

Systematic Theology for the Local Church
#17—Bibliology—Part VIII¹
‘Whole Message’ Inspiration: Beyond Verbal Inspiration
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For the studies in Bibliology: Become familiar with Sections 6-12 in House’s *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine*. Read all of Packer’s *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*. Packer’s book was written against the background of the debate over Fundamentalism in the late 20th century. However, his presentation of the systems of authority (reason, tradition and Scripture) is timeless. Also, read Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, ch. 1, “The Fact of Divine Revelation,” ch. 2, “The Inspired Nature of Holy Scripture,” ch. 3, “The Attributes of Holy Scripture,” and ch. 5, “The Bible as the Που Στῶ for Knowledge and Personal Significance,” which deals with the Bible as the basis for life.

God’s purpose in revelation is to provide human beings with information about himself so that they can have a relationship with him that involves worship and fellowship. The information has to come from God, because we are his enemies and do not and cannot reach out to him (Rom. 3:11). In addition, we do not know by ourselves God’s requirements for reaching him. To bring humans into a relationship with himself, God must tell us exactly what to do, otherwise we cannot do what is necessary to comply with his requirements. For Pelagians and Semipelagians², who believe that we can move toward God by ourselves, there is the assumption that we know what to do and even want to do it. However, from beginning to end the Bible teaches that we are running from God and do not know how to reach Him, much less please him and worship him. Therefore, there must be accurate information (I am not saying at all that a person will be saved if he just has the right information). There can be no Christianity without the Bible, and if it is to be based on the Bible, it cannot be religious experiences as the Liberal would have us believe. The Bible is not the record of the religious experiences of some people (Paul, Moses, etc.) that can help us have similar experiences. It is a revelation of exactly what God wants us to do to get across the gap between a holy God and sinful human beings. Jesus himself underscored the degree of detail inherent in the Scriptures and the value of that detail for us: “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Mt. 4:4) Similarly, we should notice the degree of accuracy in the tablets God gave Moses: “When the LORD finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the Testimony, the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God.” (Ex. 31:18).

I for one am glad that God did not give me a book with errors in it. Otherwise I would be left to try to figure out how to do everything He wants me to do. In this study we are going to look at how the Bible is designed to be perfectly effective in changing sinners.

Beyond ‘verbal inspiration’

Many evangelical writers who hold to the inspiration of the whole Bible have spoken of ‘verbal inspiration,’ by which they mean that the Spirit’s guiding and controlling work extends to the very words of the Bible (this assertion should be made about the original writings only, not translations).

There are many indications that we should view every part of the Bible as coming from God, down to the words themselves. In Jer. 30:1 God told Jeremiah to write specific words in a book. In addition to statements

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² Pelagianism holds that sin is a choice of the will, and human beings can move toward God on their own. Semipelagianism holds that human beings can make a first move toward God, after which there is a cooperative process between a person and God.

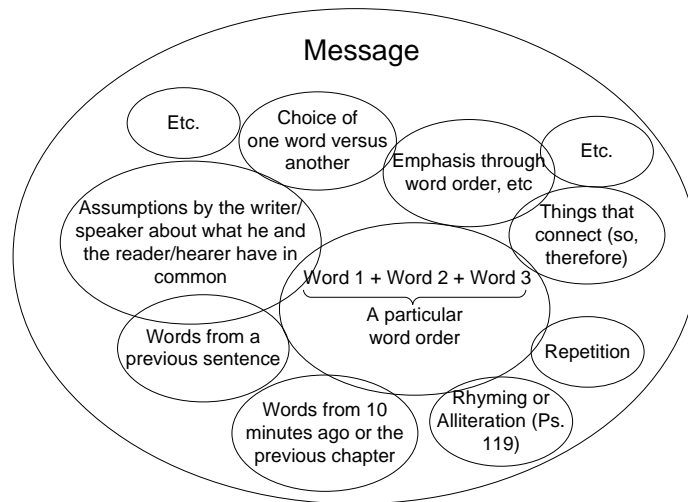
of this kind, we should stop to consider the fact that as human beings we cannot send or receive useful messages without reference to words. Even Morse code, although it does not utilize words at its lowest level, reflects words. Some have suggested that God simply gave individuals general suggestions concerning what He wanted them to write and they filled the rest in on their own. But this kind of view flies in the face of the implicit and explicit statements of Scripture and leads to serious problems. For the Bible to be breathed-out and thoroughly trustworthy it has to be exactly what God intended. Human elaboration of God-given ideas would not achieve this. We should not search to try to figure out which parts of the Bible are breathed out and which are not. For the message to be from God all the parts have to be from Him.

