

Is the Princeton View of Scripture an Enlightenment Innovation?

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Before addressing the subject of the title of this paper, I would like to make a couple of comments about the nature and scope of the argument which I wish to present.

First, this is not an exercise in systematic theology. I am not a systematician and have no desire to be one; rather, I am an historian, and thus that which I present here is an attempt at historical, rather than theological, analysis. My aim in this paper is thus comparatively modest: I will not argue that the Princetonian approach to scripture, articulated most fully and forcefully by B.B. Warfield is right or wrong; the case for, as the case against, needs to be made on exegetical and theological, not historical grounds. Rather, I will argue simply that there is little that is particularly innovative in the nineteenth century Princeton doctrine, and that the various aspects of the basic Protestant doctrine of scripture find antecedents in earlier points of church history. This is not to argue that the fully-fledged Princetonian doctrine can be found in mature form in earlier periods; but simply that its various elements can be found there. This should be sufficient to cause pause for thought among those who confidently dismiss it as rationalism.¹

Second, I am acutely aware of the classic historian's dilemma, of demanding that texts written in one time and context should provide answers to questions raised in another time and another place. There is an acute danger in such circumstances of anachronism and the danger of over-reading brief statements or, even worse, cryptic comments and even silences; and this is particularly the case when doctrinal issues are at stake. Thus, I stress at the outset that I offer in this paper an analysis which is self-consciously provisional in nature.

As to structure, I will follow a broadly chronological framework: early church; middle ages; Reformation and post-Reformation. First, however, I want to establish the basic outlines of the Princeton doctrine.

The Princeton Doctrine

The Princeton doctrine of scripture involves a number of basic points.²

First, God's revelation is verbal; that is, God reveals himself through words. This is not to reduce God's revelation to words, since, in accordance with Westminster Confession 1.1, Warfield understood that God revealed himself in his acts of creation and of providence; nevertheless, God's actual words possess a normative interpretive value and thus provide the key to understanding his revelation elsewhere.

Second, the words of scripture are divinely inspired. That is, there is a connection between the minds and hands of the human authors of scripture and that of God, such that the written record of scripture is that which God would have it to be. To clarify further, this should not be understood to mean that scripture says what God says in the sense that, as Academic Dean at Westminster, I have authority to send out memos on behalf of the seminary's administration which represent the word of the President, even though he may never have been involved in their composition. It is not, if you like, a form of delegated authority or inspiration; the connection is a prior one which means that, deep and mysterious as the connection is, the words of scripture are both the words of the human authors and also the very words of God.

Third, the Princetonians argued for the inerrancy of original autographs. In other words, apparent conflicts between different texts are to be understood as the result of the process of textual transmission. It is this accent on the autographs that has garnered most hostility towards the Princetonians, and that from various quarters: those who see it as a function of an Enlightenment need for certainty (or control), to those who, with remarkable condescension, dismiss it as an ‘American’ doctrine, as if the fact that something is developed by somebody in the US renders it of only parochial significance.

While the three points are formally separable, there is clearly a very close connection between them, as becomes clear if we pose a series of questions to those who might wish to view them as entirely discrete issues. If God reveals himself through words, then what is the connection between the human words of God’s human agent and God’s intention? And if God’s inspiration of his words is prior to, or simultaneous with, their inscripturation, then how or why would errors appear in what is written? If God’s word does contain errors in its original delivery, is there an incipient spirit-letter opposition at work, where God’s word says one thing, but God actually says or intends something quite different? And, if such an opposition is there, how do we resolve it?

The Early Church

As hinted above, it is not my intention to demonstrate that the Princetonian view of scripture meets the criteria of the Vincentian canon – of that which was believed everywhere, at all times, by everyone – but the more modest one, that its basic elements were held by somebody, somewhere, at some time prior to the nineteenth century. Thus, in approaching the early church fathers, I do not claim to offer either an exhaustive, or even a representative, account of what they all believed about scripture. The documents we have from this period are too numerous to allow for such in a short paper, but also arguably only a sample of all the material actually written. Instead, I offer evidence that aspects of patristic thinking are consistent with later positions on scripture.

One of the most striking things about the writings now commonly known as the Apostolic Fathers, is the way in which scripture³ is central to the life of the church, is quoted with straightforward confidence, and with the apparent assumptions both that its meaning is clear and it is authoritative and thus quite capable of playing an important part in theological argument. For example, the *Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians* says at one point:

For I am convinced that you are all well trained in the sacred scriptures and that nothing is hidden from you (something not granted to me). Only as it is said in these scriptures ‘be angry and do not sin,’ [Eph. 4:26/Ps. 4:5] and ‘do not let the sun set on your anger.’ [Eph. 4:26]⁴

This use of scriptural writings indicates two things. First, it suggests that some kind of embryonic canon exists, whereby particular writings are deemed to have an authoritative quality. Second, and more important for the topic in hand, there is an assumption that God has revealed himself in the words of these writings, that what they say is binding because it is said by God.

