



Lecture # 16 Part 2

The Continuation of the Doctrine of Inspiration to the Reformation

Just as the Old Testament claim for inspiration finds support in the New Testament, so the New Testament claim for inspiration finds support in the testimony of early Christian writers, the church Fathers. Although the testimony of the Fathers is not authoritative or inspired, it does reveal the orthodox doctrine of inspiration that prevailed throughout the history of the church. Their testimony, with hardly a dissenting voice, reflects the traditional view of the origin and nature of Scripture from apostolic times to the rise of Deism and Rationalism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

THE ANTE-NICENE AND NICENE FATHERS (C. A.D. 150-C. 350)

These add further support to the New Testament claims for inspiration.

Justin Martyr (d. 165).

In his first *Apology* (c.150–155), Justin Martyr regarded the gospels as the “**Voice of God**” (chap. 65). He further stated of the Scriptures, “**We must not suppose that the language proceeds from men who were inspired, but from the Divine Word which moves them**” (*Apology* 1.36). Elsewhere, he went on to say that Moses wrote the Hebrew character by divine inspiration “**and that the Holy Spirit of prophecy taught us this, telling us by Moses that God spoke thus.**”

Tatian (c.110–180).

The disciple of Justin, Tatian called [John 1:5](#) “**Scripture**” in his *Apology* (chap. 13). In this work he made a passionate defense of Christianity and regarded it as so pure that it was incompatible with Greek civilization. He is also noted for his pioneer effort in writing a harmony of the gospels, *Diatessaron* (c. 150–160).

Irenaeus (c. 130–202).

As a boy, before he moved to Rome for studies prior to his ordination as a presbyter (elder) and later bishop of Lyons (France), Irenaeus is reported to have actually heard Polycarp. Irenaeus himself was a seminal figure in the development of Christian doctrine in the West, and his role makes him a key individual in understanding the doctrine of Scripture in the early church. In his treatise *Against Heresies* (3.1.1), Irenaeus referred to the authority of the New Testament when he stated,

For the Lord of all gave the power of the Gospel to his apostles, through whom we have come to know the truth, that is, the teaching of the Son of God . . . This Gospel they first preached. Afterwards, by the will of God, they handed it down to us in the Scriptures, to be “the pillar and ground” of our faith.

In fact, he entitled the third book of this treatise “**The Faith in Scripture and Tradition,**” in which he acknowledged the apostles to be “**above all falsehood**” (3.5.1).



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He called the Bible “**Scriptures of truth,**” and he was “**most properly assured that the Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they are spoken by the Word of God and His Spirit.**”

Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215).

Clement of Alexandria appeared on the scene about a century later than Clement of Rome. He became head of the Catechetical School at Alexandria in 190 but was compelled to flee in the face of persecution in 202. Clement held to a rigid doctrine of inspiration but allowed that the Greek poets were inspired by the same God in a lesser sense. In his *Stromata* Clement notes:

There is no discord between the Law and the Gospel, but harmony, for they both proceed from the same Author, ... differing in name and time to suit the age and culture of their hearers ... by a wise economy, but potentially one, ... since faith in Christ and the knowledge ... of the Gospel is the explanation ... and the fulfillment of the Law.

He does call the gospel “**Scripture**” in the same sense as the Law and the Prophets, as he writes of “the Scriptures ... in the Law, in the Prophets, and besides by the blessed Gospel ... [which] are valid from their omnipotent authority.” Clement of Alexandria went so far as to condemn those who rejected Scripture because “they are not pleased with the divine commands, that is, with the Holy Spirit.”⁷

Tertullian (c. 160–220).

Tertullian, “**The Father of Latin Theology,**” never wavered in his support of the doctrine of inspiration of both the Old and the New Testaments, neither as a Catholic nor as a Montanist. In fact, he maintained that the four gospels “are reared on the certain basis of Apostolic authority, and so are inspired in a far different sense from the writings of the spiritual Christian; all the faithful, it is true, have the Spirit of God, but all are not Apostles.’ ” For Tertullian,

apostles have the Holy Spirit properly, who have Him fully, in the operations of prophecy, and the efficacy of [healing] virtues, and the evidences of tongues; not particularly, as all others have. Thus he attached the Holy Spirit’s authority to that form [of advice] to which he willed us rather to attend; and forthwith it became not an *advice* of the Holy Spirit, but, in consideration of His majesty, a *precept*.

Hippolytus (c. 170–236).

A disciple of Irenaeus, Hippolytus exhibited the same deep sense of the spiritual meaning of Scripture as has already been traced in his immediate teacher and in earlier writers. He writes of the inspiration of the Old Testament,

The Law and the Prophets were from God, who in giving them compelled his messenger to speak by the Holy Spirit, that receiving the inspiration of the Father’s power they may announce the Father’s counsel and will. In these men therefore the Word found a fitting abode and spoke of Himself; for even then He came as His own herald, shewing the Word who was about to appear in the world.

