

WHEN PEOPLE SPEAK FOR GOD

by

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book began as a compilation of previously written material. I have written several essays that I published on the web, both on my Energion.com Webzine and on my blogs. Biblical inspiration, the gift of prophecy, God speaking to people, and people claiming that God told them certain things very often will become part of the discussions when I'm teaching in person. A number of readers of the internet material have suggested I get it in print, as they find reading 50-60 pages at a time on screen difficult. Those who attend my classes often ask me for something they can read for more information on what I teach about inspiration. Thus far I've referred them to URLs, often an unsatisfactory option.

My original plan was to collect the essays, write a couple of connecting or explanatory notes, add topical and scripture indexes, and publish. Ah, that was wishful thinking! I may be the boss but I'm an incredibly *cruel* and *evil* boss. Thus when I looked at the collected essays I said to myself, "This won't do at all. Get thee to work!" (Note that the archaic language is not an indication of divine inspiration.)

The backbone of the book is my essay *Inspiration, Biblical Authority, and Inerrancy*, which you can check out on the web at <http://rpp.energion.com/inspired.shtml>. It has been edited and

scattered throughout the book where it logically fits in. The illustrations have also been redone by Jason Neufeld (jasonneufelddesign.com). Added to this is material on the modern gift of prophecy, and practical considerations for handling the situation when someone claims divine authority for their words. You'll find almost all the remaining material in this book by checking out the *Biblical Inspiration* category on both my *Threads from Henry's Web* blog (<http://www.energionpubs.com/wordpress>) and my *Participatory Bible Study Blog* (<http://www.deepbiblestudy.net>).

Besides the print format, this book provides you with better organization, a **Table of Contents**, a complete **Scripture Index**, and a fairly detailed **Topical Index**.

I would like to acknowledge a number of teachers who saw me through my own struggles with Biblical inspiration.

- ✓ My uncle Pastor Don F. Neufeld who got me started studying Greek
- ✓ Prof. J. Paul Grove, at Walla Walla College who worked with me through the servant passages of Isaiah
- ✓ Dr. Alden Thompson at Walla Walla College who saw me through Biblical Hebrew and Old Testament history
- ✓ Dr. Malcolm Maxwell, Walla Walla College, who challenged my theology and exegesis at all times
- ✓ Prof. Lucille Knapp, Walla Walla College, who taught me to see the human side while also teaching me Greek grammar
- ✓ Dr. Leona Glidden Running, Andrews University, my graduate advisor who taught me about the importance of empowering women in the church while also teaching me Middle Egyptian and Akkadian
- ✓ Dr. Larry Geraty, Andrews University, who encouraged me to think about publishing. It took around 25 years, but I eventually headed that way!

- ✓ Laney Beard, who read parts of this book and made suggestions that helped me to clarify it.
- ✓ My wife Jody, who listened to numerous selections, helped me with wording, and who is also patient enough to live with someone who is obsessively editing a manuscript!

All errors, weaknesses, and heresies are, of course, totally my own. I do not in any way intend to suggest that these wonderful people would necessarily endorse my conclusions.

I hope and pray that this collection helps you in your own efforts to hear God speak to you.

PREFACE

This book is the result of practical experience and personal exposure to the Bible. It is not going to summarize all the theological positions that the church has ever held on the inspiration of scripture. It's not going to be a work of deep theology. I also intended it to be short, about 80-100 pages in 12 point font, but as I write this I'm threatening 200 pages, and it may get a bit larger than that. (It ended up around 275 pages.) Nonetheless I'm going to try to keep it straightforward and practical.

The question people ask me when they come for prayer or advice is this: How can I know what God's will is for my life? Now I could respond by telling them that the Bible is completely inspired in every word, known as *verbal plenary inspiration*. But what exactly does that mean to you? I could respond by stating that the Bible is historically and scientifically inerrant, but nobody has ever come to me for prayer over a historical or scientific issue.

What people want to know is precisely what God expects of them. They want to know God's will and purpose for their lives. They think they can find that out in the Bible, but they aren't sure how. Often they have tried reading, but they haven't managed to get the answers that they are looking for.

It seems to me that the answers we give in theology classes and in churches tend to miss the point. I also think many of those answers are wrong, but that's actually a less important issue. If one has the means of pursuing the answer, then it is much less important whether one has arrived at an answer yet. With the means, answers will come.

I see a similar problem with Bible study and prayer. Often when we try to make a case for the power of prayer, we emphasize that God answers prayer. There's the acronym PUSH—pray until something happens. We conduct scientific studies on whether or not prayer works. But we miss the simple fact that prayer is not a means to make God do the things that we want him to do. If prayer was the means by which we could trigger desired responses from God, then such scientific tests might be relevant. But prayer is about us having a conversation with God. Prayer is successful if you have that conversation. Only you know whether that is taking place, and you are the only one who needs to know.

Bible study is similar. You will find out soon enough that I don't accept the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy. That scares some people, because they believe that the Bible is their standard, and the idea that their standard for living might contain errors is frightening. But that ignores a great deal of what the Bible itself is about. Again, it's a matter of conversation.

