

The Inspiration, Authority and Inerrancy of Scripture in the History of Christian Thought

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This article traces attitudes towards the Bible amongst leading Christian thinkers from the early church to the present, showing that (with some change in how the concepts have been understood) the church has generally affirmed the Bible's inspiration, authority and inerrancy ever since the formation of the New Testament canon. Organized into four major time periods, the article should be a valuable resource for all who wish to uphold the Bible's credibility.

The inspiration, authority and inerrancy of Scripture are three inter-related issues that have occupied scholars for centuries and are of crucial significance to Christian faith and practice. In this article, I examine the prominent views on these topics during four periods of church history—patristic, medieval, Reformation and modern—that coincide with major turning points in the church's understanding of Scripture. I treat inspiration as the relationship between divine and human authorship; authority as the relationship between biblical authority and other authorities such as tradition, bishops and councils; and inerrancy as what the church has said about Scripture's truthfulness.¹

The patristic era (2nd–5th centuries)

Some have claimed that the Bible's inspiration, authority and truthfulness were assumed rather than argued for in the early church, because there were no controversies that forced the church to articulate these doctrines clearly and systematically.² This is an overstatement. These issues were not as hotly debated as

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1 I use 'inerrancy' to represent the claim that Scripture does not affirm any falsehoods. As we will see in Origen's and Augustine's differing articulations of inerrancy, this definition is actually quite limited and allows room for significant hermeneutical differences.

2 See James Bannerman, *Inspiration: The Infallible Truth and Divine Authority of Holy Scripture* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1865), 2:123; Geoffrey Bromiley, 'The Church Doctrine of Inspiration', in *Revelation and the Bible*, ed. Carl Henry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958), 207.

other controversies such as the deity and humanity of Christ, but several factors forced the early church to reflect on Scripture.

When Marcion excised words from the New Testament to make it fit his theology, Tertullian responded by showing their importance. When Gnosticism claimed that some Scriptures were incorrect, unauthoritative and/or ambiguous, Irenaeus demonstrated the contrary. Montanists forced the church to think through the extent and mode of revelation. Origen's—and, to a lesser extent, Jerome's—work on textual criticism forced them to interact very closely with the biblical text. Such figures as Origen, John Chrysostom and Augustine carefully exegeted Scripture in their writing and/or preaching. And the authors of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed—which summarizes Christian belief in just 175 words in the original Greek—deemed the inspiration of Scripture sufficiently important to dedicate five words to it: '[the Holy Spirit] who spoke by the Prophets'. Thus, although we may not have as much information as we may like, neither are we left without anything.

Biblical inspiration

The predominant view of inspiration in the early church was what we now call divine dictation, meaning that God's Spirit was the only active agent in the writing of Scripture, with humans playing a strictly passive role.³ Their preferred illustration came from the world of music: just as a musician makes sound by plucking or blowing into an instrument, so the Spirit composed Scripture by 'plucking' or 'blowing into' humans.

This theory was not original to Christians; rather, it was a common view of inspiration in antiquity. For example, ancient Greeks understood Sibyls to be speaking on behalf of the gods in a trance-like state,⁴ and Jews such as Philo and the authors of 4 Ezra and Genesis Rabbah also understood the human agent to be passive in the process, at times even suggesting that the mind of the prophet was somehow absent when the Spirit overcame them.⁵

Thus, when early Christians such as Justin Martyr, Theophilus of Antioch, Athenagoras and Hippolytus of Rome spoke of inspiration, they tended towards a divine dictation theory, often employing the musical instrument illustration to help explain their view.⁶ Justin Martyr's testimony is illustrative:

For neither by nature nor by human conception is it possible for men to know things so great and divine, but by the gift which then descended from above upon the holy men, who had no need of rhetorical art, nor of uttering anything in a contentious or quarrelsome manner, but to present themselves pure to the energy of the Divine Spirit, in order that the divine plectrum [i.e. plucking] itself,

3 This view is not alien to how Scripture itself talks about inspiration in certain texts. Some interpret texts such as Num 24:13; 1 Sam 10:10–11; 2 Tim 3:16; and 2 Pet 1:21 in this way.

4 David Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 36–38.

5 Philo of Alexandria, *Who Is the Heir*, 265; *Special Laws* 1:65; 4:49.; 4 Ezra 14:22, 37–47; *Gen. Rab.* 8:8 (Moses must write down what God dictates, even though he may have reservations).

6 Justin Martyr, *Exhort. Greeks*, 8; Theophilus of Antioch, *Auto.*, 2:9; Athenagoras, *Plea*, 7, 9; Hippolytus of Rome, *Christ and Antichrist*, 2.

descending from heaven, and using righteous men as an instrument like a harp or lyre, might reveal to us the knowledge of things divine and heavenly.⁷

However, others such as Augustine articulated a somewhat more nuanced view. Although Augustine adamantly affirmed that God was the ultimate author of Scripture, he understood humans to be active in the writing process as well.⁸ Thus, on one hand he could say that the Lord used the gospel writers ‘as if they were His own hands’,⁹ yet on the other hand he stated that each writer ‘believed it to have been his duty to relate what he had to relate in that order in which it had pleased God to suggest to his recollection the matters he was engaged in recording’ and that thus the Spirit ‘has left one historian at liberty to construct his narrative in one way, and another in a different fashion’.¹⁰

Clearly, Augustine attributed an active role to humans in the inspiration process, even if this role was subordinate to the Spirit’s guiding. This view has come to be called the concursive theory of inspiration.¹¹ Augustine’s theory would remain influential in subsequent eras, although there would be disagreement over the relationship between the two agencies.

Biblical authority

The patristic testimony regarding biblical authority as it relates to other authorities such as tradition, bishops and councils is rather complex, with some arguing for multiple authorities—perhaps even equal to Scripture—and others giving a privileged position to Scripture.

On one hand, many believed that apostolic tradition, bishops’ teaching and conciliar statements were authoritative, perhaps even as authoritative as Scripture itself. Regarding apostolic tradition, their argument was primarily a phenomenological one: the universal church (or at least their local church) maintained certain beliefs and practices—for example, making the sign of the cross and praying towards the east—that were not found in Scripture and thus must have come from another source, namely unwritten tradition handed down by the apostles.¹² Jerome’s language summarizes the position well: ‘Don’t you know that the laying on of hands after baptism and then the invocation of the Holy Spirit is a custom of the Churches? Do you demand Scripture proof? You may find it in the

7 *Exhort. Greeks*, 8 (trans. ANF 1:276). Throughout this essay, I have used the well-known series ANF (*Ante-Nicene Fathers*) and NPNF 1 and 2 (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 1 and 2) for many of the patristic citations.

8 This ‘thicker’ view of inspiration, shared by several patristic authors, may have come as a reaction against the Montanist claims that their prophets dictated messages from God. See Matthew Crawford, *Cyril of Alexandria’s Trinitarian Theology of Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 78ff.

9 Augustine, *Harmony of the Gospels*, 1.35.54 (trans. NPNF 1 6:101).

10 Augustine, *Harmony of the Gospels*, 2.21.51–52 (trans. NPNF 1 6:127).

11 This view is not alien to how Scripture itself talks about inspiration in certain texts. Some interpret texts such as 2 Sam 23:2; Matt 15:4//Mk 7:10; and Lk 1:1–4 in this way.

12 Roman Catholics and especially Eastern Orthodox see Scripture and unwritten tradition as two components of one source of authority, which they call Tradition.

