

ETS 2023: CSBI Needs a Facelift

When COVID hit in late-2019, it was a new and uncharted problem and no one really knew how to handle it properly. Vaccines, masks, and lockdowns resulted. All of us remember these too well! At the time, most believed these were the best ways to limit the spread of COVID. This wasn't necessarily a left vs right matter. I have two physicians on the board of my ministry who are political conservatives. Both got the vaccines and booster and encouraged my wife and me to do the same, given our age. So we did and I have a vaccine card to prove it!

However, there were some along the way, including numerous medical doctors, who were pushing back and saying, "Wait a minute. Something's wrong here." Unfortunately, those voices were strongly rebuked, labeled "anti-vaxxers," and quickly cancelled.

But it turns out those dissenting voices were largely correct. Some of the recommended precautions did little to prevent the spread of COVID. In fact, the benefits of some solutions were outweighed by *negative* consequences: suicide rates increased, children became delayed in their learning, unemployment surged, many small businesses went out of business, health professionals, first responders, military personnel and civil servants who refused to get the vaccine lost their jobs. Ultimately, some of the forced solutions were wrong from the beginning and have been revised or abandoned altogether.

During the next 19 minutes, I will contend that some of the solutions to COVID and the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (henceforth CSBI) have something major in common: Despite the good intentions of their proponents to

solve a threat, both were wrong in some ways from the start and that CSBI needs to go the way of some COVID solutions and be revised significantly, if not abandoned altogether. I'll address 3 key matters in support: Problem, Proposal, and Payoff.

Let's begin with **the Problem**. Actually, there are several problems with CSBI. However, given time limitations I'll focus on only one. But this one is so important that, if I'm correct, CSBI may not even be salvageable. Here it is: **CSBI has an incorrect concept of inspiration.**

This flaw is crucial because **an incorrect concept of inspiration begets an incorrect concept of inerrancy**. CSBI states, "*We affirm that the doctrine of inerrancy is grounded in the teaching of the Bible about inspiration.*"¹ What does the Bible teach about inspiration? Well, the mother of all verses in this matter is 2 Timothy 3:16, which reads: "All Scripture is *theopneustos* [God-breathed]."² But what does it mean for something to be *theopneustos*?

There are around 2,500 occurrences of *theopneustos* in ancient Greek literature.³ I'll highlight what I think are some important uses. The term was relatively rare until Origen uses it in the early 3rd century. In the period that potentially extends from before the time of Jesus through the end of the second century and perhaps a little later, *theopneustos* appears only 8 clear times and possibly as many as 13. In addition to 2 Timothy, which is the only time it appears

¹ Articles of Affirmation and Denial, #XV.

² "inspired by God" is the rendering of the NASB, NRSVue, NET, CSB, NABRE, NJB, NLT, CEB, WEB; "given by inspiration of God": KJV, NKJV; "inspired": REB; "God-breathed": NIV; "breathed out by God": ESV.

³ Search conducted using Thesaurus Linguae Graecae© Digital Library. Ed. Maria C. Pantelia. University of California, Irvine. <http://stephanus-tlg-uci-edu.libproxy.hbu.edu> (accessed Jun. 13, 2023).

in the Greek Bible, the literature includes the *Sibylline Oracles*, the *Testament of Abraham*, the *Anthologies* by Vettius Valens, *the Lives of Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonice*, and *Doctrines of the Philosophers* by Pseudo-Plutarch. In these, the Scriptures are said to be *theopneustos*. But so are streams that serve ancient female pagan prophets called sibyls. Aether, believed by the ancients to be an invisible substance in the heavenlies that held the stars, is said to be *theopneustos*. Ointments that angels placed on Abraham's corpse are *theopneustos*. The teachings of the church are said to be *theopneustos* as is the ability to interpret dreams. In none of these occurrences is *theopneustos* further defined or explained.

So, what do we learn? Perhaps the best way of describing the meaning of *theopneustos* prior to the third century is to say the thing it describes *derives from God or that God is its ultimate origin*. I agree with the Lexham Research Commentary on 2 Timothy, which reads, "*Theopneustos* does not have enough precision to go beyond the basic idea that the Scriptures came from God."⁴ Therefore, 2 Timothy 3:16 does not contribute as much to our discussion as we may have first thought. So we should be cautious not to read more into it than Paul may have intended.

