

THE BIBLE, HONKY TONK MUSIC AND THE WORD OF GOD

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Some time back I wrote an article entitled [The Spirit of God and Bibliolatry](#) in which I suggested that modern day Christians have made an idol out of scripture. We have mistaken the Bible to be the Word of God (capital W). In that article I attempted to make the case that the Bible never claimed to be the Word of God. Indeed, Jesus told the Pharisees,

You do not have His word abiding in you, because whom He sent, Him you do not believe. You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life. (John 5:38-40; NKJV).

Clearly, Jesus understood *Himself* to be the Word that gives life, as acknowledged by John in the introduction to his gospel: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (John 1:1, KJV).*

Many people like to make the distinction between the “written Word” (referring to scripture) and the “living Word” (typically referring to Jesus or the Holy Spirit).

Scripture itself, however, never refers to itself as the Word. More appropriately understood, scripture *expresses* the Word of God ONLY under a specific condition. That condition is that the written page in scripture must be *quicken*ed, or brought to life, by the Spirit to the persons(s) reading or hearing that word. Without the quickening of the Spirit (who is the expression of Christ Himself) that which is written is nothing more than a dead letter, as Jesus emphasized to the Pharisees in John chapter 5. There are thus two “contact points” of inspiration: the writer or speaker, and the receiver. The point which I wish to make in this brief article is twofold. First, unless the receiver of any given message is quickened (inspired) within by the Holy Spirit, that message—even scripture itself—is but a dead letter. It fails to take on the stature of the Word (capital W) of God. Furthermore, even if the writer or speaker is NOT inspired, a given message will become the Word of God whenever the Spirit of God quickens that message within the reader or hearer.

Nearly all of the discussion regarding “divine inspiration” that I have heard or read centers on the individual writing or speaking the word in question: Was the author truly inspired by the Spirit of God in any given text? Moreover, the overwhelming majority of such discussion is focused on scripture itself. Indeed, the discernment of which of the many texts emanating from the early church experience were truly inspired was a primary focus of the Council of Nicaea in the fourth century. *As important as these efforts were, I want to suggest that even more important is the inspiration of the hearer or reader of these words.*

I want to say at the outset that I believe that the writers of both the Old Testament and New were inspired by God. We have, of course, inherited centuries of traditions of men and mistranslations of scripture which have left us with a distorted view of what those Biblical writers were expressing. Nevertheless, these 66 books emanated from the pens of men who were inspired by the Spirit of God as they wrote. The error that we have made is *not* the declaring of original scripture as inspired. The error, rather, is two-fold: (1) we have assumed that the message in scripture that we receive in the 21st century as it has been filtered through many mistranslations and traditions of men is the same message that was communicated to the original readers of these

documents; and (2) that this written message, even in its original context is, in and of itself, the Word of God. The Word of God is a person, Jesus Christ, as He comes to us in the person of the Holy Spirit.

When is Scripture NOT the Word of God?

The problem that we have with scripture today stems, in part, from the place of idolatry in which some have placed these canonized writings. Because some have come to regard the 66 books of the Bible as the actual Word (capital W) of God, they give these books a place of preeminence over any and every other word that may be written or spoken by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This would probably not be such a problem if we were all Greek or Hebrew scholars, as well as experts on the culture of the times in which these books were written, as I believe these writers were, indeed, inspired by the Holy Spirit in what they wrote. However, when we consider that what has been handed down to us as scripture has been greatly distorted through many mistranslations, and as it has then been even further misinterpreted through the lens of the traditions of man, what we are receiving through the pulpits of our lands, and through the commentaries and theological treatises, often bears little resemblance to what was originally communicated by the original scribes of those pages. Stated differently, the “scripture” that we are hearing and reading today is often not an inspired Word of God at all. It is, rather, the machinations of the minds of carnal men.

