50 CORE TRUTHS OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

A GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING AND TEACHING THEOLOGY

GREGG R. ALLISON

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I dedicate this book to the leadership, staff, and faculty of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Through their constant encouragement to write, their valuing of publishing so their faculty can extend its influence throughout the world, and their provision of regular sabbaticals, they foster a creative environment that results in books like *50 Core Truths of the Christian Faith*.

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With thankfulness and profound respect, I dedicate this book to you.

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PREFACE

In 2015 I was asked to write up a proposal for a book that would present the essential truths of Christian theology in a clear, user-friendly format. Fulfilling this request and writing the book consumed a large part of my time and energy for a year, and the result is *50 Core Truths of the Christian Faith*.

I am in my twenty-third year of teaching Christian theology, so this work flowed out of a lifetime of study and teaching experience. Currently, I am professor of Christian theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. I am also a pastor of Sojourn Community Church.

This book is unique in its approach to Christian theology. Though Christian education books explain the theology, methodology, and techniques of teaching, and though Sunday School curricula provide the actual material for teaching, *50 Core Truths of the Christian Faith* is unique in that it provides guidance for how to teach each Christian doctrine. As far as I know, no book like it exists.

I explain how to teach Christian theology in the church. Specifically, the audience envisioned includes pastors who wish to preach doctrinal sermons; Sunday school teachers who are covering basic Christian doctrines in their classes; leaders of small groups who need to address doctrinal matters with group members; church members who are engaged in teaching the faith in catechism classes, leaders-in-training programs, and adult education courses; educators in Christian schools with classes on Christian doctrine; and the like.

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The book is divided into fifty chapters. Each chapter begins with a concise summary of the primary content of what is believed, together with a list of the doctrine's "Main Themes." A list of "Key Scripture" is also provided, giving those biblical passages that ground the doctrine. When preaching and teaching these passages, one can refer to the doctrine and, if time permits, develop it. The first main heading is "Understanding the Doctrine," which explains the main themes as major affirmations that must be made in constructing sound doctrine. It also focuses on the biblical support for the doctrine and notes the major errors to be avoided. The teaching section also includes a list of perennial issues and problematic questions meant to alert teachers to matters that may be of pressing concern to participants; these are phrased from a participant's point of view. Each chapter also contains a teaching outline that can help structure your presentation of the material.

In addition to constructing the doctrine in the "Understanding the Doctrine" section, each chapter contains an "Enacting the Doctrine" section and a "Teaching the Doctrine" section. The application section connects the topic to daily living for both individual believers and churches. The teaching section offers guidance for communicating the doctrine to today's audiences.

To help you gain a more complete understanding of each core truth, I have included a "Resources" list in each chapter. These lists point to the relevant discussions (when applicable) in seven general books that cover the full range of topics treated in *50 Core Truths of the Christian Faith*. I selected these resources because they offer either deeper treatments of these themes, useful overviews that summarize key ideas, or broader evangelical perspectives that can complement my own. Many other resources could have been included in this list. Readers and teachers are encouraged to use their favorite theological resources—preferred authors, standard denominational works, in-depth treatments of specific subjects—as they study these doctrines or prepare to teach them. The resource lists include these seven works:

- Gregg R. Allison, *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016).
- Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001).
- Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

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- Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994; paperback ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).
- Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).
- Michael Horton, *Pilgrim Theology: Core Doctrines for Christian Disciples* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).
- Erik Thoennes, *Life's Biggest Questions: What the Bible Says about the Things That Matter Most* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011).

The format of this book arises from my conviction that doctrine is both true belief and true practice, and that it is to be confessed by the church and taught from generation to generation. Like Paul, I urge Christians to be "trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed" (1 Tim. 4:6). My prayer is that this theological resource will help to form believers in sound doctrine and transform their lives for the glory of God.

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Portions of this material draw from and develop definitions in *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms*.[1] For further study of the historical development of these fifty core truths, see my *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine*.[2]

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INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

In its most basic sense, Christian doctrine is Christian belief based on Scripture. Examples include that God is triune (God is three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), that Jesus is both fully God and fully man, and that salvation is by divine grace. Sound doctrine reflects in summary form what Scripture affirms and what the church is bound to believe.

Sound doctrine stands in contrast to false doctrine. Such heresy is false belief that misinterprets Scripture or overlooks some affirmations of Scripture. Examples include Unitarianism (God is only one person, not three), Arianism (Jesus is not fully God), and legalism (salvation is by human effort). The church is called to avoid heresy and correct its errors.

CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE IN ITS FOUR APPLICATIONS

Doctrine is believed. *Orthodoxy* is true belief, or sound doctrine.

Doctrine is practiced. *Orthopraxis* is right practice, or godly living.

Doctrine is confessed. *Confession* is the public profession of Christian belief.

Doctrine is taught. *Teaching* (the word "doctrine" comes from the Latin *docere*, "to teach") is the faithful transmission of Christian belief from generation to generation.

Accordingly, doctrine is believed, practiced, confessed, and taught. It is Christian belief that involves not just our head but our whole being: our mind, emotions, will, motivations, attitudes, intentions, behavior, words, and instruction.

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CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE AS BELIEF AND PRACTICE

Christian doctrine as belief and practice is important for several reasons. Scripture associates sound doctrine with Christian maturity and leadership responsibilities. As for the first matter, Scripture's vision for mature believers in mature churches has this goal: "so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes" (Eph. 4:14). Christian maturity aims at, and at least in part is measured by, the embrace of sound doctrine and the rejection of false doctrine.

Maturing Christians and maturing churches are characterized by good theology.

As for leadership responsibilities, Scripture describes good servants of Jesus Christ as disciples who are "trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that [they] have followed" (1 Tim. 4:6). An elder/pastor/minister "must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it" (Titus 1:9). Church leaders must embrace and live sound doctrine, as well as be able to refute those who oppose it.

Leaders of the church are characterized by good theology.

Negatively, an outsider to the Christian faith "teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness" (1 Tim. 6:3). Indeed, at the conclusion of a lengthy description of types of evil people—"the lawless and disobedient, . . . the ungodly and sinners, . . . the unholy and profane"—Paul indicates that the list could continue by adding a type of "etc.": "and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine" (1:9–10). False doctrine, or heresy, stands opposed to sound doctrine. We are to reject the former and cling to the latter.

People outside of the faith are characterized by bad theology.

Thus, Christian doctrine as belief and practice is important.

CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE AS CONFESSION AND TEACHING

Christian doctrine as confession and teaching is important for several reasons. Several of the above biblical passages emphasize holding firmly to good theology and transmitting it. On many occasions and at many times, the church has publicly confessed what it believes. Here is a snippet of

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an early church creed about Jesus Christ, a confession found in the New Testament (1 Tim. 3:16):

> Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:
>
> He was manifested in the flesh,
> vindicated by the Spirit,
> seen by angels,
> proclaimed among the nations,
> believed on in the world,
> taken up in glory.

Early church creeds expressed in summary form the sound doctrine the church confessed. The Apostles' Creed, for instance, asserts, "I believe in God the Father almighty . . . and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord . . . [and] in the Holy Spirit."

The church publicly confesses good theology.

The church teaches sound doctrine. From its beginning, the church has the tradition of transmitting its faith—what it believes—to its new members. We sometimes refer to this as passing on a *tradition* (from the Latin *traditio*, "hand over"). Older Christians—in particular church leaders—instruct new believers in sound doctrine, which they in turn live out. Indeed, a disciple (from the Latin *discipulus*, "learner") is a student of good theology who grows in increasing conformity to the image of Jesus Christ. Without minimizing the important role that Christian schools, colleges, universities, and seminaries play in teaching theology, the church must never abdicate its position as the primary transmitter of sound doctrine.

The church transmits good theology from generation to generation.

Thus, Christian doctrine as confession and teaching is important.

CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE AS THE WISDOM OF THE AGES FOR THE CHURCH TODAY

For nearly two thousand years, the church has constructed sound theology based on Scripture. Because Scripture is the written Word of God and, as such, the ultimate authority for what the church is to believe and how it is to live, it is the foundation for good theology. Though challenged by false doctrine, and despite falling prey at times to heresy, the church has developed

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a theological consensus on many of its beliefs. Very broadly, and with significant disagreement on many details, these beliefs include the following:

- The inspiration, authority, truthfulness, power, and centrality of Scripture as divine revelation
- The existence, knowability, and nature/attributes of God
- The Trinity (God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit)
- Divine creation and providence
- The reality and work of spiritual beings (angels, demons, Satan)
- The dignity of human beings as image bearers of God
- The depravity of human beings as fallen into sin (including original sin and actual sin)
- The deity and humanity of Jesus Christ (including his virgin birth)
- Jesus Christ's work of salvation (for example, incarnation, death, burial, resurrection, ascension)
- The person and work of the Holy Spirit
- The application of salvation (for example, the forgiveness of sins, regeneration, justification) as a gracious work of God appropriated by faith
- The church as the people of God, the body of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit
- The church as one, holy, catholic/universal, and apostolic
- Means of grace (for example, baptism and the Lord's Supper) through the church
- Personal eschatology in terms of death and the intermediate state
- Cosmic eschatology in terms of the return of Jesus Christ, the resurrection, the last judgment, and eternal punishment
- The new heaven and new earth as the ultimate hope[3]