Another text commonly appealed to for inspiration is 2 Peter 1:20-21, which speak of prophets being "carried along by the Holy Spirit." The term "carried along" (the Greek word *pherō*) has a close affinity with the terms *theophorētos* and *enthusiōn*, both of which Philo uses to describe how prophets received revelation from God, during which time they had "no power of apprehension" while God

⁴ Douglas Mangum and E. Tod Twist, *2 Timothy*, ed. Douglas Mangum and Derek R. Brown, Lexham Research Commentaries (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2013), comment on 2 Ti 3:16.

made “full use of their organs of speech.”⁵ Josephus makes similar statements, saying God’s Spirit put the words in the mouths of the prophets.⁶ This is nearly as close to dictation as one can get without using the word.

The 2 Peter text is referring to words God gave prophets to say and that we’re now reading in Scripture. Whether this also pertains to the inspiration of Scripture itself is not clear. Yet, CSBI assumes the two are similar. It states, “the theological reality of inspiration in the producing of Biblical documents corresponds to that of spoken prophecies: although the human writers’ personalities were expressed in what they wrote, *the words were divinely constituted.*”⁷ Since CSBI’s position is based on an unsettled interpretation of the 2 Peter text and should be provisional, similar to 2 Timothy 3:16, CSBI may be reading more into those verses than 2 Peter intended. This is important because these two texts in 2 Timothy and 2 Peter often serve as the foundation for the concept of inspiration embraced by CSBI. And inerrantists of this sort may be reading more into both texts than is actually present. Moreover, it does not instill confidence that the traditional authorship of these two texts has been seriously questioned since the early Church.

But there’s a greater problem for CSBI: Some of the phenomena of Scripture. Acknowledging the different personalities, writing styles, vocabularies, and education levels of the biblical writers is a given. But CSBI neglects to consider other phenomena that suggest a far greater role of the human writer and that cannot be so easily accommodated in CSBI’s concept of inspiration. I have in mind

⁵ Philo, *The Special Laws*, 1:65.

⁶ *Jos. Ant.* 4:111, 118, 119.

⁷ CSBI, *Exposition: Creation, Revelation and Inspiration*.

Mark's awkward grammar that Matthew and Luke apparently found undesirable at times and worked to improve.⁸ Now if CSBI is correct that God "[caused] *these writers to use the very words that He chose*" [and that] "*the words were divinely constituted,*" we are left to conclude the Holy Spirit reviewed Mark at a later time and thought, "I can do better than that! Let's say it this way in Matthew and in Luke." The human element also includes Luke's occasional editorial fatigue. If Luke used the very words God constituted, we're left to imagine the Holy Spirit catching the editorial fatigue at a later time and thinking, "How'd I miss that?" Then there's Paul's memory lapse in 1 Corinthians 1:16 pertaining to whether he'd baptized anyone outside the household of Stephanus. Here we're left to envision the Holy Spirit asking Paul not to get ahead of Him but instead to take a break while the Holy Spirit checked heaven's records only to learn the relevant item was missing. These would practically be required if CSBI is correct that God "[caused] *these writers to use the very words that He chose*" [and that] "*the words were divinely constituted.*" After all, Paul may not have remembered everyone he'd baptized. But the Holy Spirit knew.

These observations clearly reveal a human element in Scripture; an element that includes imperfections. Although this does not challenge the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture, it does challenge the *concept* of inspiration imagined by CSBI. That's a problem. Let's now look at the proposal.

⁸ These textual observations are frequently overlooked by theologians, a shortcoming when theologians draft doctrine without consulting their brothers and sisters who work in biblical scholarship.

The Proposal

Our understanding of what it means to say Scripture is “divinely inspired” should be consistent with what we observe in Scripture. However, we’ve seen that inspiration – as conceived by CSBI – would probably not produce some of the phenomena we observe in the texts. I propose the way out of this quagmire is to acknowledge the *confluence of Scripture*, that is, its *dual authorship*. Scripture has divine and human authors. What might this look like? In 1999, William Lane Craig argued, in essence, that God, knowing all circumstances that could possibly occur, generated those circumstances whereby the biblical authors would write what they did. In this sense, the biblical literature is divinely inspired because God guided certain circumstances and approved the final product. God was its ultimate origin. Craig adds,

Perhaps some features of Paul’s letters are a matter of indifference to God: maybe it would not have mattered to God whether Paul greeted Phlegon or not; perhaps God would have been just as pleased had Paul worded some things differently; perhaps the Scripture need not have been just as it is to accomplish God’s purposes. We cannot know.⁹

If Craig’s hunch is correct, it’s the *message of Scripture* with which God is concerned rather than each and every word.

