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A Spiritu Sancto Dictata

Calvin's Concept Regarding the Inspiration of the Holy Scripture*

Talking about Calvin's concept regarding the nature of the inspiration of the Holy Bible means taking into consideration a topic which has been and still is subject to heated debates and which presents no unity of opinion within the same religious tradition. Talking about Calvin's conception on the topic also means referring par excellence to the inspired character of the Biblical Books, which house God's wisdom, proving of utmost importance to man's redemption.

Calvin's opinion

The Holy Spirit has inspired writers of the Bible; the Bible is not a simple work of literary art among all the others, but it holds a unique religious, moral and practical authority. The Scripture is *God-breathed*: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (NIV, 2 Tim. 3:16); it is God's Word and revelation. The prophets and the apostles have been "moved by the Holy Spirit" (ASV, 2 Pet. 1:21), God has spoken to us through their mouth. Calvin places the same emphasis on the authority and the divine origin of the Scriptures, the Bible's authority *comes* from Him whom *breathes* it, the source of the Bible's authority is God Himself. "In order to uphold the authority of Scripture, he [Paul] declares that he is *divinely inspired*":¹ therefore, we must "give the credit to the holy prophets which is due to God", because they "obediently followed the Spirit as their guide, who ruled in their mouth as in his own sanctuary".²

Talking about the inspired character of the Holy Scripture means talking about its divinity and authority, its unique normative character regarding faith and Christian life. The word of the Scripture has authority; it demands absolute obedience from us, because it is the Word of God, because it comes from God. "The Holy Scripture derives its authority exclusively from God only, who is the author of it", wrote Benedict Picet.³ The divinity the Holy Scripture goes hand in hand with its profitability (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16): for the Scripture to be useful to us, we must first be convinced that God is its author.⁴

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¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, trans. by the Rev. William Pringle (Edinburgh: C.T.S., 1856), 248.

² John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, trans. by the Rev. John Owen (Edinburgh: C.T.S., 1855), 391.

³ *Christian Theology*, trans. by Frederick Reyroux (London: R. B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 1834), 35.

⁴ CO, 54, 285.

Only the Canonical Bible is the Word of God, word with authority within the Church: it is an *inspired* word, a *dictated* word.

“Let this then be sure an axiom – that there is no word of God to which place should be given in the Church save that which is contained, first, in the Law and Prophets; and secondly, in the writings of the Apostles, and that the only due method of teaching in the Church is according to the prescription and rule of his word”, Calvin stated.⁵ The word of God is the only standard of the whole teaching of the Church. The apostles have allowed themselves only to present the Scripture received from their predecessors, all the apostles did what they did through God, with the Holy Spirit “dictating words to them”.⁶ Only the Spirit, in this case, is originary and original,⁷ the prophet or the apostle practically limiting themselves to repeating the *words (verba)* previously coming upon them from God. We also reach this conclusion after analysing the verb *praeēō*, from the Latin text of *Institution* (“idipsum tamen non facerent nisi ex Domino, hoc est, praeēunte et verba quodammodo dictante Christi Spiritu”).⁸

The ambassador communicates a message, he is entitled to send it further, to repeat the words whose author is another⁹. As the reformer puts it in the analysis of Peter’s first *Epistle*, ch. I, v.12: “He further reminds them, that under the banner of the same Spirit, by his dictation and guidance, the Gospel was preached, lest they might think of anything human in this case”¹⁰

The apostles were the *ambassadors* of Christ, preaching a doctrine which was not *invented*, but merely *recorded* by them. Unlike their followers, the apostles had a unique position, they were “sure and authentic amanuenses of the Holy Spirit”,¹¹ “certi et authentici Spiritus sancti amanuenses”,¹² and that is why their writing must be considered as *oracles of God* (“Dei oraculis”).¹³

This is a distinctive feature of our religion: “that we know that God hath spoken to us, and are fully convinced that the prophets did not speak at their own suggestion, but that, being organs of the Holy Spirit, the only uttered what they had been commissioned from heaven to declare”. Hereupon, “the Law and the Prophets are not a doctrine delivered according to the will and pleasure of men, but dictated by the Holy Spirit” (*a Spiritu Sancto dictatam*).¹⁴ The Holy Scripture comes exclusively from God; it has nothing human in its teachings.

T. H. L. Parker, in his work *Calvin’s Preaching*¹⁵ references the next Calvin text, which indicates the manner in which the reformer conceived the process of God’s inspiring the writers of the Bible, meaning the role of the human factor in creating the

⁵ *Inst.* IV, 8, 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ “The Prophets were not innovators, but expositors of the Law”, T. H. L. Parker writes in *Calvin’s Preaching* (Westminster, John Knox Press, 1992), 6.

⁸ OS, 5, 140.

⁹ The ambassador has been “called and commissioned by God for this work, but also... because his message is the message given by God, it is the will and mind of the Sender” (T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching*, p. 29).