Acts of the Apostles. And even if it did not rest on the authority of Scripture the consensus of the whole world in this respect would have the force of a command.¹³

Arguably the most celebrated example of this posture appears in Basil of Caesarea's *On the Holy Spirit*: 'Of the beliefs and practices whether generally accepted or publicly enjoined which are preserved in the Church some we possess derived from written teaching; others we have received delivered to us "in a mystery" by the tradition of the apostles; and both of these in relation to true religion have the same force.'¹⁴

Regarding the authority of bishops and councils, Ambrose stated that 'neither death nor the sword can separate me' from the Council of Nicea; Leo the Great affirmed, 'My respect for the Nicene canons is such that I never have allowed nor ever will the institutions of the holy Fathers to be violated by any innovation'; the eastern bishops present during the first Council of Constantinople (381) charged the western bishops to accept the Nicene Creed of 325; and the definition of Chalcedon (451) endorsed the creeds of Nicea and Constantinople.¹⁵

On the other hand, many viewed Scripture as more authoritative than the authority of tradition, bishops, councils and even angels. Their arguments follow, in ascending order of importance. First, some speak so highly of Scripture as to give the impression that it plays a unique role in the church's life, arguably reflecting what Protestants would later call *sola Scriptura*.¹⁶ Second, comments by authors such as Irenaeus of Lyons, Basil of Caesarea and Augustine demonstrate that 'tradition' was not uniform but rather pluriform, and occasionally self-contradicting. They recognized that arguments based on competing ecclesiastical traditions led to a stalemate, and their solution was that, at least in these cases, tradition should be set aside and Scripture should be used as the only source.¹⁷ Third, some argued that the

13 Jerome, *Against the Luciferians*, 8. In this text, Jerome specifically mentions post-baptismal laying on of hands and invocation of the Holy Spirit, triune immersion, postbaptismal drinking of mixed milk and honey, standing in worship on the Lord's day, ceasing from fasting on Pentecost, and 'other unwritten practices'.

14 Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, 27:66–67 (trans. NPNF 2 8:41–42), who then specifically mentions the following practices: making the sign of the cross, prayer towards the East, the invocation prayer for the Eucharist, blessing of the water and oil at baptism, anointing of oil at baptism, triune immersion, renunciation of Satan and his angels at baptism, standing in prayer on Sundays, confession of the faith in Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and doxology 'with the Spirit' instead of 'in the Spirit'. Origen similarly argued for infant baptism based on unwritten tradition (*Comm. Rom.* 5.9.11). John Chrysostom expressly endorsed unwritten tradition, but without specifying its contents (*Hom. 2 Thess.* 2:15). Augustine mentioned the liturgical observance of Holy Week, Christ's ascension, and Pentecost (*Ep.* 44.1, although he says that this could also have come from 'plenary councils').

15 Ambrose, *Ep.* 21.14 (trans. NPNF 2 10:428); Leo the Great, *Ep.* 119.3 (trans. NPNF 2 12:86); letter from the eastern bishops to the western bishops in the year 382 (reprinted in Norman Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* [Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990], 1:25–30); definition of Chalcedon (reprinted in Tanner, *Decrees*, 1:84).

16 Hippolytus of Rome, *Against Noetus*, 9; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 7.16; Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*; Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomius*, 10.4; *On the Soul and the Resurrection* (two places; above human reasoning); *Optatus: Against the Donatists*, 5.3; Augustine, *De unitate ecclesiae*, 4.7.

17 Irenaeus, *Con. Her.* 3.2.1; Basil of Caesarea, *Epistle* 189 (to Eustathius), §3; Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, 2.14.3.

New Testament writings were more important than tradition and custom. For example, Cyprian of Carthage, in his ongoing dispute with the bishop Stephen of Rome, denounced the raising of tradition to the same level as scriptural authority and famously quipped that ‘custom without truth is the antiquity of error.’¹⁸ In this instance, a bishop of Carthage felt free to challenge the bishop of Rome based on scriptural teaching, a fact which should not go unappreciated.

Fourth and most importantly, some of the church’s most influential figures explicitly taught that Scripture is above other sources of authority. For example, Cyril of Jerusalem wrote:

For concerning the divine and holy mysteries of the Faith, not even a casual statement must be delivered without the Holy Scriptures; nor must we be drawn aside by mere plausibility and artifices of speech. Even to me, who tell thee these things, give not absolute credence, unless thou receive the proof of the things which I announce from the Divine Scriptures. For this salvation which we believe depends not on ingenious reasoning, but on demonstration of the Holy Scriptures.¹⁹

Similarly, Ambrose wrote, ‘I do not wish that credence be given to us; let the Scripture be quoted.’²⁰ Jerome, commenting on Psalm 87 [*Vulgate* 86]:6, drew the following conclusion from the verse’s use of the past tense (‘who have been’) as opposed to the present (‘who are’): ‘That is to make sure that, with the exception of the apostles, whatever else is said afterwards should be removed and not, later on, hold the force of authority. No matter how holy anyone may be after the time of the apostles, no matter how eloquent, he does not have authority.’²¹ John Chrysostom, commenting on Galatians 1:8–9, said that Paul included in this anathema himself, the other apostles and the angels, and that it applied to those who ‘even slightly vary, or incidentally disturb’ the gospel. He concluded his contrast between angels and the Scriptures by saying that ‘for the angels, though mighty, are but servants and ministers, but the Scriptures were all written and sent, not by servants, but by God the Lord of all’, and his discussion of the apostles by declaring, ‘In the discussion of truth the dignity of persons [i.e., even of the apostles] is not to be considered.’²²

Augustine provides perhaps the most important patristic testimony. At one point in his dialogue with the Donatists, in response to their claim that they had the support of Cyprian of Carthage, whose life and doctrine were revered by both sides, Augustine stated:

You are wont, indeed, to bring up against us the letters of Cyprian, his opinion, his Council. ... But who can fail to be aware that the sacred canon of Scripture,

18 Cyprian of Carthage, *Ep.* 73[74].9 (trans. *ANF* 5:389); cf. *Ep.* 70[71].2–3; 72[73].13; 73[74].2, 3. In the specific context of this quotation, as well as in the general context of Cyprian’s larger debate with Rome, ‘custom’ clearly refers to the tradition that Rome had been practising, and ‘truth’ to scriptural teaching.

19 Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat. Lect.* 4:17 (trans. *NPNF* 2 7:23); cf. 12:5.

20 *Sacrament of the Incarnation of Our Lord*, 3, quoted in David King and William Webster, *Holy Scripture: The Ground and Pillar of Our Faith* (Battle Ground, WA: Christian Resources, 2001), 66.

21 Jerome, *Hom. Ps.* 18; see *The Homilies of Saint Jerome*, trans. Sister Marie Liguori Ewald (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1964), 1:142–43.

22 John Chrysostom, *Comm. Gal.* 1:8–9 (trans. *NPNF* 2 13:8–9).

both of the Old and New Testament, is confined within its own limits, and that it stands so absolutely in a superior position to all letters of the bishops, that about it we can hold no manner of doubt or disputation whether what is confessedly contained in it is right and true; but that all the letters of bishops which have been written, or are being written, since the closing of the canon, are liable to be refuted if there be anything contained in them which strays from the truth, either by the discourse of someone who happens to be wiser in the matter than themselves, or by the weightier authority and more learned experience of other bishops, by the authority of Councils; and further, that the Councils themselves which are held in the several districts and provinces (*regiones vel provincias*), must yield, beyond all possibility of doubt, to the authority of plenary Councils (*plenariorum conciliorum*) which are formed for the whole Christian world; and that even of the plenary Councils (*plenaria*), the earlier are often corrected (*emendari*) by those which follow them.²³

Augustine's comments are important for at least three reasons. First, he places Scripture in a category by itself, superior to all other authorities.²⁴ Second, he makes the striking claim that even 'plenary' (i.e. ecumenical) councils can err and, indeed, had done so already by his time.²⁵ Third, he articulates a chain of authority, which ascends in the following manner: bishops, wiser people and more learned bishops, regional and provincial councils, ecumenical councils, Scripture.

