

Sunday, December 27, 2015—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
Lesson 14 Divine Dictation: The Mechanism of Inspiration? Part 1

Introduction

- In Lesson 13 we looked at passages proving the *Plenary Verbal View* of inspiration. First, we looked at how the Bible self-authenticates its own inspiration. Second, we looked at some passages that demonstrated practically that the issue in inspiration is the words that are written down and not the men.
 - I Kings 13—is an example of a man that spoke the word of the Lord without foreseeing that he was going to do it. He did not plan it, it just happened.
 - John 11—Caiaphas said something that the Holy Spirit says is a prophecy and he never knew he did it.
 - Numbers 22-24—Balaam did not want to bless Israel, he wanted to curse them but he could only speak the words that God placed in his mouth.
- My goal in considering these passages was two-fold. First, I wanted you to grasp in a practical way that the main issue in inspiration is not the people or the man, but the words that are being spoken and/or written down, i.e., the *graphē*.
- Second, I wanted you to see that the various men speak the words that God put/placed in their mouths. In other words, God gave them the exact words He wanted said/written. Consider the following examples from the exchange between Balaam and Balak in Numbers 22-24.
 - Numbers 22:38—And Balaam said unto Balak, Lo, I am come unto thee: have I now any power at all to say any thing? **the word that God putteth in my mouth, that shall I speak.**
 - Numbers 23:5— **And the LORD put a word in Balaam's mouth**, and said, Return unto Balak, and thus thou shalt speak.
 - Numbers 23:12—And he answered and said, **Must I not take heed to speak that which the LORD hath put in my mouth?**
 - Numbers 23:16—And the LORD met Balaam, **and put a word in his mouth**, and said, Go again unto Balak, and say thus.
- These verses in Numbers bring up an important question regarding the mechanism by which the inspiration of the words was accomplished. They seem to imply the notion of dictation; God placed His word into the mouth of Balaam thereby causing Balaam to utter forth only those words that God gave him to speak.

- The notion of Mechanical or Divine Dictation as a descriptor for how *Plenary Verbal Inspiration* was accomplished has fallen on hard times in the past 150 years or so but this was not always the case. In this lesson we want to begin a consideration of whether or not dictation is an appropriate Scriptural descriptor to explain how inspiration was accomplished.
- In order to accomplish this task, we will first survey what modern theologians have said regarding the notion of dictation. Second, we will consider historic articulations of inspiration before the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species* in 1859. Last, and most importantly, we will consider the Bible's testimony concerning itself.

Divine Dictation and Modern Theologians

- Virtually all modern Systematic Theology books discuss the notion of dictation under the heading of false or spurious views of inspiration along with the following: *Natural, Dynamic, Partial, and Existential Views* surveyed in Lesson 11. Consequently, the notion of dictation is almost universally rejected as false by modern Evangelical scholarship.
- It is also important to note that discussions of dictation in modern Systematic Theology books ascribe either of the following words to the notion: 1) Mechanical, or 2) Divine. Consequently, the terms Mechanical Dictation or Divine Dictation are synonyms for they are used interchangeably by modern authors.
- For the sake of consistency we will sample the writings of the same authors cited in Lesson 11 when presenting the various theories of inspiration. We will include each author's terminology in parenthesis after his name.
 - Lewis Sperry Chafer (*Mechanical or Dictation Theory*)—"Had God dictated the Scriptures to men, the style and writing would be uniform. It would be the diction and vocabulary of the divine Author, and free from the idiosyncrasies of men (cf. 2 Pet. 3:15-16). All evidence of interest on the part of the human authors would be wanting (cf. Rom. 9:1-3). It is true that the human authors did not always realize the purpose of their writings. Moses could hardly have known the typical significance latent in the history of Adam, Enoch, Abraham, Isaac, and Joseph, or of the typology of Christ hidden in his description of the tabernacle which he wrote according to the pattern that was showed him in the Mount. . . A message which is dictated is obviously the product of the one who dictates; but if one is left free to write in behalf of another and then it is discovered that, while writing according to his own feelings, style, and vocabulary, he has recorded the precise message of the one in whose behalf he wrote and as perfectly as though it had been dictated by that one, the conviction is engendered that a supernatural accomplishment has been wrought. Under this arrangement, the human author is given full scope for his authorship, yet the exalted message is itself secured. The result is as complete as dictation could make it; but the method, though not lacking in mystery which always accompanies the supernatural, is more in harmony with God's ways of dealing with men in which He uses, rather than annuls, their wills. There is no intimation that God ever dictated any message to a man other than that which Moses transcribed when in Jehovah's presence in the holy Mount. This theory is easily classified as one in which the divine authorship is emphasized almost to the point of exclusion of the human authorship." (Chafer, 68)