This brings us to a concept that most people have overlooked in recent discussions of inspiration and the error-free nature of the Bible. It is perfectly all right to say that the Bible teaches implicitly and explicitly that the words themselves are what God intended the original readers to receive.

But we should not overlook the fact that messages using human language carry information **not** by stringing together the meanings of successive words as if they were cars in a train, as represented like this:

Word 1 + Word 2 + Word 3 → Information

Instead, information, that is, the content that a message moves from one person to another, is carried at many points and in many ways in texts. The large oval below shows only a few of the many language pieces in a message that serve to carry information:



Defining 'information'

Based on the study I have done in the area of communication theory, I make a distinction between meaning and information. Here's a description of 'information' from Wikipedia:

Information is a message received and understood. In terms of data, it can be defined as a collection of facts from which conclusions may be drawn. There are many other aspects of information since it is the knowledge acquired through study or experience or instruction. But overall, information is the result of processing, manipulating and organizing data in a way that adds to the knowledge of the person receiving it.

I would add that for something to qualify as information it should change the receiver in some way—he will be different than he was before receiving the message.³ I believe that this way of viewing information will prove very valuable for understanding God’s purposes in giving us breathed-out Scripture.

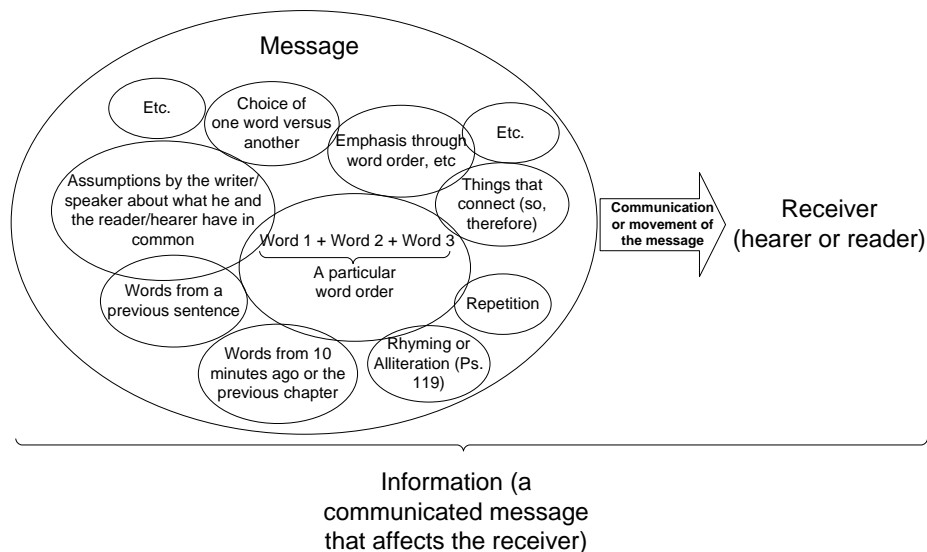
Here is a similar approach to describing what information is:

One of the most common ways to define information is to describe it as one or more statements or facts that are received by a human and that have some form of worth to the recipient. For example, the Sesame Street character “Cookie Monster” describes information as “news or facts about something,” or, as the first definition in the *Random House College Dictionary* suggests for information, “knowledge communicated or received concerning a particular fact or circumstance; news.” Cookie Monster’s definition is consistent with the common notions that information must:

1. be something, although the exact nature (substance, energy, or abstract concept) isn’t clear;
2. provide “new” information: a repetition of previously received messages isn’t informative;
3. be “true:” a lie or false or counterfactual information is *mis-information*, not information itself;
4. be “about” something.