Biblical inerrancy

In the patristic period, there was a consensus that the Bible was inerrant.²⁶ This can be demonstrated in four ways. First, as already noted, the church fathers generally believed that the Old and New Testaments were divinely dictated by God. This left little, if any, room for human agency, and since God cannot err, neither could Scripture. Second, they repeatedly affirmed that Scripture did not contradict itself. In fact, authors such as Augustine wrote painstakingly long and detailed treatises (e.g. his *Harmony of the Gospels*) to demonstrate that supposed biblical contradictions could be resolved.

Third, the fathers affirmed directly that the Bible did not lie or contain errors. Here, however, we must note that not all agreed on what an 'error' was. For example, Origen stated that the Bible had superficial errors, but that God had put them there on purpose to force humans to seek the true, 'spiritual' sense of the passage.²⁷

23 Augustine, *On Baptism, Against the Donatists* 2.3 (trans. NPNF 1 4:427); Latin text from www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu.

24 Augustine does this on numerous occasions, such as *Ep.* 28; 82.

25 Augustine wrote this work around AD 400, by which time only a few 'plenary' councils had been held, and there was still debate over which councils should be deemed 'plenary'. Thus, it is difficult to understand what he meant by the claim that earlier plenary councils were 'often' corrected by later ones.

26 For texts and analysis, cf. the chapters by John Hannah and Wayne Spear in John Hannah (ed.), *Inerrancy and the Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 3–65; the chapter by Charles Hill in D. A. Carson (ed.), *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 43–88; Andrés Messmer and José Hutter, *La inerrancia bíblica. Ensayo sistemático, exegetico e histórico* (Barcelona: Editorial Clie, 2021), 75–117.

27 See e.g. Origen, *On First Principles* 4.2.9; 4.3.5; *Comm. John* 10:4, 15–16.

However, Origen insisted that these were not really errors, since the superficial interpretation of Scriptures was not its true meaning. In contrast, Augustine refused to admit even superficial errors and instead sought to reconcile the apparent errors he found in Scripture.²⁸

Finally, authors such as Eusebius of Caesarea, John Chrysostom and Augustine explicitly affirmed that the Bible was inerrant and infallible and that it was true in all its parts.²⁹ Augustine's letter to Jerome (*Ep.* 82), in which he discusses inerrancy, is a good summary of how the fathers in general understood the issue and, as we will see, exercised significant influence on subsequent formulations of the doctrine:

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.³⁰

The medieval period (6th–15th centuries)

Very few medieval sources directly treat the issues of biblical inspiration, authority and inerrancy, fewer than in the Patristic period. Robert Preus summarizes the situation:

One may range through thousands of pages of scholastic theology before finding any explicit or direct word concerning the divine origin, authority, or truthfulness of Scripture. Among the scholastics, doctrine concerning Scripture *per se* can be extracted only from their prolegomenous discussions, where they center attention primarily on questions of epistemology and discuss man's return to God, revelation, prophetic knowledge, and similar themes.³¹

Nevertheless, although the sources are scarce, they still permit us to sketch with broad strokes the church's understanding of the Bible during this period.

Biblical inspiration

The medieval period carried forward the two understandings of biblical inspiration that were put forth in the patristic era: divine dictation and concursive inspiration. As for divine dictation, the Church continued to see God as the (only) 'author' of Scripture. The Latin word *auctor* had several shades of meaning such as seller,

28 See e.g. Augustine, *Ep.* 28; 82.

29 Eusebius of Caesarea, *Prep. Gospel* 1.3.6, who uses the words 'inerrant' (*apseudes*) and 'infallible' (*adiapoton*); John Chrysostom, *Hom. John* §68, who also uses the word 'inerrant' (*apseudes*); Augustine, *Ep.* 28; 82, who says, among other things, that the Bible is 'true' (*veritas*) 'in every place' (*ex omni parte*).

30 Augustine, *Ep.* 82.3 (trans. *NPNF* 1 1:350).

31 Robert Preus, 'The View of the Bible', in Hannah, *Inerrancy*, 366. In the West, aside from the brief Carolingian Renaissance, there was very little theological reflection until the 11th century, and it did not really begin to blossom until the 12th and 13th centuries; in the East, most of the theological debates were centered on liturgical issues (e.g. icons) and matters related to Islam.

author, founder, creator and/or originator,³² and thus each use of the word may not have carried the full force of what divine dictation implies, but the general tendency seems to have been in this direction.³³ Apparently this language goes back at least to the Fourth Council of Carthage (404), where the bishop was to be asked the following question at his consecration: 'It ought to be asked of him whether he believes God to be the one and the same author (*unum eumdemque ... auctorem esse Deum*) of the New and Old Testament, that is, of the Law, and of the Prophets, and of the Apostles.' This language became a fixed formula and was repeated several times throughout this period. The profession of faith sent by Leo IX to Peter of Antioch (1054) contained the phrase, 'I believe God, the Lord Almighty, to be the one author (*unum esse auctorem Deum*) of the New and Old Testament, of the Law and Prophets and Apostles.' The creed to which the Greeks subscribed in the second Council of Lyons (1274) read, 'We believe God, the Lord Almighty, to be the one author (*unum esse auctorem Deum*) of the New and Old Testament, of the Law and Prophets and Apostles.' And the decree *pro Jacobitis*, issued by the Council of Florence (1438), similarly stated, 'The most holy Roman Church ... professes one and the same God (*unum atque eundem Deum*) to be the author (*auctorem*) of the Old and New Testament, that is, of the Law, and of the Prophets, and of the Gospel, since by the same inspiring Holy Spirit both Holy Testaments were spoken, from which it receives and venerates the books.' Though not using the same language, Thomas Aquinas affirmed the same doctrine when he wrote, 'God is the author (*auctor*) of Sacred Scripture.'³⁴

As for concursive inspiration, John Wycliffe, who considered Augustine the 'foremost of all the doctors of Holy Scripture',³⁵ posited a threefold authorship of Scripture: God, Christ's humanity and 'their proximate scribe' (*eorum scribam proximum*), i.e. the human authors, whom he called the 'lowest author' (*infimum autorem*).³⁶ Nevertheless, Wycliffe also exhibited a strong tendency towards divine dictation, at times saying that human authors were 'only God's scribes or heralds' (*nisi scribe vel precones dei*). In relationship to the threefold authorship just noted, he affirmed that the human agent 'is not the author' (*non est autor*), since only God can be called the 'author'.³⁷

32 See Domino Du Cange et al., *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis* (Niort, France: L. Favre, 1883–1887); Leo Stelten, *Dictionary of Ecclesiastical Latin* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995).

33 The following texts come from C. A. Campbell, 'The Authority and the Authorship of Scripture', *Ecclesiastical Review* 38, no. 2 (1908): 167–68. Campbell himself contests what divine 'authorship' traditionally has been understood to mean, but the patristic evidence combined with the conservative nature of the Middle Ages suggests continuity between the two.

34 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q.1 a.10.

35 Wycliffe, *On the Truth*, 1:35. The English translation I have used is John Wycliffe, *On the Truth of Holy Scripture*, trans. Ian Christopher Levy (Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University, 2001). By contrast, Anselm, Hugh of St. Victor and Robert Grosseteste are merely his 'abbreviators' (*On the Truth*, 1:38).