This has led to many abuses of scripture throughout history, especially by church leaders. Examples of these abuses are many, including the doctrine of the tithe, the manner in which Hebrews 10:25 has been twisted by pastors to insist that parishioners show up practically every time the church doors are open, and the insistence on keeping Old Testament Mosaic law. Possibly the greatest abuse of all, in my view is the cherry-picking of select verses to bludgeon people with the threat of eternal torturous damnation if one has not made a confession of Christ as Savior (often imposing a particular formula in which this is to take place).

I will not discuss all of these abuses here. There is a multitude of literature on this topic, much of which can be found on websites that can be found on the “Links”

page of this website.¹ The point that I am wishing to make here, however, is that when scripture is mistranslated and read through the lens of any of the many traditions of men, it does not bear the inspiration of the original writers. In this way, the word of God is not always the Word of God. This is extremely important to grasp. The church in our day has raised the *written* word to such a place of idolatry, that it falls victim to the deceits of the mind of man which, with great eloquence, uses scripture wrongly, and even abusively. There is no life in scripture when it is used in this way. As Jesus proclaimed to the Pharisees, it is a dead letter in which there is no life. The Bible is not, when used in this way, the *Word of God*.

Extra-Scriptural Inspiration

This brings us to an important consideration, the discussion of which may be controversial to some readers. We now consider the extent and nature of the inspiration of writings that are not part of recorded scripture. I am speaking here of books and articles by saints of God down through the ages as well as contemporary writers. Most Christians today would consider it anathema to equate the inspiration of contemporary, or even historical extra-biblical writings with the inspiration of scripture. While the writings of Martin Luther, John Wesley or any of a myriad of other historic or contemporary writers may be acknowledged as inspired, scripture is seen as “set apart” or “set above” any other writing as far as inspiration is concerned. This is an understandable position, but not totally accurate in my humble opinion.

The premise for such a position must be that there are “degrees” of inspiration. While such historic and contemporary writings may have a certain degree of inspiration, it is suggested, the inspiration found here is not at the same level as is the inspiration of scripture. I would ask the reader, however, does God’s *in-breathing* come in different amounts, depending on who He is breathing into? Did God look at the writers of the gospels, and say, “I will give them a good long breath of inspiration,” but to Martin Luther or others he said, “Martin will get but a little short breath?” I cannot conceive of this. Inspiration is inspiration! It is

¹ www.wordforthebride.net

much like being pregnant. One is not “almost pregnant,” or “a little bit pregnant.” One is either pregnant or she is not. Similarly, one is either inspired by God to write or speak or they are not. Hence, I must boldly assert that there are scores of books, articles, sermons and even everyday conversations that bear the fullest stature of inspiration, and stand tall with scripture itself as expressing the inspired Word of God. Whether these inspired words take on the stature of the Word of God, however, is subject to the same condition that we discussed above regarding the condition for scripture as truly expressing the Word of God. That condition is that the heart and mind of the hearer has been inspired or quickened by the Holy Spirit as one receives this word.

Having made this bold assertion, it is very important that we stipulate some caveats regarding the claim that the writers of extra-biblical texts were themselves inspired. First, while many of us might take issue with whether church leaders at the Council of Nicaea were themselves truly inspired in their determination of which writings were inspired and worthy to be included in the sacred canon, there is general agreement, I believe, that the 66 books that were finally included were truly inspired.² Such consensus does *not* exist when it comes to the inspiration of extra-biblical writings and oral messages throughout history. Hence, it is incumbent upon the reader or listener to listen to the Holy Spirit within as they are reading or listening, thereby discerning whether this is a truly inspired message from God or whether it is a word that is emanating from the fleshly zeal or preconception of the mind of the writer or speaker.³ This discernment comes as we recognize the Spirit of God resonating with our spirit regarding that which has been written or spoken. Moreover, it may well be that any given messenger may have been writing or speaking under the anointing (inspiration) of the Holy Spirit when they wrote or spoke, but that word only

² The disagreement is usually around other writings that were NOT included. Many believe, for example, that most or all of the apocryphal books should have been included, as well as some other of the Gnostic texts. This may well be, but the point that I am making is that there is a near consensus as to the inspiration of those books which *were* included.