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 42.

¹¹ *Inst.* IV, 8, 9.

¹² OS., 5, 141.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, 248–249.

¹⁵ *Ed. cit.*, 11.

holy writings: Paul does not state either that “Moses was an excellent man”, or that “Isaiah possessed wonderful eloquence”, as in his writings he identifies nothing regarding the two. On the contrary, he says that Moses and Isaiah had been “organs of the Holy Spirit, and that their tongues were so guided that they put forward nothing of their own”. God spoke “by their mouth”, used them as “faithful dispensers of the treasure committed to them”.¹⁶

The Bible is a “statement of God’s will”¹⁷, its whole content is a statement of God’s expectations regarding mankind. Moses and the other prophets of the Old Testament were not the *authors* of the holy writings, but their *writers*: Moses was not the *author* of the Law, only its *writer* or *recorder*, “sous la bouche de Dieu”.¹⁸ This actually represents the authority of the Law, for it is He we follow, “not some mortal creature”, but our almighty God.¹⁹ The Holy Spirit also spoke through the Apostle Paul, guiding his speech so that he did not use any redundant words.²⁰ Extrapolating the reformer’s statements regarding Jeremiah, we note that the Holy Spirit guided the mind and tongue of the prophets, so that they may recite what God commanded to them.²¹ Although the words that God dictated to His servant are known as Jeremiah’s words, practically speaking, these are not human words, as they did not come from any mortal man, but from God Himself. “Ita etiam sermons Jeremiae vocantur quos servo suo dictavit Deus, interea proprie loquendo non sunt hominis sermons, quia non profecti sunt ab homine mortali, sed ab uno Deo”.²²

Inspiration is the unique work of the Holy Spirit. The Bible is inspired at all levels, in fact, if one cannot trust the words of the Bible, one cannot trust anything, because the Bible is made up of words.²³ The Bible itself claims to be the Word of God, God speaks to man like a human being, the Holy Spirit *speaks, dictates* through the mouth of His chosen men, He *dictates* His words (*verbis dictari*).²⁴ We are dealing with verbal inspiration, literal and complete, because the Bible is made up of words! “The old prophecies were dictated by Christ”.²⁵ The Scriptures turn our attention onto the God their books acknowledge: God Himself speaks and reveals Himself in the Scriptures and through the Scriptures.

“Danielem non loquutum esse ex proprio sensu, sed dictum fuisse a spiritu sancto quidquid protulit”.²⁶ When he speaks, Daniel does not express his own judgement, his

¹⁶ CO, 54, 286.

¹⁷ CO, 26, 714.

¹⁸ CO, 28, 647.

¹⁹ CO, 28, 648.

²⁰ CO, 54, 298.

²¹ CO, 39, 118.

²² CO, 39, 121.

In the first volume of *Reformed Dogmatics*, Herman Bavinck shows that the theory of the dictated inspiration was present in the old Church. “The event of inspiration is thus presented as an act of driving or leading but especially as an act of dictation by the Holy Spirit. The writers [of the Scripture] are not authors but only scribes. God is the author of Holy Scripture and its [human] writers were simply hands of the Holy Spirit”. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2003, 404. “Calvin regards Scripture in the full and literal sense as the Word of God” (*ibid.*, 415).

²³ “This does not mean that every word is inspired out of the relation with all the other words in their context”. Carl F. H. Henry (ed.), *Revelation and the Bible*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1958), 224).

²⁴ CO, 31, 445.

²⁵ *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 40.

²⁶ CO, 40, 530.

personal thoughts: he reveals all that has been dictated by the Holy Spirit. Everything is inspired: the doctrine as such, the words, the style. Even the style! “Doctrinam quae hic comprehenditur, a spiritu sancto in usum nostrum esse dictatam”,²⁷ the prophets speak the Word of God, “none of the prophets opened his mouth unless preceded by the Word of the Lord” (*Inst.*, IV, 8, 3), in other words, “it is impossible for God not to be true in all his words”.²⁸

Accommodating Himself to “man’s capacity”, God sometimes employs a “simple style”.²⁹ In the Bible, even the stylistic aspects are of divine origin. The Holy Spirit has guided the *style*/the *pen* of the writers of the Bible (*eorum stylum direxit*),³⁰ He harmonized the sacred histories: the Holy Spirit set up the Evangelists “to be his clerks and regulated their style in such a manner, that they all wrote one and the same history, in the most perfect agreement, but in different ways”.³¹ To continue quoting Calvin, reference is made to a text in *Institution*, 1560 edition (I, 8, 2): “I confess, however, that in elegance and beauty, nay, splendour, the style of some of the prophets is not surpassed by the eloquence of heathen writers. By examples of this description, the Holy Spirit was pleased to show that it was not from want of eloquence he in other instances used a rude and homely style”. The Spirit “announces and repeats in innumerable forms of expression” (*pronuntiaet Spiritus, et innumeris loquendi formis repetat*),³² God speaks to us “in His own words” (*suis verbis*).³³

