

## Scripture with a Southern Accent: Understanding and Applying a Southern Presbyterian's View of the Bible

By Gabriel N.E. Fluhrer

A distinctive feature of evangelical Christianity is the doctrine of God's plenary, verbal inspiration of the Bible, resulting in an inerrant and infallible text in the original autographs. While other religions might venerate a sacred book, they are either offshoots of Christianity or hold to a fundamentally different understanding of what it means to possess God's word. Small wonder, then, that much controversy has surrounded this cardinal doctrine. In what follows, we will focus our attention on a recent criticism of the nineteenth century Southern Presbyterian theologian James Henley Thornwell's view of Biblical inspiration. The main goal of this paper is to clear away misinterpretations of Thornwell's work and then suggest some ways in which his view of Scripture can help Christians today.

### WHO WAS JAMES HENLEY THORNWELL?

James Henley Thornwell was born on December 9, 1812, in what is known today as the Pee Dee region of South Carolina. It was then called the Marlborough District. His father, James Thornwell, was of English descent and managed a local plantation. He died when Thornwell was only eight years old, leaving him and his mother destitute. There were few worse situations to find one's

self in the nineteenth century antebellum South than that of a poor widow. But God cared for her and her child. Early in his life, two benefactors recognized the brilliance of the young Thornwell. As a result, he was afforded opportunities that others in his position at the time would not have enjoyed.<sup>1</sup>

Because of this kind providence, Thornwell was educated in a small school near Level Green, South Carolina. A contemporary from his childhood years recalls, "A large part of every night, while others were asleep, he spent at work upon the lessons assigned for the following day, and in reading the volumes of history and literature that were furnished by kind neighbors."<sup>2</sup> Thornwell's pattern of intense nocturnal study would continue for the rest of his life.

The young scholar matriculated to the College of South Carolina in 1829 (the present-day University of South Carolina), but was not accepted into the class for which he applied. This was a devastating blow to him, so he redoubled his efforts and gained entry shortly thereafter, to the junior class no less. During his time at university, he regularly studied fourteen hours a day, committing to memory large portions of the Bible, Shakespeare, and Milton's *Paradise Lost* (Palmer, 63). He graduated in 1831 at the age of nineteen.

From there, he moved to Sumter, South Carolina where, like many young graduates during this period, he became a private tutor. On May 6, 1832, Thornwell professed faith in Christ and was joined to the Concord Presbyterian Church in Sumter.<sup>3</sup> One biographer notes, "Thornwell was unable to point out the exact time he became a Christian" (Wells, 17). However, once he did profess faith, he immediately set about to enter the ministry. He studied briefly at Andover Seminary in Massachusetts, then Harvard. He despised the Northern climate, so he returned to South Carolina to complete his studies at Columbia Theological Seminary, which

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1. Benjamin Morgan Palmer, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), 3–35.

2. John Miller Wells, *Southern Presbyterian Worthies* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1936), 13.

3. David B. Calhoun, *Our Southern Zion: Old Columbia Seminary (1828–1927)* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2012), 52.

was founded in 1828 and moved to the capital city of the Palmetto State in 1830.

Thornwell was licensed by the Harmony Presbytery in November 1834 and one of the professors, Dr. Goulding, remarked, "I feel like sitting at this young man's feet as learner" (Palmer, 127). He married Nancy White Witherspoon on December 3, 1835. Earlier that year, he had accepted the call to the newly organized Presbyterian work in Lancaster, South Carolina.

This charge did not last long. January 1, 1838 found Thornwell returning to the College to assume his duties as professor of Logic and *Belles Lettres*. Nor did this position endure. He was called to the pastorate of First Presbyterian Church in Columbia on January 1, 1840. His tenure here was even shorter: one year later, he returned to the College as chaplain and professor of Sacred Literature and the Evidences of Christianity.

