

# THE INSPIRATION AND AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE

## WHAT THE EVANGELICAL CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH BELIEVES

What the Evangelical Congregational Church believes concerning the Inspiration and Authority of the Bible is embodied in the Article of Faith, "Of the Holy Scriptures".

*By the Holy Scriptures we understand those canonical books of the Old and New Testaments, which the church has at all times received as such. (These books in order are listed below.) These Scriptures, given by Divine inspiration, contain the will of God concerning us in all things necessary to our salvation; so that whatever is not contained therein nor can be proved thereby is not to be enjoined on any as an article of faith.*

Although it appears fourth on the list of our articles of faith, this statement on the Holy Scriptures lays the foundation for all the others. It provides the source of authority for everything we believe. Every religion, every philosophy appeals to an authority of some sort. It may be the authority of reason, the authority of experience, the authority of a person or group, or even the authority of one's own inner feelings. But we are convinced that apart from a revealed Word from God, these approaches, individually or in any combination, cannot provide a firm base for knowledge from God - or about anything else for that matter.

Quite properly, then, our first three articles of faith deal with the nature of God and the divine Persons of the Trinity. For in the final analysis our ultimate authority is God himself. As the Psalmist says, "*to fear the Lord is the **beginning** of wisdom*" (Ps. 111:10). If we are to take God seriously as the Creator of the cosmos, and as the source of all intelligible thought, it is plain that He cannot be simply a product of our own imaginings. The only God worth knowing is the God who is really there, who exists independently of all human attempts to create, to change or to ignore Him.

It is this God who is really there that we confess in the first article of our Creed as the "one true and living God, an eternal Being, a Spirit without body, indivisible, of infinite power, wisdom and goodness, the Creator and Preserver of all things, visible and invisible". As the eternal Creator, God is prior to all things - including the Bible. But if God's wisdom is to benefit us, He must make known something of that wisdom in a form that we can understand. The Bible claims to be just such a revelation from God to rational creatures made in the divine image. Without this revelation, we could only guess at or grope after God (Acts 17:27). While God, then, is primary as far as wisdom and creation are concerned, revelation and the Bible are primary as far as our knowledge of this God is concerned.

To appreciate fully our statement on Scripture it is helpful to have some knowledge of its origins. Its roots go back to earlier times when skeptical attacks on the Bible were not so numerous nor so widespread as they now are. Therefore we should not expect this article of faith to include all the words and concepts currently employed in discussions of revelation and Scripture. Nevertheless our article remains remarkably adequate to meet the challenges of today.

Historically our statement came out of the Protestant Reformation as that historic movement came to expression in the Church of England's **Thirty-nine Articles** published in 1563. A major issue at that time was the nature and extent of the church's authority. Before the Reformation, church traditions and the pronouncements of ecclesiastical councils had effectively concealed the pure light of

the Gospel. Over against these medieval distortions, the Reformers insisted that Scripture alone (**sola scriptura**) is the basis for the church's faith and life. Reflecting this Protestant heritage, our article reads, "the Scriptures...contain the will of God concerning us in all things necessary to our salvation." Teaching from any other source "is not to be enjoined on any as an article of faith."

In identifying the Scriptures as "those canonical (authoritative) books of the Old and New Testaments which the church has at all times received as such, the article speaks to another issue. It places the apocryphal books (such as Maccabees, Judith, Tobit, etc., which were written after the last books of the Old Testament) outside the scope of Scripture. These books, still found in some editions of the Bible, are considered by the Roman Catholic Church to be legitimate sources for establishing Christian doctrine. These writings were not, however, included in the Hebrew canon of the Old Testament in the days of Jesus and the apostles, and the Reformers definitely eliminated them from the body of authoritative Scripture.

This emphasis on Scripture as the sole authority remains vital. Today we face a tidal wave of new and older cults contending for the loyalties of people. A common characteristic of such groups is the attempt to elevate the authority of a person, a book, or an organization above the Bible as the source of religious truth. In the light of this continuing challenge, we need to guard the centrality of Scripture now as much as ever.