At the same time, commenting upon chapter 3, verse 12 of the *Gospel According to John*, Calvin condemns those who only deal in intellectual subtleties in all matters of religion, thus neglecting the study of any New Testament writing because of its stylistic simplicity. God speaks our language, lowering Himself to man’s simplicity and ignorance. “When God prattles to us in Scripture in a rough and popular style, let us know that this is done on account of the love which he bears to us” (*Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. I, p. 119). In this case, the simple style hides *spiritual wisdom*, as Calvin points out in his *Commentary* to the *Epistle to the Romans* (2:8), it is full of the “dignity of the spirit”.³⁴ And still, to say the whole truth, the reformer does not report this process of stylistic accommodation only to God, the author of the Scrip-

²⁷ CO, 25, 421.

²⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, trans. by the Rev. William Pringle, vol. I (Edinburgh: C.T.S., 1847), 211.

²⁹ Jean Calvin, *Commentaires sur le Livre des Psaumes*, t. II (Paris: Meyrueis, 1859), 80.

³⁰ CO, 45,820.

³¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists*, vol. I, trans. by the Rev. William Pringle (Edinburgh: C.T.S., 1845), 127. Also see H. Jackson Forstman, *Word and Spirit: Calvin’s Doctrine of Biblical Authority* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1962), ch. 4. The author mentions that the unity of the Bible – which itself is positive and useful – rests on its divine origin. “The holy book is the work of the Holy Spirit. On this fundamental point Calvin bases his immutable conviction in the unity of the scripture” (*ibid.* 59). Consequently the task set for the responsible interpreter consists in reconciling all the apparent divergences of the Scriptures, and these divergences are apparent, because the Holy Spirit cannot be “inconsistent with himself” (cf. *Inst.* I, 9, 2). That is why the Bible has to be read considering the fact that its message is a genuinely divine one, but at the same time an adjusted one: not only to the limited interpretative abilities of man, but also to the peculiarities of a specific social environment. See CO, 40, 256 and Forstman, *op. cit.* 51.

³² OS, 3, 204.

³³ *Ibid.* 354.

³⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary of the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. I, trans. by the Rev. William Pringle, Edinburg, C.T.S., 1848, 114, 1 Cor. 2:13.

tures, but also to the writers of the Bible, whom accommodated “their style unto the capacity of their time”.³⁵ Generally speaking, this accommodation results from the happy marriage of doctrinary height with stylistic moderation, the latter providing access to the elevated doctrine of the Scriptures for the “visible state of this world”³⁶

The reformer does not limit the verb *to dictate* to the act of inspiration. With Calvin, the verb does not always refer to the concrete modality of the Bible’s divine inspiration. It can mainly illustrate the idea of authoritarian message, order or command, as it happens in this fragment from the *Institution* (III. 4, 22): the pastor proclaiming what has been dictated to him through the Word of God cannot fail. Neither in the following case does the verb *to dictate* refer to the process of biblical inspiration as such: in order to support our debility, God gives us the Holy Spirit, who *teaches* and *dictates* what is allowed for us to ask for in prayers: “To assist this weakness, God gives us the guidance of the Spirit in our prayers to dictate what is right, and regulate our affections”.³⁷ Furthermore, regarding the vow, God shelters our conscience from recklessness, guiding it by *dictating* through His word what is right and what is wrong: “In vows, then, our first precaution must be, never to proceed to make any vow without having previously determined in our conscience to attempt nothing rashly. And we shall be safe from the danger of rashness when we have God going before, and, as it were, dictating from his word what is good, and what is useless”³⁸. The resulting idea is that God communicates to us, lets us know as directly as possible and in full authority what His will is and what we humans have to do.

Calvin’s followers

In the century of the Reformation, according to the opinion of Brian A. Gerrish, the theory of inspiration through dictation was indeed in fashion.³⁹ This vision of the inspiration of the Holy Scriptures finds its expression not only in the documents of Protestant faith, but in the Roman-Catholic ones as well.⁴⁰

Luther has stated that God Himself speaks to us through the Scriptures, the Bible being “the word and book of God”.⁴¹ But “Luther never formulated a doctrine of the

³⁵ John Calvin, *The Commentaries Upon the Acts of Apostles* (London, 1585), 36.

³⁶ Jehan Calvin, *Commentaires sur le Livre des Psaumes*, t. II, 159, Ps. 78:3.

³⁷ *Inst.*, III, 20,5. “It is therefore probable, or rather it may be inferred with certainty, that this prayer was frequently used by the Jews, and, consequently, was in every man’s mouth; so that the Spirit of God put words into the mouths of those men, when they wished a prosperous arrival to the Lord Jesus” (John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel according John*, vol. II, trans by the Rev. William Pringle, Edinburgh, CTS, 1847, 18). “Though really or by the event it does not appear that our prayers have been heard by God, yet Paul concludes, that the presence of the celestial favour does already shine forth in the desire for prayer; for no one can of himself give birth to devout and godly aspirations. The unbelieving do indeed blab out their prayers, but they only trifle with God; for there is in them nothing sincere, or serious, or rightly formed. Hence the manner of praying aright must be suggested by the Spirit” (John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. by the Rev. John Owen, Edinburgh, CTS, 1849, 313).