36 Wycliffe, *On the Truth*, 1:398; Latin text: Rudolf Buddensieg, *John Wyclif's De veritate sacrae scripturae*, 3 vols. (London: 1905), 1:398. Although I have not been able to find additional sources which discuss or develop the theory of concursive inspiration, Augustine's influence throughout the Middle Ages and the 'boom' of a modified version of concursive inspiration in the 16th century imply that this theory maintained support during the medieval period.

37 Wycliffe, *On the Truth*, 1:392, 398 (Buddensieg, *John Wyclif's*, 1:392, 398); cf. 1:402.

Biblical authority

It does not appear that many medieval writers wrestled with the relationship between biblical authority and other authorities. Thus, only a few texts can be included, some of which only indirectly address the issue.

On one hand, there was an assumption that Scripture and tradition spoke with one voice and that, in this sense, both were authoritative. The fact that influential figures such as Peter Abelard, Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas could indiscriminately cite either Scripture, the fathers, councils or even philosophy—either as an authoritative voice in favour of or against any number of doctrines—implies that they understood these non-biblical sources as carrying significant authority, perhaps equal to Scripture itself.³⁸

On the other hand, Scripture could also be spoken of as a unique authority. Thus, Anselm of Canterbury stated in his justly famous work *Why God Became Man*, 'If I say anything which is undoubtedly contradictory to Holy Scripture, it is wrong; and, if I become aware of such a contradiction, I do not wish to hold to that opinion.'³⁹ Similarly, Thomas Aquinas, contrasting Scripture with human reason and the authority of philosophers, wrote:

Nevertheless, sacred doctrine makes use of these authorities as extrinsic and probable arguments (*extraneis argumentis, et probabilibus*); but properly uses the authority of the canonical Scriptures as an incontrovertible proof (*ex necessitate argumentando*), and the authority of the doctors of the Church as one that may properly be used, yet merely as probable (*probabiliter*). For our faith rests upon the revelation made to the apostles and prophets who wrote the canonical books, and not on the revelations (if any such there are) made to other doctors. [Aquinas then quotes from Augustine, *Ep.* 82.3.]⁴⁰

Most forceful is Wycliffe's testimony. He wrote his famous work on biblical authority, *On the Truth of Holy Scripture*, in 1377–1378, just after he had been condemned by the Pope for his comments on church–state relations, and during the so-called 'Great Schism' when the Western church had two rival popes.⁴¹ His comments can be divided into negative statements against church authority and positive statements about biblical authority.

As for negative statements, Wycliffe attacked church and/or papal authority. He claimed that 'the Church has proven herself deceptive, mistaken, and ignorant, not only in her judicial proceedings, but in other private points concerning the state of

38 Peter Abelard, *Sic et non*; Peter Lombard, *Sentences*; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*.

39 Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (eds.), *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 298.

40 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q.1 a.8 (translation at www.logicmuseum.com). In his *Comm. John* 21.6, he similarly wrote, 'We should note that although many have written about Catholic truth, there is a difference among them: those who wrote the canonical scriptures, such as the evangelists and apostles and the like, so constantly and firmly affirm this truth that it cannot be doubted. ... The reason for this is that only the canonical scriptures are the standard of faith. The others have set forth this truth but in such a way that they do not want to be believed except in those things in which they say what is true' (translation at www.isidore.com).

41 The Great Schism shook many people's confidence in the church's authority, causing some of them, like Wycliffe, to look for authority elsewhere.

the Church, evinced in matters concerning the celebration of Easter, the sacrament of the Eucharist, and many other essential difficulties which remain unresolved.⁴² Wycliffe blamed the church's errors on the (pseudo-)Donation of Constantine, by which the church officially entered into worldly politics.⁴³ Interestingly, Wycliffe did not oppose the authority of the magisterium *per se*, but he rejected placing it on the same level as Scripture:

Nevertheless, I do not deny, but in fact concede, that it is lawful for bishops and Vicars of Christ to formulate statutes designed to help the Church. And whenever they do institute such statutes they ought to be accepted, unless they contradict other statutes or prove contrary to Holy Scripture. But I do think that it is clearly blasphemous to imagine that statutes of this sort, on the grounds that they are issued by the pope, might then claim equal authority with the gospel.⁴⁴

As for positive statements, Wycliffe exalted biblical authority over ecclesiastical authorities. Here is one example: 'Any part of Holy Scripture is of infinitely greater authority than any decretal letter. And this is clarified in the following manner: every decretal letter is the creation of some pope, the Vicar of Christ together with his subordinates. Every part of Holy Scripture, however, is immediately and proximately authorized by God; and thus the conclusion.'⁴⁵ Elsewhere he wrote:

God bestowed his own law completely through the scribes of the books of both testaments, and he commanded that nothing foreign to be added to it, and nothing be removed from it. How then can a person presume to place his own statements on a par with those bearing the authority of Holy Scripture? Lest he seem to be doing just that, he ought to adduce his statements from Scripture. Hence, those who compose so many decrees and decretal letters should never presume that they are of equal authority with the words of the Lord, inasmuch as they are his own, since this would be to declare blasphemously that they themselves are God.⁴⁶

At one point, Wycliffe went so far as to say—basing his argument on Galatians 1:8, 11–12—that the biblical authors were not authoritative in and of themselves, but only when God spoke through them: 'In fact, the statements of the authors of Holy Scripture are not authentic because they spoke them, but only insofar as God instructed them to speak in this way.'⁴⁷

Overall, Wycliffe seems to have followed the example of Augustine. He acknowledged and even endorsed the church's authority to promulgate decrees and statutes, but only to the extent that they helped the church, did not contradict Scripture and were seen as inferior to the authority of Scripture. This Augustinian–Wycliffian view of the relationship between biblical authority and other authorities would become the typical Protestant position during the Reformation.

42 Wycliffe, *On the Truth*, 1:407.

43 Wycliffe, *On the Truth*, 1:395; 2:130. The so-called Donation of Constantine would not be proved a forgery until Lorenzo de Valla made this demonstration around 1440.

44 Wycliffe, *On the Truth*, 1:403; cf. 1:406.

45 Wycliffe, *On the Truth*, 1:395.

46 Wycliffe, *On the Truth*, 1:405.

47 Wycliffe, *On the Truth*, 1:397.

Biblical inerrancy

On inerrancy, important figures continued to maintain the patristic position that Scripture was true, did not contradict itself and did not contain any error. Thomas Aquinas affirmed that ‘other sciences derive their certitude from the natural light of human reason, which can err (*errare*); whereas this [science] derives its certitude from the light of divine knowledge, which cannot be misled (*decipi non potest*).’⁴⁸ Later he said that ‘faith rests upon infallible truth (*infallibili veritati*)’, and the context makes it clear that ‘faith’ comes from Scripture.⁴⁹ Finally, in another place he wrote, ‘It is unlawful to hold that any false (*falsum*) assertion is contained either in the Gospel or in any canonical Scripture, or that the writers thereof have told untruths (*mendacium*), because faith would be deprived of its certitude which is based on the authority of Holy Writ.’⁵⁰

Similarly, Wycliffe affirmed that Scripture did not contain any errors: ‘Surely even a small error (*modicus ... error*) in this principle could bring about the death of the Church. ... I have often said that Scripture is true in all of its parts (*vera ... secundum quamlibet eius partem*) according to the intended literal sense.’⁵¹ Elsewhere he affirmed, ‘No Holy Scripture is false (*nulla scriptura sacra sit falsa*). But whatever is sacred is true (*vera*), such that no part of it is capable of being contrary (*contraria*) to another, as I have very clearly stated throughout this treatise.’⁵² As Anthony Kenny has noted, it ‘is wrong to think of Wyclif as a fundamentalist’ on the inerrancy of Scripture, but rather he should be considered a faithful son of the church: ‘In attributing inerrancy to the Bible in this way Wyclif was merely following Catholic tradition.’⁵³

The Reformation period (16th–18th centuries)

Whereas in the Middle Ages the doctrine of Scripture was more assumed than reflected on, in the 16th to 18th centuries it became one of the central issues of theological debate and discussion. For the first time ever, confessions of faith and dogmatic treatises dedicated lengthy chapters—often the first, or one of the first—to the doctrine of Scripture. Whereas in previous periods our problem was a lack of sources, here we face the opposite. Thus, I cannot be exhaustive in my treatment of the sources, but I will try to be representative.