This approach to information, like most human-centered approaches to information, leads one to emphasize the meaning and use of message, “what the message is about?” and “what is known already?” over the information carrying messenger and the message itself. When the message is essentially random, or the message is of no value to the recipient, such as a repeated message previously received and understood, it is colloquially said that no information was received and no information was transmitted.⁴

Information results when words and other linguistic features (word order, emphasis, etc.) that connect and enhance them are put together in such a way that receiver reacts the way the sender intended to the meaningful pieces and their combination.



Defining ‘meaning’

Words are *symbols* that stand for things in life: ‘dog’ stands for a certain type of animal, ‘jump’ stands for a kind of physical action, etc.

³ Some define information as anything that reverses the production of entropy. In this sense, it provides order that is not accidental (I have the basic assumption that order cannot come from randomness). This is dealt with at the popular level in Jeremy Rifkin’s *Grammatical Man: Information, Entropy, Language, and Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982).

⁴ Robert M. Losee, “A Discipline Independent Definition of Information,” *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, 48 (3), 1977, 254-269. This article is available at <http://www.ils.unc.edu/~losee/b5/book5.html>.

Meaning has to do with the coding process where symbols stand for things in life. The sequence ‘car’ (spoken or written) is associated with a self-propelled vehicle used to transport people.’ The sequence ‘dog’ is associated with an animal, etc.

When we say that something ‘means’ something, we are connecting a symbol (such as a word) with something that by general consensus it is connected with in human existence. Usually we have to express the connection with the use of other words. For example, if you ask me what ‘dog’ means, I will have to say something like “It refers to a four-legged domesticated animal that is not a cat.” Or I may say, “A dog is exemplified by. . . .” and then give the names of dogs that we both know. But I may just point to one and say, “A dog is *that*.” These are examples of providing the content value of a symbol.

Here is a description of ‘meaning’ from Wikipedia:

The nature of meaning, its definition, elements, and types, is mainly established by Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas (also known as the AAA framework). According to this classic tradition, ‘meaning is a relationship between two sorts of things: *signs* and the kinds of things they *mean* (intend, express or signify)’. One term in the relation of meaning necessarily causes something else to come to the mind in consequence. In other words: ‘a sign is defined as an entity that indicates another entity to some agent for some purpose.’

If the hearer and speaker share the same knowledge of the world, then ‘car’ for the receiver ‘points to’ the same thing as it does for the sender. Associating symbols (‘car,’ ‘dog,’ ‘leap,’ ‘tomorrow,’ etc.) with things in life is at the heart of ‘meaning.’

Carrying information

‘Meaning’ can occur in small pieces or in aggregations of pieces. Take the following sentence, for example: My television is small. Here ‘My’ has the meaning ‘belonging to the speaker.’ ‘Television’ has the following ‘meaning’: an electrical device that receives electrical signals from a transmitter and converts them into sound and pictures.’ ‘Is’ has the meaning of establishing a relationship between a noun and an adjective.’ ‘Small’ has the meaning of being diminutive in size.’ All of these meanings are chosen from among several possibilities and are used for the sake of example.

A word by itself does not carry information, except in a few circumstances. Notice that ‘television’ by itself carries no *information* in the sense in which the Wikipedia article describes it. The word television has a meaning, but does not carry information in isolation.

Exceptions to this are words such as ‘Stop!’ where it is a command that communicates information. If we hear this word in the appropriate context we interpret it as giving the information ‘Cease doing what you are doing!’ There are other examples in English of single words carrying information (‘Whew,’ ‘Easy!’, ‘Next!’, etc.)

Combined ‘meanings’ *may* produce information: ‘My television is small’ is a message that contains information. When you hear it, you are changed because your stock of knowledge has been increased and your world enlarged. In this case we have created a whole sentence that has meaning resulting from the combination of linguistic elements. This is called ‘sentential meaning.’ So there can be *word meaning* and *sentential meaning*. I take sentential meaning to be equivalent to the *information* carried in the sentence.

However, combined meanings *might not* carry information: ‘Small is television my’ will not satisfy the definition of information. When I say this, you are—at the very least—unsure of what I am communicating

to you. In fact, I am not communicating anything—except maybe that I am confused. There is no information available until there is a message of some kind. By itself ‘television’ is not a message and carries no information in the sense of changing the hearer/receiver.

To put this another way, information results when pieces that have meaning are put together in such a way that there is potential change in the hearer. ‘My television is small’ adds to your knowledge. ‘Small is television my’ does not. Notice that ‘small is television my’ fails to carry information not because we don’t know what the individual words are, but because we don’t accept the order as being appropriate for English.

