

What is inspiration? Our understanding of this doctrine must not be hazy; too much depends upon a correct knowledge of what inspiration is.

Inspiration is not human genius. As brilliant as men may be at times, human intellect alone could not have produced a book with such accuracy, unity, and spiritual power as the Bible. And we may add, there are truths and concepts in the Bible which the human mind would never have dreamed of unaided by the Holy Spirit.

Inspiration is not illumination. Every believer in Christ has the illumination of the Holy Spirit which is the Spiritual ability to understand Bible truth (I Corinthians 2:9-16).

Inspiration is not revelation, although the two are so related and interdependent they seem to be one. Revelation is God's activity of communicating divine knowledge to the human mind. Inspiration is God's activity of controlling and guiding those who made that knowledge known to others as they recorded it.

The distinction in these three terms has been summarized in this way: revelation is God's giving the truth; inspiration is God's guiding those who recorded the truth so that they were preserved from error; illumination is God's imparting understanding of what has been revealed and recorded. All of these are the work of the Holy Spirit. (Read Galatians 1:11, 12; II Timothy 3:16, 17; Psalm 119:18; John 16:13.)

Inspiration can be claimed only for the original documents of the Bible. None of the originals exist today; we only have copies of the originals, and translations made from the copies. God did not inspire the copyists; they were not preserved from error. However, their errors are amazingly few in proportion to the thousands of words in the Bible, and no copyist's error affects a single doctrine of the Bible or lessens the Scriptures' veracity and trustworthiness. We have an accurate and totally trustworthy Bible.

Historically, Baptists have believed in the inspiration of the Scriptures. We have accepted the Bible as the very Word of God without error and have humbly submitted to its authority. Nevertheless, we are forced to admit, and sadly, that modernism has infiltrated several Baptist groups in this

century, and not all Baptists believe now in the infallibility and inerrancy of the Scripture. For this reason we must read even Baptist writings now with caution lest we be corrupted by modernistic theories regarding the nature of the Bible. It is safe to say, though, that the majority of Baptists are still firm believers that every word of the Scriptures is inspired of God and that the whole Bible is the Word of God.

Various Versions

The first copies of the Bible circulated among the churches were on papyrus, a kind of "paper" made from the papyrus plant which grew chiefly along the Nile in Egypt. For the first two centuries very few copies of the whole New Testament existed; for the most part the churches had only portions, perhaps only the gospels or the epistles. But as Christianity spread, interest in the Christian Book grew, and devout men vigorously spread the Word of God in handwritten copies. Charles Gulston says:

With Christianity barely three hundred years old, therefore, the Word of God was being widely diffused. The modern world can claim no originality in its art of multiplying books rapidly. In the Graeco-Roman Empire, a manuscript could be put into a thousand different homes within a month if copyists did a little overtime. The ancient scriptorium was as efficiently run as the modern printing house. And by the fourth century papyrus (paper), the Greek name for which was "*biblos*," was giving place to vellum, and the roll form of manuscript to the codex. The Divine hand can already be noticed moving behind the momentous events of the time, controlling already the preservation of the sacred Scriptures. By the year A.D. 150 the twenty-seven books of the New Testament were ready for their transcription to the more durable quality of calfskin. (*Our English Bible: No Greater Heritage*).

During the Dark Ages, the Roman Catholic Church tried to keep the Bible out of the hands of the common people, forbidding anyone but priests and officials of the church to possess it—on pain of death. The Roman hierarchy feared the Bible in the vernacular in the hands of the common people, and with good reason. William Butler, a Franciscan friar, expressed the official sentiment of the Roman church when he wrote:

The prelates ought not to suffer every one at his pleasure should read the Scriptures translated even into Latin; because as is plain from experience this has been in many ways the occasion of falling into heresies and errors. It is not, therefore, politic that any one wheresoever and whensoever he will, should give himself to the frequent study of the Scriptures. (*Gulston.*)

By "heresies and errors" the friar meant, no doubt, teachings contrary to the official Roman dogma. The friar's statement is an unwitting confession that the Bible in the vernacular in the hands of the common people was the means of turning them from Roman Catholic errors and toward a true New Testament faith. No wonder Rome feared the Bible!

