

The Vivificationist View of *Theopneustos* as a Framework for Inspiration: Trusting Scripture When Inerrancy Harms Faith

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Abstract

This article explores the question: *How can Christians affirm the divine inspiration and authority of Scripture without relying on the problematic framework of inerrancy?* It unfolds in four main sections. First, it addresses the contemporary crisis of faith deconstruction, showing how rigid inerrantist frameworks of Scripture have contributed to disillusionment and clarifying why a renewed model of inspiration is needed. Second, it defines and contrasts the inerrancy and vivificationist frameworks, outlining their differing assumptions about *theopneustos*, authority, and interpretation. Third, it defends the vivificationist view by tracing God's breath throughout Scripture, examining Jesus's and Paul's understanding of the Spirit's role, exploring first-century conceptions of inspiration, and showing its coherence with God's partnership with humanity and early Christian interpretation. Finally, it compares both frameworks across four hermeneutical issues—Christ-centered interpretation, literalism, harmony of Scripture, and Scripture's relationship to science—concluding that the vivificationist understanding of *theopneustos* offers a coherent and pastorally constructive alternative to inerrancy while preserving a high view of Scripture.

Keywords

Inspiration of scripture, *theopneustos*, God-breathed, 2 Tim 3:16-17, Chicago Statement, God's breathing, hermeneutics, fundamentalism, vivification, deconstruction

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

A Real-Life Example

Maria had been a devout Christian her entire life, believing that the Bible was inerrant—meant to be understood literally, with all stories historically

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true, all verses equally authoritative, and each claim scientifically based. As she studied the Bible more deeply, she encountered irreconcilable contradictions, wrestling with the portrayal of a loving God commanding genocide, and struggling with scientific claims contradicting Genesis 1–3. Eventually, she walked away—not just from inerrancy, but from Christianity altogether.

The Current Crisis of Christianity

Western Christianity is in a crisis. Maria is one of millions who have deconstructed their faith. A 2024 Barna study found that 42 percent of U.S. adults have deconstructed the faith of their youth.¹ “More than one-third of committed, churchgoing Christians relate to the idea of having deconstructed the faith of their youth.”² “About 40 million adults in America today used to go to church but no longer do, which accounts for around 16 percent of our adult population.”³ If current trends continue, an estimated 42 million young people could leave the church by 2050.⁴ The deconstruction movement is not a fringe phenomenon but a significant and rapidly expanding reality within the church. These numbers represent real lives—individuals struggling with the collapse of their long-held beliefs and parents grieving as their children abandon faith.

The deconstruction movement has exposed elements within traditional Western Christianity that are perceived by many believers as unbiblical, unreasonable, or even toxic. This raises important questions for the Asian context, where theology has historically been shaped by imported Western paradigms. It has been shown that certain inherited theological beliefs and ecclesial practices, though often well-intentioned, have proven harmful in various Asian settings.⁵ While efforts relating to Asian contextual theology

1 Barna Group, *Engaging Spiritually Open: Findings on Spiritual Engagement*, <https://barnga.gloo.us/reports/engaging-spiritually-open>, accessed 5 May 2025.

2 Barna, *Engaging*.

3 Jim Davis and Michael Graham, *The Great Dechurching: The Missing Generation and the Church's Future* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2023), 3.

4 Pinetops Foundation, “*The Great Opportunity*,” <https://www.greatopportunity.org/>, accessed 6 May 2025.

5 Manuel Becker, “What Christian Practices Harm the Task of Making Disciples in Thailand, and What Are Conducive Alternative Practices?” (MA Thesis, Columbia International University Korntal, 2024).

have advanced, large segments of Christianity in Asia remain deeply influenced by Western theological frameworks.