³ As is discussed in the next section, it is contended here that even one who has not been under an anointing or inspiration when writing, speaking (or singing), such an “uninspired” word may indeed become incarnate as the Word of God in the hearer as he or she has been quickened by the Holy Spirit to receive that which He would speak through this, even totally secular, message.

becomes the WORD as it takes on life within the receiver of that word. Once again, the litmus test as to whether any word issued forth is truly the Word of God is whether that word resonates and takes on life within the heart and life of the receiver.

The size of the crowd, the popularity of the book or the breadth of its distribution has nothing whatsoever to do with whether a particular message is inspired truth. Indeed, I found as a rule of thumb, that there is an *inverse* relationship between the popularity of the message and the level of inspiration of the writer or speaker. That is to say, I have generally observed that the more popular the book or speaker, the less likely that that individual has truly been inspired by the Living God. The seduction is to be teaching, preaching and writing to attract a following. This is a seduction that a true disciple of Christ must be wary of, both in their own expression of God's Word, and in their discernment of what they read or hear.

This brings us full circle to the condition under which any word, including scripture itself, is truly the Word of God. That condition is that this word (small w) is quickened to the reader by the Holy Spirit and becomes incarnate as the Word (capital W) of God. We must understand that inspiration is not merely a quality of the scribe or speaker, but of the reader/listener as well. A given book or article, teaching or sermon may have been highly anointed when written/spoken, but if the heart of the reader/listener is not so anointed, that word is merely a dead letter. This brings me to my final and central point that I reiterate here:

Inspiration is most importantly a quality of the receiver (reader or listener), not of the sender (writer or speaker). I am not suggesting by this that the writers of the biblical text or other writers did not write in response to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. ***I am saying, however, that for any word to be transformed into the Living Word of God, the quickening, or inspiration, must take place within the heart and mind of the one receiving this word.***

Any Word Might Be Inspired

If it is true that inspiration consists of a word being quickened within the heart and mind of the receiver of that word, it follows that *any* word (not just religious

or “spiritual” words, and indeed not just words in which the writer or speaker has been inspired by God to write)⁴ may be inspired by God. God can use even the most profane of vocabulary to speak forth His truths. I am a lover of country music; I am particularly partial to that genre of country music that emerged in the 1950’s known as “honky-tonk” music. This is some of the most “earthy,” and some would even suggest vulgar, music in American musicology. The themes of honky-tonk music are of drinking and drunkenness, cheating, and lawlessness and prison. Someone has said that if you play a honky-tonk song backwards, you will sober up, get your wife back, and get out of prison! The titles of these songs are revealing of these themes: *You’re Cheatin’ Heart*, *Cold Cold Heart*, *The Bottom of the Bottle*, *Wine Me Up*, *Pick Me Up on Your Way Down*, *Mama Tried (to Raise Me Better)*, *Folsom Prison Blues*, and *I Didn’t Know God Made Honky-Tonk Angels* (and its response song) *It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky-Tonk Angels* are just a few that come to mind. What could possibly be inspired about these songs? Well, probably nothing if we understand inspiration merely as the Spirit of God moving on a writer to write. It is indeed very possible that most of these songs were written while the composer was under the influence of alcohol or drugs! If the key condition for inspiration—which is to say, a message taking on the stature of the Word of God (capital W)—is the quickening of the spirit of the *listener*, however, and measured by the effect that a written or oral piece of material has on the one receiving, then even these songs have the capacity to become life to the one listening. These songs speak of heartache, loneliness, drowning sorrow in booze, etc. Yet, when I listen to these songs, I become overwhelmed at the love of God that overcomes all of these woes. One of the more powerful of this musical genre is a song recorded by T. Graham Brown entitled [Wine into Water](#). The song is about an alcoholic who has tried everything to reform. He has come to the end of his rope and he cries out to Jesus, saying “*Once upon a time you turned the water into wine. Now on my knees I’m turning to you Father. Could you help me turn the wine back into water.*” The poignant and graphic expression of painful experiences such as this invokes the overpowering experience of God’s

