

WHO IS THIS GOD?—BIBLICAL INSPIRATION REVISITED

Jeremy Begbie

Summary

Much of the contemporary discussion about biblical inspiration can be significantly advanced if the most important question of theology—who is God?—and its most profound answer—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—are kept firmly in the foreground. More specifically, although frequent mention of the Holy Spirit is made in the modern debate, insufficient attention has been paid to the trinitarian setting of the Spirit's work. This is illustrated by reference to the work of B.B. Warfield and James Barr. The article suggests some of the ways in which a greater trinitarian awareness might open up more fruitful avenues for future consideration.

I. Introduction

Can anything new be said about biblical inspiration? So well-worn is the topic, and so sensitive the associated issues, one's natural inclination is to give the topic a very wide berth. Nevertheless, a striking feature of the modern debate about inspiration calls for at least some comment and is, I believe, worth following up, namely the widespread reluctance to relate the inspiration of Scripture to fundamental theological convictions about the nature and character of God and his ways with the world.

As is well known, a number of theories have been constructed by extrapolating (often inappropriate) meanings from the English word 'inspiration'.¹ For example, inspiration has been taken to mean a general illumination that all spiritually sensitive people share and is thus either narrowed down to only some ('inspiring') books or passages of the Bible or widened to include other religious

¹For a very useful discussion of the word which skilfully draws out its many connotations and nuances in relation to biblical and theological usage, see Patrick Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty* (Oxford, Clarendon Press 1992) ch. 5.

classics. Some scholars model biblical inspiration on one person inspiring another.² A number of literary critics see the Bible chiefly as an artistic creation whose inspiration—its poetic, rhetorical and narrative force—may be enjoyed by any modern reader quite apart from the beliefs of the community which produced it or ‘authorial intention’.³

In such instances, it is often said that the key text 2 Timothy 3:16 is being ignored, where the word *theopneustos* is probably best rendered ‘God-breathed’ rather than ‘inspired’ and appears to denote primarily the origination of Scripture in God, conveying little if anything about the manner in which it was written and compiled, nor about its effect today. But I would contend that a deeper problem—and it is one shared by many of the classic accounts of biblical inspiration—is that remarkably little attention is being paid to the question: who (or what) is the inspiring Spirit? Even if we take ‘inspiration’ to cover not only the origin but the process of scriptural formation (and the efficacy of Scripture today), serious consideration of the person and work of the Holy Spirit cannot be bypassed. For it was presumably the indwelling eschatological Spirit within and amongst the early Christian community who generated written Scripture, and something similar could be said—though less obviously—of the Old Testament. The connotations of the word *theopneustos*—God-breathed, expired by God—when set against the background of the common breath/Spirit link in the biblical writings, lend extra weight to the point. And if we reflect on our saving encounter with God through Scripture in the present, it is quite proper that we should turn to consider the Spirit as the one who makes such an encounter possible and actual. With John Muddiman, then, we might well urge that the ‘proper theological method. . . is to move from the work and doctrine of the Spirit to an understanding of the inspiration of Scripture’.⁴

²E.g. William Abraham, *The Divine Inspiration of Holy Scripture* (Oxford, OUP 1981).

³Cf. e.g. *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, R. Alter and F. Kermode (eds.), (London, Collins 1987).

⁴John Muddiman, ‘The Holy Spirit and Inspiration’, in *The Religion of the Incarnation*, Robert Morgan (ed.), (Bristol, Classical Press 1989) 131.

The point can be extended. What is lacking in many treatments of inspiration, I shall contend below, is a *trinitarian* doctrine of the Spirit. Even where the Spirit is mentioned, all too often nothing is said about the relation between the Spirit and Christ or the Spirit and the Father, relations which are frequently evident (and sometimes prominent) in the New Testament. This may be part of a wider inclination in Western theology to wrench the Spirit apart from the Son and Father. It may also be in part due to a disturbing ignorance of classic trinitarian pneumatologies propounded by the master theologians of the past. In some cases it can result from an unwillingness to tackle at any depth questions about the being of God. At any rate, the upshot, I suggest, is an impoverished view of the Scriptures and the way in which God employs them in his church.

In what follows, two modern but very different views of biblical inspiration will be examined. I shall argue that despite their strengths both would have benefited from sustained attention to the trinitarian setting of the Spirit's work. In conclusion, I shall make some tentative suggestions as to the advantages of employing a fuller trinitarian pneumatology and indicate some of the avenues which such an approach opens up for future discussion.

II. B.B. Warfield

Undoubtedly the most famous modern exponent of our theme was that colossus of the 'Princeton school', B.B. Warfield (1851-1921). Offered primarily to meet the assaults of nineteenth-century scholarship on the authority and reliability of the Bible, Warfield's theory of biblical inspiration has proved enormously influential and is by no means obsolete. In an early article, Warfield offered a definition he was never to modify substantially:

Inspiration is that extraordinary, supernatural influence (or, passively, the result of it,) exerted by the Holy Ghost on the writers of our Sacred Books, by which their words were rendered also the words of God, and, therefore, perfectly infallible.⁵

⁵B.B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, S. Craig (ed.), (Philadelphia, Presbyterian and Reformed 1948) 420.