³⁸ *Inst.*, IV, 13, 2.

³⁹ According to H. Jackson Forstman, *op. cit.* 50.

⁴⁰ In its 4th session, the Council of Trento mentions that God is the author of the Holy Books of the Old and New Testament, the truths of the faith being dictated to the apostles by the Holy Spirit (Mark A. Noll ed., *Confessions and Catechisms of the Reformation* (Leicester: Apollos, 1991), 170).

⁴¹ Martin Luther, *Propos de table*, trad. Charles de Mellert, t. I (Paris, 1933), 142.

inspiration of Scripture”, as Pierre Chaunu mentions in his work *Le Temps des Reformes*.⁴² The very same author also states that the Reformed Church constituted itself around “the undeniable authority”⁴³ of the Scripture, the authentic Word of God, and therefore followed the way of re-discovering a Book of divine inspiration from beginning to end, instrument of life and repository of the entire redeeming truth. Thus we should not be surprised that the reformed theologians of the 16th–17th centuries show their interest in this problem of the inspiration of the Scriptures. Calvin gains prominence among them, and some of his followers followed in his footsteps in regard to the theory of dictation.

Thus, Pierre du Moulin states that God teaches the Church through His Word, which can be found in the Holy Scripture “dictated by the Holy Spirit”.⁴⁴

The *author* and *giver* of the holy books is God, Who also set them up to be written, inspiring, urging and guiding His servants in this respect. Johannes Cocceius shows us that the prophets, these men of God, were “God’s assistants and amanuenses” (*administri et amanuenses Dei*), who have spoken and written “not by their own will, but driven by the Holy Spirit” (*qui non propria voluntate, sed acti a Spiritu S.*).⁴⁵

The writers of the New Testament thought and wrote through the “inspiration and dictation of the Holy Spirit” (*ex inspiratione & dictamine Spir. S.*).⁴⁶ The content and form of the Biblical writings, ideas and phrasing are altogether the work of the Holy Spirit, in other words, the stylistic peculiarities of each holy writing in turn are the same product of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁷

Referring to the Scriptures, Francis Turretin⁴⁸ notices that the verbal revelation was necessary, because the Word of God represents “the sole principle of theology” (*unicum est Theologiae principium*).⁴⁹ The Holy Spirit is the *teacher*, the Holy Scripture is His *doctrine*. The Scripture is God-inspired, it contains the whole truth of the faith and nothing false resides therein. The Holy Spirit inspired, moved and kept the writers of the Bible free from error. The Holy Spirit inspired, moved these holy men (regarding the events recorded and the words used), so that their writings may indeed be *authentic* and *divine*. God, Who has dictated to them the words of the Scripture, has also been mindful of preserving the holy writings: “Nec facile credi potest, Deum, qui omnia et singula verba Viris *theopneustois* dictavit et inspiravit, de omnibus etiam conservandis non curasse”.⁵⁰

Benedict Pictet states that the Scriptures contain many prophecies which the prophets and the apostles have communicated to us, being *influenced* or *directed* by the Holy Spirit. And in order to find the true sense and the correct interpretation of the Scripture,

⁴² Pierre Chaunu, *Le Temps des Reformes*, t. II (Bruxelles: Complexe, 1984), 409–410.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 411.

⁴⁴ Pierre du Moulin, *Bouclier de la foi* (Paris: Delay, 1846), 67.

⁴⁵ Johannes Cocceius, *Summa Theologiae*, IV, 39, apud Dr. Heinrich Heppe, *Die Dogmatik der evangelisch-reformierten Kirche* (Neukirchener Verlag, 1958), 18; *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. by G. T. Thomson (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007), 17.

⁴⁶ D. Gysberti Voetii, *Selectarum Disputationum* (Amstelodami: J. A. Wormser, 1887), 22.

⁴⁷ „His praemissis dicimus totam scripturam esse authenticam authentia historiae, hoc est, infallibilem & θεόπνευστον veritatem per omnes & singulas ejus partes esse diffusam: ita ut scriptores non privato suo impulsu & libitu, sed dictante Spir. S. omnes & singulas sententias quod ad rem & quod ad phrasim protulerunt” (D. Gysberti Voetii, *Selectarum Disputationum*, 11). Cf. Heinrich Heppe, *Die Dogmatik...*, 24, *Reformed Dogmatics...*, 27).

⁴⁸ *Institutio Theologiae Electicae*, I (Edinburgh: John D. Lowe, 1847).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 53.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 67.