This model of inspiration proposed by Craig may not be the final word on the matter. However, the confluence of Scripture, that is, its dual authorship, is a

⁹ Craig, “‘Men Moved by the Holy Spirit Spoke from God,’ (2 Peter 1.21).” Craig offers a far more detailed presentation and defense of this view in chapter one of his *Systematic Philosophical Theology* (forthcoming).

plausible way for understanding what it means to say Scripture is divinely inspired, because it takes into consideration what Scripture says about itself AND what we observe in Scripture.¹⁰ In contrast, CSBI's concept of inspiration imagines a role of the biblical writers that's too small and would not result in the Bible we have. In fact, CSBI may not even be compatible with the dual authorship of Scripture, because it states that "*all Scripture is the product of a single divine mind.*"¹¹

A model of inspiration that includes the dual authorship of Scripture can be open to the possibility of the presence of some errors *in the autographs*. How? Consider CSBI's acknowledgement that "a singular providence of God" with respect to our present biblical texts resulted in them being "amazingly well preserved."¹² In other words, God, in his sovereignty, has ensured that the original biblical texts have been preserved with sufficient accuracy so that "the authority of Scripture is in no way jeopardized by the fact that the copies we possess are not entirely error-free."¹³ Now, if the providence of God can guarantee the authority and message of Scripture throughout the *preservation of its texts* despite the *copies* having errors, the same could be true throughout the *composition of those texts* despite the *autographs* having errors. I'll restate that: Humans were involved

¹⁰ I would even add that there could have been a number of occasions when God acted upon the authors of Scripture in a manner that compelled them to write certain items in a specified manner. Some occasions could have included dictation, such as the giving of the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:1–17). Throughout Leviticus, God dictates to Moses procedures for making a variety of offerings, becoming ceremonially clean, various laws and punishments, and other items. There are several occasions when God tells the biblical author to "write this" (Exod. 17:14; 34:27; Deut. 31:19; Rev. 14:13; 19:9; 21:5). These are exceptions, however.

¹¹ CSBI, Exposition: Infallibility, Inerrancy, Interpretation.

¹² CSBI, Exposition, Transmission and Translation.

¹³ CSBI, Exposition, Transmission and Translation. Moreover, even after being translated into a modern language, the meaning of the texts have been preserved in "serious" translations (ibid).

in both the composition and preservation of the biblical texts. God allowed the human element to introduce errors in the text throughout the transmission process while ensuring the integrity of Scripture's message was preserved. Similarly, God could have allowed the human element to introduce errors during the composition process while ensuring the integrity of Scripture's message was preserved.

In fact, this model receives support from Paul. In 1 Corinthians, we learn that some in the church in Corinth were standing against him by questioning his credentials as an apostle and, therefore, his authority that came with it.¹⁴ Paul responded in 2 Corinthians, saying,

. . . if I come again I will not spare [anyone], since you seek proof that *Christ is speaking through me*. He is not weak toward you but is powerful among you.
(2 Cor. 13:2-3)

When Christ was speaking through Paul, in what sense were Paul's utterances divinely inspired? If he could experience a memory lapse when writing divinely inspired Scripture, there's no reason to think he could not have done so when Christ was speaking through him while preaching. Given all of Paul's preaching over a period of about 30 years, are we to demand that, while he preached, he never once attributed a text to the wrong prophet or unintentionally mislocated an event in the life of Jesus? If Paul's statement "Christ is speaking through me" is an example of what it means to be *theopneustos* or "carried along by the Holy Spirit," *the message* Paul preached derives from God and is approved by God. But to insist

¹⁴ See 1 Cor. 5-6.

that every last word in Paul's preaching was **always** inerrant in the CSBI sense, is something that I doubt most of us in this room would want to argue. Yet if minor errors of detail could be present in Paul's preaching when Christ was speaking through him, why could they not also be present in Paul's writing when Christ was speaking through him? This is not to say there were errors in the autographs. It is to say that we cannot know if there were and that the position that they could not have been is based on a dubious concept of inspiration.

Now if an incorrect concept of inspiration begets an incorrect concept of inerrancy, I propose that a better concept of inspiration begets a better concept of inerrancy. Craig's model of inspiration fits *hand-in-glove* with the phenomena of Scripture. Paul's statement that Christ was speaking through him and what such probably looked like can provide a guide to help us understand what is meant by the terms *pherō* in 2 Peter 1:20-21 and *theopneustos* in 2 Timothy 3:16.

Now let's discuss . . . **The Payoff**

A better concept of inspiration begets a better concept of inerrancy. And a better concept of inerrancy begets a number of spiritual benefits. I'll name two.

First, **it begets a better understanding of Scripture.**

There are occasions when the NT quotes the LXX, whereby the LXX differs from the Hebrew. In such instances, which one is inspired: the Hebrew text or the LXX? When we understand inspiration to refer to *Scripture's message*, the answer is easy: Both!