This is quite distinct from artistic inspiration. It also differs from God's 'providential preparation' of the biblical writers prior to their writing the texts and indeed also from the Spirit's 'ordinary' activity in conversion and sanctification. In biblical inspiration there is a *direct* and *immediate* act of God on a person 'which takes effect at the very point of the writing of Scripture. . .with the effect of giving to the resultant Scripture a specifically supernatural character'.⁶ And this applies to every word. Inspiration is verbal and 'plenary': 'the Bible is inspired not *in part* but *fully*, in all its elements alike'.⁷

Accordingly, the Bible is not simply a record of, or witness to, revelation; it *is* revelation. It is the very Word of God 'in which God speaks directly to each of our souls'.⁸ In support of this view Warfield alludes to 2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 1:21 ('men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God'), John 10:35 ('the Scripture cannot be broken') and Jesus' high view of the Old Testament. In addition he points to the attitude of New Testament writers to the Old Testament, to other New Testament texts and to their own writings.⁹

The mode of inspiration is 'inscrutable' yet Warfield emphatically eschews 'mechanical' dictation. The authors were not mindless automata; distinctive personal characteristics and literary style were not overridden. In this regard, Warfield commonly uses the terms 'superintendence' and 'concursum', intended to make clear that the Bible is both divine utterance *and* the result of human effort.¹⁰

However, a significant ambivalence appears here. In many places, Warfield seems wary of granting any human participation in the process of inspiration¹¹—probably because of his concern to do justice to the divine effects of the Bible upon and within the Church, and his passionate belief that only *God's* Word can effect redemption. Hence his frequent description of biblical inspiration in terms of a

⁶*Ibid.*, 160.

⁷*Ibid.*, 113.

⁸*Ibid.*, 125.

⁹*Ibid.*, 131-66.

¹⁰*Cf. Selected Shorter Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, II, John E. Meeter (ed.), (Nutley, New Jersey, Presbyterian and Reformed 1973) 542-48.

¹¹B.B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, 137, 150ff., 421f.

pure divine intervention and the sharp division between this and other acts of the Spirit. However, in other places, probably in order to account for the obvious stylistic differences within Scripture, he stresses the authors' distinctiveness and humanity: hence the vehement rejection of the notion of dictation and his plea that inspiration be set in the context of a long divine preparation of the biblical scribes.¹²

At any rate, Warfield is anything but ambivalent about the effect of inspiration: inspiration necessarily implies *infallibility* and *inerrancy*.¹³ How could we use the Bible authoritatively in the Church if it includes mistakes? To accept the full authority of Christ and his apostles leads us to affirm an infallible Bible at their hands. Scripture is in fact, and in principle, wholly without error. There may be 'apparent' discrepancies but they turn out not to be 'real'.¹⁴ Of course, Warfield could only maintain this by holding that inerrancy characterised only the 'original autographs'. Nonetheless God has preserved enough texts for us to reach a near approximation to the original through textual criticism.¹⁵

Warfield's account of inspiration—supported by painstaking exegesis—has met with intricate analysis, fierce criticism, and fervent defence. Without space to enter fully that cauldron of debate, I shall make only a few comments pertinent to our concerns. First, Warfield's greatest strength is his clear grasp of the necessity of a direct divine initiative for our salvation. This would appear to be a prime motivating force behind his high view of biblical inspiration and must surely be upheld as central to any account of inspiration which takes *sola gratia* seriously. Second, even his supporters concede that an unfortunate rationalist streak pervades his work. The precise causes of this, and the extent to which it affects the main thrust

¹²This tension in Warfield can even be seen within a single article: he insists on the directness of the Spirit's work in inspiration in sharp contrast to all his other works and then immediately asserts that inspiration is analogous to other areas of the Spirit's activity. *Ibid.*, 160f. On this, see Kern Robert Trembath, *Evangelical Theories of Biblical Inspiration* (Oxford, OUP 1988) 22ff.

¹³These terms are carefully distinguished by some protagonists in modern inerrancy debates; for Warfield they appear to be synonymous.

¹⁴*Selected Shorter Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, 585.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 581.

of his argument are fields of virulent controversy. But there are more than hints in Warfield that Christianity makes its primary appeal to our faculty of reason.¹⁶ Against any who would put faith before reason or make faith irrational, Warfield believed the non-Christian could be met on the ‘neutral ground’ of ‘right reason’. ‘All minds’, he urged, ‘are after all of the same essential structure’.¹⁷ Faith must be built on solid evidence, accessible to all.¹⁸ Rational assent, though it might not directly involve the Holy Spirit, is still faith, even though it may not be ‘saving faith’. The logical foundation of saving faith is thus what already has been proved to the mind.¹⁹

It appears, then—in striking contrast to John Calvin, we might note—that the certainty of the truth of Christianity and the assurance of salvation are logically separable and that epistemological priority belongs to the former. For Calvin, one cannot know the Christian faith is true outside a saving relationship with the Father through Christ enabled by the Spirit. The persuasion of divine truth known through Scripture cannot be proved ‘from the outside’ but only experienced within the circle of faith: ‘For truth is cleared of all doubt

¹⁶See e.g., *ibid.*, 99f. Various factors seemed to have pushed Warfield in this direction: the growth of the natural sciences in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, concepts of the relation between theology and philosophy derived from medieval philosophy, the ‘inductive’ method championed by Francis Bacon, and, perhaps most important, what is usually called the ‘Scottish common sense philosophy’ of the eighteenth century. All these fed into the development of the Princeton theology prior to Warfield and together form a large part of the horizon against which his basic method can be understood. Cf. Jack B. Rogers and Donald McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco, Harper & Row 1979) chs. 5 & 6. (Rogers and McKim have come under heavy fire from some quarters. Cf. John Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan 1982).)

¹⁷*Selected Shorter Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, 100ff., 117-20.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 112ff.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 115. Cf. B.B. Warfield, *Studies in Theology* (New York, OUP 1932) 15. The marked difference between Calvin and Warfield here is something even those very sympathetic to Warfield can concede. Cf. e.g. J.I. Packer in *God’s Inerrant Word*, Montgomery, John Warwick (ed.), (Minneapolis, Bethany Fellowship 1974) 97, n. 17.

when, *not sustained by external props*, it serves as its own support'.²⁰ For Warfield, we must first be convinced of the verity of Christianity before saving faith is possible (even though Warfield admits that not every person needs the 'whole body of evidences' to convince them).