Benedict Pictet resorts to prayer: The Word can only understood by the Same Spirit which has dictated it.⁵¹

Attempts to reevaluate the doctrine of inspiration through dictation

Still, this approach to Calvin, held so dear by H. Jackson, which singles out the texts of the reformer containing the idea of dictation is in contradiction with the opinions of many Protestant theologians in the past centuries. Let us begin with the last, in chronological order. Pierre Courthial, French theologian, recently deceased, takes for granted the “humanity” of the Bible; he also quotes Karl Barth: “The Holy Scripture corresponds exactly to the unity between God and man in Jesus Christ: it is not only divine, not only human, nor a mixture of human and divine... In its own way, it is like Christ Himself, wholly divine and wholly human altogether.”⁵²

In the same vein, underlining the humanity of the Bible, Pierre Courthial contests the fact that the writers of the Bible were mere scribes, stenographers: “the humanity of the Bible is not that it is made up of human words, that it is written in human language, but that its real authors did not write *mechanically*, like stenographers, but *actively*, starting from what they saw, thought and felt, using style and ways of expression which were their own”.⁵³

We would allow ourselves a small remark: it is true that the Holy Spirit did not speak directly to each of us, but through the mouth of other people, inspiring them, thus without substituting Himself to the prophets and apostles, but this statement requires precise comprehension, in our opinion: the Bible remains the Word of God, it is not the Word of God and a human word in the exact same sense.

Besides, it should be mentioned that the French theologian does not seem to be extremely interested in theories regarding the modality of inspiration. What could be the reason? As any theory of this kind is speculative, rationalist, subjective, and first of all encroaches upon “the very mystery of God’s inspiration act”.⁵⁴ We are still convinced though, that our preoccupation for this *how* of the inspiration, which is so delicate and elusive, helps us understand a little better the inspiration act as it is, i.e. its relevance and profile.

Pierre Courthial – as a representative of the French reformed orthodoxy – has Auguste Lecerf as his distant precursor. Auguste Lecerf considered as justified the approach of the representatives of the reformed orthodoxy in the 19th–20th centuries aiming at revising certain Calvinist theological formulae in the 17th century on the *inspiration* and *integrity* of the holy Scripture: these new theologians wanted to replace the *mechanical concept* by a *suppler* one, leaving room for the *personality* and *freedom* of the Bib-

⁵¹ “First it is not necessary to suppose, that the Holy Spirit *always* dictated to the prophets and apostles every *word* which they used. Nevertheless those holy men wrote very many things under the immediate suggestion of the Spirit, such as prophecies” (p. 33). The Holy Spirit *inspired, influenced* or *guided* them so that their writings may be errorless. Benedict Pictet, *Christian Theology*, trans. by Frederick Reyrout (London: R. B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 1834), 51.

⁵² *Dogmatique*, 5, 43, apud Pierre Courthial, *Fondements pour l’avenir* (Paris: Kerygma, 1981), 21.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Dogmatique*, 5, 43, apud Pierre Courthial, *Fondements pour l’avenir* (Paris: Kerygma, 1981), 22.

lical writers, and for “their manner of feeling and thinking”. To this purpose, they did nothing but replaced *automatism* with the notion of “organic inspiration”.⁵⁵

Auguste Lecerf mentions that inspiration in thinking is seen in this case as being analogous to the *modus operandi* of the divine grace in converting a person. The conversion has a “primordial cause”, which is God Who enlightens the mind of men, and effectively moves their will. Man himself stands for the secondary formal cause. He is the one who feels, believes and wishes to return to God, the freer as God moves him, enlightening his mind and energizing his will. The same goes for inspiration, God is the “main author” (*auctor primarius*): He determines the writers of the Bible to talk and express the truths about believing. But the *sacred author* also benefits from a certain intellectual endowment and life experience, which allow him to be the *real secondary author* of those said and written by him.⁵⁶

Auguste Lecerf further nuances his discourse: God is absolutely free in his actual ways of inspiration. When talking about divine inspiration, we should start from the inspiration itself, from its very identity. Auguste Lecerf thinks that “it would be absurd not to take into account the intervention of the author’s personality in a writing like the *Epistle to the Galatians*,⁵⁷ but in the same time we cannot be fully sure that other places of the Bible are not *automatically inspired* (like for example the Exodus, Ezekiel and the Apocalypse).

Starting from Pierre du Moulin, the author of the *Introduction to Reformed Dogmatics* distinguishes between the *content* and the *form* of the Biblical teachings. The content, i.e. the *matter*, is entirely of divine origin, God being its “total and unique cause”, and solely in this respect, the Holy Scripture is from God, “without any human interference, as Calvin says” (Lecerf alludes to the reformer’s comment in 2 Tim. 3:16).⁵⁸ But if we take into account the *editorial form*, then we are dealing with a *double action*, both divine and human, that of the Primary Cause and of the Secondary Cause. The spirit commands and the organ carries out, the sacred author expresses under the influence of the Spirit of God, but also in his native language, according to “the literary genre used and the particular purpose which God determines him to set for himself”.⁵⁹ In other words, if the doctrine, as such, is exclusively from God, with the *style of the Scripture* things are not quite so.

