but all around the world.

2. It must also be said, however, that in most respects his effort is not successful. *The Divine Spiration of Scripture* exhibits wide reading and acquaintance with a broad range of contemporary thought on the topic he treats. One observes at the same time that many of the writers with whom he is in serious discussion, though professedly evangelical, have abandoned a conviction firmly held by the great majority of Christians from the beginning. I do not presume to pass judgment on the sincerity of anyone's faith, but I have the responsibility to register profound concern. James Orr and G. C. Berkouwer did their work as the doctrinal collapse of the churches they served was becoming increasingly apparent. Orr's mediating position did nothing to deliver the United Free Church of Scotland from the devastation wrought by A. B. Davidson, William Robertson Smith, Marcus Dods, James Denney, and others.^[7] Berkouwer, though much of what he gave us can be valued, in his teaching on Scripture did not and could not help the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands resist the tidal wave of a new theology which destroyed their once firm witness. For what conceivable reason should we be inclined to follow them?

3. That Dr. McGowan's intentions are worthy I do not doubt; but he would have served us better by forthrightly resisting the redefinition of

'infallibility' which is now so frequently to be found in evangelical writers. Each generation has its own battles to fight. McGowan's book reminds us that the struggles which appear to be waged on new ground are really very far from that. The same issues constantly recur, in new dress and with fresh intensity, as though now — at long last and in the light of ideas hitherto undisclosed — the truth of the matter has been discovered. From *The Divine Spiration of Scripture* we may draw a solemn warning. It is, I suppose, in the nature of the case that good men succumb to the yearning for intellectual respectability and acceptance. I am certainly very far from casting aspersions on scholarship. The church deserves and the church must have ministers and leaders as learned as the circumstances allow. But that learning is always to be governed by obedience to the Word of God, the Holy Scriptures. When the theological enterprise falls prey to worldly philosophy or some sort of what is considered to be 'new knowledge', the consequences are inevitably disastrous.

The gauntlet thrown down by McGowan's treatise differs little from the challenges with which evangelical Christianity has been confronted over the centuries. In the words of John Murray:

If the testimony of Scripture on the doctrine of Scripture is not authentic and trustworthy, then the finality of Scripture is irretrievably undermined. The question at stake is the place of Scripture as the canon of faith. And we must not think that the finality of Christ remains unimpaired even if the finality of Scripture is sacrificed. The rejection of the inerrancy of Scripture means the rejection of Christ's own witness to Scripture. Finally and most pointedly, then, the integrity of our Lord's own witness is the crucial issue in this battle of the faith.^[8]

End Notes

1. See John Murray, *Calvin on Scripture and Divine Sovereignty* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1960), pp. 11-51.
2. E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 379.
3. While McGowan distances himself from Rogers and McKim, whose work has been severely and justly criticized as special pleading in the interest of a particular — less than evangelical — doctrine of inspiration, he gives them considerable attention in his book. The following statement by Donald McKim, Dr. McGowan's protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, could almost serve as a summation of the central argument in *The Divine Spiration of Scripture*. Calvin, Reformed confessions, and theologians such as Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, and Gerrit C. Berkouwer have emphasized Scripture as presenting a divine message in human thought forms. The purpose of Scripture is not to present inerrant facts; yet it is 'infallible' in that it will not lie or deceive about what Scripture is intended to focus upon: God's salvation in Jesus Christ. In this view, Scripture is seen in relation to its central purpose, the proclamation of the gospel (John 20:31). The Spirit witnesses to Scripture's content. Scripture is infallible in accomplishing its purpose. [Donald K. McKim, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), p. 348.]

McKim errs in precisely the same way as McGowan by sundering Kuyper and Bavinck from Hodge and Warfield. In the case of Prof. Berkouwer the position is entirely different.

4. John Murray, ***Collected Writings Volume 4***, 'Inspiration and Inerrancy' (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), p. 26. This essay and the one which immediately follows it, 'The Inspiration of the Scripture', are surely indispensable reading for us all.

5. One wonders what we are to make of a reference McGowan makes to Thomas F. Torrance on this point, apparently with approval. In 1954, T. F. Torrance wrote a review of B. B. Warfield's *Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*. After speaking highly of Warfield and of his status as one of the truly great Reformed theologians, Torrance expressed his problem with Warfield's notion of the relationship between the divine and the human in Scripture. In particular, he said that for Warfield's position on Scripture to be correct, there would have to have been an incarnation of the Holy Spirit. (p. 120)

For my part, I am not at all inclined to allow Prof. Torrance to set the terms for a discussion of biblical inspiration. It strikes me also that Torrance in these words comes close to the theological equivalent of slander.

6. John Macleod, *Scottish Theology, In Relation to Church History* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, reprint ed. 1974), p. 308.

7. See Iain H. Murray, ***A Scottish Christian Heritage***, (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2006), especially Chapter 11, 'The Tragedy of the Free Church of Scotland', pp. 367-396.

8. John Murray, 'The Attestation of Scripture', in *The Infallible Word* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1946), pp. 41,42.