- Paul Enns (*Divine Dictation*)—the dictation view states that God dictated the words of Scripture and the men wrote them down in a passive manner, being mere amanuenses (secretaries) who wrote only the words they were told to write. This claim would render the Bible similar to the Koran which supposedly was dictated in Arabic from heaven. Although some parts of the Bible were given by dictation (cf. Ex. 20:1, “And God spake all these words”), the books of the Bible reveal a distinct contrast in style and vocabulary, suggesting the authors were not mere automatons. The beginning student in Greek will quickly discover the difference in styles between the gospel of John and the gospel of Luke. John wrote in simple style with a limited vocabulary, whereas Luke wrote with an expanded vocabulary and a more sophisticated style. If the dictation theory were true, the style of the books of the Bible should be uniform.” (Enns, 161-162)
- Charles F. Baker (*Mechanical Inspiration*)—“This is the view that the writers of the Bible were merely secretaries to whom God dictated the Bible. Thus it is sometimes referred to as the Dictation Theory of Inspiration. It is true that there are some parts of the Bible that might be classified as dictation, such as those passages which read, “Thus saith the Lord.” It would also seem that it was a case of dictation when God spoke the law to Moses in the mount and said to him: “Write thou these words: for after the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with thee and with Israel.” (Ex. 34:27)

The major portion of Scripture, however, cannot be classified a dictation. It is evident that the style and vocabulary differ from one writer to the next. Surely when the Apostles wrote letters expressing their feelings in the first person singular, this could not be classified as dictation from God. Hodge says:

“The church has never held what has been stigmatized as the mechanical theory of inspiration. The sacred writers were not machines. Their self-consciousness was not suspended; nor were their intellectual powers superseded. Holy men spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. It was men, not machines; not unconscious instruments, but living, thinking, willing minds, whom the Spirit used as his organs. . . The sacred writers impressed their peculiarities on their several productions as plainly as though they were the subjects of no extraordinary influence.” (Baker, 39-40)

- Norman L. Geisler (*Secretary/Musical Instrument*)—“The mode of operation by which the Holy Spirit worked with the authors in order to assure an infallible and inerrant product is a matter of much speculation among theologians. The mystery remains inscrutable, but the process is intelligible and the parameters are definable.

Two factors define the limits within which legitimate speculation may occur: 1) the product is infallible and inerrant; 2) whatever the means used, different personalities, different styles, and the freedom of the authors manifested in their books must be accounted for.

The first point is known as the *doctrine* of Scripture and is supported above by numerous references. The second is known from the *data* of Scripture, clearly manifested in its human characteristics.

Like illustrations of the Trinity, no analogies of scriptural inspiration are perfect, some are better than others, and still others are misleading. Several fall into the latter category.

In particular, two illustrations would be avoided: that of a *secretary* and that of a *musical instrument*. Early church fathers were particularly known to use the latter. The problem with these illustrations is that they lend to the false charge that evangelicals believe in mechanical dictation.

The *musical instrument* illustration is unhelpful because a musical instrument has no free will, no personality, and no literally style—it is an inanimate object, and not an efficient cause of the notes but only an instrumental cause.

The *secretary* illustration is not much better, because faithful secretaries take dictation. They are not inanimate or non-free instruments, nevertheless, by the very nature of their occupation, they are not creating the material by merely recording it. The words written are not theirs, nor is their personality expressed. This is not true of Biblical inspiration, which, as we have seen employs freedom, style, vocabulary, and personalities of the various Biblical authors to convey God’s Word to humankind.

In his noted *Theopneustia*, Louis Gaussen (1790-1863) uses the illustration of an *orchestra conductor*. This is somewhat better, since all members of the orchestra are freely participating and expressing their distinctive sounds while the master brings them together in unity and harmony, as does God with the Scriptures. Even here the analogy breaks down, however, since the whole sound is not really the result of each member playing his own solo. Further, instrumentalists make mistakes, while the Bible does not.