In his well-known work referring to the the sources and evolution of Calvin’s religious thinking⁶⁰, François Wendel challenges the historians’ opinion (such as Reinhold Seeberg), who have seen in Calvin, if not the inventor of the doctrine of “the literal inspiration of the Holy Books”, then at least “one of its most renowned representatives”.⁶¹ François Wendel claims that even if the disciples of the reformer adopted this theological attitude, Calvin himself never supported the literal inspiration of the Scripture; besides, the expressions used by the reformer would point to the fact that he actually cut himself off from this theory of literal inspiration. In order to support his point of view, François Wendel refers to a fragment from the *Institution* (III.

⁵⁵ Auguste Lecerf, *Introduction à la dogmatique réformée*, t. II (Paris: « Je Sers », 1938), 160.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 160–161.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 162.

⁵⁸ Auguste Lecerf, *Introduction à la dogmatique réformée*, t. II (Paris: « Je Sers », 1938), 163.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ François Wendel, *Calvin. Sources et évolution de sa pensée religieuse* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 1985).

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 117.

2,6) in which the Word of God is “like a mirror” reflecting God.⁶² Then he focuses on the reformer’s commentary on *Matthew 27:9*: he notes that *the content* of the Holy Scripture is divine, but that does not mean that the form assumed by the content is also divine; even if the writers of the Bible wrote under the breath of the Holy Spirit, they were not shielded from some minor errors which “do not affect the doctrine”.⁶³

In founding his rejection of Calvin’s literalism on the parallel between the Holy Writ and a *mirror*, François Wendel does not prove original at all. He only resumes an older argument found in Emile Doumergue. The latter refused to accept the idea that the reformer of Geneva would have adopted the theory of *dictation* in the sense of “verbal and literal inspiration”.⁶⁴ Emile Doumergue thinks we should not rush into being persuaded by *phrases* like: *scribe, notary, God’s breath*, etc., because these are just *images*, just like the term *mirror*.⁶⁵ In other words, Calvin’s language, in this case, should be taken figuratively.⁶⁶ This is the same idea openly supported by B. B. Warfield in *The Knowledge of God*.⁶⁷ B. B. Warfield underlined that, by such phrases, Calvin intended to really evince that “the result of inspiration” was as if being dictated, that is a pure word of God, free of any human influence: in this case, the term “dictation” qualifies *the effects* of the inspiration rather than its *mode*.⁶⁸

But the American author H. Jackson Forstman thinks that the *metaphor of the mirror* should not be overrated by those who reject the idea that the reformer may have been the supporter of the theory of verbal inspiration for the Bible. Calvin used the *metaphor of the mirror* in various contexts: the creation is a mirror, as is the Bible, the Church, man and Christ: it is impossible for the *mirror* and *mirroring* to mean one and the same thing in all these different cases.⁶⁹ The lack of a unique meaning in all these situations

⁶² H. Jackson Forstman, in his book about *Calvin’s Doctrine of Biblical Authority* (ed. cit. 54), presents Peter Brunner appreciation – *Vom Glauben bei Calvin* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, Paul Siebeck, 1925, 93) regarding the *meaning of this metaphor*: “The mirror reflects an image that is quite clear, but the image reflected in the mirror is not the thing itself”. Also see Wilhelm Niesel, *Die Theologie Calvins* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1938), 29. Wilhelm Niesel denies the fact that the reformer would have sustained the idea of a *mechanical inspiration* of the Bible or that he would have believed in her *inspired literal innerancy* (*ibid.* 33).

⁶³ François Wendel, *op. cit.* 118.

⁶⁴ E. Doumergue, *Jean Calvin. Les hommes et les choses de leur temps*, t. IV, *La pensée religieuse de Calvin* (Lausanne: Bridel, 1910), 73.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Cf. H. Jackson Forstman, *op. cit.* 54.

⁶⁷ B. B. Warfield, *Calvin and Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1931), 63.

⁶⁸ Cf. *ibid.* 64.

⁶⁹ The world created until the Fall: „Ante lapsum, mundi status divini in hominem favoris, et paternae indulgentiae, pulcherrimum et in primis delectabile speculum erat” (CO, 23.73) – „Avant la chute de l’homme l’état de ce monde était un très beau et très plaisant spectacle de la faveur et de l’indulgence paternelles de Dieu envers l’homme”. (Jean Calvin, *Commentaires bibliques. Le livre de la Genèse* (Aix-en-Provence – Fontenay-sous-Bois: Kerygma – Farel, 1978, 84).

The Church – „L’Eglise [...] est comme un miroir auquel les Anges contemplent la sagesse admirable de Dieu, laquelle ils ignoraient auparavant”. Jehan Calvin, *Commentaires sur le Nouveau Testament*, t. III (Paris: Meyrueis, 1855, 786).