Two comments are in order. First, the assumption that there exists a universal human rationality, valid despite sin, by reference to which the axioms of the Christian faith can be established, is highly dubious. In the wake of insights from the sociology of knowledge, and on strictly theological grounds, such a contention is increasingly opposed today.²¹ Second—and more important for our purposes—Warfield's rationalism has the effect of eclipsing the witness of the Spirit to *Christ* who lays a claim on us as *whole persons*—mind, spirit and body. Of course, Warfield believed in the Christ-centred ministry of the Spirit yet when speaking of biblical inspiration this curiously slips into the background. Geoffrey Bromiley's comments on views similar to Warfield (but held prior to him) are very apt:

The attack on the historical reliability of the Bible was damaging just because orthodoxy no longer had full confidence in the witness of the Spirit but must find for it rationalistic support by a reversal of the relationship between inspiration and inerrancy, suspending the former on the latter.²²

²⁰J. Calvin, *Institutes*, I:8:1. My italics. It needs to be admitted, however, that for Calvin, what were later called 'evidences' of the divine origin of Scripture—its fulfilled prophecy, its antiquity, its truthfulness, etc.—do have a part to play in vindicating Scripture against its disparagers. Even so, they are only secondary aids. *Op.cit.*, I:8:1-13.

²¹The literature abounds. Cf. e.g. Alister McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundations of Doctrinal Criticism* (Oxford, Blackwell 1990); A. McIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, Notre Dame University Press 1988); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 1984); Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London, SPCK 1989), ch. 5. Cf. also Richard R. Topping, 'The Anti-Foundationalist Challenge to Evangelical Apologetics', *EQ* 63 (1991) 45-60.

²²Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 'The Church Doctrine of Inspiration', in *Revelation and the Bible*, Carl Henry (ed.), (London, Tyndale Press 1959) 216.

In order to preserve the character of Scripture as inerrant Word of God, Warfield over-stresses the distinctiveness of the Spirit's work in the biblical authors and thus fails to relate this adequately to the wider salvific work of the triune God. The issue is well illustrated in Warfield's handling of the doctrine of the Spirit's 'internal testimony'. For Calvin, this referred to a conviction, generated by the Spirit, of Scripture's divine origin. But such a conviction comes only within the context of saving faith established by the triune God. By contrast, Warfield extracts the 'internal testimony of the Spirit' from the circle of personal faith; for him it consists in the Spirit confirming to our minds the *indicia* of Scripture's divinity—the substantial evidence for the divine origin of the Bible.²³ Despite traces of a somewhat different line²⁴ Warfield's central direction, with its highly noetic stress, is unmistakable.²⁵

²³Calvin and Augustine, S. Craig (ed.), (Philadelphia, Presbyterian and Reformed 1956) 84-90. Warfield seriously misunderstands Calvin on this point; *Calvin and Calvinism* (Philadelphia, Presbyterian and Reformed 1956) 74-80. Cf. B.A. Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark 1982) 300, n. 82; Edward A. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1965) 116.

²⁴Cf. Rogers and McKim, *op. cit.*, 334.

²⁵We cannot consider in detail the complex question of to what extent Warfield was a theological innovator in this respect. In a famous—if occasionally inaccurate—book, Ernest Sandeen argued that the Princeton theology was marked by radical theological innovations. (Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids, Baker 1978) ch. 5.) Rogers and McKim advance a similar argument; *op. cit.* Others affirm, just as emphatically, that Warfield and his followers represent no radically new departure from Protestantism or indeed from the central teaching of the Church throughout its history. (E.g. John D. Woodbridge and Randall H. Balmer, 'The Princetonians and Biblical Authority: An Assessment of the Ernest Sandeen Proposal', in D.A. Carson and J.D. Woodbridge, *Scripture and Truth* (Leicester, IVP 1983) 251-79.) It is undoubtedly true that many Protestant and Catholic theologians prior to Warfield and prior to the foundation of the Princeton Seminary had expressed similar views. It is also fair to say that Sandeen and those sympathetic to him are apt to overstate their case. Yet it is far from obvious that Warfield's theory was a mere restatement of the 'Reformation position' (if there ever was one position). It is undoubtedly true that Rogers and McKim exaggerate in many places and quote Warfield selectively out of polemical interest. Yet the *theological* thrust of their arguments should not be missed. (If some of the energy that has gone into defending the Princetonians could have been spent tackling the strictly theological issues at stake, we all might be happier.) Two points in particular can be made here. First, it was the Princeton school which gave the notion of plenary verbal inerrancy its earliest developed, systematic formulation. Second, while Warfield certainly stands in line with the principal reformers on many matters, there are undeniable and very significant differences of approach between him and say, Calvin, with regard to theological assumptions and strategy. As G.W. Bromiley

Therefore, in Warfield, the Spirit's role in establishing us in relationship with the Son and his Father seems to fall somewhat out of focus. Closely related to this, we might add, the inspiring Spirit often seems to be little more than a divine 'power' or causative agency, leaving the reality of his *personal* nature in question. Of course, much hinges on what is meant by 'personal' in this context. All we might note here is that with Warfield leaning in this direction it is not surprising to find somewhat impersonal concepts (e.g. 'instrumentality') in later Warfieldian theories which understandably invite the charge that some form of 'mechanical dictation' is being proposed.

A more general comment is worth adding. If the trinitarian character of inspiration is given insufficient weight in the way I have argued, might this be linked to a deeper weakness in the concept of God in the Calvinism Warfield so fervently espoused? There are good reasons to believe that, although affirmed as part of orthodoxy, in the development of Calvinism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the doctrine of the Trinity did little to shape in any fundamental way the way in which God's nature was construed, tending to be grafted on to a concept of divine being already determined by particular notions of power, sovereignty and justice.²⁶ The two features of Warfield's theory we have just noted—the proneness to divorce the Spirit from

and others have shown, these divergences can be traced in part to shifts of emphasis in Lutheran and Calvinist writings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Cf. Bromiley, *op. cit.*, 213f.; J.K.S. Reid, *The Authority of Scripture* (London, Methuen 1957) ch. 3.

²⁶The literature on this is legion, but on the general issues involved, cf. e.g. E. Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 1983) 3-42, 299-396; James B. Torrance, 'The Incarnation and Limited Atonement', *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 2 (1984) 32-40.