*Biblical inspiration*⁵⁴

During this period, the theories of divine dictation and concursive inspiration were carried forward, but with important modifications. In fact, it might be more accurate to say that everyone was committed to the concursive theory of inspiration, but that

48 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q.1, a.5.

49 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q.1, a.8.

50 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIb, q.110, a.3.

51 Wycliffe, *On the Truth*, 1:1–2 (Buddensieg, *John Wyclif's*, 1:2); cf. 1:109.

52 Wycliffe, *On the Truth*, 3:278 (Buddensieg, *John Wyclif's*, 3:278); cf. 1:23.

53 Anthony Kenny, *Wyclif* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 60.

54 For Catholic views of inspiration in this and the modern period, see James Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories of Biblical Inspiration since 1810: A Review and Critique* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), esp. 44–87.

two distinct groups positioned themselves on opposite sides of the divine–human spectrum: one group emphasized the divine element over the human while the other did the reverse.

To understand the debate over the nature of the Bible during this time period, we must situate it within the broader debate over the relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom.⁵⁵ On one side, Scotists, Jesuits, Benedictines and Anabaptists favored reason and human freedom, while on the other side, Dominicans, Augustinians, Jansenists, Lutherans and Reformed favored faith and God's sovereignty, and this divide generally parallels the two sides' views of inspiration.⁵⁶ Thus, although the debate occurred mainly along Roman Catholic–Protestant lines (and it will be presented as such below), it was actually more complicated than that, since Roman Catholics and Protestants were clearly divided amongst themselves.

In Roman Catholic circles, and in no small part thanks to the influence of the Jesuits and their reaction against Protestant teaching on Scripture, three distinct yet related positions emerged. First, according to the divine assistance theory (also known as special direction) developed by Lessius (Leonhard Leys), God's role was limited to preserving the biblical authors from asserting error. This theory was similar to the Jesuit doctrine of middle knowledge: God surrounds the individual with a set of circumstances and graces by which he will inevitably, but of his own choice, perform God's will (in this case, write Scripture).⁵⁷ Second, the consequent inspiration theory, developed by Sixtus of Siena, stated that a text can be viewed as inspired because the church subsequently deemed it so.⁵⁸ Lastly, according to the limited inspiration theory developed by Marcantonio de Dominis, the extent of the Bible's inspiration was limited to faith and morals, thereby excluding other affirmations such as those related to history and science.⁵⁹ All three views shared a commitment to concursive inspiration, but with a marked emphasis on the human element. Despite some revivals in the 19th century (see below), none of these theories would ultimately survive, since all were condemned at Vatican I (1869–1870).

At the other end of the concursive spectrum, Protestants tended to emphasize the divine element in inspiration, occasionally employing language reminiscent of divine dictation. Thus, Luther said prophets were those 'into whose mouth the Holy Spirit has given the words',⁶⁰ and 'not only the words but also the expressions used

55 Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories*, 127. Although Burtchaell was speaking of 19th-century debates in this passage, the statement seems applicable to the 16th century as well.

56 The two groups were similarly divided over justification and the relationship between faith and good works, with the former emphasizing good works and the latter emphasizing faith.

57 Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories*, 90–91.

58 Casiodoro de Reina would edit one of his works, *Sacred Library*, calling it a 'theology of great importance', although he did confess to having 'corrected' some parts of it (in a letter to Theodore Zwinger on 27 October 1574).

59 In the 19th century, this theory would enjoy a revival thanks to its most famous exponent, John Henry Newman, who coined the phrase *orbiter dicta* (incidentally spoken) to describe 'errors' in the Bible.

60 *Weimarer Ausgabe* (WA) 3:172, quoted in A. Skevington Wood, *Captive to the Word: Martin Luther: Doctor of Sacred Scripture* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1969), 142.

by the Holy Spirit and Scripture are divine.⁶¹ Similarly, John Calvin described Scripture as having been given by God when commenting on 2 Timothy 3:16:

This is a principle which distinguishes our religion from all others, that we know that God hath spoken to us, and are fully convinced that the prophets did not speak at their own suggestion, but that, being organs (*organa*) of the Holy Spirit, they only uttered what they had been commissioned from heaven to declare. Whoever then wishes to profit in the Scriptures, let him first of all, lay down this as a settled point, that the Law and the Prophets are not a doctrine delivered according to the will and pleasure of men, but dictated by the Holy Spirit (*a Spiritu Sancto dictatam*).⁶²

However, this did not keep them from affirming human agency. For example, when preaching on Matthew 24:15–28, Luther stated:

In this chapter is described the conclusion and end of both kingdoms, that of Judah and that of the whole world. But the two evangelists, Matthew and Mark, mingle the two and do not keep the order that has been preserved in Luke, for they are concerned only about telling and repeating the words without troubling themselves as to the order in which they words were spoken.⁶³

Biblical authority

During the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, as is widely known, Roman Catholics argued that other authorities—specifically tradition and the magisterium—were equal to biblical authority while Protestants insisted on *sola Scriptura*. During the fourth session of the Council of Trent (1546), the Roman Catholic Church decreed—in line with previous councils such as Nicea II (787), which Protestants typically reject—that both ‘written books’ and ‘unwritten tradition’ were equally authoritative.⁶⁴ The Catechism of the Council of Trent subsequently affirmed, ‘Now all the doctrines in which the faithful are to be instructed are contained in the Word of God, which is found in Scripture and tradition.’⁶⁵

In contrast, Protestants averred that Scripture alone was the unique and final authority in the life of the church.⁶⁶ Martin Luther’s famous 1521 speech at the Diet of Worms could have been said by any Protestant of this period. When asked to retract his views, he declared:

61 WA 40:3:254, quoted in Wood, *Captive to the Word*, 143.

62 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1856), 249; for the Latin, cf. John Calvin, *In omnes Pauli Apostoli Epistolas* (Geneva: John Crispin, 1557), 523. For a treatment of Calvin’s view of Scripture, see John Murray, *Calvin on Scripture and Divine Sovereignty* (Hertfordshire: Evangelical Press, 1979), esp. 11–31.

63 Quoted in M. Reu, *Luther and the Scriptures* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg Press, 1944), 110–11. Similarly, Wood affirms Luther’s doctrine of ‘double inspiration’ (*Captive to the Word*, 143).

64 Tanner, *Decrees*, 2:663.

65 *The Catechism of the Council of Trent for Parish Priests*, trans. John McHugh and Charles Callan (1566/1923), eBook edition, location 260 of 9018.

66 For example, Formula of Concord, §1; Ten Theses of Bern, §1–2; Tetrapolitan Confession, §1; Second Helvetic Confession, §1–2; Juan Díaz, *Sum of the Christian Religion* (1546).