Many evangelicals have been content to rely on the *providently pre-planned personalities* model, whereby God preplanned the lives, styles, and vocabularies of the various Biblical authors so that they would freely choose to write the correct thing in the right way at the right time, which God, by preordained divine concurrence, has determined would be their part of His Word. While it is no doubt true, even this does not account for the whole story. For one thing, it does not explain how free will fits into the picture. Were the free choices of the various authors causally predetermined? If so, were they really free? Further, how could God guarantee that the results would be infallible and inerrant if the authors were free to do otherwise?

While some models are better than others, no matter how good the model is, there always seems to be some mystery left at the very point where there is a divine/human encounter. This is true of the doctrines of predestination and free will as well as the doctrines of how the two natures of Christ relate and the mode of inspiration.” (Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 178-179)

- As usual, I find Geisler’s comments to be the widest ranging and complete. I appreciate the fact that Geisler acknowledges that “no matter how good the model is, there always seems to be some mystery left at the very point where there is a divine/human encounter.” This is no doubt true; it is exceedingly difficult to illustrate the supernatural nature of divine inspiration.
- What troubles me, is the overall lack of Scriptural support offered by these theologians to justify their positions. To a man, they seem to be more concerned with the freedom of thought, expression, and personality afforded to the human authors than on explaining how they were able to record on paper the very words God wanted written. Apart from some form of dictation, it is difficult to conceive how the standard demanded by the *Plenary Verbal View* of inspiration would

have been accomplished. Some of the statements made regarding why dictation is a poor descriptor for how inspiration was accomplished seem very close to arguing for Dynamic Inspiration.

- Moreover, some of the statements quoted above seem to be contrary to the Biblical text itself. For example, Chafer stated, “There is no intimation that God ever dictated any message to a man other than that which Moses transcribed when in Jehovah’s presence in the holy Mount” (Baker says something very similar.). All this makes one wonder if Chafer has ever considered the story of Balaam and Balak from Numbers 22-24 (or the other two passages we considered in Lesson 13 in I Kings 13 & John 11) as an example of dictation. Balaam is only allowed to speak the words that God placed in his mouth despite his desired will to do otherwise.
- The quote from Charles Hodge (different person from A.A. Hodge of Warfield and Hodge fame.) found in Pastor Baker’s book is truly puzzling. Hodge stated, “the church has never held what has been stigmatized as the mechanical theory of inspiration.” First of all, if one reads between the lines, Hodge reveals that his thoughts on “the mechanical theory of inspiration” are a response to how inspiration had been “stigmatized.” This speaks to one of my fundamental contentions, Fundamentalist and Evangelical views on inspiration changed as a result of the controversies with evolutionists, German higher critics, and Modernists in the late 19th and early 20th century. Hodge, writing in 1872, reflects the stigmatism that had been placed upon the notion of dictation by theological liberals during the second half of the 19th century. This stigmatism did not exist thirty years earlier in 1840 when Louis Gaussen wrote *The Divine Inspiration of the Bible* and used the word “dictation” liberally throughout to describe the mechanism by which Plenary inspiration was accomplished (more on Gaussen in Lesson 15.).
- Secondly, I find Hodge’s statement quoted in the previous point to be a bit misleading. Hodge leaves his readers with the impression that at no point throughout church history was the “mechanical theory of inspiration” ever articulated. Meanwhile, Geisler correctly conveys the fact that the church fathers did use the imagery of a musical instrument to describe how inspiration was accomplished.
- In the next section we will turn our attention to historical articulations of inspiration before the publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of the Species* in 1859.

Historic Articulations of Inspiration

- The words “dictate”, “dictation”, or “*dictare*” in Latin have a long history of being associated with the inspiration of God’s word. Please recall from above that Geisler objected to the imagery of a *secretary* or *musical instrument* as illustrations of inspiration because they “lend to the false charge that evangelicals believe in mechanical dictation.” In this section we will consider the testimony as to the usage of this imagery for inspiration from the following three eras of church history:
 - The Pre-Reformation Fathers
 - The Reformers
 - Post-Reformation Theologians