At present, no large-scale deconstruction movement appears to be occurring within the Asian church. Nevertheless, given that some of the problematic theological beliefs now under scrutiny in the West have also been transmitted to Asia, it may only be a matter of time before similar challenges arise. The Western deconstruction movement has largely focused on deconstructing beliefs, often without offering viable pathways to faith reconstruction—frequently resulting in disillusionment or loss of faith. To spare Asian believers the pain of deconstruction, the Asian church must take preventive action. By identifying harmful doctrines now and replacing them with healthier alternatives, the church can equip believers to stay rooted in Christ with both intellectual integrity and spiritual vitality.

Inerrancy as a Problematic Framework

Maria's story is not uncommon. "The vast majority of people walking away from church in America ... are rejecting erroneous biblical interpretations"⁶ that are often caused by "hyperliteral readings of the text."⁷ Such interpretations, often rooted in a rigid framework of inerrancy, frequently become "*stumbling blocks* because these beliefs often lead people to stumble on the path to knowing and following Jesus."⁸

This phenomenon is not limited to the U.S. but occurs in many other countries. The latest study on faith deconstruction in Germany found that struggles with the Bible are among the leading reasons Christians deconstruct.⁹ Some assume that those who deconstruct were never deeply rooted in their faith or lacked biblical knowledge, but this is not necessarily the case. In fact, several participants reported that their deconstruction was triggered precisely by their study of Scripture.¹⁰ For them, reading the Bible

6 Scot McKnight and Tommy Preson Phillips, *Invisible Jesus: A Book about Leaving the Church and Looking for Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2024), 60.

7 McKnight, *Invisible*, 77.

8 McKnight, *Invisible*, 77.

9 Tobias Faix et al., *Warum ich nicht mehr glaube: Wenn junge Erwachsene den Glauben verlieren*, eBook version (Witten: SCM R. Brockhaus, 2014), chap. "Annäherungen an ein verdrängtes Thema."

10 Faix, *Warum*, chap. "Annäherungen an ein verdrängtes Thema."

became the primary stumbling block. Despite their efforts, they could not reconcile its apparent contradictions, align it with scientific consensus, or accept its troubling depictions of God.

Many deconstructionists insist that, whether they want to or not, they simply cannot believe certain doctrines anymore,¹¹ particularly inerrancy. Simply refining its definition offers no solution, as the term is too loaded. Pressuring them to embrace inerrancy often causes more harm. Instead, we must help them value the Bible amid their struggle.

To be clear, I do not believe that the Bible itself is the problem. The Bible is fine as it is. Discussions on inerrancy often lead to misunderstandings due to unaddressed assumptions. Therefore, I affirm my agreement with Christians throughout history that Scripture is inspired and infallible—fully capable of accomplishing its purpose.

However, for many deconstructionists who were taught a rigid inerrantist view of inspiration, this doctrine becomes an unnecessary reason to abandon Christianity when they become convinced that the biblical texts do not align with the claims of inerrancy.¹² John Goldingay has expressed concern that inerrancy can ultimately drive people away from faith, stating:

A stress on [biblical] inerrancy cannot safeguard people from a slippery slope that carries them from abandoning inerrancy to an eventual reneging on all other Christian doctrines. Indeed, it more likely impels them toward such a slope. The claim that scripture is factually inerrant sets up misleading expectations regarding the precision of narratives and then requires such far-fetched defenses ... that it presses people toward rejecting it.¹³

D.A. Carson rightly observes that many in the deconstruction movement “seem to be more certain of what version of inspiration and authority they are against than of what version of inspiration and authority they

11 McKnight, *Invisible*, 120.

12 Gregory A. Boyd and Paul Rhodes Eddy, *Across the Spectrum: Understanding Issues in Evangelical Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 15.