It is hard for us to imagine the Roman Church ever putting this restriction on the people in view of the more liberal spirit in the Church today. Rome will permit its people to have the Bible now, but still there is a restriction on its use. The Church reserves the right to be the only interpreter of the Bible. The Roman Catholic is permitted to interpret the Scriptures, but not contrary to the official teaching of the Church. Still, even allowing its members to possess the Bible is allowing far more than the Church has in other days.

During the medieval period the Waldenses, Albigenses, and other Baptist Christians helped circulate the Scriptures by making copies of them by hand, carrying them with them as they traveled, and giving them to people hungry for the Word.

The English speaking people have been blessed with the English Bible for more than 400 years. The history of its translation into English is one of the most fascinating stories in the saga of western man.

The remarkable John Wycliffe first undertook to give the Bible to the common Englishman. The most eminent Oxford scholar of his day, Wycliffe (who probably did none of the work of translation himself) inspired his colleagues to translate the whole Bible into English from the Latin version.

Another great Englishman, William Tyndale, carried forward Wycliffe's initiative. Tyndale's translation of the New Testament from the Greek language has the distinction

of being the first English New Testament to be produced on the printing press.

Following in the wake of these first versions came the Great Bible, the Geneva Bible, the Elizabethan Bible, and the enduring King James (Authorized) Version. It all sounds so easy; but the fact is the English Bible is the fruit of bitter suffering and even death for Wycliffe, Tyndale and others.

The King James Version has been revised within the last century, the English Revised Version appearing in 1889 and the American Revised Version in 1901. Both improved in several ways on the King James Version but were never able to replace it in the affections of the people. Since the turn of the century, Bible translators have given us a host of modern English translations, and we can expect many more. Baptist scholars have frequently served on the translation panels.

The Authority of the Scriptures

Two great doctrines stand together in the Scriptures and in Baptist theology: the inspiration and authority of the Word of God. One is not complete without the other. The Bible possesses its authority because it is the inspired revelation of God's truth and will. We may declare its inspiration but if we do not submit to its authority we have belied our confession of its inspiration. The doctrine of the inspiration of the Scriptures is practical only if we accept the Bible as the standard for our teachings and practices.

This is precisely how Baptists have historically looked upon the Scriptures—as the “all-sufficient rule of faith and practice.” We are assured in II Timothy 3:16, 17 that the Bible furnishes us completely unto every good work. We do not look beyond the Bible for either our doctrines or our practice. We appeal to the Bible alone for our teachings and principles.

At this point we differ from some religious bodies which add to the Bible their tradition or writings they consider sacred. For instance, the Roman Catholic Church believes in two channels of revelation: the Bible and the tradition of the Church. The tradition is comprised of the writings of the church fathers, the dogmas proclaimed by the pope in the

name of the Church, and the decrees of the various Roman Catholic ecumenical councils. To the Roman Church the tradition has equal authority with the Bible.

Similarly, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormon) places the Book of Mormon in equal authority to the Bible; and the Christian Science religion makes Mary Baker Eddy's *Key to the Scriptures* equal to the Bible. We can never allow any other book to stand alongside the Word as the standard of doctrine and practice.

Neither can we allow anyone to be an "official" interpreter of the Bible for us. The indwelling Holy Spirit in every believer assures that we will have light upon God's Word. This does not guarantee we will interpret infallibly; but it does guarantee our privilege to interpret for ourselves. Only by preserving this right of interpretation are we assured that the Bible will continue to be the sole authority of our faith and life. To place an official interpreter between us and the Bible is to make the interpreter the authority for our doctrine and practice. This, we have never been willing to allow. We must remain free to interpret the Scriptures for ourselves so that the Holy Spirit may speak the truth of God's Word to our hearts.

Now Test Yourself

1. What does the Greek word translated "inspired" mean?
2. What does this term primarily have reference to?
3. How does inspiration differ from human genius? From divine revelation? From illumination?
4. Can inspiration be claimed for copies of the original manuscripts?
5. What effect do the copyists' errors have upon the truthfulness and accuracy of the Bible?
6. How do the majority of Baptists believe about the infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible?
7. Upon what kind of material were the first copies of the Bible made?