Your Imperial Majesty and Your Lordships demand a simple answer. Here it is, plain and unvarnished. Unless I am convicted of error by the testimony of Scriptures or (since I put no trust in the unsupported authority of Pope or of councils, since it is plain that they have often erred and often contradicted themselves) by manifest reasoning I stand convicted by the Scriptures to which I have appealed, and my conscience is taken captive by God's word, I cannot and will not recant anything, for to act against our conscience is neither safe for us, nor open to us. On this I take my stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.⁶⁷

However, Protestants did not do away with all other authorities. Rather, they continued to hold tradition and bishops in high regard, and as for church creeds, the standard Protestant position was to accept the Apostles', Nicene-Constantinopolitan and Athanasian Creeds as faithful expositions of essential Christian belief. All major Protestant traditions except the Anabaptists⁶⁸ included them as part of their confessional tradition.⁶⁹ Less common, but still within the general Protestant tradition, was to accept the first four ecumenical councils as authoritative.⁷⁰ Thus, whatever particular approach each Protestant tradition took, they typically upheld the spirituality, theology and ecclesiology of the first five centuries of Christian tradition as subordinate to Scripture.⁷¹

In a related development, during this time Roman Catholics began insisting on the Latin Vulgate as the official text of Scripture, whereas the Reformers preferred the original biblical languages of Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek.⁷²

Biblical inerrancy

As for Roman Catholic authors of this period, although most of their energies went into defending papal infallibility rather than biblical inerrancy,⁷³ James Burtchaell

67 Translation taken from Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, eds., *Documents of the Christian Church*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 214.

68 However, some Anabaptists such as Balthasar Hubmaier endorsed the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds; see his *A Christian Catechism* in H. Wayne Pipkin and John Yoder (eds.), *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism* (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing House, 2019), 339–65 (esp. 349, 351).

69 Lutheran: Formula of Concord, §4; Anglican: 42 Articles of the Church of England, §7 and 39 Articles of the Church of England, §8; Reformed: French Confession, §5, Belgic Confession, §9 and Second Helvetic Confession, §11.

70 Juan Diaz, *Sum of the Christian Religion*, §2; Waldensian Confession of Turin (Leger, Balmas and Theiler); Geneva Students' Confession; French Confession, §6; Second Helvetic Confession, §11; Netherlands Confession, §1.

71 This position is known as the *consensus patrum* (consensus of the fathers) or *consensus quinquesecularis* (consensus of the [first] five centuries). This did not mean that Protestants rejected the next thousand years as heretical, but rather that they saw a general drift in the church's focus away from Christ and Scripture, and that later accretions—such as certain elements in the mass or Mariology—were not legitimate developments of scriptural teaching.

72 The Latin Vulgate was declared the official text of the Roman Catholic Church at the fourth session of the Council of Trent (1546). For a defender of the original languages from this period, see Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 2.10–12, 15.

73 For example, see Thomas Stapleton, *A Returne of Untruthes upon M. Jewelles Replie* (Antwerp: John Latius, 1566), 111. The concept of papal infallibility did not originate in the 16th century, but rather dated back to the Middle Ages.

succinctly summarizes their position as follows: ‘As for the content of the Bible, this was taken for granted as inerrant.’⁷⁴

Although Protestant Reformers’ stance on inerrancy has been called into question by some scholars,⁷⁵ the overall evidence favours the interpretation that they upheld the classical teaching of the church. Martin Luther stated, ‘Scripture has never erred’ (*Schrift ... die noch nie geirret hat*), and then approvingly cited Augustine’s *Epistle 82* to Jerome.⁷⁶ As the quotation above from his commentary on 2 Timothy 3:16 above makes clear, Calvin believed that all of Scripture had been ‘dictated by the Holy Spirit’, which implies a commitment to inerrancy.⁷⁷ After providing the appropriate texts from the major Lutheran, Reformed and Anglican confessions of faith from the 16th and 17th centuries, Charles Hodge summarized the basic Protestant position as follows: ‘The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and are therefore infallible and of divine authority in all things pertaining to faith and practice, and consequently free from all error whether of doctrine, fact, or precept.’⁷⁸

During this period, Protestants began affirming explicitly that inerrancy was not limited to faith and morals, but rather extended to every word contained in Scripture (otherwise known as verbal, plenary inspiration). For example, the Lutheran theologian Johannes Andreas Quenstedt said that Scripture

is the infallible truth, free of any error; or, to say the same thing in another way, in canonical Sacred Scripture there is no lie, no falsehood, not even the tiniest of errors (*nullus vel minimus error*), either in content or in words. Rather, each and every thing contained in it is altogether true, be it dogmatic or moral or historical, chronological, topographical, or onomastic. It is neither possible nor permissible to attribute to the amanuenses of the Holy Spirit any ignorance, lack of thought, or forgetfulness, or any lapse of memory, in recording Holy Writ.⁷⁹

Similarly, the Reformed theologian Johann Heinrich Heidegger wrote, ‘Under the inspiration of God the writers simply could not err ... neither in important matters nor in trivial ones’ since ‘if we acknowledge any errors of any sort in the Scriptures, we no longer believe the Holy Spirit to be their author.’⁸⁰ In fact, the Protestant insistence on inerrancy went so far that some authors attributed inerrancy to the

74 Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories*, 88.

75 For example, C. A. Briggs, *The Bible: The Church and the Reason*, 2nd ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1893), 217–21; Jack Rogers and Donald McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999).

76 Martin Luther, *Sämtliche Schriften*, 15:1481.

77 See Murray, *Calvin on Scripture*, 11–31; Roger Nicole, ‘John Calvin and Inerrancy’, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25, no. 4 (1982): 425–42. The three most famous counter-examples in Calvin’s commentaries—Matt 27:9; Acts 7:14–16; and Heb 11:21—can be resolved by careful exegesis and textual criticism.

78 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, and Co., 1873), 1:152.

79 Johannes Andreas Quenstedt, *Theologia didactico-polemica sive systema theologicum* (Leipzig, 1715), 1:112, quoted in Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, 5 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971–1991), 4:343–44.

80 Johann Heinrich Heidegger, *Corpus theologiae Christianae* (Zurich, 1700), 1:33 (quoted in Pelikan, *Christian Tradition*, 4:344).

Hebrew vowel points.⁸¹ Happily, this unsustainable position has remained on the fringe of Protestant thought.

Summary up to this point

Robert Preus has ably summarized the Church's teaching on Scripture up through this period: 'That the Bible is the Word of God, inerrant and of supreme divine authority, was a conviction held by all Christians and Christian teachers through the first 1,700 years of church history. Except in the case of certain free-thinking scholastics, such as Abelard, this fact has not really been contested by many scholars.'⁸² In the next period, however, this conviction would be challenged.

The modern period (19th–21st centuries)

The modern period presents a sharp break with how the church—and those outside the church—had traditionally understood biblical inspiration and inerrancy. Instead of stressing the divine element in inspiration, scholars began to stress the human, and instead of asserting the Bible's truthfulness in all its parts, scholars begin to assert more frequently that the Bible contains errors (even if they were limited to minor details that did not affect faith and morals). James Burtchaell provides four reasons why this change took place: according to many scholars of the time, geology and paleontology discredited the Genesis cosmogony, archaeology discredited the Bible's history, comparative studies discredited the Bible's originality, and literary criticism discredited the Bible's credibility, making it seem as if the Bible had elevated myth and legend into historical fact.⁸³ In addition to these four changes, one may add the general influence of the Enlightenment on Western epistemology, which stresses that all truth claims must be subjected to human reason and that if something did not seem reasonable, it should be discarded as erroneous.