This then raises the question about how the words of these writings are to be connected to God. Certainly, the idea that they are the speech of God, rooted in the work of the Holy Spirit, is present in these early writings. For example, 1 Clement 1:45 states the following: ‘Look carefully into the Scriptures, which are the true utterances of the Holy Spirit.’ The writer goes on just a few chapters later to identify the words of scripture with the prophetic utterances of God himself.⁵

These statements in 1 Clement do not offer an opinion on exactly how the process of inspiration should be understood in terms of its mechanics, just an assumption that the words of scripture are the Spirit-inspired words of God; but we do find such speculation elsewhere. Thus, the Greek Apologist of the second century, Athenagoras, makes the following statement:

We have the prophets as witnesses of the things we understand and believe. Men like Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah and other prophets declared things about God and the things of God. It would be irrational of us to disbelieve God's Spirit and accept mere human opinions instead, for God moved the mouths of the prophets as if they were musical instruments.⁶

Now, without wishing to argue that what Athenagoras proposes here is at all adequate as an account of the process of inspiration, it is worth noting that this is an example of the 'dictation' theory of inspiration, something not held by Hodge and Warfield, but also something which renders the role of human agent as so minimal in the process that the resulting text would presumably be precisely as God would want it; and that is, presumably, the assumption which underlies Athenagoras's thought at this point – what scripture says, God says, in a very direct manner.

This disregard for, or lack of interest in, the human authorship of scripture is evident elsewhere in the early church writers. Compare these following quotations:

First, Gregory the Great:

It is pointless to ask who wrote the book of Job, since the Holy Spirit is rightly believed to have been its author. In other words, the one who wrote it is the one who dictated what is to be written.⁷

Second, the Muratorian Fragment:

Although different things are taught in the different Gospels, there is no difference with respect to the faith of believers, because all of them were inspired by the same controlling Spirit.

Third, Theodoret of Cyr:

Some have said that not all the psalms come from David, but that some are the work of others. I have no opinion either way. What difference does it make to me whether they are all David's or whether some are the compositions of others, when it is clear that they are all the fruit of the Holy Spirit's inspiration?⁸

Of course, these writers are not necessarily saying that human authorship is of no significance. They were presumably aware that languages used were human languages and that the books of the Bible were of diverse literary genres and evidenced the different literary styles of their human authors. The point is not to deny the human but to underscore that the really important fact is the divine authorship, that it is this which is decisive for the content and authority of what is written. This reflects the fact that the main point at issue here is that of scripture's authority; and this authority is grounded upon the relationship between the words of the text and the words of God; human authorship is of only remote interest to this matter.

Of course, no treatment of any doctrinal issue in the early church is complete without some reference to Augustine and, as usual, he does not disappoint. In two letters to his contemporary, the Bible translator Jerome, the bishop of Hippo gives some fascinating insights into his own approach to scripture. In the first, Letter 28, Augustine is addressing the idea that scripture may contain incorrect statements in order to achieve a particular desired goal, as, for example, I might tell my children that the bogey man comes out at night, in order to make them stay in their bedrooms after lights out. Here is what Augustine says to such:

Once you admit that a false statement has been made out of a sense of duty, there will not be a single sentence in the entire Bible that will be free of such suspicion if it seems difficult in practice or hard to believe. In such circumstances it would be all too easy to explain the passage away by saying that the writer deceived his readers out of a sense of duty.⁹

Clearly, Augustine has no patience with this notion of 'godly deception' when applied to the Bible. We might also note that such a passage in Augustine seems to point away from a purely functional understanding of scripture's authority, where it is considered infallible because it achieves that which it is intended to achieve in terms of its impact upon the listener or the reader. Such approaches always involve some separation, or even opposition, between the letter and the spirit, between what is actually said and what is really intended. Augustine's argument here is akin to the kind of slippery slope argument sometimes used to defend post-Princetonian views of inerrancy: countenance an error in one place, and the whole edifice is eventually mired in uncertainty.

Further, Augustine also understands the moral ethical implications of such a position, and that not primarily in terms of the idea that God has engaged in deception but that the human interpreter now has another reason for avoiding the challenge of the Bible's message: any passage which I do not like, I can simply dismiss it as a contextual deception.