⁴ There are those who would disagree with this position, and would argue that if the messenger of any given message is not truly inspired by God in their writing or speaking, that message is not inspired. Period. I disagree with this position for reasons that I discuss below.

love within me. I hear the heartache with a deep compassion that sometimes moves me to tears as God moves upon me to share in these struggles through the medium of a particular song. I have met some of these song writers, and the stories of their lives stirs within the deepest compassion. Their inspiration for writing these songs was their pain or anger; the Holy Spirit transformed those angry or sorrowful words into a renewed life within me as God would quicken me to see these individuals through His eyes. These songs have been the medium through which God has spoken to me on any number of occasions. Whenever I have had this experience, these songs became incarnate within me as the Word of God. The Lord has also spoken to me some of His deep truths through these totally secular songs: the truth, for example, of the ultimate redemption of even the most “hopeless” alcoholic and wife cheater. *The inspiration of God over this word is taking place within me, the one receiving this message in song.* Such inspiration may not take place within the next person listening to the same song, and does not, in that individual, become incarnate as the Word of God.

We also recognize that God can quicken His truths to us through the most casual and “uninspired” or “unspiritual” of circumstances in which we find ourselves. These circumstances might be simply taking in the breathtaking beauty of nature; or the radiance of a young child’s face; or even a casual conversation that on the surface has no spiritual content at all. I recall being in a telephone conversation with a brother, and as I remember it, we were discussing the current state of world affairs. In the course of this conversation, this brother made a very casual comment—the substance of which I do not even remember at this time. What I do remember is that it jolted me, and initiated a process of reevaluation of my whole understanding of God and of who I was as a child of God. My entire world view was affected by this one casual comment that neither I nor my friend can now remember.⁵ This casual word became the Word of God within me.

Jesus himself acknowledges the inspiration of God in the most common of places. The multitude of His disciples were praising God with a loud voice at the mighty

⁵ This shift in world view took place over time, of course, as I then began reading other materials and listening to teachings that I had not been prone to take in before. The point that I am making, however, is that this casual, very “unspiritual” comment was given life by God as it was quickened within me.

works that they had seen their Master perform. They were clearly deeply moved by the Spirit in their adoration and worship. The Pharisees came to Jesus and told Him to silence His disciples. His response: *I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out* (Luke 19:40). Whether we take Jesus' response literally or symbolically, the message is clear: God will move by His Spirit on even the most profane or "unspiritual" person or circumstance to speak forth His Word.

Conclusion

The matter of divine inspiration is a far more complex, and indeed mysterious, phenomenon than the most sophisticated theological treatments of the subject could possibly give to it. My purpose in this short essay is merely to urge us to take down the walls that have been put around God's life-giving activity in the hearts and lives of His special creation. The church has generally relegated divine inspiration to the confines of 66 books that the western church calls the Bible. Furthermore, this inspiration is understood to be merely an anointing that came upon the writers of these 66 books at the time at which they wrote. Such is a very narrow and limiting view of inspiration.

My hope is, first, that we will come to understand that God is not done inspiring writers and speakers. Some of these inspired writers and speakers may attract large audiences; most, however, will share their inspired messages with but a handful of people. Regardless of the platform from which these individuals proclaim the message, it remains fully inspired as it is anointed by the Spirit of God. Indeed, it is no less inspired than those 66 books that can be found within the "genuine leather."

Beyond this, I pray that we will come to appreciate that life-changing inspiration can only take place within the heart and mind of the one receiving the message. Mere inspiration of a writer or speaker is not sufficient for any word to become incarnate and become the Word. Apart from a quickening within the receiver of that word, the message—even scripture itself—is nothing more than a dead letter. The divine activity of the Holy Spirit in quickening a ready heart, however,

can transform even the most base, uncouth, and otherwise totally *uninspired* expression into a life-giving and life transforming Word. How incredibly creative and redemptive is our Father!