Man – „Et n’y a nulle doute que Dieu ne nous vueille occuper continuellement en ceste sainte méditation, assavoir que quand nous contemplons les richesses infinies de sa iustice, sagesse, bonté et puissance en toutes ses créatures comme en des miroirs, non seulement nous les regardions légèrement, pour en prendre incontinent la mémoire, mais plustost nous arrestions longuement à y penser et ruminer à bon escient, et en ayons continuelle souvenance” (*Inst.* (JDB) I, 14, 21).

Christ is “miroir de la grâce inestimable de Dieu” (*Inst.* (JDB) II, 14, 5), “comme un miroir, auquel il convient contempler nostre election” (*Inst.* (JDB) III, 24, 5).

leads H. Jackson Forstman to the next remark: “The argument based on the metaphor of the mirror is not a negligible one..., but neither is it conclusive”.⁷⁰

By analysing several of Calvin’s texts referring to the inspiration of the Holy Books, Edward A. Dowey, Jr. admits that the reformer saw the Bible as literally being dictated by God, *word by word*.⁷¹ Edward A. Dowey points out that theologians like Emile Doumergue, Henri Clavier and Jacques Pannier⁷² refused to admit that the reformer would have supported the inspiration of the Holy Bible through dictation, while other theologians situated themselves closer to the truth, admitting that with Calvin we can talk legitimately of the existence of a theory of dictation (Edward A. Dowey, Jr. mentions Reinhold Seeberg, Otto Ritschl and A. M. Hunter). But Edward A. Dowey, Jr. eventually expresses his preference for B. B. Warfield’s point of view, which has been mentioned previously.

As G. C. Berkouwer rightfully noticed, the term *theopneustos*, “God-breathed” indicates a mystery, the mystery of the Holy Scriptures, but at the same time, positively reveals its divine origin. There is a close connection between the Holy Spirit’s breath and what is written, a unique and entirely special bond, which sets the Bible apart from all the other writings on the face of the earth.⁷³

But 2 Tim. 3:16 says nothing about the mode of the *divine inspiration*. And *breath* is precisely the very topic of this paper. All the scholars who were at some point interested in these aspects ultimately tried to probe the slippery perimeter of a mystery. That is the origin of the reserves each of us may have regarding any explanatory attempt, or any attempt — as commendable as it may be — at revealing what is not really (or completely) revealed by God.

What is certain is that *Verbum Dei*, *the Word of God* has reached us, in the 21st century, through human mediation. “The prophetic word is truly God’s Word, not because human words are transubstantiated into something divine, but because the word of the prophets is truly God’s Word addressed to men”.⁷⁴ Whence we can extract the following definition: “The word of the sacred writers is the Word of God addressed to man”. God has spoken in our language, through chosen people. The Bible is sacred by virtue of this very idea: it is sacred not because it asks for worship, but because it asks for obedience. The Holy Scripture comes from God, it requires our faith, devotion and obedience. Our faith does not lie with one theory or another which we may adopt regarding the mode of the inspiring act. As a matter of fact, G. C. Berkouwer proves to be extremely reserved about the theory of dictation: “it would be a mistake to formulate a supernaturalistic and mechanical theory of inspiration”.⁷⁵ It is no less true to state that, considering the modern tendencies of “humanization” of the Scriptures, the theory of dictation was aimed at underlining the divine origin of the sacred

⁷⁰ H. Jackson Forstman, *op. cit.* 55.

⁷¹ A. Dowey, Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), from pp. 90f.

⁷² Jacques Pannier had proved his subjectivity on the matter when he had uncompromisingly stated that the reformer “did not write a single word which we could invoke in favour of *literal inspiration*”. *Le témoignage du Saint-Esprit. Essai sur l’histoire du dogme* (Paris: Fischbacher, 1893), 200.

⁷³ G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture*, trans. by Jack B. Rogers (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 139–140.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 146.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 149–150.

Books, meaning the “the undoubted utterance of God”,⁷⁶ thus determining man to trust the Word of God.

G. C. Berkouwer repeatedly quotes Herman Bavinck in the pages of his work. The author of the *Reformed Dogmatics* underlines the necessity of a theistic perspective on the act of inspiration.⁷⁷ The mechanical inspiration – whose content is still rather hard to delineate – neglects the role, that is the importance of the human authors in the act of writing the Holy Books. “A mechanical notion of revelation”,⁷⁸ as Herman Bavinck shows, is able to highlight only the supernatural element present in the inspiration, while disregarding the natural element. This “detaches the Bible writers from their personality”, separating them from the historical context in which they lived, attributing them par excellence the role of “inanimate instruments in the hands of the Holy Spirit”.⁷⁹ The fact that in the patristic period, prophets and apostles were compared with a musical instrument, or a writing instrument, in the hands of the Holy Spirit, must not lead us to false conclusions, as such comparisons were aimed at evincing the idea that God is the main author of the Scripture, but not the sole author.