Testimony of the Pre-Reformation Fathers

- From very early in church history, the imagery of a musical instrument was used to illustrate how inspiration was accomplished. Please consider the following examples.
 - Justin Martyr (c. 160 AD)—“. . . Rather, they presented themselves in a pure manner to the energy of the Divine Spirit, so that the divine plectrum itself could descend from heaven **and use those righteous men as an instrument like a harp or lyre. Thereby, the Divine Spirit could reveal to us the knowledge of things divine and heavenly.**” (cataloged in Bercot, 601-602)
 - Athenagoras (c. 175 AD)—“We have the prophets as witnesses of the things we comprehend and believe. These were men who declared things about God and the things of God. They were guided by the Spirit of God. . . It would be irrational for us to disbelieve the Spirit from God and to give heed to the mere human opinions. **For He moved the mouths of the prophets like musical instruments.**” (cataloged in Bercot, 602)
 - Athenagoras (c. 175 AD)—“Prophets were lifted in ecstasy above the natural operations of their minds by the impulses of the Divine Spirit, **and they spoke the things with which they were inspired. The Spirit operated through them just as a flute player breaths into a flute.**” (cataloged in Bercot, 602)
 - Hippolytus (c. 200 AD)—“These fathers were furnished with the Spirit and they were largely honored by the Word Himself. They were similar to instruments of music. For they had the Word always in union with them, **like a plectrum (the small implement by which a lyre was plucked). When moved by Him, the prophets spoke what God willed.** For they did not speak of their own power. Let there be no mistake about that. Nor did they speak the things which pleased themselves.” (cataloged in Bercot, 602)
 - Eusebius quoting Caius (c. 215 AD)—“For this reason, (the heretics) have boldly laid their hands upon the divine Scriptures, alleging that they have corrected them. . . and as to the great audacity implied in this offense, it is not likely that even they themselves can be ignorant. **For either they do not believe that the divine Scriptures were dictated by the Holy Spirit (and are thus infidels),** or else they think that they themselves are wiser than the Holy Spirit (which makes them demoniacs).” (cataloged by Bercot, 602-603)
 - Augustine of Hippo (c. 354-430 AD)—“When they write what He has taught and said, it should not be asserted that He did not write it, **since the members only put down what they had come to know at the dictation (dictis) of the Head. Therefore, whatever He wanted us to read concerning His words and deeds, He commanded His disciples, His hands to write.** Hence, one cannot but receive what he reads in the Gospels, though written by the disciples, as though it were written by the very hand of the Lord himself.” (quoted by Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 217)
- Robert D. Preus is the author of Chapter 12, “The View of the Bible Held by the Church: The Early Church Through Luther” found in the book *Inerrancy* edited by Norman L. Geisler.

According to Preus, Augustine used the terms inspire and dictate interchangeably in a large variety of contexts. (Geisler, *Inerrancy*, 364)

- Thomas Aquinas (c. 1125-1274)—“Prophecy is a type of knowledge impressed on the prophet’s intellect from a divine revelation; this happens after the manner of education. Now the truth of knowledge is the same in both the student and the teachers since the student’s knowledge is a likeness of the teacher’s knowledge.” (Aquinas, [*Summa Theologica*](#))
- Geisler offers the following commentary on this quotation from Aquinas, “Unlike the mechanical illustration used by many of his predecessors (such as God playing on a musical instrument), Aquinas provided new insight into the process of inspiration. Just as a teacher activates the potential of the student for knowledge, so God (the Primary Cause) activates the potential of man (the secondary cause) to know what He desires to reveal to him. Thus, the prophet is not a puppet or even a secretary but a human learner. And, like a human teacher, God only activates in the prophet what he has the potentiality to receive in terms of his own capacities, culture, language, and literary forms.” (Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 219)
- The nuanced articulation of inspiration offered by Aquinas notwithstanding, there is ample evidence that the Church Fathers, from very early in church history and stretching through the Medieval Period, conceived of dictation as being the primary means by which inspiration was accomplished.

Works Cited

Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica*.

Baker, Charles F. *A Dispensational Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Grace Bible College Publications, 1971.

Bercot, David W. *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*. Peabody, MS: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998.

Chafer, Lewis Sperry. *Systematic Theology Vol. I*. Dallas, TX: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1947.

Enns, Paul. *The Moody Handbook of Theology*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1989.

Geisler, Norman L. *Inerrancy*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1980.

Geisler, Norman L. *Systematic Theology: In One Volume*. Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2011.