Thornwell's commitment as a churchman was evident from the time he began his ministry. He attended the pivotal General Assembly of 1837, his first of ten, in Philadelphia. It was here that the Presbyterian Church in America split between the Old School and the New School. Briefly, the Old School complained that the New School was abandoning the theology of the Westminster Standards, while those on the New School side promoted the revivalism of the day, citing Jonathan Edwards as their inspiration. Given this dichotomy, the Old School party saw itself as the guardians of Reformed orthodoxy inherited from English and Continental Calvinists. To their way of thinking, the New School represented a dangerous compromise with New England theology and polity (the latter in the form of Congregationalism). Thornwell was decidedly Old School in his theology, a fact which will become more important as we proceed to his doctrine of Scripture.

For the rest of his life, Thornwell would go between serving as pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Columbia, president and/or professor at the South Carolina College, and professor at Columbia Seminary, the post he held when he died. Though brief, his career was distinguished; his written works fill four volumes. He was only forty-nine when he passed into glory on August 1, 1862. His final words were, "Wonderful! Beautiful! Nothing but space! Expanse! Expanse! Expanse!" He is buried in the historic Elmwood Cemetery in Columbia, next to his wife and daughter (Palmer, 524).

#### WHAT DID THORNWELL BELIEVE ABOUT SCRIPTURE?

The concise biographical sketch above places Thornwell in context. He was an Old School Presbyterian

committed unreservedly to the Westminster Standards. Hence, it should not surprise anyone that Thornwell affirmed and defended the Westminster doctrine of Scripture, what we would call today the *organic view* of the inspiration of the Bible. According to this position, the Bible is infallible (incapable of erring) and inerrant (without error in the original autographs), yet bears the marks of human authorship (i.e. different styles, life experiences, etc.). God's word, therefore, is inspired *organically* through the human agent. In addition, Westminster's view of Scripture is simply a summary of the historic belief that Christians, both East and West, have held since the early church. It is not an innovation. As one scholar summarizes, "The Confession does not give a specific theory of inspiration but simply states that the Scriptures 'are given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life' (1.2). This approach stands in contrast to other expressions of the day, such as those from Calvin or Leigh. Calvin once stated that the Holy Spirit 'dictated' the Scriptures, though he did not always maintain this conviction unreservedly."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the Confession's doctrine of inspiration is very much against a dictation theory of inspiration, even if it does not state this contrast in stark terms.

What is the dictation theory to which the Confession is opposed? Essentially, this view teaches that the Bible was dictated directly to the human authors, making them little more than entranced automatons. To be sure, there are passages in the Bible where we are told that God dictates his words to the authors (i.e. Jer. 36:4, 32; Rev. 2:1, 8). But the dictation view goes beyond these texts, to the point of obscuring the reality of human agency in the process of divine inspiration. This theory is often caricatured as the Bible "being dropped from heaven, gilded edges and all." The main point to grasp is that, on the dictation view, the reality of human authorship is eclipsed, if not denied. It has never been the majority report in church history.

Recent scholarship has charged Thornwell with holding to the dictation view as opposed to the organic view. Specifically, renowned Southern historian James O. Farmer maintains that there is clear evidence in Thornwell's writings that he held to the dictation view. Farmer contends, "[Thornwell] asserted his belief in the plenary inspiration of the Bible. In 1849 he described his view of the Bible's genesis with the phrase 'verbal dictation,' adding that this is the only conception that 'makes the Bible what it professes to be—the Word of God.'"<sup>5</sup>

4. J.V. Fesko, *The Theology of the Westminster Standards: Historical Context and Theological Insights* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 75.

5. James O. Farmer, *The Metaphysical Confederacy: James Henley*

Therefore, regarding Thornwell's view of Biblical inspiration, he concludes, "The Biblical authors, in this view, were simply human conduits through which the divine message was delivered to man" (Farmer, 136). Farmer is citing two of Thornwell's review articles, which appeared in the 1849 and 1856 issues of the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, respectively. According to Farmer, it seems that Thornwell's adherence to the dictation view is unmistakable. From there, he goes on to discuss how Thornwell's understanding of inspiration affected nearly every area of his life.