A second important passage on the nature of scripture occurs in Augustine's Letter 82, again to Jerome. Here is what the bishop says:

Of all the books of the world, I believe that only the authors of holy Scripture were totally free from error, and if I am puzzled by anything in them that seems to go against the truth, I do not hesitate to suppose that either the manuscript is faulty or the translator has not caught the sense of what was said, or I have failed to understand it for myself.¹⁰

This passage is important for a number of reasons. First, Augustine makes a clear statement that the authors of scripture were totally free from error. Given his statement in the earlier letter, it seems reasonable to take this statement at face value and assume that he is using the notion of 'error' to mean incorrect information or misleading statement, rather than some more slippery concept. Second, Augustine gives three reasons for perceived errors in scripture: faulty manuscripts, poor translation, or a fault in his own understanding. Of particular interest, in relation to later Princeton, is the first: faulty manuscripts. While the comment is too brief to build any elaborate theory of textual transmission relative to inspiration, it nonetheless clearly roots error in the manuscript tradition; and the implication, therefore, would seem to be that the originals were not prone to error but that these crept in by some other means, such as copyist error.

Thomas Aquinas

Given the vast nature of the medieval period, I want to focus on the figure of most theological significance for the church in the Middle Ages and, indeed, for later Catholicism: Thomas Aquinas. Despite the popular image of medieval theologians as overly preoccupied with fine logic and abstruse metaphysical speculation, medieval theologians had to work at significant exegetical engagement with the biblical text in order to qualify as teachers; further, many, like Aquinas, also continued to preach regularly throughout their careers. Thus, it is worth noting at the outset that the typical medieval scholastic theologian was probably more deeply and comprehensively acquainted with the text of scripture, albeit in Latin rather than the original languages, than the typical seminary graduate today.¹¹

Aquinas's doctrine of scripture includes a number of important points. Central to this is his notion of prophecy, and the implications this has for his understanding of inspiration and revelation. In the *Summa Theologiae*, he comments that:

It is requisite to prophecy that the intention of the mind be raised to the perception of Divine things: wherefore it is written (Ezekiel 2:1): 'Son of man, stand upon thy feet, and I will speak to thee.' This raising of the intention is brought about by the motion of the Holy Ghost, wherefore the text goes on to say: 'And the Spirit entered into me... and He set me upon my feet.' After the mind's intention has been raised to heavenly things, it perceives the things of God; hence the text continues: 'And I heard Him speaking to me.' Accordingly inspiration is requisite for prophecy, as regards the raising of the mind, according to Job 32:8, 'The inspiration of the Almighty giveth understanding': while revelation is necessary, as regards the very perception of Divine things, whereby prophecy is completed; by its means the veil of darkness and ignorance is removed, according to Job 12:22, 'He discovereth great things out of darkness.'¹²

It is worth noting, first, that Aquinas here builds his understanding of prophecy on the text of scripture itself, not on some prior dogmatic position, and also that he identifies the giving of prophecy with the exaltation of the human intellect in some way. This in fact allows him to make another key distinction, that between inspiration and revelation.¹³ Whereas revelation involves the direct transmission of some item of information to the prophet via a vision, or dictation, or some such, inspiration involves the exaltation of the human mind by the Spirit of God, such that the prophet is enabled to say or write supernatural truths to which he would not naturally have access.

The importance of the distinction is that it allows Aquinas to move away from a simple theory of verbal dictation as the means by which scripture is inspired. This is important, and it is worth remembering in all discussions of biblical inspiration, that neither the Bible nor the creedal and confessional traditions of the church, ever reduce the theory of inspiration to a single model. Yet for Aquinas, as for others, this refusal to reduce inspiration to dictation does not mean that the Holy Spirit does not superintend the words which are to be used.¹⁴

This role of the Holy Spirit in the inspiration of the scriptures was defined as a dogma of the Catholic faith by Pope Eugenius IV in his decretal, *pro Iacobitis*, in 1441, where it was declared that one and the same God is author of both Old and New Testaments, and that these books were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, which is the reason why they are received as canonical and venerated.¹⁵ Yet again, it is worth noting that the definition of the Bible as inspired by the Holy Spirit leaves out the details of how the mechanics of this inspiration should be understood – entirely appropriate in what is essentially a confessional document.

Scripture in the Reformation

Martin Luther

As with the patristic and medieval periods, it is important to understand that the context for discussion of scripture and its authority in the Reformation is considerably different from that of the nineteenth century. For the Reformers, the key issues were the sufficiency and perspicuity or clarity of scripture, with the matter of canon being a significant theme as well.¹⁶ These concerns generated an interest in linguistic and textual study which was ultimately to bear fruit in the kind of text-critical questions which informed the world of the Princetonians but they were not major concerns during the Reformation.