In general, information is carried in sentences: ‘That chair is green,’ ‘I own a car,’ and ‘Jesus walked on water.’ Historically, ‘sentence’ has been defined something like this: A sentence has a subject and a predicate. That is roughly equivalent to saying that a sentence has a topic and a comment (subject and predicate) about that topic. ‘Roses are pretty’ involves a topic (‘roses’) and a comment ‘are pretty.’ As people who use language, we like sentences, because they give us neat bundles of information that are complete in themselves. However, if we think of sentences as carrying information, then ‘Stop!’ is just as effective a carrier of information, even though there is no topic and comment. Similarly, if you say to me “Did you eat lunch yet?” my answer of “No” constitutes information for you the speaker—and it is probably complete in terms of what you were looking for from me by way of a reply.

Combining various linguistic units

Now while sometimes in languages individual words can carry information, they do not really do it alone. Look again at the big diagram with the ovals. There are many things going on around one word or many words that help with getting information from speaker to hearer. Individual words can contribute to the flow of information only in connection with other linguistic items, some of them words, some of them parts of words or the relative placement of words. For example, ‘Jesus’ has meaning and ‘lives’ has meaning, but neither by itself is information. However, ‘Jesus lives’ combines two words in a string of words (only two) that constitutes information.

Some of the things in language that contribute to the information value of messages are not words. For example, stress on a word, indicated in speech by relative loudness and sometimes in writing by italics, contributes to the information value of an utterance. Stress does not have ‘meaning’ such as the kind we can find in a dictionary, but it contributes to the information value of an utterance. Stress can also be indicated by word order in some languages, including Greek, Hebrew and English: ‘Green onions are the ones I like’ (as opposed to the red ones).

Word order or relative placement is utilized by language to carry information. So ‘lives Jesus’ is not information, because the sequence of the words is wrong. In English a sentence like this has to have the noun before the verb.

As a biblical example of information that is present but not carried in words we can note that a particular word in Greek or Hebrew, by virtue of its position in a sentence, may ‘mean’ “view this word and therefore what it stands for in this text as emphasized.” It does this not because it is a particular word as opposed to another, but because it appears in the text in a different place from what might normally be expected. We saw an example of this in Study #15, where the Holy Spirit’s work of carrying the prophets is highlighted by coming first in the sentence: ‘*But by the Holy Spirit being carried* spoke from God men.’ In other words, meaning can be indicated by *relations* within texts. Many more examples could be given.