Farmer is correct when he argues what Thornwell's view of the Bible *did*; it shaped every area of his life. He is incorrect when he argues what Thornwell's view of the Bible *was*; Thornwell did not hold to the dictation theory. Farmer's book was published first in 1986 and then went into a second edition in 1999. Hence, Morton Smith's watershed monograph *Studies in Southern Presbyterian Theology*<sup>6</sup> would have been available for Farmer to reference. But Smith is not mentioned in Farmer's bibliography. This absence is a major weakness in Farmer's argument, inasmuch as Smith's book reveals that Thornwell did not hold to the dictation view. The evidence for Smith's conclusion is impressive and merits close reading.

Smith's study was written in the 1960's, a time when historic Calvinism was being overthrown in the Southern Presbyterian Church by those of a more liberal persuasion. Accordingly, his work focuses on two doctrines that Calvinists have always cherished, divine election and the inspiration of the Bible. Smith wants to show just how pervasive was the historic understanding of these doctrines in the forefathers of the Southern Presbyterian church. As a result, at the outset of his investigation Smith argues, "To the writer's knowledge there are no ministers of the Presbyterian Church in the United States who hold a mechanical dictation theory" of Biblical inspiration (Smith, 14). Therefore, Farmer's insistence that Thornwell held to the dictation theory would have been a novelty in Thornwell's day and in the recent past. The very fact that none of Thornwell's biographers mention his view of Scripture as innovative alerts the reader that Farmer's reading is on the wrong track.

Nonetheless Smith acknowledges that Thornwell's understanding of inspiration could be misunderstood as the dictation view, citing the same review that Farmer

quoted from. Smith observes, "Taken out of context, this statement certainly gives the impression that... Thornwell was so naïve as to hold to a 'verbal dictation' theory of inspiration" (Smith, 128). But the review does not tell the whole story of Thornwell's views, as Smith highlights. "The fact is, that in the manuscript fragment of [Thornwell's] lecture on this subject, we have the definite refutation of this particular theory [i.e. of verbal dictation]" (Smith, 128).

The manuscripts Smith is referencing are limited to two fragmentary pieces in Thornwell's archived papers, now located in Columbia, South Carolina (Smith, 128). Since these artifacts represent Thornwell's mature thinking on this subject and arise from his lectures on systematic theology, we would not be overreaching to claim that they are the definitive statement of his understanding of inspiration. Thornwell begins by underscoring the relationship between inspiration and its effects. "All that we can do is to notice the end and apprehend the effect of inspiration, and we can only define what is, by relation to what it does." He goes on to argue, "Its effect, therefore, is to make the teaching of the inspired person the teaching of God. If it fails to do this, it is nothing... The effect to us, so far as the ground of faith is concerned, is just the same, *as if no human instrument had been employed at all.*" (Smith, 128–129). In these statements, it is clear that Thornwell is simply summarizing the historic teaching of the church's doctrine of inspiration. After this citation from Thornwell's unpublished manuscripts, Smith points out that, in the same review cited by Farmer, Thornwell seems to use the term "dictation" as synonymous with "verbal inspiration" (Smith, 129–30). Hence, the ambiguity which originally aroused Farmer's suspicions.

Despite having the appearance of the dictation theory, Thornwell immediately refutes this view in the very next line of the manuscript. He writes, "It [i.e. the orthodox view] has been compared to *dictation*. The mistake there is that the man is passive. The analogy good, but the resemblance is a failure" (Smith, 129). Thornwell clearly disavows the dictation view in this statement.

Fascinatingly in one the review articles already mentioned, Thornwell disavows the dictation theory and even refers to his theory as "organic." He states his position in unambiguous terms:

Mr. Morrell is not surely to learn that the theory of verbal inspiration contemplates something more than *organic influence*; that it represents the sentiments and language...of the writers as well as of the Holy Ghost. God employed the minds of the writers as well as of

*Thornwell and the Synthesis of Southern Values* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999), 136.

6. Morton H. Smith, *Studies in Southern Presbyterian Theology* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1987).

the Holy Ghost. God employed the minds of the Apostles, with all their faculties and powers, distinctively as minds, *and not as machines*, to communicate His own will in His own words to mankind (cited in Smith, 129).

A better statement of the classic organic view of inspiration than Thornwell articulates here would be difficult to find. As a result, it is evident that while he used the terms “mechanical dictation” as synonyms for the organic view, he clearly did not hold to the dictation theory.