Biblical inspiration

In Roman Catholic circles, there were three great schools of thought during this period, two of which continued the teaching of previous periods. Jesuits—mainly in Germany—continued to hold to content inspiration and Dominicans—mainly in Italy and France—to verbal, plenary inspiration.⁸⁴ Both sides held to some version of concursive inspiration, but with different nuances. Many were treating the topic as if divine and human authorship were mutually exclusive, with one beginning where the other left off. As in the previous period, the precise nature of concursive inspiration was part of the bigger theological issue of the relationship between God's sovereignty and human freedom.⁸⁵

The third view, which originated primarily at the University of Tübingen but also found support elsewhere, would become known as the 'liberal' view. At least three issues were at play here. First, while many were willing to maintain that

81 E.g. *Helvetic Consensus*, §2.

82 Preus, 'The View of the Bible', in Hannah, *Inerrancy*, 357.

83 Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories*, 2; cf. 115–16.

84 According to Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories*, 88 and 121, content inspiration was the dominant theory from the 1840s to the 1890s.

85 Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories*, 127.

Scripture was ‘inspired’, the divine element was so weakened as to become almost non-existent. Second, according to this view, Scripture is a collection of primitive documents written in a specific time and context—indeed, the phrase ‘children of their time’ comes from this period⁸⁶—and thus is radically human throughout. Its wisdom, knowledge, ethics and grammar all reflect the limitations of the human authors who penned the works. If Scripture is anything, it is not God’s word for all mankind for all time, but rather the first step—riddled with errors and contradictions—in a long journey of development and self-understanding. Third, Enlightenment principles, such as the preference for naturalistic explanations over supernatural ones, facilitated the conclusion that inspiration could be explained on natural grounds alone. During the early 19th century, clear denials of inspiration began to emerge. It appears that the first denial of plenary inspiration can be attributed to Franz Anton Staudenmaier in 1840 and the first denial of verbal inspiration to Johann Evangelist von Kuhn in 1859.⁸⁷

Within the Protestant world, similar postures can be detected. Some influential theologians continued to expound divine dictation and concursive inspiration, but others began arguing for the liberal view. Charles Hodge seems to have endorsed divine dictation: ‘On this subject the common doctrine of the Church is, and ever has been, that inspiration was an influence of the Holy Spirit on the minds of certain select men, which rendered them the organs of God for the infallible communication of his mind and will. They were in such a sense the organs of God, that what they said God said.’⁸⁸ However, shortly thereafter he eschewed divine dictation theory (which he called the mechanical theory of inspiration) in favour of concursive inspiration. Although his judgement on the church’s historical position must be modified in light of our previous discussion of divine dictation, the following statement articulates his own view on the topic:

The Church has never held what has been stigmatized as the mechanical theory of inspiration. The sacred writers were not machines. Their self-consciousness was not suspended; nor were their intellectual powers superseded. Holy men spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. It was men, not machines; not unconscious instruments, but living, thinking, willing minds, whom the Spirit used as his organs.⁸⁹

Similarly, B. B. Warfield—Hodge’s colleague at Princeton Seminary and perhaps the most influential modern thinker on the topic of the nature of Scripture—defined inspiration as follows: ‘Inspiration is that extraordinary, supernatural influence (or, passively, the result of it), exerted by the Holy Ghost on the writers of our Sacred

86 Franz von Hummelauer, *Exegetisches zur Inspirationsfrage, mit besonderer Rücksicht auf das alte Testament* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1904), 50–98, quoted in Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories*, 187.

87 See Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories*, 24–25, 29, citing Staudenmaier’s *Encyclopädie der theologischen Wissenschaften als System der gesammten Theologie*, 2nd ed. (Mains: Florian Kupferberg, 1840), 347–48 and Kuhn’s *Katholische Dogmatik*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Laupp & Siebeck, 1859), 1:94. Burtchaell distinguishes between the ‘Tübingen School’, from which these quotations come, and the ‘Inspiration without Inerrancy’ school. However, I find them sufficiently similar as to include them as one group.

88 Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 154; cf. 156.

89 Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 157.

Books, by which their words were rendered also the words of God, and, therefore, perfectly infallible.⁹⁰ However, Warfield then added a significant clarification: '[This definition] purposely declares nothing as to the mode of inspiration. The Reformed Churches admit that this is inscrutable. They content themselves with defining carefully and holding fast the effects of the divine influence, leaving the mode of divine action by which it is brought about draped in mystery.'⁹¹

Regarding the liberal view, several other influential theologians began to assert that the Bible contained errors and to limit inerrancy to matters of faith and practice. One common way to do so was to argue that the biblical text was the product of many authors—many of them anonymous or pseudonymous—whose primary 'inspiration' came not from God but rather from their surrounding ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman cultures. The seeds of this liberal approach to Scripture can be traced to the 17th century during the rise of inductive reasoning as the dominant method for research, the scientific revolution, and the explosion of archaeological and scientific finds.⁹² Thus, for example, in the 17th century, Baruch Spinoza claimed that the Bible contains contradictions; in the 18th and 19th centuries, scholars such as Hermann Samuel Reimarus and David Strauss claimed to have uncovered the 'Jesus of history' as opposed to the 'Christ of faith'; and in the 19th century, W. M. L. de Wette and Julius Wellhausen attacked traditional views on the dating and authorship of several Old Testament works and crystallized the JEDP theory of Pentateuchal authorship.⁹³

Similar to liberalism within Roman Catholic circles, in the 19th century denials or redefinitions of inspiration became more overt in Protestant thought as well. Thus, for example, in 1830, Edward Pusey—a conservative theologian and churchman—denied or redefined plenary inspiration such that the biblical authors were not completely free from error, and in 1860 the seven authors of *Essays and Reviews* cautiously denied the traditional understanding of biblical inspiration.⁹⁴

90 B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), 420 (italicized in the original).

91 Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority*, 420–21. He does mention three 'modes of revelation': external manifestation, internal suggestion and concursive operation (*Inspiration and Authority*, 83). The Reformed tradition has not always affirmed that the mode of inspiration is unknowable. Warfield's 1915 article on inspiration, in which he exegetes 2 Tim 3:16 and 2 Pet 1:19–21, leans heavily towards the divine dictation theory of inspiration, but without crossing over into it (*Inspiration and Authority*, 132–37).

92 See Norman Geisler, 'Inductivism, Materialism, and Rationalism: Bacon, Hobbes, and Spinoza', in Geisler (ed.), *Biblical Errancy: An Analysis of its Philosophical Roots* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 11–22.

93 John Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism in the Nineteenth Century: England and Germany* (London: SPCK, 1984), esp. 28–49, 257–89; Colin Brown, *Jesus in European Protestant Thought, 1778–1860* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), esp. 1–55; Robert Morgan and John Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 44–61; Roy Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Theology and Historical-Critical Method from Spinoza to Käsemann* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 32–65, 89–130.

94 Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism*, 168–69; Morgan and Barton, *Biblical Inspiration*, 57.