Son and Father, and to see the Spirit as a causative power rather than a personal agent—would certainly cohere well with this broad tendency.

III. James Barr

In many respects James Barr stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from Warfield. This prolific scholar is perhaps best known for his merciless exposure of what he sees as intellectually flimsy attitudes to the Bible. In *Fundamentalism*, he unleashes an aggressive assault on much (but not all) evangelicalism, including some theories of biblical inspiration. ‘In the end’, he writes, ‘verbal inspiration is not very important; and not too much sleep should be lost over it’.²⁷ Nevertheless, four years earlier he took a somewhat different line:

[Inspiration] stands for something that seems to be necessary in a Christian account of the status of the Bible. It expresses the belief, which most Christians surely hold, that in some way the Bible comes from God, that he has in some sense a part in its origin, that there is a linkage between the basic mode through which he has communicated with man and the coming into existence of this body of literature.²⁸

Moreover, though it may not have cost him much insomnia, Barr has in fact written a substantial amount on the theme in the last thirty years or so—both negative and positive in tone.

We begin by looking at what he rejects. The enemy is certainly not verbal inspiration. To claim that it was not the words which were inspired but the ideas, or the people who wrote the Bible, or the general contents of the Bible leads us nowhere. For ‘What we know about the authors, the ideas, the inner theology and so on is known ultimately from the verbal form (I would prefer to say, linguistic form) of the Bible’.²⁹ The Bible is indeed verbally inspired. Barr’s prime target of attack is not verbal inspiration but *infallibility*—

²⁷J. Barr, *Fundamentalism* (London, SCM 1977) 299.

²⁸J. Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (London, SCM 1973) 17.

²⁹*Fundamentalism*, 287; cf. *The Bible in the Modern World*, 130ff., 178f.

he wants ‘inspiration without inerrancy’.³⁰ It makes no sense to suppose that God in some way provided exactly the right words to convey infallible facts. The words of Scripture are ‘fully human and *in every way explicable as words of men* spoken in the situation of their own time and under the limitations of that situation’.³¹ (Recent attempts to distinguish between ‘infallibility’ and ‘inerrancy’ Barr brushes aside.) Inspiration does not guarantee verbal, historical, geographical, chronological, or any other type of accuracy and to insist that it does imposes upon Scripture a false character.³² ‘The Holy Spirit inspired, or at least permitted, the writing of inaccurate reports’.³³ Despite its flaws, however, the ‘Bible remains a substantially reliable document of the world of ancient Israel and of the early decades of the church’.³⁴

Barr dismisses as ‘grotesque’ the view that the Scriptures are inspired and inerrant because this was how Jesus regarded them. Equally invalid is the citing of texts which purportedly claim inerrancy for the Bible (e.g. 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:20). We cannot show that these texts refer unambiguously to our New Testament canon or the biblical corpus as a whole. There is no ‘Bible’ which makes claims about itself, only sources which make claims about other writings.³⁵ As for the appeal to ‘original autographs’, this too must be disallowed. Not only does it render the fundamentalist’s position undemonstrable and unfalsifiable, it also falsely locates inspiration solely in the moment of writing some supposedly perfect text, ignoring the long process of scriptural formation in which traditions were gathered, passed on, edited, and eventually compiled as a complete canon.³⁶

In a perceptive study, Paul Wells suggests that Barr’s work can be helpfully viewed as an ongoing critique of the ‘Christological analogy’: between Christ as divine and human on the one hand and the Bible as divine and human on the other.³⁷ Whether or not this is

³⁰*Fundamentalism*, 288.

³¹*Ibid.*, 288. My italics.

³²J. Barr, *Escaping from Fundamentalism* (London, SCM 1984) 124.

³³J. Barr, ‘Fundamentalism and Evangelical Scholarship’, *Anvil* 8 (1991) 151.

³⁴*Escaping from Fundamentalism*, 129.

³⁵*Fundamentalism*, 72-85.

³⁶*Fundamentalism*, 268, 279-84, 294f., 298.

³⁷P. Wells, *James Barr and the Bible: Critique of a New Liberalism* (Phillipsburg, Presbyterian and Reformed 1980).

true of Barr's entire corpus, it makes a good sense of his treatment of inspiration. In an early review of J.K.S. Reid's *The Authority of Scripture*, Barr argues that the Christological analogy threatens the humanness of the Bible.³⁸ Since it links the writing of the Bible with God coming in Christ, the stress is placed very firmly on the movement *from* God *to* humankind. Even if a human response is acknowledged, it is a response of further transmission from God to humanity; the basic, underlying dynamic remains the same. This fails to give due weight to the genuinely human response of Israel and the Church embodied in the Bible: 'The response, however weak, is genuine word of Man to God'.³⁹

This concern for authentic human response turns out to be the key to Barr's own positive account of biblical inspiration. The true analogy 'for the Scripture as Word of God is *not* the unity of God and Man in the Incarnation; it is the relation of the Spirit of God to the People of God'.⁴⁰ Traditionally, the notion of inspiration has been used to highlight the 'divinity' of the Bible; Barr suggests that it is 'paradoxically the humanity of the Bible which leads us to restate a view of inspiration'. He writes:

Behind the Scripture is the action of God in history, creating and redeeming his people. Scripture is not 'Word of God and Word of Man' but is the response of that people, in witness, in worship and in the moulding of communal life and individual piety, a response which bears the authentic marks of divine action. Within this total response, traditions were gathered and eventually canonised into 'Scripture'. The guidance of the people of God in this particular aspect is inspiration.⁴¹

So Scripture is the product of a process—the historical unfolding of tradition in Israel and the Church—which involves the communion of the Spirit of God with his people. The Bible emerges from a covenanted community which bears the 'stigmata of divine

³⁸Review of J.K.S. Reid's *op. cit.*, in *SJT* 11 (1958) 86-93.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 88. We must assert that 'the *human* character is the bearer of revelation, the *human* word is the word that has authority'. *Ibid.*, 90.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 89.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 91.

action. . .[it] moves both from God to Man and Man to God'.⁴²

In later works these comments are drawn out further. Instead of restricting inspiration to a single moment we must apply it to the whole history of the production of Scripture, including the various stages of oral tradition, editing and redaction, and transmission.⁴³ There can be no one set of inspired words ('original autographs'). The inspiration of the Spirit applies, at least to some degree, to early drafts, variant texts, trial books for the canon, translations of the original, and even post-biblical tradition.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the main locus of inspiration was in the formation of tradition in Israel and the early Church. The 'lively centre' of the process 'is the fact that God was with his people in ancient Israel; and the early church'.⁴⁵ Secondly it can apply to the turning of this tradition into Scripture, and even more remotely to the writing down of complete books.