By rejecting the *mechanical* approach, Herman Bavinck stands in favour of an *organic* vision on the act of inspiration. The same as in the act of creation, God will confirm and fortify (not destroy) the freedom of action inherent to all human beings: God treats us not like pieces of wood, but like “intelligent and moral beings”.⁸⁰ The prophets and the apostles, in this view, wrote according to their own character, language and style. There always were stylistic differences between the Holy Books, but these differences have not always found a satisfactory explanation. The erroneous explanation would be that the Holy Spirit, “out of sheer caprice” decided to write “one way today and another at some other time”.⁸¹ The right version would rather be to assume that the Holy Spirit, inspiring these authors, also penetrated their style, language, character and unique personality, which had been properly prepared for this purpose.

The organic concept regarding the inspiration of the Scriptures turns style into a human product. Style belongs to man, not to the Holy Spirit. The difference from Calvin’s doctrine is real, as it can be noticed. Herman Bavinck purports that an organic view on inspiration is implicitly a vision with a pronounced historical and psychological signification. We take the liberty to provide a meaningful quotation on this issue, in its original form: “The activity of the Holy Spirit in the writing process, after all, consisted in the fact that, having prepared the human consciousness of the authors in various ways (by birth, upbringing, natural gifts, research, memory, reflection, experience of life, revelation, etc.), he now, in and through the writing process itself, made *those* thoughts and words, *that* language and style, rise to the surface of that consciousness, which could best interpret the divine ideas for persons of all sorts of rank and class, from every nation and age”.⁸²

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 151.

⁷⁷ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2003), 428.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 431.

⁷⁹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2003), 431.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 432.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* 434. The difference in language and style between the books of the Bible had been attributed in the past to the will of the Holy Spirit, as Herman Bavinck states, but the organic view perceives this difference to be something natural and not super-natural (cf. *op. cit.* vol. 1, 443).

⁸² *Ibid.* 438.

Another author of a *Reformed Dogmatics*, G. K. Kersten, distinguishes between verbal inspiration and its mechanical counterpart: the inspiration of the Holy Books was a verbal, organic one, certainly not mechanical. The Scripture was inspired by God “word for word”, but the writers of the Bible “were neither machines, nor unconscious instruments in the hands of the Lord”.⁸³ On the contrary, they lived the revelation and recorded it, according to their own talents, character and style.

Did the sacred writers, at least sometimes, get their inspiration through dictation?⁸⁴ Dictation has been seen as a sign of rupture between thought and language.⁸⁵ The distancing of Protestant theologians in recent times from the theory of dictation is real, but the problem remains open to further debate, other answers being equally possible to the debate in question. John Calvin supported the doctrine of inspiration through dictation, without implicitly suppressing “the individuality and intellectual activity of the human authors”.⁸⁶ The lack of certain limits at the level of terminology regarding the types of inspiration, the variety of arguments and counterarguments brought forward with respect to one theory or another, vividly signals the existence of a discontinuity between past and present, within the same religious tradition: in this respect, reformed theology remains on the road of self clarification.

A spiritu Sancto Dictata Kálvin felfogása a Szentírás ihletettségről

Mihai Androne, református hitű egyetemi filozófianár (Universitatea Dunărea de Jos Galați) vizsgálat alá vette nemcsak a kálvini inspirációtant, hanem az erre használt terminológiát is, és arra a következtetésre jutott, hogy a reformátor – a maga korában – a *verbális inspirációt* vallotta, anélkül azonban, hogy háttérbe szorította volna „az emberi szerzők egyéniségét és értelmi tevékenységét”.⁸⁷ A terminológia szintjén hiányzik bizonyos, az ihletettség típusaira vonatkozó meghatározások. Ezek hiánya, valamint a különféle elméletekre vonatkozó érvek és ellenérvek sokszínűsége élesen jelzi, hogy ugyanazon vallási hagyományon belül megszakad a múlt és a jelen közötti folyamatosság: ebben a tekintetben a reformátori teológia az öntisztázás útján halad.

⁸³ Rev. G. H. Kersten, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. I (Grand Rapids, MI: Netherlands Reformed Book and Publishing Committee, 2000), 18.

⁸⁴ In his work *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, Abraham Kuyper uses only once the verb *to dictate*, and then only to express the mode in which God inspires John’s *Apocalypse* – trans. Henri de Vries (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company 1900), 77.

⁸⁵ See, in this respect, William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, vol. I (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1980), 89. The American theologian does not see dictation as a species of verbal inspiration: dictation separates thought from language, while verbal inspiration unites them (90).

⁸⁶ Louis, Berkhof, *Systematic Theology. New Combined Edition* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 145.

⁸⁷ Louis, Berkhof, *Systematic Theology. New Combined Edition*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996, p. 145.