Nevertheless, scriptural sufficiency and clarity were involved with a number of assumptions about the text of scripture, as is clear from the writings of Luther. Indeed, in *The Bondage of the Will*, which is in part a response to Erasmus's assertion of the obscurity of the Bible on many points and of a Christianity conceived primarily as practical morality, Luther boldly and famously asserts the centrality of assertions in this oft-quoted passage:

Nothing is better known or more common among Christians than assertion. Take away assertions and you take away Christianity. Why, the Holy Spirit is given them from heaven, that he may glorify Christ [in them] and confess him even unto death – unless it is not asserting when one dies for one's confession and assertion.¹⁷

What is less frequently quoted is a statement he made just a few paragraphs before, which actually sets up the context for understanding what he means by *assertions*:

[I]t is not the mark of a Christian mind to take no delight in assertions; on the contrary, a man must delight in assertions or he will be no Christian. And by assertion – in order that we may not be misled by words – I mean a constant adhering, affirming, confessing, maintaining, and an invincible persevering; nor, I think, does the word mean anything else either as used by the Latins or by us in our time.

I am speaking, moreover, about the assertion of those things which have been divinely transmitted to us in the sacred writings.¹⁸

Luther's theology, placing law and gospel at its centre as the two fundamental categories whereby the relationship between God and humanity must be understood, inevitably sets the word, and also assertions, declarations of states of affairs, at the heart of the Christian faith; and this is reflected in his understanding of scripture – what it is and how it connects to God.

As far as inspiration is concerned, he can on occasion use language which points towards dictation. This, in his early lectures on the Psalms, the *Dictata*, he makes the following comment on Psalm 45:

[A]s he who waters and plants is nothing, but God who gives the increase (1 Cor. 3:7), so he who has the stylus or is the stylus or puts it to the tablet is nothing, but He who writes, namely, the writer writing swiftly, the Holy Spirit. Therefore, O prophet, it is for you to utter and be the pen.¹⁹

More typically, however, Luther prefers simply to use language of prophetic inspiration or the movement of the Holy Spirit to describe what happens in the writing of scripture, without giving details on the precise mechanics (for want of a better term) of how this connected to inscripturation. Thus, in commenting on Joel 2:28, he says:

Here he sets down three kinds of divine illumination: first, prophecy. This occurs when the mystery of Christ or the grace shown to the world through Christ is preached in clear detail, as when Jeremiah says (Jer. 31:33): 'I will put My law within them.' Also, when Paul or the other apostles are manifestly interpreting Scripture, this interpretation is prophecy.²⁰

Scripture here clearly refers to the Old Testament; thus, when Paul and the other apostles interpret the Old Testament in their letters, this is an action facilitated by the illumination of the Holy Spirit which guards the human writer from error.

Much has been made of Luther's apparently critical comments on the text of scripture and, of course, his rejection of the book of James. The latter must be understood first as an issue of canon; as to his critical remarks, it is important to bear in mind the comment of Mark Thompson, that such occasional comments need to be set in the context of his overwhelming confidence in the text of

scripture.²¹ This, for example, in commenting on Gal. 3:14 in his 1535 commentary on the letter, he declares the following:

Therefore if He Himself is the price of my redemption, if He Himself became sin and a curse in order to justify and bless me, I am not put off at all by passages of Scripture, even if you were to produce six hundred in support of the righteousness of works and against the righteousness of faith, and if you were to scream that Scripture contradicts itself. I have the Author and the Lord of Scripture, and I want to stand on His side rather than believe you. Nevertheless, it is impossible for Scripture to contradict itself except at the hands of senseless and stubborn hypocrites; at the hands of those who are godly and understanding it gives testimony to its Lord. Therefore see to it how you can reconcile Scripture, which, as you say, contradicts itself. I for my part shall stay with the Author of Scripture.²²

Earlier in his career, responding to the critique of his views by Sylvester Prierias, he cites Augustine and affirms that:

I have learned to give this honour only to those books which are called canonical: to believe most assuredly that none of their writers erred.²³

Of course, such brief comments are insufficient to allow us to reconstruct Luther's doctrine of inspiration and authority in any elaborate way, but they are nonetheless suggestive of, and consistent with, the kind of statements about verbal inerrancy later advocated by the Princetonians. Certainly, Luther has such a high view of the biblical text and its absolute truthfulness that he is quite comfortable in hanging an entire argument on a single text. Thus, in addressing the issue of monastic vows, he refers to 1 Tim. 4:1-3 and declares:

On the authority of this text alone (since it is a word of the Holy Spirit, who is our God blessed forever, Amen), I am bold enough to declare that all monks be absolved from their vows, and I pronounce with confidence that their vows are unacceptable and worthless in the sight of God.²⁴

In sum, we find no elaborate theory of inspiration in the works of Luther, nor do we find significant wrestling with textual problems, but we do find a robust assertion of the full truthfulness of scripture, its identity as the speech of God, the importance of its verbal form and content, and its inspiration by the Holy Spirit.