Therefore, inspiration 'is a way of affirming that God was present in his community in the Spirit as it formed and shaped the traditions that became scripture'.⁴⁶ But can we say anything about *how* inspiration worked? In *Escaping from Fundamentalism*, a number of suggestions are offered.⁴⁷ (a) The Christological analogy (he now says) has its place. Consequently, 'Inspiration might then be thought of as the link, the bond, that holds the being of scripture as

⁴²*Ibid.*, 89.

⁴³*Fundamentalism*, 294; J. Barr, *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* (Oxford, Clarendon 1983) 27. The widening of the concept of inspiration beyond the initial writing of the text to cover subsequent selection and reworking of material, and indeed reception by reader and hearer, is a common one in recent writings on the subject. Cf. e.g., Paul Achtemeier, *The Inspiration of Scripture: Problems and Proposals* (Philadelphia, Westminster 1980), chs. 4 and 5; Sherry, *op. cit.*, 119f. Provided this goes hand in hand with a proper accent on the particularity and diversity of the Spirit's activity, something we shall explore below, this trend away from a narrow view of inspiration is to be welcomed.

⁴⁴*Fundamentalism*, 293-99.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 288.

⁴⁶*Escaping from Fundamentalism*, 128.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 125-29.

word of God and its being as word of man together in one'.⁴⁸ Needless to say, Barr does not argue from Christ's sinlessness to the Bible's infallibility! (b) We might say that Scripture is not itself the word of God but that it *becomes* the word of God for us through the Holy Spirit. (c) The doctrine of justification by faith might help. A Christian is justified but still a sinner; likewise, 'The Bible is the product of men of exactly this kind . . . What is perceived and understood by such men remains to some degree clouded by sin and inadequacy of understanding'.⁴⁹ (d) Barr also cites William Abraham's analogy of the teacher and the student.⁵⁰ The natural abilities of the students are not erased by a good teacher; the students receive all the *essentials* of the subject, along with the atmosphere in which it has to be seen and the wider implications it carries for life. But there is no guarantee of perfect understanding amongst the students. Moreover, on this model inspiration can continue long after the original instruction has come to an end.

The merits of Barr's approach are substantial and should be taken to heart, especially by those who are over-keen to find an excuse for pouncing on this particular scholar. Among them are his refusal to abandon verbal inspiration, his proper attention to the ecclesiological dimension and the long process of tradition-compilation, and his linking of inspiration with central Christian doctrines. Not least, his oft-repeated plea that the Bible is not pressed into pre-conceived theological moulds is salutary: 'many of the troubles of modern Christianity are self-inflicted burdens which would be much lightened if the message of the Bible were more highly regarded'.⁵¹ Quite so.

But perhaps this is just where we need to throw the ball back in Barr's court. We have seen something of his stress on the freedom of the biblical scholar from theological straight-jackets. Wells portrays Barr as 'an exegetical pilgrim who has struggled through the slough of false authorities with the hope in view of the free exegesis of an open Bible'.⁵² In his inaugural lecture at

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 126.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 127.

⁵⁰Cf. Abraham, *op. cit.*, especially 58-75.

⁵¹*The Bible in the Modern World*, 112.

⁵²Wells, *op. cit.*, 5.

Oxford⁵³ Barr made a sharp distinction between biblical studies, a largely descriptive discipline concerned with presenting biblical evidence, and ‘theology’ which involves confessional commitment. Of course, Barr knows well that biblical scholars operate with presuppositions, doctrinal convictions, and that ‘objectivity’ and a sober handling of biblical data can go hand in hand with profound personal faith. He even pleads that biblical scholars have a ‘sufficient openness of mind to permit theological questions to be asked’ and that ‘if theology is excluded from academic study of the Bible it will mean one of two things: either that certain questions will not be asked at all, or that some other metaphysical assumption will rush in to fill the vacuum’.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, has Barr himself made sufficient allowance for major theological questions to be asked? Have not some of his *own* metaphysical assumptions been rushing in rather too rapidly? As far as his account of inspiration is concerned, some such charge would not seem out of place.

No one can have read Barr without being impressed by the enormous importance he attaches to the humanity of the Bible.⁵⁵ This is the ground of his suspicion of the Christological analogy. However, because ‘Christ and Scriptures are not related in terms of divine-human *revelation* but as part of the same ongoing process of the people of God in history’,⁵⁶ the question naturally arises: in what way does God ‘guide’ his people in the composition of Scripture? In what manner is he ‘present’ with them? Here Barr is disappointingly vague. As connoisseurs of Barr will know, he is highly cynical about talk of special ‘divine interventions’. It was not as if God made himself known in a unique act or series of acts and this generated a tradition. Rather, *the tradition is the process in which God is known*.⁵⁷ For ‘Scripture itself gives no suggestion that the writers, as ‘authors’ of biblical books, were anything different from what they

⁵³Cf. J. Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (London, SCM 1980) ch. 2.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 25.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 291f. *et passim*.

⁵⁶Wells, *op. cit.*, 40.