The problem with Farmer's reading is that he does not seem to understand the historic doctrine of inspiration. He does not take into account that the Calvinism of Southern Presbyterians was refined, developed, and nuanced. Not only did they read Calvin himself carefully, as Palmer documents extensively;<sup>7</sup> they were descended from the progeny of the high Calvinism of Puritan England and Scotland that sprung up in the centuries that followed the Genevan reformer's work. The magisterial Reformers and their theological offspring saw themselves as recovering apostolic Christianity. The result was a view of Biblical inspiration that stood squarely on the shoulders of the church's uniform teaching on the subject, which was the organic view.

Farmer's error reveals a limitation in his method. Historians who ignore or do not take the time to understand the Reformed theology which weaves itself throughout the work of Thornwell and his peers do so at their own peril. When they do neglect this structural symmetry between Southern Presbyterians and the stream of historic Christianity in which they stood, the kind of missteps we have noticed in Farmer's work are inevitable.

#### WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THORNWELL ABOUT SCRIPTURE?

We have concentrated on an a very narrow section of Thornwell's impressive body of work in order to scrutinize a misapprehension of his views. As Farmer correctly observed, Thornwell's belief about the nature of Scripture influenced everything else he did. Therefore, his affirmation of the historic Christian teaching regarding the nature of Biblical inspiration draws attention to the weaknesses of other views. For example, the Qur'an teaches the mechanical view of inspiration. As noted Islamic expert Daniel Janosik explains, “Muslims believe that the original Qur'an is written on a table that is eternally kept in heaven...Allah gave this message to Muhammad in order to preserve the true explanation of his

law and nature.”<sup>8</sup> The *Book of Mormon* suffers from the same mistaken view. Both of these texts, which claim to complete or supplement the Bible, suffer from a distorted conception of verbal inspiration. In these writings, the author is given God's word directly, becoming akin to a robot in the process.

The result, however, is not a text that is more plausibly God's word than the Bible. In fact, both these examples offer the reader striking portraits of religious texts that are hidebound—the very thing that a dictation view of inspiration was designed to avoid. Specifically, in both the Qur'an and the Book of Mormon, the wisdom, variety, poetry, and exalted language of the Bible are exchanged for bizarre accounts and repetitive, tedious laws. The reader is left with something very human, something that lacks the redemptive movement and eschatological transcendence which the Bible exhales on every page. In sum, the mechanical view of inspiration attempts to bypass the human element of true inspiration and results, ironically, in a text that is all too human.

By contrast, the view of inspiration championed by Thornwell results in a book whose authors, despite a vast intellectual and artistic variety, demonstrate an essential harmony over thousands of years (and pages) which is nothing short of breathtaking. From the hushed majesty of the Genesis creation account, to the thunderings of the prophets against wayward Israel, to the incomparable prose of Isaiah, to the staccato descriptions of Mark's gospel, to the triumphant apocalyptic imagery of Revelation, the Bible's diversity and unity are evidence that while written by men, its primary author is God himself. The organic theory of inspiration Thornwell defended accounts for the Bible's own teaching and overall style to a degree that no other view can even approach.

The second lesson we learn from Thornwell's view of inspiration is a humble submission to God's word combined with intellectual rigor. Again, by all accounts, Thornwell was a brilliant scholar from his earliest days. One more incident, which occurred during his tenure as the president of South Carolina College, should cement this impression.

I would venture that most of us have never been to a dinner party where the finer points of Aristotle's philosophy (in Greek, no less) were the topic of discussion for the group. Even fewer of us have probably ever been

7. Representative are Palmer's comments in *Life and Letters of Thornwell*, pp.532ff.

8. Daniel Janosik, *The Guide to Answering Islam: What Every Christian Needs to Know About Islam and the Rise of Radical Islam* (Cambridge, Ohio: Christian Publishing House, 2019), 42.

at a dinner party where the disputants in this were a renowned college president and a Harvard literature professor. So when Thornwell and George Bancroft, professor at Harvard, debated a certain reading of Aristotle at a New York dinner party in 1853, the distinguished guests took great delight in bearing witness to the two scholars' verbal fencing. As an aside, this kind of discussion have not been unusual at the time for a company like this; most of the guests probably had a working knowledge of Greek.