Many factors contribute to this amazing theological consensus, not the least of which is the Word of God, upon which it is grounded, and the Spirit of God, who guides the church into sound doctrine. This heritage is a treasure of theological wisdom that helps the contemporary church construct its doctrine today.

In some churches, a popular motto is "No creed but the Bible." If this sentiment aims at underscoring the ultimate authority of Scripture, it is on

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target. If, however, it rejects the legacy of the above theological consensus, it cripples the church's embrace of sound theology. It is also naive, since the church has been, and continues to be, helped by factors outside of the Bible. For example, when the church affirms the doctrine of the Trinity and confesses that the Son is of "the same essence" as the Father, it is using nonbiblical terms (in these cases the Latin word *Trinitas* and the Greek word *homoousios*) to express its sound doctrine.

As the church believes, practices, confesses, and teaches sound theology, it is aided by theological wisdom from the past.

To summarize: Christian doctrine is Christian belief based on Scripture. The church bears the primary responsibility for constructing and transmitting good theology, with an essential assist from the theological wisdom of the ages. This sound doctrine is believed, practiced, confessed, and taught.

This is the vision of *50 Core Truths of the Christian Faith*.

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Part 1

DOCTRINE OF THE WORD OF GOD

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1

THE INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE

SUMMARY

All Scripture is God-breathed, because the Holy Spirit superintended the biblical authors as they composed their writings, the Word of God.

MAIN THEMES

- Scripture has God for its author.
- Scripture was also written by human authors under the direction of the Holy Spirit.
- All Scripture is God-breathed.
- Inspiration extends to the words of Scripture.
- The Spirit and the human authors wrote together.
- Various modes of inspiration were used.
- As a result of its inspiration, Scripture is authoritative and true.

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KEY SCRIPTURE

Matthew 19:4–5; John 10:35; Acts 4:24–26; 1 Corinthians 2:10–12; 2 Timothy 3:16–17; 2 Peter 1:16–21

UNDERSTANDING THE DOCTRINE

Major Affirmations

As the Bible itself affirms, "All Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16 NIV). The word "inspiration" has historically been used to describe this doctrine, referring to the divine guidance of the writers of Scripture through the movement of God's Spirit. But we should also think of the process as one of "expiration" (breathing out): Scripture is the product of the creative breath of God.

The Holy Spirit was particularly responsible for the Bible's inspiration: the biblical authors "spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:21). He superintended Moses, Isaiah, Luke, and the others as they composed their writings. While these authors employed their own personalities, theological perspectives, writing styles, and so forth, the Spirit ensured that what they wrote was what God wanted them to write: the Word of God, divinely authoritative and fully truthful.

At times, the church has tended to emphasize Scripture's divine authorship, even to the neglect of its human authorship. Indeed, the Holy Spirit's role in relation to the biblical authors was illustrated by a musician who strums his stringed instrument or a flautist playing her flute. At times the church embraced mechanical dictation. But the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture affirms complete participation on the part of both its divine author—the Holy Spirit—and its human authors. Moses, Jeremiah, Matthew, Paul, and the others were fully engaged in the writing process. They consulted earlier writings, conducted interviews, selected the narratives to include, thought carefully, composed their writings, and more—all under the superintending work of the Holy Spirit.

Inspiration is *plenary*: *all* Scripture is God-breathed (2 Tim. 3:16). Inspiration is not confined to the "important" parts of Scripture, those passages that guide people to salvation or instruct about faith and obedience for pleasing God. Rather, its historical references (for example, Adam and Eve, Noah's ark, Jonah and the great fish), its affirmations about the world

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(for example, creation out of nothing, the sun and the moon appearing as two great lights), its genealogies, and more were inspired by the Spirit. The contemporary tendency to ascribe inspiration to some portions of Scripture but not to all is in part due to feelings of embarrassment about portions like the imprecatory psalms and God's decree to destroy Israel's enemies. But the difficulties encountered in Scripture are not a reason for dismissing its plenary inspiration. Readers of Scripture may find parts of it more or less inspiring at different times and different places, but *all* Scripture is God-breathed.