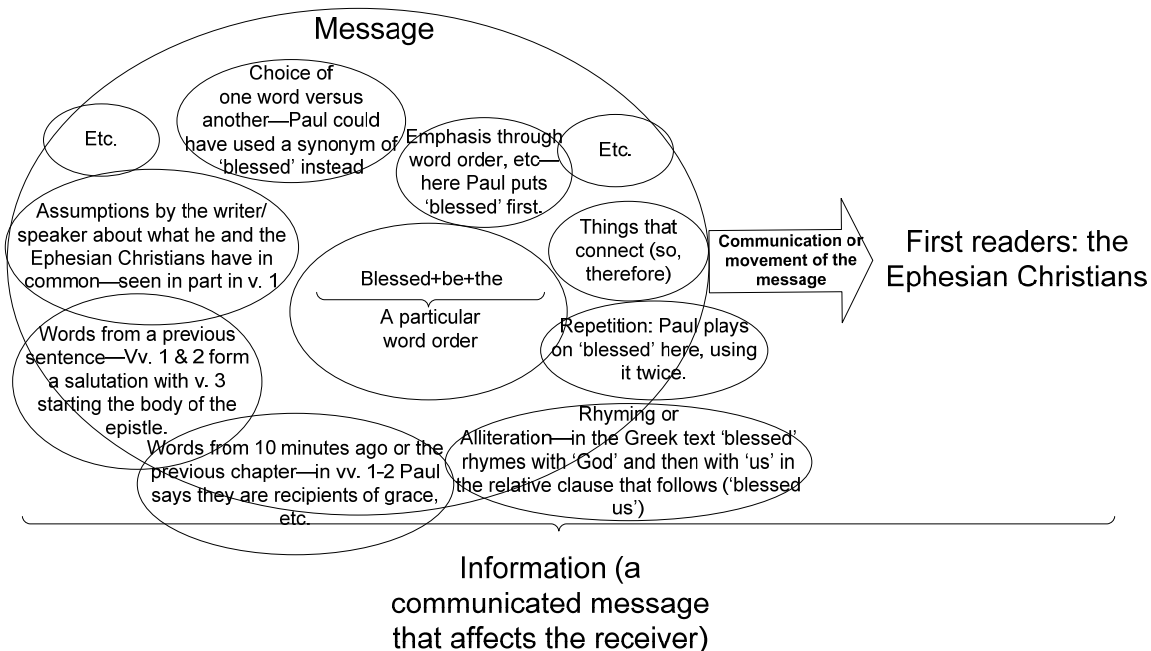
Whole-message inspiration

If information is the content of a message that one person sends to another and has the effect of changing a person's existence in some way, then inspiration means that the Spirit of God worked in individuals to have them write down language (or have their scribes write down language, in some cases) that would have the *exact effect* on people that God desired. God's instructions to us concerning salvation and pleasing him must be precise so that we react just the way he wants us to.

The implication of this for inspiration is that it is *not detailed enough* to make the formulation, as many have made over the years, to the effect that we should be concerned with the very words of the Bible because the words are the place where the exact intended message of God is carried. The exact words are certainly necessary; inspiration does not involve the concepts only. **But the information God has given us is carried in complex, interlocking ways in the text.** This kind of view of information, based on linguistics and communication theory and other fields of study, actually **enhances** our view of the activity of God in giving the Bible, since it brings to the fore the intricate nature of the Bible and reminds us that it had its origin totally in the perfect purposes of a God who is able to design beyond our capacities to design. **I would prefer to speak therefore of 'whole message' inspiration instead of 'verbal inspiration.'**

I believe that this is a much more inclusive and precise way of looking at the extent and effect of inspiration. It also helps us to see that inspiration has to have operated at a higher level than simply stringing words together. The words are important, but *God's ultimate purpose is to change people by means of information, not just to give them words.* Inspiration guarantees that *any part* of the Bible is part of a message that is designed to have a precise effect on people.

In light of this, we should look at a portion of Scripture such as Eph. 1:3 as being given by God in a holistic way with regard to the language. The Spirit of God led Paul to write the words that appear in the Greek text in the exact order that he wanted, along with many other language features, to yield the exact information value that he wanted. Here is a diagram like the one above, but this time with just a few of the features of the message in Eph. 1:3:



In addition, the Spirit led Paul to write chapter one before chapter two, and to write verse three before verse 7, and so on. Thus inspiration can include even non-language phenomena. The fact that Paul wrote Ephesians after Moses wrote the Pentateuch is a piece of spiritual information, and is somehow included in God's

working in writers. Paul's combining part of Luke's writings with a piece of Deuteronomy in 1 Tim. 5:18 is part of the process of inspiration. Leading Peter to quote the Old Testament in 1 Pet. 1:24 is also part of inspiration. All of these are beyond the words themselves, but certainly are part of the inscripturation process and as such come under 2 Tim. 3:16 and 2 Pet. 1:20-21.

So inspiration is much richer than many believe. It includes supra-linguistic details and processes ('holy men of old were carried by the Holy Spirit') that along with things like words result in a message that is perfectly designed to produce the spiritual changes God wants to see in sinners.

There are various views of what meaning and information are. Many issues are not settled. My point is that **the Bible constitutes information that is perfectly designed through inspiration to change the hearer in keeping with God's purposes.** Without this perfection it will not change people the way God wants them to be changed. The message will be inaccurately received. With this perfection, however, it can bring about the changes in us that God desires. As the psalmist says, "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul."

People studying information speak of bad data in the transmission process. A cell phone with its dropped signal provides a good example. If Scripture were not accurate, there would be bad data and we would be led astray. (We will return to this topic in our study of inerrancy.) But the message that is Scripture can be understood just as God intended it to be. It constitutes information that can perfectly accomplish God's purposes. This is what inspiration achieves.