8. What form of “book” replaced the scroll? And what kind of material replaced papyrus?
9. What was a scriptorium?
10. What effort did the Roman Catholic Church make during the Dark Ages regarding the Bible?
11. Why did the Roman Church make this effort?
12. What restriction does the Roman Church place on the Catholic Bible reader today?
13. Two great Englishmen led the way in giving the English Bible to us; who were they?
14. What great doctrine is the corollary of the inspiration of the Scriptures?
15. Why can Baptists allow no one to become an “official” interpreter of the Bible for them?

The Baptist Name

Bible Reading: Matthew 16:16-18.

The Lord Jesus Christ chose not to name His church. If He had done so, every false religious body could have taken the name, making it even more difficult to distinguish the true churches from the false.

“The Baptist Church,” consequently, is not the New Testament name for Christ’s church. But Baptist churches are New Testament churches. They are not identified as true churches by the name Baptist which they wear but by the doctrines they teach and the principles they follow. These are New Testament doctrines and principles and mark Baptist churches as New Testament churches. The name Baptist has become a name in which to have godly pride: it identifies a New Testament people.

Fundamentals of the Baptist Faith

According to the *Yearbook of American Churches: 1970* Baptists total more than 20 million in 26 different fellowships. (The yearbook probably does not list all Baptist fellowships.) Baptists may be classified doctrinally: fundamental, conservative, orthodox Baptists over against liberalistic Baptists. They may be classified ethnically: Negro, Swedish, German, or Dutch Baptists. Often they are classified denominationally: American Baptist Association, Southern Baptist Convention, American Baptist Convention, General Association of Regular Baptists, Bible Baptist Fellowship, or New Testament Association of Independent Baptist.

Churches. These are only a few of the several ways Baptists may be distinguished.

Included in the general Baptist denomination are some groups of churches holding certain doctrines which deny them the right to be recognized as regular Baptist churches. For example, the Freewill Baptists. Although they teach most of the doctrines generally taught by regular¹ Baptists, they teach that a saved person can fail to persevere in salvation, fall from grace, and finally be lost in hell. So, Freewill churches have a doctrine of salvation which mixes faith and works in order to be saved. Regular Baptist churches generally do not recognize Freewill churches as orthodox Baptist churches.

Baptists are divided into separate groups because each fellowship holds certain principles or follows policies different from the others. For instance, the churches of the American Baptist Association contend for church authority in their mission program in contrast to some Baptist groups' board-system which delegates the authority to mission agencies independent of the churches.

Some Baptist leaders have dreamed of uniting all Baptists in a world-wide fellowship. The Baptist World Alliance is an international organization dedicated to the union of all Baptists, but it has never achieved that goal. Conservative critics of the Alliance charge it with being too inclusive, making room for liberalistic Baptists who should not be recognized any longer as regular Baptists. The Baptist Bible Union, which was organized during the fundamentalist-modernist controversy in the 20's, endeavored to unite all conservative Baptists. And the Fundamental Baptist Congress, recently organized, is seeking to bring fundamental Baptists of various associations into closer fellowship.

¹We use the term "regular" Baptists to distinguish them from those churches, such as the Freewills, which have deviated from the historic Baptist faith at some vital point, and from the liberalistic Baptists who have abandoned the New Testament faith, denying such fundamental doctrines as the inspiration of the Scriptures, the deity of Christ, etc.

The dream of uniting all Baptists will probably never be realized because Baptists are the most individualistic Christians in the world. Each Baptist group believes its distinguishing principles are Biblical; their convictions will not allow them to compromise even though holding their convictions will mean continued separation from others in the Baptist family.

All regular Baptist, nonetheless, do share certain basic teachings and principles.² These have been the hallmark of the Baptist faith over the years. What are these teachings and principles? They are (1) the Bible is the only authority for faith and practice; (2) salvation is by grace through repentance and faith in Christ alone; (3) baptism is the voluntary immersion of a believer in Christ to symbolize what Christ has done for him through His death and resurrection; (4) the Lord's Supper is symbolic only, commemorating the substitutionary death of Christ; (5) a church should be composed only of believers who have been scripturally baptized; (6) each church is self-governing and democratic under the rule of its Head, Jesus Christ; (7) the church and state should remain separate, each carrying out its God-given function.