13 John Goldingay, *Models for Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994; repr., Toronto: Clements, 2004), 278.

are actually advocating. It is difficult to delineate in their writings a stable positive construction.”¹⁴

This article does not address whether the Bible is truly inerrant. Instead, it aims to bridge the gap by offering a biblically grounded model of inspiration—one that upholds a high view of Scripture while allowing deconstructionists to wrestle with difficult passages and acknowledge contradictions. The vivificationist framework of inspiration provides a much-needed alternative for those who, for various reasons, can no longer affirm inerrancy. Before addressing specific ways this model resolves challenges posed by inerrancy, I will first outline the framework itself.

DEFINING THE INERRANCY AND THE VIVIFICATIONIST VIEW

The Inerrancy Framework

Christians throughout history have affirmed the inspiration of Scripture, yet the exact mechanics and implications of this doctrine remain debated. Many Evangelicals equate inspiration with inerrancy, as defined by the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* (1978), which asserts that divine inspiration “guaranteed true and trustworthy utterance on all matters of which the Biblical authors were moved to speak and write.”¹⁵ This inerrancy framework relies heavily on a specific interpretation of *theopneustos* (God-breathed¹⁶) in 2 Timothy 3:16, which claims that because God is perfect, his ‘God-breathed’ word must also be free from error.¹⁷ Consequently, all biblical texts are considered true, historical, and should predominantly be interpreted literally. According to article XV, this understanding of inspiration is precisely “grounded in the teaching of the Bible about inspiration.”

14 D.A. Carson, “The Many Facets of the Current Discussion,” in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 11.

15 Article IX.

16 Moisés Silva, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 433.

17 Richard A. Mohler Jr., “When the Bible Speaks, God Speaks: The Classic Doctrine of Biblical Inerrancy,” in *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy*, ed. J. Merrick, S.M. Garrett, and S.N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 39.

The Vivificationist Framework

This article argues that a vivificationist understanding of *theopneustos* better aligns with the biblical depiction of God's breathing, his character, early views of inspiration, and the purpose of Scripture. Therefore, the vivificationist perspective can help deconstructionists overcome difficulties posed by the inerrancy framework while maintaining a high view of Scripture.

The vivificationist view understands *theopneustos* as God continuously breathing into Scripture, making it alive through the Holy Spirit.¹⁸ This perspective aligns with Karl Barth, who argued that Scripture is not itself the fundamental revelation but serves as a witness to the crucial revelation—Jesus Christ, the true Word of God.¹⁹ Barth emphasized that inspiration is not a static quality rendering the biblical text magically inerrant;²⁰ rather, Scripture consists of human words conditioned by culture and time.²¹ For Barth, inspiration encompasses the Spirit influencing the biblical authors²² and the Spirit's ongoing work of animating the text for readers despite its human imperfections.²³ Thus, its authority rests not in textual perfection but in the Spirit's continuous activity of making Scripture transformative and effective in believers' lives, as it fulfills its divine purpose. The following table outlines key differences between the inerrancy and vivificationist views of inspiration.

18 See also Amos Yong, *The Hermeneutical Spirit: Theological Interpretation and Scriptural Imagination for the 21st Century* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2017), 52; Walter Brueggemann, *The Book That Breathes New Life: Scriptural Authority and Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 25–33.

19 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, vol. 1, part 2, ed. Geoffrey William Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 463.