Biblical authority

In Roman Catholic circles, the document *Dei Verbum* from Vatican II reinforced the Roman Catholic position that Scripture and tradition ‘flow from the same divine wellspring, merge together to some extent (*quodammodo*), and are on course towards the same end. ... Both scripture and tradition are to be accepted and honored with like devotion and reverence.’ Shortly thereafter, the document states, ‘It is clear that, by God’s wise design, tradition, scripture and the church’s teaching function are so connected and associated that one does not stand without the others, but all together.’⁹⁵

As for Protestants, the traditional position of viewing the Bible as the unique, but not the only, authority in the church began to be pulled in two opposite directions during the 19th century. On the one hand, the Church of England’s Tractarian/Oxford Movement emphasized the importance of church history, the historic creeds and confessions and the authority of tradition and the magisterium to such an extent that a large portion of the church became ‘Anglo-Catholic’, with some—most notably John Henry Newman—ultimately converting to Roman Catholicism.⁹⁶

On the other hand, both inside and outside the Church of England, several movements attempted to restore Christianity to its supposed New Testament purity and reacted strongly against traditional and ecclesiastical authorities, which they saw as perversions of the true gospel and church. Thus, England witnessed the Brethren movement as a reaction against the Church of England, and the United States witnessed ‘restorationist’ movements such as the Stone-Campbell movement, Landmarkism and Adventism, many of which began employing the slogan ‘No creed but the Christ, no book but the Bible’.⁹⁷ All these movements shared a commitment to *sola Scriptura*, but to the exclusion of other authorities such as tradition, bishops and the historic creeds and councils. To distinguish this 19th-century understanding of *sola Scriptura* from its previous formulations, some have preferred to call it *solo Scriptura* (‘the Bible alone’, i.e. without anything else whatsoever) or *nuda Scriptura* (‘bare Scripture’). Whatever one calls it, this emphasis represented a drastic change from how the church traditionally had understood the relationship between Scripture and other authorities.

95 *Dei verbum*, §9; cf. Tanner, *Decrees*, 2:974–75; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §81–82, 585–86.

96 See John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dryer, 1876); Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, rev. ed. (London: Basil Montagu Pickering, 1878).

97 For the slogan, see Terry Miethe, ‘Slogans’, in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, ed. Douglas Foster et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 688. This mentality deeply affected the Southern Baptist Convention in the 19th century; see Rhyne Putman, ‘Baptists, *Sola Scriptura*, and the Place of the Christian Tradition’, in *Baptists and the Christian Tradition: Towards and Evangelical Baptist Catholicity*, ed. Matthew Emerson, Christopher Morgan and R. Lucas Stamps (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Academic, 2020), 28–33.

Biblical inerrancy

During this period, a movement of scholars who denied inerrancy arose;⁹⁸ it was especially strong in Germany but also present in other European countries. Scholars began to argue either that Scripture was not all inspired (and therefore errant in some places) or that while Scripture may be inspired in its totality, the human element in the inspiration process placed certain limitations and restrictions on what the biblical text could contain, thereby relativizing its contents and reducing its universal and timeless truthfulness. Although the movement never organized behind a specific leader or school, James Burtchaell summarizes its basic tenets as follows: '(1) Secular affirmations (of science and history) lie beyond the charismatic interests and competence of inspired writers. (2) Biblical religion portrays the faith in its crudest and most imperfect stages.'⁹⁹ In addition, the Enlightenment's project of submitting all truth claims to human inquiry and independent confirmation meant that even Scripture should not be taken at face value, but rather must be submitted to the human intellect.

Nevertheless, most of the Christian tradition continued to affirm inerrancy. In the Roman Catholic camp, a whole host of official documents affirmed the plenary inspiration and total inerrancy of Scripture: *Syllabus Errorum* (1864), *Providentissimus Deus* (1893), *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (1907), *Spiritus Paraclitus* (1920) and *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943).¹⁰⁰

Within the Protestant camp, affirmations were just as vigorous. In 1840, the Frenchman Louis (François) Gaussen published *La Théopneustie, ou pleine inspiration des saintes écritures*, in which he argued for verbal, plenary inspiration and biblical inerrancy.¹⁰¹ In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, B. B. Warfield wrote extensively on issues related to the nature and inerrancy of Scripture, treating it from exegetical, historical and systematic/philosophical perspectives.¹⁰² Similarly, the International Council of Biblical Inerrancy, formed in 1977, held conferences and published five volumes on biblical inerrancy from multiple perspectives.¹⁰³ Most of the modern debate regarding inerrancy has taken place in the English-, German-

98 Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories*, 164–229, and also 8–43. He summarizes the view of some 19th-century Roman Catholic thinkers as follows: 'The Bible, though totally inspired, is not necessarily totally inerrant. The writers are concerned, indeed unequipped, to teach matters that do not touch on religion. And even when religion is in question, the faith portrayed is in a primitive, undeveloped state' (*Catholic Theories*, 216).

99 Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories*, 229.

100 Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories*, 2.

101 The second edition, published in 1841 and translated into English, is better known. See Louis Gaussen, *Theopneustia. The Plenary Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures* (London: Samuel Bagster and Sons, 1841), 29–30, 36–37.

102 See his collected works on the topic in *Inspiration and Authority*.

103 Norman Geisler (ed.), *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980); Geisler, *Biblical Errancy*; Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest (eds.), *Challenges to Inerrancy: A Theological Response* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984); John Hannah (ed.), *Inerrancy and the Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984); Earl Radmacher and Robert Preus (eds.), *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).

and French-speaking worlds, but recently the debate has been introduced into the Spanish-speaking world as well.¹⁰⁴

Conclusion

Biblical inspiration

For most of church history, the church has tended towards a divine dictation theory of inspiration, according to which God was the only real author of Scripture, with humans remaining mainly or entirely passive in the process. However, as early as the patristic period, one also finds evidence of the concursive theory of inspiration, in which both human and divine agencies were active. These views are not mutually exclusive, as Augustine's own testimony has illustrated: God could use human writers' personality, experiences and memory to communicate a message that ultimately came from God. Working out the mechanics of inspiration has plagued the church for centuries, and thus figures such as B. B. Warfield have preferred to shift the focus of inspiration away from its process and towards its result, contending that however Scripture may have been inspired, the resulting product reflects God's very words.

Biblical authority

Arguably the majority position throughout church history, which has been embraced energetically by Protestants, has seen Scripture as holding unique authority in the church but has also accepted other authorities such as tradition, bishops, creeds and councils. Arguably the minority position, taken up by Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, has viewed Scripture and tradition as equally authoritative. As Protestants, we believe that we have recovered the scriptural and patristic position of submitting all other authorities to Scripture, which is the only 'God-exhaled' teaching we have (2 Tim 3:16; cf. 2 Pet 1:19–21).

Given the balance between Scripture and other sources of authority through church history, it is troubling to see in much of the evangelical community a nearly complete disregard for church tradition. For all the good done by the 19th-century restorationist movements, they have also often had the disastrous effect of separating modern evangelicalism from historic Christianity. Is it any wonder that so many denominations and cults can trace their roots back to 19th-century America, where it became common to read and interpret the Bible in *solo* or *nuda Scriptura* fashion? The 19th-century slogan 'No creed but the Bible' has never reflected traditional Christian theology and ought to be abandoned.

104 Along with a few other Spanish-language works which contain sections or chapters on inerrancy, Messmer and Hutter, *La inerrancia biblica*, have addressed inerrancy from systematic, exegetical and historical perspectives.

Biblical inerrancy

Despite the oft-repeated accusation that inerrancy is a 19th- and 20th-century American phenomenon,¹⁰⁵ the first time when inerrancy was seriously questioned within the church was in 19th-century Germany. Thus, if there is any ignorance over the historical development of the doctrine of inerrancy, it is on the part of the liberals, not the inerrantists. As Origen and Augustine demonstrated, inerrancy is a limited idea that allows for diverse hermeneutical approaches. Therefore, the fundamental affirmation—that Scripture does not assert any falsehood—should be maintained today. Of course, there are difficulties to overcome—most notably the relationship between Scripture on one hand and science and history on the other—but there have always been difficulties to overcome in the church’s articulation of biblical inerrancy, and our age is no different.

105 For example, see N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 183; Carlos Bovell, ‘Editor’s Preface’, in Bovell (ed.), *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Authority of Scripture: Historical, Biblical, and Theoretical Perspectives* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), xxi; Stephen Dawes, ‘But Jesus Believed That David Wrote the Psalms ...’ in Bovell, *Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 179–80.