Shortly after this scene in New York, a beautiful new set of Aristotle's works for Thornwell from Dr. Bancroft arrived in South Carolina. Inscribed were the words, "A testimonial of regard to the Rev. Dr. J. H. Thornwell, the most learned of the learned." Moreover, Dr. Bancroft conceded Thornwell's interpretation of the point in question (Palmer, 536–37). Thornwell's broad learning is indisputable, as historian Eugene Genovese makes clear. "By common consent, he emerged as the greatest theologian in the South and among the greatest in the United States."<sup>9</sup>

Despite being a scholar of towering capability in a broad range of subjects—former U.S. Vice President and fellow South Carolinian John C. Calhoun once remarked, "I was not prepared for the thorough acquaintance he exhibited with the topics that are generally familiar only to statesmen" (Farmer, TMC, 153)—Thornwell submitted his imposing mind to the word of God. His problem was not ignorance of views which challenged his own; his complaint was that they fell far short of proving their claim to undo the classic view of inspiration. Instead, from his scholarly work to his preaching, the dominant theme is that the Bible is God's very word. As such, it is worthy of our most rigorous investigation with the unwavering confidence that it is, as one statesman is reputed to have said to the French monarch at one point, "the anvil that has worn out many hammers."

Christians today must recover this same commitment to high scholarship and humble submission to God's word. There has been much advancement in this regard over the past decades, but the task remains unfinished. Thornwell stands as yet another example in a long and distinguished line of believing intellectuals who championed an orthodox view of the Bible. While this view is laughable to large sections of society today, their scorn often arises more out of ignorance than reasoned debate. Thornwell stands as a model for us in this

9. Eugene D. Genovese, *The Southern Front: History and Politics in the Cultural War* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1995), 32.

regard; oftentimes, he knew his opponents' arguments better than they did. If only the critics of the Bible exhibited the same spirit of free inquiry Thornwell demonstrated! Instead, the Western intellectual tradition has traded its proud Christian birthright for a mess of relativistic pottage. In this anti-intellectual climate, it should not surprise us that the dismissal of the Biblical view of inspiration comes not after careful refutation, but only by way of rhetorical gamesmanship. We could use a strong dose of Thornwell's brilliance, combined with his childlike trust.

Third, Thornwell's view of inspiration teaches us that principled Christian living begins only with the correct doctrine of Scripture. The chief objection to this final point surely is the glaring problem of Thornwell's racist views. If the Bible is the word of God and it is the kind of book Thornwell thought it was, then why did he hold such aberrant views regarding black people? The answer is somewhat ironic: it is only the highest conception of the Bible which not only explains but also refutes Thornwell's inconsistency in this regard.

A robust doctrine of inspiration *explains* Thornwell's racism because the Bible never tires of pointing out that most countercultural of truths, the doctrine of man's total depravity. If the man after God's own heart and the forefather according to the flesh of God in the flesh, King David, was capable of adultery, murder, covetousness, and a host of other sins, how much worse are we? Accordingly, any attempt to dismiss Thornwell's view of the Bible simply because he held racist views is an *ad hominem* argument. Only if we believe the Bible is true in all its parts can we explain how someone like Thornwell, so evidently gifted and used by God, could also be so wrong about black people.

But we must also be careful here. Thornwell's views on race, while wrong, are more complex than is appreciated generally. Again, Genovese helps us recognize this point. "Thornwell, while holding black to be culturally inferior, assailed the scientific racism to which they constituted a separate species, and he held a cautiously hopeful view of the future of the race...to bring blacks into the church, he bravely stood against a hostile demonstration in Charleston and declared, 'We are not ashamed to call [the black man] our brother'" (cited in Genovese, 37–38). Certainly, his support of black people coming into the church in the Charleston episode does not excuse his overall racist views. But Genovese's remarks should give us pause if we are trying to make Thornwell's views on race fit into the "either/or" box which colors so much current historical writing.