Heinrich Bullinger

The Swiss Reformation did not differ substantially in the high view of scripture we find in Luther. This, in *The Ten Theses of Bern* (1528) the first two articles establish the priority of the Word over the church (in opposition to Catholic claims to the contrary) 'and the normative, regulative nature of the Word regarding church laws and statutes.'²⁵ The most significant Swiss theologian of the sixteenth century, Heinrich Bullinger, devoted one of the sermons in his monumental treatment of theology, the *Decades*, to the nature of the Word of God. Given that the *Decades* was, in its day, a work of equal significance and influence to Calvin's *Institutes* and, under Archbishop Whitgift, the standard theological textbook for ministerial students in Elizabethan England, his thinking in this area is worthy of note.

For Bullinger, the word of God is authoritative because it is spoken by God, who cannot lie: God of himself naturally speaketh truth; he is just, good, pure, immortal, eternal: therefore it followeth that the word of God also, which cometh out of the mouth of God, is true, just, without deceit and guile, without error or evil affection, holy, pure, good, immortal, and everlasting.²⁶

True to his historical interest, Bullinger then proceeds to outline the history of revelation, how God initially spoke to the patriarchs and then eventually came to Moses, whom he inspired by the Holy Spirit to write the words down:

The Holy Ghost, which was wholly in the mind of Moses, directed his hand as he writ. There was no ability wanting in Moses that was necessary for a most absolute writer. He was abundantly instructed by his ancestors: for he was born of the holiest progeny of those fathers, who God appointed to be witnesses of his will, commandments, and judgments... He was able, therefore, to write a true and certain history, from the beginning of the world even until his own time. Whereunto he added those things which were done among the people of God in his own life-time, whereof he was a very true witness as one that saw and heard them.²⁷

It is important to note here that Bullinger clearly does not conceive of the inspiration of Moses as necessarily requiring something akin to dictation as the only means of inscripturation. He sees Moses as heir to an oral tradition, and as witness to the great saving acts of God in his own lifetime; thus, from a human perspective, Moses acts as author and editor of the written material; yet this is still clearly under the direction of the Holy Spirit. Elsewhere in the lecture, he applies the same kind of thinking to the prophets, who both expound and apply Moses teaching, and do so under the special inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit who was thus the primary author.²⁸ Further, the New Testament writers, using the cumulative testimony of the Old Testament books, did the same in writing the Gospels and the Letters.²⁹

Thus, as with Luther, so with Bullinger: here we have a theologian who is committed to the notion that scripture is divine speech, inspired by the Holy Ghost. Like Luther, Bullinger does not articulate a hard-and-fast single model for explaining the precise mechanics of the process of inspired inscripturation; further, and perhaps in a way that Luther did not, Bullinger exhibits sensitivity to the historical process issue of revelation and inscripturation.

John Calvin

In a brief essay such as this, it is impossible to do justice to Calvin's thoughts on scripture (any more than those of Luther, Bullinger or any other major Reformer of the sixteenth century). Nevertheless, a few basic points can be made. First, Calvin stands with Luther and Bullinger as seeing the text of scripture as providing the basic objective cognitive ground for the construction of theology. This should not be understood as pointing towards a kind of 'no creed but the Bible' theology in the sense that Calvin just read his Bible and thought up his theology from scratch. Far from it: Calvin's theological and exegetical works clearly demonstrate that he read widely in the history of theology and exegesis and developed his theology in conscious dialogue with writers from the past and from his own generation.

Second, Calvin's emphasis (typical of reformation era Protestantism) on the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit in applying the word to its readers and, even more, its hearers, should not be set in opposition to the objectivity of the text as truth. The opposition between dynamic Spirit and static word is something of a modern preoccupation, and not an issue of any great significance for the Reformers.³⁰

With this as background, it is evident in Calvin's writing that he did not simply regard the content but also the form, the words, of scripture as of divine origin. Indeed, in his comment on 2 Tim. 3:16, he refers to the prophets as not speaking by themselves but rather as 'organs of the Holy Spirit,' a comment whose most natural meaning would seem to indicate some form of dictation. Further, in the *Institutes*, he declares that:

[n]o other word is to be held as the Word of God, and given place as such in the church, than what is contained first in the Law and the Prophets, then in the writing of the apostles; and the only authorized way of teaching in the church is by the prescription and standard of his Word. From this also we infer that the only thing granted to the apostles was that which the prophets had of old. They were to expound the ancient Scripture and to show that what is taught there has been fulfilled in Christ. Yet they were not to do this except from the Lord, that is, with Christ's Spirit as precursor in a certain measure dictating the words.³¹

While this is far removed from an elaborate theory of inspiration and from any later discussion of autographs and inerrancy, the concept of verbal inspiration is clearly present. What is said here is consistent with what we have seen elsewhere in both Luther and Bullinger.