I believe that most of us come to the Bible looking for *information*, while God comes to the Bible looking for *conversation*. These are not mutually exclusive options. But if our focus is not similar to God's, either in prayer or in scripture reading, then I think we will tend to miss the point.

In fact, over time I have come to see less and less difference between my devotional times that are spent in prayer and those spent in Bible study. I can speak to God during either time, and I can listen for God to speak during either time.

Some years ago I worked for Radio Shack. One function of a salesman is to match the customer to just the right item or part. An elderly lady, clearly not too comfortable with technology, came in to buy a “telephone cord.” Now at the time, “telephone cord” could mean any of a number of things. One type of cord would connect the handset to the base unit. A few different types of cords could connect the telephone to the wall jack as well. It took a few minutes for me to get it clear that the cord she wanted connected the phone base unit to the wall jack. I was hoping both ends would be RJ-11 or 14 plugs, but just to make sure I said, “What does the other end look like? Let me show you the possibilities.”

“It doesn’t have any other end,” she replied.

Now I want you to know that I did figure out the correct “other end” for her cord, and she went home a satisfied customer. But I think that many people view prayer and Bible study as a sort of one-ended cord. Doctrines of inspiration tend to be essentially doctrines of God. God is perfect, so the Bible must be perfect. So what? I have to read it, interpret it, and apply it, and I’m a very imperfect person.

In order to have an effective understanding of inspiration, we have to understand both ends of the cord, and in this case the cord is much more like a network, with extenders along the way, and we have to understand how each of those connections work as well.

In this book I plan to examine the function of inspiration by looking at how it happened, and how it happens. Most books about inspiration are solely about scripture—the written text. We write separately about the gift of prophecy in the church today and the words of scripture. Some people have become quite angry when I try to combine them, as though it was unfair.

One person with whom I discussed this issue on the Internet was offended by this question: When you hear a voice, how do you know it’s the voice of God? He said, “We’re not talking about hearing voices. We’re talking about the Bible!”

But when God tells Abraham to leave his country and go to a place he didn't know, he was hearing a voice. He may have been having a vision. We don't know. But whether it was an ordinary voice, or a voice in a vision, he heard a voice. But he didn't have any written scripture. Because he followed the voice that he heard, we have scripture. There are many, many people in the Bible who heard voices. If you are disturbed by people hearing voices, you probably should choose something other than the Bible as your reading material.

Think of one end of this telephone cord as God, and the other as human beings. On the one hand, many conservative Christians see the one and only critical element to be the sovereignty and power of God. In the Calvinist tradition, God chooses who will be saved and then saves them. We talk about human activity, but there is no point in the process at which Calvinism allows human activity to be significant. The cord has just one end! It may be people who are saved, but the people don't have a function in that process other than to be acted upon.

On the other hand, many liberal Christians put the focus so thoroughly on humanity that the only thing that matters is what a human being can do and become. God is again effectively outside of the loop. The cord has one end—it's just the opposite end.

Now please don't remind me that many Christians, Calvinists, conservatives, liberals, and others, are not at the extremes I've described. I know that. That's why they are called *extremes*. But I do know that the extremes exist, and I believe there are many who might not like the description who nonetheless behave as though the cord has only one end.

So my goal here is to look at how people hear from God, how their writings might be accepted and collected (by them or others), how those might come to be a part of scripture, and then how we can hear God's voice through that scripture. But it's also about how someone living today can hear God's voice, then relate what they heard by

speaking or writing, while listeners respond. What is the appropriate way to go about testing, understanding, and applying this?

Think about this: If you heard a voice, one you thought was audible and not just in your head, and it told you to pack all your earthly goods and put them in a moving van and move, but told you that you would be told your destination after you drove the moving van out of the driveway, how would you react?

If you're a Christian, and you said, "No way," you may need to think a bit about your use of the Bible. That is precisely what Abraham did. Jesus followed what his Father told him, and walked right into crucifixion. Are you comfortable in their company?

If you're not a Christian, this book will be of less interest to you. I'm not trying to prove the inspiration of the Bible or of prophets from outside the community, testing them by some objective standard. I am looking at how they are used in Christianity and how they can function. I don't totally ignore objective tests here, but they are not my main focus.

Let's explore these ideas together.

But as if, in all the instances of this covering (i.e., of this history), the logical connection and order of the law had been preserved, we would not certainly believe, when thus possessing the meaning of Scripture in a continuous series, that anything else was contained in it save what was indicated on the surface; so for that reason divine wisdom took care that certain stumbling-blocks, or interruptions, to the historical meaning should take place, by the introduction into the midst (of the narrative) of certain impossibilities and incongruities; that in this way the very interruption of the narrative might, as by the interposition of a bolt, present an obstacle to the reader, whereby he might refuse to acknowledge the way which conducts to the ordinary meaning; and being thus excluded and debarred from it, we might be recalled to the beginning of another way, in order that, by entering upon a narrow path, and passing to a loftier and more sublime road, he might lay open the immense breadth of divine wisdom.

-- Origen, De Principiis, Book IV.15

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