At the time of the Protestant Reformation, virtually everyone within the church - despite often heated debate over disputed points of doctrine - considered the Bible to be true and without error. By the 19th century, however, some biblical scholars were beginning to question the accuracy and trustworthiness of the Bible in matters of history as well as in matters of faith. In their opinion the Bible was simply an ancient human record reflecting the aspirations as well as the fallibility and limited horizon of the men who wrote it. Therefore some theologians looked to reason or the religious experience of the church as more reliable paths to God. In opposition to this modernist approach, evangelical Christians found it necessary to add to their statements of faith that "the Scriptures (were) given by divine inspiration."

Acknowledging the divine inspiration to the Scriptures implies a number of important things.

It says first of all that the Scriptures themselves, the words of the Bible, are inspired. God did not simply suggest thoughts to the writers and then let them express their ideas as best they could. Inspiration of the Bible means that the Bible itself is God's Book. It does not mean, however, that God used the human authors merely as "typewriters". In the mysterious process of inspiration, God utilized the personalities of the authors of the Bible together with their language, customs, and figures of speech in order to reveal His wisdom in a way that we can understand. The Bible has real human authors, but what they wrote is what God wanted said.

To assert that the Scriptures are given by divine inspiration means secondly that **all** of the Bible is the Word of God. It is important to maintain the complete (plenary) inspiration of the Bible over against the view which says that only part of the Bible is the Word of God and the rest is the word of men. In the final analysis, this attempt to distinguish God's truth from human error in the Bible makes our opinions the final test of truth. In the end even those portions of the Bible which we most admire would then bear the stamp of human judgment rather than divine authority.

In the third place, divine inspiration of the Scriptures means that what the Bible teaches is true and without error. It is inconceivable that a holy God who condemns falsehood (Ex. 20:16, Nu 23:19) would reveal himself and His will to us through a book containing mistakes and wrong information about Himself. There are places, of course, where the Bible records the words and deeds of evil persons including Satan himself. In such instances, however, it is clear that the Bible is not endorsing such teaching or example; it simply reports these things honestly and often shows the dire consequences of following the path of sin and unbelief. It remains true, then, that an inspired Bible is without error in all that it affirms.

In the light of this affirmation of an inspired Bible, when our statement adds that these

Scriptures "contain the will of God concerning us in all things necessary to salvation", it does not mean that only some parts of the Bible are the Word of God. The intent of the phrase is positive, not negative. It means that the Bible itself tells us the truth about God, about our need and about God's mercy. Today it is fashionable in some circles to deny that God ever speaks in human words and phrases. Rather, it is maintained, He communicates only indirectly through historical events and personal encounter. This reduces the Bible to a halting and faulty attempt to describe God's real Word which remains forever beyond the ability of human language to convey. Over against this, we are bold to assert that the Bible provides us with the will of God, the words of God to guide us in our faith and life.

To insist upon the divine inspiration of Scripture is simply to reflect the Bible's own witness regarding itself: *"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God"* (2 Tim. 3:16). This claim to divine authority, however, is by no means limited to this one verse. It is found throughout the Scriptures. The Old Testament prophets introduced their messages with "thus saith the Lord." Even earlier, God's Old Testament people accepted the words of the covenant as the words of the Lord (Ex. 24:3, 7). In the New Testament Jesus speaks with authority (Mt. 7:29) and what Paul writes is a command from the Lord (1 Cor. 14:37). What the Bible says about its own authority must be taken every bit as seriously as what it says about Christ, sin and salvation.

Since the Bible was given originally in human languages (Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic), its truths may be translated into other languages as well. In this way, the message of salvation has been made more accessible to many tribes, tongues and nations of the earth. No translation is perfect, however. Therefore, serious readers of the Bible will want to compare several translations in order to gain greater insight into its meaning. And biblical scholars have the never-ending task of studying the original texts of the Bible in order to deepen the church's understanding of God's revelation.

Of course the Bible is not an end in itself. It tells us what God has done for his people, redeeming them from Egypt and providing Jesus Christ as the divine sacrifice for sin. Indeed, without these historical acts of God there never would have been a Bible as we know it. The purpose of the Bible is to bring men and women into a personal relationship with the living God through Christ, and to guide them in their spiritual walk with Him. Therefore we must not simply defend an inspired infallible Bible. We must obey it and live it as well.