Scripture in Lutheran and Reformed Orthodoxy

In the century after the initial reforming impulses of Luther and his contemporaries, debates about scripture underwent significant development. In large part, this was driven by the polemical context, as Roman Catholic authors, such as Robert Bellarmine, responded to Protestantism's opposition of scripture to the authority of the papacy by pressing hard on matters of perspicuity and sufficiency, and also defending the authority of the Vulgate translation. This, combined with the establishment of Protestantism within the cultural context of the university, meant that its theologians, reformed and Lutheran, asked new questions pertaining to scripture.

Thus, we find at the end of the sixteenth century William Whitaker responding at length in his *Disputations on Holy Scripture* (1588) to Bellarmine on issues of canon, authority, perspicuity, and sufficiency; yet the kind of critical questions with which we are now so familiar had not yet developed as significant topics for discussion. This is also evident from the *Irish Articles* of 1615, which devote 6 articles to the nature and function of scripture, and, while asserting inspiration, give no detailed account of the ways in which this is to be conceived as having taken place. By the time of the Westminster Assembly in the 1640s, critical debates about the text of scripture, particularly relating to the antiquity of the Masoretic vowel points, were emerging, and thus the Westminster Confession offers in Chapter 1 a much more elaborate statement on the nature and authority of scripture. Again, however, it is worth noting that, while inspiration is asserted, it is not defined – an entirely appropriate move in a confessional document, given the diversity of models of inspiration in scripture itself and in the history of the church's reflection on the matter. Even so, a basic commitment to what we now call inerrancy is evident in the era of orthodoxy.

While it is important to bear in mind Richard Muller's comment on the different function which the original autographs play in post-Reformation Orthodoxy to the specific logical arguments of Hodge and Warfield, there is nonetheless significant continuity between the Orthodox and the Princetonians both in terms of the conception of verbal inspiration and the historical reality of inerrant autographs, albeit now lost.³² Thus Lutheran theologian Johann Wilhelm Baier (1647-95) defines inspiration as follows:

Divine inspiration was that agency by which God supernaturally communicated to the intellect of those who wrote, not only the correct conception of all that was to be written, but also the conception of the words themselves and of everything by which they were to be expressed, and by which He also instigated their will to the act of writing.³³

In fact, Lutheran Orthodox theologians were capable of revisiting the language of dictation, not so much to articulate the precise mechanics of inspiration as to underscore the fact that the very words of scripture were themselves inspired. Thus, David Hollaz (1648-1713):

- I. The conceptions of all that is contained in the Holy Scriptures were immediately communicated by the Holy Spirit to the prophets and apostles.
- II. All the words, without exception, contained in the Holy Manuscript, were dictated by the Holy Spirit to the pen of the prophets and apostles.³⁴

Such statements are not unique to Lutheran Orthodoxy and, indeed, the same sentiments can be found frequently among Reformed Orthodox authors. Thus, we find John Owen also referring to the inerrancy of the autographs in his rather bad tempered debate with Brian Walton. Here, he acknowledges that the original autographs are lost and, indeed, in the case of the New Testament, were never actually gathered together in a single volume, since the originals were very quickly copied, circulated, and recopied.³⁵ Owen is also very clear that this copying process was not divinely inspired and that this is the source of the various variant readings that occur, although Owen absolutely repudiates the idea that the copies are susceptible to the same casual errors as one might find in other profane works of literature. On the contrary, the care and precision used by the copyists, deriving from their knowledge that they were handling sacred texts, was used providentially by God to ensure a remarkably high level of textual accuracy in transmission.³⁶ Nevertheless, Owen also states the following:

[T]he whole scripture, entire as given out from God, without any loss, is preserved in the copies of the originals yet remaining.³⁷

In other words, whilst the collation of various manuscripts does indicate a number of variant readings and textual problems, the whole content of the original autographs is preserved in some form or another. It is not the purpose of this paper to address the problems this position itself raises; but merely to indicate that the origin of the extant texts in inerrant autographs is as basic to Owen as it was to Augustine; it is no innovation of the nineteenth century Princeton school.