Inspiration is *verbal*: it extends to the *words* of Scripture. This is the sense of Paul's statement "all *Scripture* is God-breathed," as the term "Scripture" refers to the very words themselves. Because Scripture is verbally inspired, Jesus builds his argument for the resurrection of the dead on a present-tense verb, challenging its critics, "Have you not read what was said to you by God: 'I *am* the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living" (Matt. 22:31–32, quoting Exod. 3:6; emphasis added). Likewise, Paul argues his case for a sole heir of the Abrahamic promises on a singular noun: "Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ" (Gal. 3:16, quoting Gen. 12:7). Thus, while inspiration certainly applies to the biblical authors as they were being moved by the Holy Spirit as they wrote, it is true of the very words of Scripture themselves.

Inspiration is *concursive*: the Spirit and the human authors *wrote together*. The Spirit's work was not just the influence of providential care or guidance that all Christians experience as they walk with God. Nor did inspiration lead merely to a heightened religious consciousness, or extend only to the thoughts or ideas in the minds of the human authors. This particular work of the Holy Spirit was unique to the prophets and apostles, as he and they collaboratively wrote the Word of God. Thus, Jesus considered that what Moses said, God himself said (Matt. 19:4–5, quoting Moses's comment about marriage [Gen. 2:24] and ascribing it to "he who created them"—that is, God).

Though Scripture is inspired, the way that inspiration came about is largely mysterious. These modes include historical research (Luke 1:1–4), observation of life (Ecclesiastes), Spirit-assisted memory (John 14:26), miraculous revelation (2 Cor. 12:1–4), occasional dictation (Rev. 2–3), and sound counsel (1 Cor. 7:25–26, 39–40).

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Because of its inspiration by God, Scripture is authoritative and true. It possesses the right to command what believers are to do and prohibit what they are not to do. Moreover, whatever it affirms corresponds to reality, and it never affirms anything that is contrary to fact.

Biblical Support

The doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture is evident in the Old Testament writings. "Moses spoke to the people of Israel according to all that the LORD had given him in commandment to them" (Deut. 1:3). The prophets affirmed of their instructions, "Thus says the LORD" (for example, Isa. 66:1). Still, the divine inspiration of those earlier writings is more fully presented in the New Testament. Paul highlighted plenary inspiration (2 Tim. 3:16–17). Peter underscored the collaboration between the Holy Spirit's superintending work and the human authors' writing of Scripture (2 Pet. 1:16–21). The early Christians attributed the words of a psalm of David to the "Sovereign Lord, . . . who through the mouth of our father David . . . said by the Holy Spirit . . ." (Acts 4:24–26, quoting Ps. 2:1–2). Jesus emphasized the unfailing authority of even casual clauses in the Old Testament: "Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35, referring to Ps. 82:6). Indeed, he warned people who thought that he had come to do away with Scripture. Rather, his intention was to fulfill its every word (Matt. 5:17–18).

As for the inspiration of the New Testament writings, Jesus himself promised the Holy Spirit as the guarantee that what the apostles taught and wrote would be a truthful, authoritative witness to him and his work (John 14:26; 16:13). The Holy Spirit, then, knowing completely the things of God, revealed them to the apostles and superintended their writing (1 Cor. 2:10–13). Paul wrote with the conviction that his instructions were given "through the Lord Jesus" (1 Thess. 4:2). Indeed, the gospel that he communicated was the very word of God (2:13). Even when he could not point to a specific teaching of Jesus on a particular topic, Paul sensed that he had the Spirit of God when presenting his sound judgment (1 Cor. 7:25–26, 39–40). Peter considered Paul's writings to be part of "the other Scriptures"—that is, together with the body of the inspired Old Testament writings (2 Pet. 3:15–16).

Major Errors

1. *The denial of the superintending work of the Holy Spirit*. This position dismisses all divine action in the writing of Scripture, reducing it to

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a merely human book. This viewpoint refuses to listen to Scripture's own affirmation about itself, and demonstrates a very low view of divine action among human beings.

2. *The denial of the human authorship of Scripture*. The mechanical-dictation view considers the biblical authors to be passive secretaries without any significant and willful participation in the writing process. God simply dictated his Word, and they wrote it down. This position cannot explain the various personalities, theological perspectives, writing styles, and more that are clearly evidenced in the biblical writings. Some people deny the human role in writing Scripture out of fear that, if human beings actually wrote it, and if "to err is human," then Scripture must contain errors. This fear overlooks the superintending operation of the Holy Spirit that protected the Word of God from human error.