⁵⁷J. Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation. A Study of the Two Testaments* (London, SCM 1966) 163.

were as human persons in the rest of their lives and activity'.⁵⁸ Warfield would blush. For Barr, Scripture can be examined as a human document *quite apart from* an immediate consideration of its divine origin or the revelation it may witness to or contain.⁵⁹

This distrust of the notion of unique divine interactions within history surfaces also in the way Barr, when speaking of biblical inspiration, will speak frequently of the Spirit in inspiration but rarely of the historical figure of Jesus. There is little recognition of the fact that the Spirit in the New Testament is that of Jesus Christ whose dying and rising constituted a particular activity of God within history on which our salvation and hope for the future depends. Even the most theologically liberated exegete would need to give this Spirit-Christ connection a more central place. Notwithstanding the immense problems attending the theology of God's action in the world, if we lose our conviction that something decisive has been achieved in the person of Jesus Christ by God within the orbit of human history, something we were unable to achieve, to which the Spirit bears witness and the fruits of which the Spirit enables us to enjoy, it will soon prove singularly hard to distinguish the voice of God from the voice of the Church talking to herself.

Thus a yawning gulf seems to open up between the being and activity of God and the people of God (despite the 'Spirit' language), and hence between God and Scripture.⁶⁰ The compilation of Scripture is essentially a process of human struggle and discovery in which, in some sense, the presence of God is known. Yet it is far from clear to what extent we can really speak of *God* as the one who is encountered. So keen is Barr to preserve the integrity of human history, it is by no means clear why 'God language' needs to be invoked at all. We appear to be left with a mere human response to largely silent acts of divine revelation. All we can say of the Bible is that 'this was how these particular people understood the purposes of God'. But if we rule out of court the possibility of a distinct and

⁵⁸*Escaping from Fundamentalism*, 125.

⁵⁹The words of the Bible, we recall, are 'fully human and *in every way explicable as words of men* spoken in the situation of their own time and under the limitations of that situation'. *Fundamentalism*, 288. My italics.

⁶⁰Cf. Wells, *op. cit.*, 313.

unrepeatable *self*-revelation of God, we can never say with any substantial confidence that this or that *was* or *is* the purpose of God. It is hard to know how faith can be, in Barr's words, 'a personal relation to God through Jesus Christ'.⁶¹ For without access to God as he is in himself the relation between the faith expressed in the biblical tradition and the reality of God who is spoken of in that tradition but who—in some sense—transcends it, seems highly tenuous.⁶²

Coupled with this metaphysical conception of God's relation (or lack of it) to the world is a highly problematic understanding of human freedom. We have seen that the free humanity of the people of God must be left unimpaired. Hence although people may have 'contact' with the Spirit, Barr appears reticent to use language which suggests that the Spirit might transform people radically and unexpectedly from within. But the underlying assumption (and it is one evident in a good deal of post-Enlightenment Western theology) seems to be that any immediate or transfiguring activity of the divine in the human sphere, diminishes, or at least threatens to diminish, human freedom. It is far from obvious that the New Testament construes freedom in this way.

IV. Rethinking Inspiration—Some Tentative Suggestions

It is time to pull the strands together. In Warfield, we discovered an eagerness to preserve the specific, particular saving action of God, of which the inspiring of the biblical authors is one example. But this is coupled with an over-emphasis on the intellectual component of faith, on the words of the biblical text at the expense of the saving

⁶¹*The Scope and Authority of the Bible*, 126.

⁶²Similar questions need to be asked of those who would reject talk of divine dictation or supernatural communication in favour of the idea of God merely increasing a writer's level of spiritual insight or intellectual vision. For examples, see M.R. Austin, 'How Biblical is "The Inspiration of Scripture"?', *ExpT* 93 (1981-2) 75-9. Such appeals to some kind of 'secondary causes' doctrine is certainly one way of conveying how God might work through the ordinary course of events without major disturbance, but there is the danger of losing a sense of the novelty and particularity of God's acts and an associated tendency to widen the concept of inspiration to the point where it becomes indistinguishable from other acts of the Spirit. Cf. Sherry, *op. cit.*, 128ff.

relationship with Christ (and the Father) mediated through it, and a somewhat impersonal conception of the Spirit. In the case of Barr, with such a fervent desire to maintain the full humanity of God's people and a suspicion of direct divine interaction with the world, we were left wondering to what extent divine inspiration really is *divine*. Something more substantial is needed than what appears to be—at least in his theory of inspiration—a rather hazy and amorphous notion of God as 'Spirit'.

It is my conviction that both scholars would have benefited from pursuing more rigorously the question: who is the God who inspires? For all their dissimilarities, when it comes to biblical inspiration, both tend to collapse God into an undifferentiated Spirit who in some manner impinges upon our lives. Without wishing for one moment to diminish the deity of the Holy Spirit, more fruitful paths, I would suggest, are opened up if we explore more fully the relatedness of the Spirit to Son and Father.

Of course, the appearance of trinitarian conceptuality here will likely make the biblical scholar balk. To use an ecclesiastical doctrine (the Trinity), and a highly contentious doctrine at that, as a key to interpreting biblical inspiration is surely dogmatic imperialism at its worst. Have we learned nothing from Barr? Is not the drawback of so many inspiration theories that they get locked into some grand dogma which blinds us to the diversity and variety of Scripture? Would we not do better to keep our feet on the ground, scrutinising only those texts which speak directly of the origin of scripture, and, if we must, build our concept of inspiration only from this sure foundation of biblical exegesis?

