

Plenary Inspiration of Scripture

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Question: What do they mean who say that they believe in the **plenary** but not in the **verbal** inspiration of the Scriptures?

Answer: Let us listen to one, the late Dr. A. Pieters, who held to this position. He writes in his “Notes” and I quote:

“The position taken by the author of these notes is that the Bible is the Word of God, in all its parts – the position usually designated in theology as the belief in the plenary inspiration of the Holy Scriptures.

“He believes also that the inspiration involves the trustworthiness of the Old Testament in its statement of facts of whatever kind, as well as in all its teachings with regard to religious truth and duty.

“It is to be carefully noted, however, that the trustworthiness of the Old Testament is not the same as inerrancy in every detail. When it comes to statistics, dates, and similar matters, there are certainly errors in the Bible, as we have it. It is possible that many, perhaps most, of these errors are errors in transmission, and didn’t exist in the original documents (by which he means the Scriptures as they left the pens of the prophets and the apostles – O.); but no one can be sure that this is true of all of them. If the inerrancy of the original documents is asserted, this is not on the basis of evidence, but merely as an inference from the doctrine of verbal inspiration. The author of these notes holds to plenary inspiration but not to verbal inspiration...A document can be a trustworthy source of information even though minor errors exist in it; and therefore it is not inconsistent with the position here assumed to believe that some minor errors may have existed in the original documents.” End of quote.

This makes it clear what they mean who say that they hold to the plenary but not to the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures. But their position is untenable certainly. The word **plenary** is from the Latin **plenus** and means **full, entire, complete**. Thus to say that inspiration was plenary but not verbal is to play with words.

Inspiration was certainly **plenary** in the sense of **verbal**. What is meant thereby is that the men of God through whom He gave us His word wrote under the infallible guidance of His Spirit so that their productions were in truth God’s very own Scriptures, also certainly as to the form of their words including dates, numbers and statistics. Why should the guidance of the Spirit not also have covered dates and numbers? Involved in the question of the accuracy of the dates, numbers and statistics of the Scriptures is the veracity of the whole of the religious and ethical teachings of Holy Writ. It was only because Abraham was a hundred years old when Isaac was born and not, let us say, 30 years old that Paul could write, “Who (Abraham) against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be. And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body, now dead, when he was about a hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah’s womb: he staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able to perform. And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness” (Rom. 4:18-22).

That the Bible is the infallible Word of God as to all the form of its words without exception is an article of faith. For it means that all the Scriptures originated with God. And this cannot be demonstrated. Hence, making an exception of dates, numbers and statistics must

necessarily lead to the denial of the whole idea of the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures. Dr. Pieters (for some years a teacher of Bible in Hope College) did just that. From the above quote it appears that he held to plenary but not to the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures, as if the two are not the same.

To deny the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures is to be arguing the point that God imparted the ideas and that men put the thoughts of His heart into words without His guidance. It is to argue that God imparted the discourse in outline form and that the finished product is of men.

If the inspiration of the Scriptures is not verbal without exception, it did not take place at all, and we are shut up to the view that the Bible is a collection of fallible and even deceptive writings.

That the inspiration of the Scriptures was verbal does not mean that it was mechanical. That is, in being used of God to produce His Word, the state of the human writers was not such as warrants their being compared to a lifeless pen in the hand of a writer. The human writers of the Scriptures were indeed pens in God's hand, but as rational beings and living saints. Writing God's Scriptures and speaking His Word was their act into the performance of which went all that they were as God's workmanship – their gifts, talents and individuality and their entire apperceiving mass; but the act was at once God's own work in such a way that its product was His very own infallible Scriptures.

Certainly, the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures is a mystery, as are all of God's works. It defies our powers of penetration. Basically it is a question of how God can do all His good pleasure with, in and through His moral creatures without reducing them to automatons.

Of course, the Scriptures themselves tell us that they were inspired also as to the form of their words. II Tim. 3:16: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness."

Now certainly Paul could not be telling us here that all the Scriptures are given – mark you, given – of God by inspiration if men wrote them, i.e., if the finished product was of men and if all that God did is to supply the ideas.

That the inspiration of the Scriptures is verbal is clearly evident from Paul's reasoning at Gal. 3:16. From the fact that in making His promises to Abraham, God said not: 'And to seeds, as of many, but as of one, And thy seed,' Paul, as infallibly guided by the Spirit, concluded that the promises are to Christ in the first instance. It shows that in His selection of the word "seed" the human writer of Genesis was infallibly guided by Christ's Spirit.

That the formula, "thus saith the Lord," occurs over and over in the discourses of the prophets, and that they continually introduce the Lord as the speaker, can only be because their discourses were God's very own infallible Word as to all the form of their words without exception.

The position that the Scriptures were not verbally inspired must lead to the denial of revelation, i.e., the act of God whereby He communicated the thoughts of His heart to the mind of men – the prophets and the apostles of the Scriptures. For thought can be communicated only by the vehicle of the word. A thought is a word so that to think is always to think words. Without words, thought is impossible.

Now the original Scriptures soon waxed old through much handling and vanished away. But many copies had been made of them. These copies, let us call them manuscripts, would go the way of the original Scriptures. And so copies continued to be made of copies and thereby the Word of God was fully preserved. This is clear from the marvelous agreement between the

manuscripts that have come down to us. Variations do occur. But about nineteen-twentieths of them have so little support that, though they are various readings, no one would think of them as rival readings; and nineteen-twentieths of the remainder are of so little importance that their adoption or rejection would cause no appreciable difference in the sense where they occur. So, the church is still in the possession – and how could it be otherwise – of God's infallible Scriptures.

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