When the NT quotes the OT and attributes the words to God,¹⁵ how are we to account for this in view of the imperfections in Scripture? No problem, when we understand claims such as “God said *x*” to be referring more to the *message of Scripture* rather than the *very words of Scripture*.

A second spiritual benefit is that **it begets a stronger faith.**

Many have placed so much weight on CSBI inerrancy that, when they see discrepancies, they are forced to engage in painful harmonizing efforts. When an error seems apparent, they say we must not be reading the text properly. They also limit inerrancy to the autographs we no longer have while denying the inerrancy of the texts we have. Should it not surprise when we observe some in the pews struggling in their faith when they see some evangelical scholars, apologists, and pastors having to go to these lengths to rescue their presumptuous understanding of Scripture’s nature?

However, if we have a more flexible view of inspiration like Craig proposes and a flexible view of inerrancy in terms of the *message* of the texts, these fit comfortably with what Scripture says about itself AND the phenomena we observe in Scripture. Furthermore, by having a more flexible understanding of inerrancy, we can speak of the inerrancy of the autographs AND of our present Bible. So, when I’m having a friendly dispute on the matter of inerrancy with a CSBI inerrantist, I can say, “You may not like the way I define inerrancy, but of the two

¹⁵ For example, in Psalm 104:4, the psalmist says, “he makes his messengers winds, his ministers a flaming fire.” But in Hebrews 1:7, the author precedes quoting the psalmist by saying “[God] says,” “he makes his angels winds, and his ministers a flaming fire.” See also Acts 1:16; 4:25; Heb. 4:7.

of us, I'm the only one who believes that our present Bible, the Bible you and I hold in our hands and study, is the inerrant Word of God."

Conclusion

The doctrine of biblical inerrancy was the theme of the 2013 ETS Annual Meeting. During that conference, there was a panel discussion featuring contributors to the book *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy*.¹⁶ Panelists were asked whether it's still important to use the term *inerrant* to describe the Bible. Four of the five contributors were present.¹⁷ Al Mohler answered that the term "inerrant" remains important, while Michael Bird, John Franke, and Peter Enns stated that they thought the term was useful but needed to take on a more nuanced meaning.¹⁸ Although the fifth contributor, Kevin Vanhoozer, was absent, in the book he writes, "I regularly refuse to say whether I hold to inerrancy until my interlocutor defines the term (or allows me to do so)."¹⁹ In their book *The Lost World of Scripture*, John Walton and Brent Sandy, both ETS members, assert that

¹⁶ Merrick and Garrett, *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy*.

¹⁷ Kevin Vanhoozer was absent.

¹⁸ An MP3 sound recording of the panel discussion may be purchased from WordMp3 at <http://www.wordmp3.com/details.aspx?id=15848>.

¹⁹ See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Augustinian Inerrancy: Literary Meaning, Literal Truth, and Literate Interpretation in the Economy of Biblical Discourse" in Merrick and Garrett, *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 206. In a video he made to be shown at the conference in his absence, he says, "We must, therefore, make every effort to avoid identifying God with our ideas of what perfection entails. And we must be similarly vigilant not to identify inerrancy with our ideas of what a perfect book must be." Dr. Kevin Vanhoozer, "Augustinian Inerrancy: A Well-Versed Account" (2013 ETS Presentation): <https://vimeo.com/79158043#t=300s>. At 5:58. Vanhoozer defines inerrancy as follows: "By inerrancy, I mean that Scriptures' authors' speak truth in all things they affirm, when they make affirmations, and will eventually be seen to have spoken truly, when right-minded readers read rightly."

“we need to adjust our understanding of inerrancy to the evidence we find in Scripture.”²⁰

Scripture does not inform us *how* divine inspiration occurred. Even CSBI acknowledges that “the mode of divine inspiration remains largely a mystery.”²¹ So we can only speculate. And different models of inspiration result in different kinds of biblical texts, some of which allow errors in the autographs. Therefore, our speculations must attempt to have a coherent model of inspiration that takes seriously both the claims of Scripture about itself AND what we observe in Scripture. CSBI made noble efforts in this regard but fell short, because its *incorrect concept of inspiration begat an incorrect concept of inerrancy*. This problem can be remedied by acknowledging the confluence of Scripture and understanding inerrancy to refer to the message of Scripture. The payoff is a better understanding of Scripture and a stronger faith.

CSBI has been with us 45 years. It states, “We invite response to this statement from any who see reason to amend its affirmations about Scripture by the light of Scripture itself.”²² Accordingly, I offer these criticisms and suggestions for your consideration. So, let the discussion begin!

²⁰ John H. Walton and D. Brent Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 196; cf. 303.

²¹ Article VII.

²² CSBI, Preface.