This kind of objection has considerable force and compels us to face important methodological issues. We readily acknowledge the perils of squeezing exegesis into improper dogmatic moulds. A close inspection of specific texts which deal with scriptural formation—beyond the scope of this article—is of course part of the picture. At the same time, I would maintain, such exegesis cannot be undertaken in complete abstraction from the fundamental *theological* question: 'Who is the God who speaks through the witness of the Bible?' The doctrine of the Trinity seeks to provide an outline answer to just this

question. It speaks of the *theological* integrity which gives Scripture its unity despite its diversity. It articulates a ‘dynamic understanding of the self-related being of God which finds its counterpart in the history of God with his people which is the burden of both Old and New Testaments’.⁶³ Of course, a great deal needs to be said in defence of the claim that a doctrine of the Trinity can be the prism which focuses the biblical testimony. My point here is simply that the question: ‘How did God generate the process by which the church’s Scriptures emerge?’ can only be answered along with the question ‘who is the God who addresses us through those Scriptures?’ And I am suggesting that a classic and well-tried answer to the latter question (namely the doctrine of the Trinity) might significantly advance our attempt to answer the former.⁶⁴

How, then, can setting the Spirit’s work in a trinitarian perspective help us? Here I highlight five overlapping dimensions of the Spirit’s agency and suggest ways in which each might illuminate the nature of biblical inspiration.

First we should draw attention to the *atoning* and *relating* character of the Spirit’s ministry. Central here will be the recognition that the Spirit relates us to the risen and ascended Christ and to his Father in such a way that we are included in the fellowship of Father and Son. This participation is our salvation, for it entails being freed from the self-obsession and self-concern which so cripples us. Biblical inspiration is but one moment in the Father’s work of reconciling wayward human beings to himself by his Spirit through his Son. It speaks of that particular work of the Spirit by which the words of those who have been drawn into a redeeming relationship with Christ are established as his own through a long process of remembering, rehearsing and eventual compilation as Scripture, in order that we too might come to know and enjoy our destiny as

⁶³Alasdair Heron, ‘The Biblical Basis for the Doctrine of the Trinity’, in *The Forgotten Trinity: A Selection of Papers presented to the BCC Study Commission on Trinitarian Doctrine Today* (London, BCC/CCBI 1991) 40.

⁶⁴I am of course aware of the dangers of speaking about *the* doctrine of the Trinity when there are clearly many such doctrines. For this article I am broadly adopting that outlined in *The Forgotten Trinity* (London, BCC 1989) which itself follows (with some important qualifications) that propounded by the Cappadocian Fathers of the fourth century.

children of the Father and share in his mission to the world. The focus of this process is of course Christ himself—the Spirit, sent by Christ, directs the original witnesses and writers (and us) toward him (Jn 15:26; 16:14-15; 1 Jn 5:6-10)—yet the trinitarian dimension should not be overlooked (as with some radically Christ-centred theories of inspiration). In reading Scripture, it is not simply that Christ meets us; we are first of all freed internally by the Spirit to respond to Christ and through him know ourselves forgiven, accepted and claimed by the Father.

It follows that even if we do want to take ‘biblical inspiration’ as referring chiefly to the production of the Scriptures, this must be related to the Spirit’s ‘breathing through’ them today. Indeed, it is when biblical inspiration is viewed outside the whole sweep of the triune God’s reconciling work that distortion easily arises. T.F. Torrance has commented that both ‘fundamentalists’ and ‘liberals’ (if we may use those terms) often fail to get beyond the surface level of the biblical text because they forget that revelation has taken the form of a personal overture of love such that biblical words need to be read and heard with a view chiefly to the relationships which are made possible through them.⁶⁵ It is noteworthy that for Calvin the ‘inner testimony’ of the Spirit, although a conviction about Scripture’s divine source, could arise only within the circle of saving faith in Christ and his Father. Taking the point further, Bernard Ramm claims that ‘If the *testimonium* is not seen from the perspective of the Trinity, we do not see it as it must be seen’.⁶⁶ Similarly, we will want to question the excessive stress in some circles on the role of the Spirit in confirming intellectual truth. This is certainly part of

⁶⁵T.F. Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press 1982) 15-20 *et passim*.

⁶⁶Bernard Ramm, *The Witness of the Spirit: An Essay on the Contemporary Relevance of the Internal Witness of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 1959) 29. T.H.L. Parker, in the course of a detailed treatment of Calvin’s interpretation of Scripture, writes: ‘Calvin is nothing if not Trinitarian. That God reveals himself in the Bible means that the Father reveals himself in the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit’. *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries* (London, SCM 1971) 57.

what the Spirit achieves but the heart of his ministry is the creation of personal relationships of which intellectual assent is only one element.

Second, there is the *ecclesiological* dimension of the Spirit's acts which should remind us of the corporate character of biblical inspiration. Spirit and Church are of course linked very closely in the New Testament corpus, especially in the Pauline writings. The Spirit frees us, opens us out to one another, enabling our particular *charismata* to be exercised and yet empowering us to live in communion with one another. The trinitarian grounding of this is that God is eternally in relationship and as his people we are invited to share and show forth his being-in-relatedness. In any concept of biblical inspiration, we must affirm the temporal priority of a faith-community over the text, a point repeatedly made by a number of recent writers.⁶⁷ Douglas Farrow rightly warns us that if we overplay this truth, the Lordship of Christ *over* his Church will not be given its due⁶⁸ (as in Barr). But again, this is perhaps best offset not simply by re-asserting the Lordship of Christ but also by a dynamic pneumatology which speaks of the Spirit constantly renewing and transforming the Church into the likeness of Christ.

Third, we must also speak of a *liberating* work of the Spirit: 'where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom' (2 Cor. 3:17). Perhaps the most thorny issue in biblical inspiration concerns human freedom. We have seen how Warfield so emphasises the divine aspect of inspiration that at times his insistence that the authors' humanity was not cancelled appears like bare assertion. The problem reappears in later Warfieldian theories. In Barr we have the opposite problem: a massive stress on the free humanity of the church with the divine dimension left somewhat hovering and detached in the air.

Much depends here on refusing to be bound by the assumption that God's freedom and ours are mutually exclusive, and I suspect it is this (or something like it) which lurks behind both Barr and Warfield. One might say that the root issue is Christological: how can we preserve the free humanity of Christ while still holding that he

⁶⁷Cf. e.g. Achtemeier, *op. cit.*; John Barton, *The People of the Book? The Authority of the Bible in Christianity* (London, SPCK 1988).