Of course, in the seventeenth century the orthodox are developing these arguments against the background of the increasing critical pressure produced by the attention to linguistic and textual matters which commitment to scripture in the original languages produced in its wake. This led to a number of specific challenges. For the Reformed, we might note in particular the work of the Saumurian theologian, Louis Cappel, and the production of the London Polyglot Bible (1654-57) by Brian Walton and the work of Saumurian theologian, Louis Cappel, particularly his *Critica Sacra* (1650). These works both highlighted the textual variants of the manuscripts and, particularly in the case of Cappel, made the case for the historical development of the Hebrew language. Most significantly, Cappel (followed by Walton) argued for a late date for the Masoretic vowel points in the Hebrew text. This position would have been unexceptionable in the early years of the Reformation, when it had been assumed that the consonantal text was quite sufficient in itself for translation and interpretation; but, by the mid-seventeenth century, the nature of Catholic polemic, pressing hard against the issue of the sufficiency and perspicuity of scripture, had caused something of a revision of thinking among some Protestants.

Nevertheless, the impulse to defend the antiquity of the vowel points, as in the work of Francis Turretin and John Owen, should not be seen as positive evidence of a rationalizing move within Protestant Orthodoxy; given the plausibility structures of the philological and linguistic work at the time, defence of such was perfectly explicable. As we have noted above, a high view of verbal inspiration and of the biblical text is not something which emerges in the seventeenth century but which has been central to Christianity from its very inception, even as the precise nature of the challenges and their significance altered over time.

Conclusion

In looking at the doctrine of scripture from the early church to the seventeenth century, a number of points emerge. First, the notion that the very words of scripture are inspired, truthful, and exactly what God wants them to be, is present from the Apostolic Fathers onwards. Second, *that* scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit, and exactly *how* this inspiration takes place, are two separate points, and theologians exhibit a variety of opinions on the latter, ranging from early theories of dictation, through the crucial distinction between revelation and inspiration made by Thomas Aquinas, to the broad consensus statements of the post-Reformation Protestant confessions. Arguably, this consensus reflects the Bible's own account of inspiration and inscripturation, which is not tied to one single model. Third, the kind of critical textual questions to which the Princetonians were responding arise in the seventeenth century as a result of Protestant prioritizing of scripture over church tradition in terms of the former's sufficiency and perspicuity, and the linguistic and textual studies which Protestantism's scripture principle brought in its wake. It is at this point that significant discussion of autographs and scribal error develops, alongside an understanding of textual history (though, as we noted, these issues were adumbrated in the correspondence of Augustine to Jerome).

As a result, if the Princetonians are to be seen as innovators, it cannot be in terms of their articulation of the concept of inerrant autographs or in their concern for verbal inspiration and the connection of this to notions of truth. On these points, they stand within an established tradition of Christian discourse which goes back beyond the Reformation to the early church.

We might, however, simply note in conclusion that the challenges faced by Protestants today are closely analogous to those faced by the seventeenth century orthodox: text critical issues will not go away and demand that Protestants continue to work in areas of textual and linguistic study; but (more importantly) the post-critical mindset is no more of an ally to orthodoxy than the critical, on the grounds that, through its assertion of the primacy of hermeneutical theory and thus the obscurity of the text in itself, it represents a challenge very similar to that mounted against the sufficiency and clarity of scripture in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by Roman Catholic scholars such as Bellarmine.

¹ The literature on the Princetonians' approach to scripture is extensive, and frequently linked to theological and ecclesiastical debates within the contemporary church. See especially: Jack Rogers and Donald B. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: an Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979); John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: a Critique of the Rogers-McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982); A.T.B. McGowan, *The Divine Spiration of Scripture: Retrieving an Evangelical Heritage* (Leicester: Apollos, 1997); Richard B. Gaffin, *God's Word in Servant Form: Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck on the Doctrine of Scripture* (Reformed Academic Press: Jackson, 2008). Though not addressing Princeton in any great depth, Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics II: Holy Scripture* (Baker: Grand Rapids, 2003), is now the starting-point for any future discussion of the development of the doctrine of scripture in Reformed theology.

² The classic statement of this position is that of A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield, 'Inspiration,' in *The Presbyterian Review* 6 (1881), 225-60. Further articles by Warfield can be found in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948) and *Revelation and Inspiration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1927)

³ I am aware that the question of which scriptures are considered canonical in the immediate post-Apostolic period is a complex one; my point here is simply that the Apostolic Fathers quoted certain writings, later recognized as canonical, as straightforwardly authoritative.