3. *The denial of plenary inspiration*. This view considers some parts of Scripture to be inspired, while others are not, dismissing what Scripture claims for its inspiration. A major problem with this view is the need for reliable criteria for deciding which parts are inspired and which parts are not.

4. *The denial of verbal inspiration*. This position claims that the Spirit guided the thoughts of the biblical authors as they wrote but that such inspiration did not extend to the words they used. This viewpoint rejects what Scripture claims for its inspiration.

ENACTING THE DOCTRINE

Because Scripture is God-breathed, it is divinely authoritative. The church is called to do what it commands, avoid doing what it prohibits, heed its warnings, believe its promises, and so forth. Also, inspired Scripture is completely truthful. The church is called to trust everything that it affirms. This is the case when Scripture addresses matters of salvation, faith and obedience, holy living, and worshiping God. It is likewise the case when it treats matters of history, creation and God's providence, genealogies, and more. All Scripture is God-breathed, inspired by the Holy Spirit!

Because non-Christians do not yet trust Jesus Christ for salvation, the church engages missionally by communicating the gospel to them. It believes that the Word of God, breathed out by him, is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16). As people become believers, the church disciples and cares for them by preaching and teaching inspired Scripture.

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What's at stake in this doctrine? God's relationship to Scripture is. If the Bible is God-breathed, then God enjoys the closest possible relationship to it. Indeed, it means that he is fully invested in his Word, acting through it to save and transform the church. If this is not the case, then Scripture begins to resemble a human book. It is a book like all other books, filled with laws, proverbs, compelling stories, myths, and more. But being God-breathed, Scripture is the authoritative, truthful Word of God.

Perennial Questions and Problematic Issues

- Why is the doctrine of Scripture so foundational for the Christian faith?
- Some Scripture (for example, its genealogies, Paul's lists of people to greet) doesn't seem very inspiring, so why is inspiration important?
- It seems that the only way God could guarantee that the human authors got his Word right would be for him to dictate it to them.
- Did God really inspire the parts of Scripture that narrate Israel's destruction of the Canaanites and that present prayers for the destruction of enemies?
- If only parts of Scripture are God-breathed, what criteria enable us to identify those parts as inspired and other parts as not inspired?
- How can the church claim that only its holy book (Scripture) is from God? What about the Qur'an for Muslims, and the Vedas for Hindus?
- How does inspiration underscore the authority and truthfulness of the Bible?

TEACHING THE DOCTRINE

A good place to start teaching is with a Bible study focusing on Jesus's attitudes toward Scripture. The goal of this study is to understand what the Lord's view of Scripture was, establishing that he believed it to be the Word of God, fully inspired by the Holy Spirit, and thus truthful and authoritative. Once this point is demonstrated, the challenge becomes clear: If Jesus held this view of Scripture, and if we claim that Jesus is our Lord, then are we not obligated to hold the same view as he held? This point will challenge Christians who are struggling with the inspiration of Scripture and will encourage Christians who embrace its inspiration.

Teaching through the key biblical passages (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:16–21; etc.) is next. As the major affirmations about divine authorship, human authorship, and more are made, they can be combined into a robust definition of inspiration. Making specifications about plenary, verbal, and concursive inspiration will help to clarify this doctrine and avoid misunderstandings. Major errors also need to be presented and

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discussed. Affirming this doctrine leads Christians to heed the authority of Scripture and to trust it as the truthful Word of God.

TEACHING OUTLINE

1. The word "God-breathed" and the summary
2. Bible study: Jesus's view of Scripture
3. Major affirmations (with biblical support)
   A. Divine authorship
   B. Human authorship (with rejection of mechanical dictation)
   C. Plenary inspiration
   D. Verbal inspiration
   E. Concursive inspiration
   F. Modes of inspiration
4. Major errors to avoid
   A. Denial of the superintending work of the Holy Spirit
   B. Denial of the human authorship of Scripture
   C. Denial of plenary inspiration
   D. Denial of verbal inspiration
5. Enacting the doctrine
   A. Authority and truthfulness of Scripture
   B. Sharing the gospel

RESOURCES

Allison, *Theological Terms*, s.v. "inspiration"
Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. "Bible, Inspiration of"
Erickson, *Christian Theology*, chap. 8
Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, chap. 14
Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, chap. 4
Horton, *Pilgrim Theology*, chap. 2
Thoennes, *Life's Biggest Questions*, chap. 4

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