20 Barth, *CD*, 507.

21 Barth, *CD*, 509.

22 Barth, *CD*, 517.

23 Barth, *CD*, 508.

**OVERVIEW OF THE INERRANCY AND
VIVIFICATIONIST VIEWS OF INSPIRATION**

Aspect	Inerrancy View	Vivificationist View
Understanding of Inspiration/ <i>theopneustos</i>	Inspiration is a past event by which God ensured that the original manuscripts are without error.	Inspiration involves two interrelated realities: first, God revealed as much truth to the biblical authors as was possible within their human, cultural, and historical limitations; second, inspiration is ongoing because the Spirit continually breathes life into the biblical texts, making them living words that speak today.
Location of Authority	Rooted in the Bible's inerrancy and literal truth of every statement.	Rooted in the Spirit's ongoing activity in using Scripture to shape and guide his people, fulfill its purpose of witnessing Christ, and providing reliable historical accounts of Jesus's life and teachings and of the early church in the Gospels and Acts.
View of the Text	The text itself is perfect and error-free in all matters, including history and science.	Scripture is the result of a divine-human partnership: while the text bears marks of its human authors, shaped by their cultural, historical, and linguistic limitations, it is through these human words that God communicates his truth.
How the Bible Functions	The Bible serves as a perfect and timeless rulebook or manual, providing universal truth in all matters.	The Bible bears witness to God's self-revelation and becomes authoritative as the Spirit animates it. Its teachings must be discerned through the lens of Jesus's revelation.

Aspect	Inerrancy View	Vivificationist View
Interpretive Approach	The Bible emphasizes a literal, plain-sense reading; all verses are equally true and authoritative.	The Bible is compatible with multiple interpretive approaches—including literary, theological, allegorical, and historical-critical methods—while emphasizing a Christ-centered reading.
Handling Alleged Errors or Contradictions	The Bible must be harmonized or explained to preserve inerrancy.	Most alleged errors can be reasonably explained when Scripture is read contextually. Yet, even if some errors remain unresolved, they do not undermine the Bible’s authority, since its purpose is not factual perfection, but to witness to Christ. Such imperfections serve as beautiful witnesses to a God who humbly stoops down to our level and works in partnership with flawed human agents.
Progressive Revelation	This approach tends to flatten Scripture, seeing it as consistent and unified throughout.	This approach embraces progressive revelation, showing God’s truth unfolding through history and culminating in the person and teachings of Jesus as the climax of revelation.
Impact on Deconstruction	This view can contribute to crises of faith.	This view offers a framework that helps deconstructionists remain engaged with the Bible, even when facing alleged errors.

Next, I will outline why I believe that the vivificationist view is a compelling way of understanding inspiration.

THEOLOGICAL AND BIBLICAL
JUSTIFICATION OF THE VIVIFICATIONIST
INTERPRETATION OF *THEOPNEUSTOS*

In Accordance with God's Breathing Throughout the Bible

The Bible first mentions God breathing in Genesis 2:7, and the verse explicitly defines the outcome: "the man became a living being" (NRSV). The logic of the verse is straightforward: "By blowing on the inanimate body made from the earth, God made man come alive."²⁴ Although God shaped Adam's body, it remained lifeless until God breathed into it, bringing it to life. It might, or might not, be appropriate to claim that Adam became a perfect being. Crucially, the narrative does not intend to convey that God's breath rendered Adam perfect. The author's emphasis is undeniably that the result of God's breath is Adam becoming alive.

The second occurrence of God's breathing in the Bible is in Ezekiel 37:1-14, where the prophet beholds a valley filled with bones, and five times (Ez 37:5, 6, 9, 10, 14) the text explicitly describes the outcome of God's breathing as the transformation of something lifeless becoming alive. In this account, it would be unreasonable to contend that God's breath led to perfection, as the bones symbolize Israel. In both Old Testament narratives, the outcome of God's breathing is something dead becoming alive. This theme continues in the New Testament.

Another relevant narrative is found in John 20:19-23, relating the initial encounter between Jesus and his disciples following his resurrection. Jesus breathed (Greek: *emphysaō*) on his disciples, saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit." *Emphysaō* is the same word used in the LXX in Genesis 2:7 and Ezekiel 37, underscoring the relevance of interpreting John 20 in conjunction with these parallel stories.