An objective message

Under the definition of information that I have used here, information can be communicated apart from language. For example, the miracle of the parting of the sea for Israel to go through constitutes information. The people who saw it had knowledge after the event that they didn't have previously. We learned when we studied general revelation that God has given information in the heavens. Psalm 19 tells us that in declaring the glory of God the heavens communicate 'knowledge,' that is, they pour forth a message designed to bring change in human beings.

Notice that sin blocks this message and we reject the information. Similarly, Rom. 1 tells us that people reject this information conveyed by nature and substitute their own information. While the heavens say 'God is great,' sinful human beings say 'My idol is great.'

We could look at this as the sin nature interfering with the communication process and intentionally garbling the message. Notice that in Rom. 1 Paul says that the things of God are there for all to know and that all are responsible to respond to them in the way God intended. But no one will because of sin.

This is relevant to the matter of inspiration. God communicated through human beings an exact message that is designed to change us. **It is there and true independent of us.** We may choose to garble it or say it is not relevant to us, but it exists anyway and God will use it for his purposes.

"So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." Isa. 55:11

Study questions

1. Try to find at least five more features of Eph. 1:3 where information is being carried (there are many).
2. Here is a thought question that you can tackle if you have the mental energy. In a section entitled “Errors, Misinformation, and Bad Data” in the article referenced in footnote #4 above, Robert Losee describes misinformation and loss of information in the transmission process. Evaluate the quotation below with regard to the inspiration of Scripture and our response to Scripture.

When discussing knowledge, truth, and information, people often begin speaking of “misinformation” or “bad data.” Scientists often speak of “bad data,” produced by faulty measurement or poor observations. Misinformation often refers to information that is “false,” that is, the information does not directly reflect the “true” state of the world. Consider a “lie” told by an individual or an organization. The person making the lie knows the truth and, instead of repeating it, chooses to produce a lie for some purpose. The lie is then information about the process that produced it. It is misinformation or “false information” only in the sense that we may not know the nature of the full hierarchy of processes, that is, the characteristics of the function that did eventually produce the lie. The exact nature of misinformation, etc., is subject to a wide range of interpretations (and misinterpretations). Dretske notes that “no structure can carry the information that *s* is *F* unless, in fact, *s* is *F*. False information, misinformation, and disinformation are not varieties of information”.

When what is transmitted is not received as sent . . . an *information loss* has occurred in the process . . .

When information has been lost in producing a particular output characteristic, the value taken on by the characteristic is determined, in part, by a random or error component. When there exists a non-null error component in determining a characteristic or variable’s value, the “information” contained in the variable may be referred to as “misinformation.” The value of a variable is information about the input; when the information is only partial and is tainted by error, it is better understood as misinformation. Essentially, this is information that is partly or wholly false.

Economists and scholars interested in decision theory often refer to error free information as *perfect information*. Perfect information about a source domain *X* exists when there is a one-to-one mapping in a noiseless environment for the source *X* onto the destination set *Y*. Information may be said to be *incomplete* when the mapping from *X* is into *Y*, not onto *Y*.

We may define another form of misinformation as information that isn’t justified. If one believes something for the wrong reasons, one may be said to be “misinformed.” In these cases, there is a perception that something is wrong with the recipient of the information, and it is this faulty nature of the receiver that makes something “misinformation.”

Running compilation of key definitions

1. Systematic theology: The organized presentation of all that the Bible teaches about God and His works.
2. Exegesis: The actual practice of studying or interpreting a document or other message to determine its meaning.
3. Context: Context in a document or utterance is the surroundings of a portion of a word, a word, or a group of words.
4. Bibliology: The doctrinal study of the nature of the Bible.
5. Biblical authority: The quality inherent in Scripture by virtue of which human beings are completely answerable to its content.
6. Revelation: The information about Himself given by God to human beings.
7. General revelation: God's disclosure of Himself, available directly to everyone, given through means other than dreams, visions, direct words and Christ Himself.
8. Special revelation: The disclosure of information from God that is not available directly to all human beings.
9. Inspiration: A term applied to the Bible denoting that it is the product of God's creative activity, figuratively breathed out from Him (2 Tim. 3:16); applies to the process of recording Scripture, not specifically to the people involved; actually, *expiration* would be a better term to reflect the concept of 2 Tim. 3:16; the result is *inerrancy*.