Our Baptist Ancestors.

A student of church history soon finds himself introduced to assemblies of believers from apostolic times who look strikingly like modern Baptists in their teachings and principles. What we know of these believers has come largely from the writings of their enemies, and much of that information is biased and prejudicial to those believing sects. They were often charged with a great many wrongs of which they were not guilty. But as one sifts through the materials concerning these groups, he is able to identify their distinguishing characteristics.

² A statement of faith is included in the appendix at the end of this study setting forth more fully the doctrines generally held by regular Baptists.

The names these Christians wore were usually drawn from their principal leaders, or from the regions or towns in which they lived, or from teachings or practices peculiar to them. They wore the names Montanists, Donatists, Cathari (the pure), Petro-Brussions (from their leader, Peter de Bruys), Bogomils, Priscillians, Albigenses (from the town of Albi), Waldenses (valley-dwellers), Mennonites (from their leader, Menno Simons), and Anabaptists (re-baptizers). And this does not exhaust the names given them. Most of the time they humbly chose to call themselves "brethren."

We do not know as much about these Christian assemblies as we would like to know. Especially during the first six centuries of Christian history are they obscure because historical records are scant. But as we study later history, the records are more abundant and more detailed, and we have a better understanding of these assemblies. We discover that regardless of what name they were called, and though their culture was different from our own and their customs often odd, they held principles and doctrines which were identical to those basic to regular Baptist belief and church order today.

Like modern Baptists, they contended for the sole Lordship of Jesus Christ, the Bible as the supreme authority and rule of faith and practice, immersion of believers only, a regenerate church membership, the privilege and competency of every soul to worship God as he chooses, salvation by grace through faith, a democratic church with all members equal, the life of discipleship after salvation, and the separation of church and state with Christians having responsibility to both.

We should not think there were no heresies or irregularities among them, for indeed there were. For instance, some of the Anabaptists taught, as modern Jehovah's Witnesses do, that the soul sleeps in the grave until the resurrection. And some of the later Waldenses practiced sprinkling for baptism, the baptism of infants, and taught salvation by works.

It is remarkable that these assemblies were as pure in doctrine as they were in view of the fact that they did not always possess copies of the whole Bible, and when

persecution broke out against them, it was usually their pastors and theologians who were first put to death. These sects did not always maintain pure doctrine. But, then, neither do modern Baptists.

The Baptist Name: Who May Wear It?

This brings us to an interesting, and not unimportant, question: Who has the right to take the name Baptist? In one sense we can answer: Anyone has the legal right to use it. There is no law which would keep anyone from wearing it—except the moral law of common honesty.

Just as a label can be placed on any bottle, regardless of its contents, so the name Baptist can be worn by anyone regardless of beliefs and practices. But a mislabeled bottle is misleading; every bottle ought to carry that label which correctly identifies its true contents. In all honesty the name Baptist should be reserved for those who adhere to the doctrines and principles which have historically identified regular Baptist churches.

We make this point because in our times Baptist churches have drifted into modernism and have denied the fundamental doctrines which have always characterized Baptists—and yet they have retained the Baptist name. When a church has ceased to be Baptist in doctrines and practices, it should give up the Baptist name. Fundamental honesty demands it.

Now Test Yourself

1. Why did Jesus not name His church?
2. Since He did not name His church, how can Baptist churches claim to be churches of Christ?
3. Approximately how many Baptists and Baptist fellowships are there in the United States?
4. Why are some churches which are called Baptist not recognized as regular Baptist churches?
5. What divides Baptists into different groups?
6. How many of the distinctive doctrines and principles of regular Baptists can you name?

7. List as many as you can of the names by which the Baptist groups in Europe were called.

8. How did they acquire their peculiar names?

9. Since they were not called Baptists, how do we know modern Baptists are related to them historically?

10. What doctrines did they hold in common with modern Baptists?

11. Why should we not be surprised to find irregularities and even heresies among those Baptist assemblies?

12. What restriction should be put on wearing the Baptist name?