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Therefore, a high view of plenary inspiration not only explains Thornwell's inconsistency in this matter, but also *refutes* it. If we believe the Bible is God's word in its entirety, then we can repudiate Thornwell's mistakes quite easily. The Word of God teaches that all men are created in the image of God (Acts 17:26). True, slavery was regulated by God's word, but the same inspired Word also teaches that the eschatological freedom brought about by the Messiah's first coming should result in freedom for earthly citizens as well, as Paul makes clear in Philemon (Phil. 15–21). If Thornwell and other Southern Presbyterians had been consistent in their application of their view of the Bible, the United States might have abolished slavery without losing over a million lives in the process.

Finally, Thornwell's blunder in this crucial area reminds us that all of us have interpretive blind spots. Like Thornwell, we are far more influenced by the culture around us than we care to admit. If the Bible is what Thornwell argued it was, then it must serve as our authoritative lodestone for all matters of doctrine and life. We must submit constantly to its directives, some of which will be deeply countercultural. Accordingly, perhaps one of the greatest lessons we learn from Thornwell's understanding of Scripture can be stated in a question: "What are the doctrines and practices clearly taught in the Bible that we may have missed?" This is a penetrating and sobering query. I am convinced that the only way to begin to answer it is through a careful study of great men like Thornwell, both in their triumph and in their tragedy.

#### CONCLUSION

I have tried to make the case that a prominent Southern historian misunderstood a central feature of Thornwell's theological matrix, which is representative of the entire Southern Presbyterian tradition. Relative to this doctrine, the Southern church stood united in its view of plenary inspiration with Christians across time and space. Believers today do well to imitate their faith here. The frenzied revisionary spirit that grips the modern writing of history is a spirit foreign to this view of inspiration. For, the Bible itself offers a history that is full of brilliant, deeply flawed people like Thornwell. Like us. And the only way to avoid the errors we have observed in Thornwell's thinking is to hold the same view of inspiration he did. It is God's word alone, guiding and shaping everything we do, that can help us do better than those who came before us.

**Luther on Public Worship. Continued from Page 96.** a formal catechism in 1529.<sup>84</sup> It helped to systematize doctrine and explain God's work in Christ, while also providing clear direction on how one ought to respond to the Word. For Luther's theology of worship, this catechetical side provided the necessary biblical stimuli for experiential responses. Through the teaching and preaching of the Word, God not only created but also compelled corporate expressions of faith. In his mind, as God served man the means of grace, man was to be driven to rightly respond.

Various minor details of the service also stress this same point. In the pre-Supper admonition of the *Deutsche Messe*, Luther wanted it to be somewhat scripted. "We can't have [the admonition] one way today, and another way tomorrow, and let everybody parade his talents and confuse the people."<sup>85</sup> In doing this, Luther was being careful to not draw undue attention to the priest and to guard against misperception. He wanted to keep front and center the activity of God in the sacramental Word and man's humble and grateful response.<sup>86</sup> The readings from Scripture and collects provide another example of this point. The readings were done with the priest looking at the people, as a sign of God's declaration to them, and the collects were said facing the altar, emphasizing man's response.

Luther's use of music is also informative here. In his mind, music in worship was to be filled with Scripture, which made it and preaching generally related.<sup>87</sup> God was speaking to the people through words set to a tune. And yet, quite often, it was the congregation that was singing them. Not only did the music speak the Word, but it served to enable them to recall truth when struggling with *Anfechtungen*, as well.<sup>88</sup> When facing temptation, an illiterate believer in the 16th century would more readily remember a psalm set to a tune, than a verse of Scripture or the answer to a catechism question. Additionally, it made the congregation more a part of the service itself and added a dialogical element to worship. Medieval liturgies were largely non-participatory. The priest performed the mass and the choirs sang in order to merit God's grace for the people. Yet, in Luther's liturgy, the gathered assembly actively participated. Not only in the music, but in every part of the service. As they heard God speaking through Word and sacrament, reading and music,

84. Luther, "The Small Catechism," *Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, p. 322.

85. LW 53.80.

86. LW 53.74.

87. Paul Jones, *Singing and Making Music* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2006), 3–4.

88. Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, p. 103.

89. Brecht, *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation*, p. 256.