Of the New Testament writers, he confidently affirms:

These blessed men ... having been perfected by the Spirit of Prophecy, and worthily honoured by the Word Himself, were brought to an inner harmony like instruments, and



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having the Word within them, as it were to strike the notes, by Him they were moved, and announced that which God wished. For they did not speak of their own power (be well assured), nor proclaim that which they wished themselves, but first they were rightly endowed with wisdom by the Word, and afterwards well foretaught of the future by visions, and then, when thus assured, they spake that which was [revealed] to them alone by God.

Novatian (d. c. 251).

Novatian, the individual after whom the heretical sect was named, claimed the Old and New Testaments as authoritative Scripture in widespread references in his writings. His “monarchian” views are known largely through the writings of his critics and the schismatic activities of his followers.

Origen (c.185-c.254).

Origen was successor of Clement at the Catechetical School in Alexandria. Although he deviated from orthodox theology as a result of his allegorical method of interpretation, Origen appears to have held that both *the writer and the writing* were inspired. He believed that God “gave the law, and the prophets, and the Gospels, being also the God of the apostles and of the Old and New Testaments.” He wrote, “This Spirit inspired each one of the saints, whether prophets or apostles; and there was not one Spirit in the men of the old dispensation, and another in those who were inspired at the advent of Christ.” His view of the authority of the Scriptures is “that the Scriptures were written by the Spirit of God, and have a meaning ... not known to all, but to those only on whom the grace of the Holy Spirit is bestowed in the words of wisdom and knowledge.”¹³ He went on to assert that there is a supernatural element of thought “throughout all of Scripture even where it is not apparent to the uninstructed.”

Cyprian (c. 200–258).

Cyprian was bishop of one of the largest cities in the West during the persecution under Decius (A.D. 249–51). In his treatise *The Unity of the Catholic Church*, he appeals to the gospels as authoritative, referring to them as the “**commandments of Christ.**” He also adds the Corinthian letters of Paul to his list of authorities and appeals to Paul’s [Ephesian](#) letter ([4:4–6](#)).

In the same passage, Cyprian reaffirms the inspiration of the New Testament, as he writes, “**When the Holy Spirit says, in the person of the Lord.**” Again, he adds, “**The Holy Spirit warns us through the Apostle**” as he cites [1 Corinthians 11:19](#). These and several other examples in his writings lead to the conclusion that Cyprian held that both the Old and New Testaments are “**Divine Scriptures.**”

Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 263 or 265–340).

As a church historian, Eusebius spent much time espousing the Old and New Testaments as inspired writings that were commented upon by the successors of the apostles. He also wrote much about the canon of the New Testament in his *Ecclesiastical*



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History. It was Eusebius of Caesarea who was commissioned to make fifty copies of the Scriptures following the Council of Nicea (325).

Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 295–373).

Known by the epithet “Father of Orthodoxy” because of his contributions against Arius at Nicea (325), Athanasius was the first to use the term “**canon**” in reference to the New Testament books, which he called “**the fountains of salvation.**”

Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 35–86).

Cyril adds interesting light to round out the early church period. In his *Catecheses*, he informs his catechumen that he is offering a summary of “the whole doctrine of the Faith” which “has been built up strongly out of all the Scriptures.” Then he proceeds to warn others not to change or contradict his teachings because of the Scripture’s injunction as found in [Galatians 1:8–9](#).

Galatians 1:8-9 (NASB)

⁸ But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!

⁹ As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!

In his treatise *Of the Divine Scriptures*, he speaks of “the divinely-inspired Scriptures of both the Old and the New Testament.” He then proceeds to list all of the books of the Hebrew Old Testament (twenty-two) and all of the books of the Christian New Testament except Revelation (twenty-six), saying, “Learn also diligently, and from the Church, what are the books of the Old Testament, and what are those of the New. And, pray, read none of the apocryphal writings.” For Cyril the matter was drawn clearly when he wrote, “With regard to the divine and saving mysteries of faith no doctrine, however trivial, may be taught without the backing of the divine Scriptures For our saving faith derives its force, not from capricious reasonings, but from what may be proved out of the Bible.”²²

Such evidence, coupled with the other writings of that era of church history, has lead many to conclude that *virtually every church Father enthusiastically adhered to the doctrine of the inspiration of the Old and New Testaments* alike. J. N. D. Kelly affirms that position as he writes,

There is little need to dwell on the absolute authority accorded to the Scripture as a doctrinal norm. It was the Bible, declared Clement of Alexandria about A.D. 200, which as interpreted by the Church, was the source of Christian teaching. His greater disciple Origen was a thorough-going Biblicist who appealed again and again to Scripture as the decisive criterion of dogma ... “The holy inspired Scriptures,” wrote Athanasius a century later, are fully sufficient for the proclamation of the truth.“ Later in the same century John Chrysostom bade his congregation seek no other teacher than the oracles of God In the West Augustine ... [and] a little while later Vincent of Lerins (c. 450) took it as an axiom [that] the Scriptural canon was sufficient, and more sufficient, for all purposes.”

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In short, the Fathers of the early church believed that both the Old and New Testaments were the inspired writings of the Holy Spirit through the instrumentality of the prophets and apostles. They also believed these Scriptures to be wholly true and without error because they were the very Word of God given for the faith and practice of all believers.