⁶⁸D. Farrow, *The Word of Truth and Disputes about Words* (Winona Lake, Indiana, Carpenter 1987) 156-67.

is divine? All too often, a keenness to affirm the full deity of Christ has meant that his humanity is swallowed up. But a vibrant tradition in Reformed Christology (John Calvin, John Owen, Edward Irving, Colin Gunton, Tom Smail) with considerable New Testament support, has suggested that the humanity of Christ, though assumed by the Son, was empowered, redeemed and healed by the *Holy Spirit*. ‘God the Spirit opens, frees the humanity of the Son so that it may be the vehicle of the Father’s will in the world’.⁶⁹ Linked with this is a stress on the particularity of the Spirit’s work—he acts in a way which is appropriate to the specific circumstances of the incarnate Son of God at each stage of his life. Applied to us, being free means finding by the Spirit that liberating relationship to the Father which Jesus knew and which is our destiny, but in ways which are authentic to us and our time and place. Far from destroying human freedom, God enables it. Human freedom is not constituted by the absence of divine activity (the direction of Barr’s argument) nor is it ultimately unreal (the direction of Warfieldian theories)—it is something to be *received* and discovered as we are opened out by the Holy Spirit to the Father and Son in a way which is appropriate to our own distinctive historical and cultural context.

It has been pointed out by some Eastern theologians that a weak doctrine of the Spirit in the Western church (and thus a less than full-blooded trinitarianism) has often been accompanied by a weak view of human freedom.⁷⁰ Interestingly, in both Barr and Warfield, the picture painted is of a somewhat impersonal Spirit of power only loosely connected with the Son and Father. A stronger doctrine of the Spirit with more said about him drawing from us our own response to Son and Father might well point to a more fruitful way forward. For then we could have what is best in Barr (a concern to respect human nature) and Warfield (the belief that only God can save). On this

⁶⁹Colin Gunton, ‘The Spirit in the Trinity’, in *The Forgotten Trinity: A Selection of Papers*, 127.

⁷⁰Cf. e.g., Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London, James Clarke 1957) 169f. See also Colin Gunton, ‘The Triune God and the Freedom of the Creature’, in *Karl Barth: Centenary Essays*, S.W. Sykes (ed.), (Cambridge, CUP 1989) 46-68; Tom Smail, *The Giving Gift* (London, Hodder & Stoughton 1988) 66-84.

view, we could say that the Scriptures came about not through the mere static ‘presence’ of God nor the authoritarian imposition of truth but through the creation and sustenance of a community where true freedom was discovered and particular words established as God’s own. Those words are indeed an authentic human response—authentic and true to their time, place, circumstance, history and culture—and yet generated and caught up by the Spirit as he draws people to Christ and to the one Christ knew and loved as ‘Abba’.

A fourth point concerns the *eschatological* character of the Spirit, so common a theme in the New Testament. The freedom which the Spirit grants us is that of the age to come: ‘the first fundamental particularity of Pneumatology is its eschatological character’.⁷¹ In trinitarian terms, the Spirit is ‘God present to the world as its liberating other, bringing it to the destiny determined by the Father, made actual, realised in the Son’.⁷² The ramifications of this for hermeneutics are enormous. No less significant are the consequences for biblical inspiration. For example, John Muddiman proposes that ‘The pressing imminence of the eschatological hope is the main feature which distinguishes canonical from post-canonical literature’. Christianity retained its original vision by making the post-apostolic period less important, and ‘marking off the time of the first generation with a ‘scriptural boundary’’. If the Spirit who inspires scripture is understood eschatologically, we may be able to offer [a] reason why uniquely inspired scripture ceases with the New Testament’.⁷³ Moreover, understanding the Spirit eschatologically might well give us a way of conceiving the ‘finality’ of Scripture in a ‘proleptic’ way. Through a future-oriented doctrine of the Spirit, an anchoring of our faith in the final, perfect self-revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth *and* an openness to God’s future (already realised in Christ) can both be maintained. The Spirit will indeed point us back to the Christ of the New Testament (Jn. 14:26; 16:13) but this is in order to expose, explicate, interpret and apply the truth as it is in Christ in a way which relates that truth to the ever-new situations and

⁷¹Vladimir Lossky, quoted in Gunton, ‘The Spirit in the Trinity’, 130.

⁷²Gunton, *ibid.*

⁷³Muddiman, *loc. cit.*, 131, 132.

questions which emerge in history, and in so far as this happens God's final future is being realised in our midst.

Fifthly, although not specifically related to trinitarian considerations, we should draw attention to the *variety* and *particularity* of the Spirit's work. A prominent stream in Western pneumatology would have us emphasise his general, immanent presence. By contrast, in the New Testament it is the diversity and specificity of the Spirit's acts which are so striking, perhaps nowhere clearer than in Paul's discussion of the gifts of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12. As far as biblical inspiration is concerned, here is a way of doing full justice to different scriptural genres and styles and indeed to different modes of inspiration.⁷⁴

V. Conclusion

Biblical inspiration is a theme which will doubtless continue to be disputed for a long time to come. My objective in this article is not to close the debate (nor to provide a comprehensive account of the process of biblical inspiration) but to offer some hints as to how the discussion can be significantly transformed if the most fundamental question of theology—who is God?—and its most profound answer—Father, Son and Spirit—are kept firmly in the foreground. A significant practical consequence follows: although systematic theologians cannot afford to ignore the diversity and complexity of Scripture, by the same token biblical scholars cannot afford to sweep fundamental theological issues to one side and operate under the illusion that they are dealing with neutral, doctrinally free data. The widespread tendency in Britain for doctrinal theologian and biblical exegete to work *alongside* but not *with* each other may be waning,⁷⁵ but there is a long way to go, and the field of biblical inspiration is arguably one in which the benefits of a closer encounter would be enormous.

⁷⁴Cf. Muddiman, *loc. cit.*, 132.

⁷⁵Cf. e.g. the volume jointly written by David F. Ford and Frances M. Young, *Meaning and Truth in 2 Corinthians* (London, SPCK 1987).