⁴ *The Letter of Polycarp to the Philipians* 12, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 219

⁵ 'Beloved, you understand the holy Scriptures very well. You have looked deeply into the prophecies of God.' 1 Clem. 1:53

⁶ Athenagoras, *A Plea Regarding Christians*, 9

⁷ *Morals on the Book of Job*, Preface 1.2

⁸ Preface to the Psalms

⁹ Letter 28.3. Cf. Athanasius, Festal Letter 19 (Easter 347), 3: 'Now, it is the opinion, of some, that the Scriptures do not agree together, or that God, Who gave the commandment, is false. But there is no disagreement whatever, far from it, neither can the father, Who is truth, lie.'

¹⁰ Letter 82.3

¹¹ 'Granting... that the typical progress of the medieval doctor was from *cursor Biblicus*, responsible for the basic course on the Bible; to *baccalaureus sententiarum*, responsible for the introductory theology course; to commentator and doctor, the amount of biblical knowledge available to virtually all of the major medieval formulators of theology was considerable.' Muller, *PRRD II*, 44

¹² *Summa 2a2ae 171.1*

¹³ *Summa 2a2ae 171.5*

¹⁴ Cf. *Summa 3a 60 5*, resp. ad obj. 1

¹⁵ 'Unum atque eundem Deum Veteris et Novi Testamenti, hoc est, Legis et Prophetarum atque Evangelii profitetur auctorem: quoniam eodem Spiritu Sancto inspirante utriusque Testamenti Sancti locuti sunt: quorum libros suscipit et venerator qui titulis sequentibus continentur.' Denzinger, 706. As an interesting aside, in his encyclical, *De studiis s. Scripturae* (1893), Leo XIII reaffirms the inspiration of scripture by the Holy Spirit and also declares that God's authorship of scripture means that the Bible is without error: Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (Freiburg: Herder, 1937) 1951

¹⁶ The issue of canon in the reformation primarily focuses on the status of the so-called Apocryphal Books (see, for example, Belgic Confession VI, Thirty-Nine Articles VI, Westminster Confession I.3), but also famously touched upon the status of the Book of James, given Luther's profound reservations about its lack of Christ and its contradiction of Paul on justification.

¹⁷ *LW 31*, 21

¹⁸ *LW 31*, 19-20

¹⁹ *LW 10*, 212

²⁰ *LW 18*,108. Cf. 'However, we do not let ourselves be troubled by the blasphemies which the devil, through the mouths of his lying servants, speaks against Christ the Lord—now against His divinity, now against His humanity—and by the attacks which he then makes against Christ's office and work. But we cling to the Scriptures of the prophets and apostles, who spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21).' *LW 22*, 23 (commenting on John 1:3); 'Paul is profoundly moved, and in great zeal and fervor of the Spirit he speaks sheer thunderbolts against the Law and against circumcision. In his anger over the great wickedness of it all, the Holy Spirit wrests such passionate words out of him.' *LW 27*, 9 (commenting on Gal. 5:2)

²¹ Mark D. Thompson, *A Sure Ground on which to Stand: the Relation of Authority and Interpretive Method in Luther's Approach to Scripture* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2005) 140

²² Martin Luther *Luther's Works*, 55 vols., eds. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-86) 26.295

²³ *WA 1*, 647.22-24 (my translation)

²⁴ *LW 44*, 282

²⁵ *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation*, ed. James T. Dennison (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008) 41-42

²⁶ *The Decades of Henry Bullinger*, ed. Thomas Harding (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004), I.i, 37

²⁷ *Decades* I.i, 47

²⁸ '[I]t is well perceived by many arguments that they [the prophetic books] took not their beginning of the prophets themselves as chief authors; but were inspired from God out of heaven by the Holy Spirit of God: for it is God which, dwelling by his Spirit in the minds of the prophets, speaketh to us by their mouths. And for that cause have they a most large testimony at the hand of Christ, and his elect apostles.' *Decades* I.i, 50.

²⁹ 'For some, verily, writ an history of the words and deeds of Christ, and some of the words and deeds of the apostles. Other some sent sundry epistles to diverse nations. In all which, to confirm the truth, they use the scripture of the law and the prophets, even as we read that the Lord oftentimes did... Although therefore that the apostles were men, yet their doctrine, first of all taught by a lively expressed voice, and after that set down in writing with pen and ink, is the doctrine of God and the very true word of God.' *Decades* I.i, 53-54.

³⁰ The Reformers did make a routine distinction between mere intellectual assent to the truth of scripture (what Melancthon dubbed 'historical faith') and true, saving faith; but the difference was in the mode by which the individual grasped the truth, not a quality of the objective basis of the truth in God's revelation.

³¹ *Institutes* IV.viii.8

³² *PRRD* II, 413-15

³³ Heinrich Schmid (ed.), *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961), 39

³⁴ Schmid, 45

³⁵ Owen, *Works* 16, 353-54

³⁶ *Ibid.* 355-57

³⁷ *Ibid.* 357