In what way did the disciples become alive when Jesus breathed on them? In his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus stated that one must be born again by the Spirit to enter the kingdom (Jn 3:3-6). John 20:22 should be interpreted as the moment when the disciples were born again through the Spirit. Romans 10:9 asserts, "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you

24 Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Dallas: Word Books, 1987), 60-61.

will be saved.” When Jesus met his disciples after his resurrection, this was when they believed that God had raised Jesus from the dead, marking the moment they “were saved” and born again by the Spirit. They received a new spiritual life. This understanding aligns with the two earlier narratives and affirms that life is the common outcome of the in-breathed Spirit. This fits with John’s overall depiction of the Spirit as being “the one who gives life” (Jn 6:63) and Paul’s recurring conviction that the Spirit brings life (2 Cor 3:6; Rom 8:10-11). Job 33:4 (NRSV) depicts life as the result of God’s breathing: “The spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life.” Furthermore, Psalm 104:30 (NET) declares, “When you send your life-giving breath, they are created.”

All these texts collectively emphasize that God’s breath brings life to something lifeless. The Spirit of God is the Spirit of life. In accordance with Jesus’s and Paul’s depiction of the role of the Holy Spirit, Jesus declared, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (Jn 16:13 NRSV). According to Jesus, it is not the Scriptures but the Holy Spirit who, through various means, guides believers into truth. Likewise, Paul emphasized that it is the Holy Spirit who imparts life and reveals truth.

Throughout Paul’s description of the armor of God, Paul uses the same straightforward parallelism. However, he breaks with that pattern when he comes to the sword. The sword in Ephesians 6:17 stands for the word of God. But the sword has no power in itself. However, it is the Holy Spirit who gives the sword “its effectiveness, its cutting edge.”²⁵ Thus, Paul emphasizes that the word and the Spirit must come together. It is the Spirit-inspired word that is truly effective.

In 1 Corinthians 2:12-14, Paul argues that spiritual truths require the Spirit’s work to be fully understood. Without the Spirit, these truths seem like “foolishness,” meaning that they only take on their transformative power when enlivened by the Spirit.

In Romans 8:2, Paul insists that the law cannot give life by itself, but that the Spirit is needed to birth life and freedom.

In Colossians 1:9, Paul implies that it is the role of God’s Spirit to impart wisdom and understanding, which likely includes the ability to comprehend Scripture rightly.

25 Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 451.

In 1 Thessalonians 1:5, Paul highlights that it is the Spirit who brings the gospel message to life, making it effective in transforming the listener.

In 2 Corinthians 3:3, he indicates that it is the Spirit who actively inscribes God's truth on believers' hearts, transforming them from within and making the message of God alive in their lives.

These passages suggest that Paul emphasized the Spirit's ongoing work in making Scripture alive and Christ-centered for each reader, indicating that *theopneustos* can faithfully be understood through a vivificationist lens.

In Accordance with the Understanding of *Theopneustos* and Inspiration in That Time

The Understanding of Theopneustos

In this section, I first address the understanding of *theopneustos* and, following that, the understanding of inspiration in that time.

Theopneustos: As the *ruach* in the Old Testament is “the essence of life,”²⁶ so the *pneuma* is the “bearer of life.”²⁷ In Judaism, the spirit is the spirit of life. The *Book of Wisdom*, typically attributed to the mid-first century BC, states, “For he has misconceived the One who has modelled him, who breathed an active soul into him and inspired a living spirit.”²⁸ The outcome of God's breath is life—something dead becomes alive.

The concept of the breath of God as being a life-creating power was widespread in early mythology, especially in Greek and Egyptian myths. For example, Zeus impregnated a mortal woman through his breath.²⁹

In his philological study of the word *theopneustos*, Poirier has shown “that θεόπνευστος/θεόπνοος means “life-giving” every time it appears in second- and early third-century Jewish and pagan sources.”³⁰ By carefully analyzing every single occurrence of *theopneustos* before Origen, Poirier showed “that a vivificationist understanding of θεόπνευστος enjoyed exclusive rule before Origen co-opted the word to denote the verbal

26 Willem VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 1074.

27 Silva, *NIDNTTE*, 802.

28 Book of Wisdom 15:11, *The New Jerusalem Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1985).

29 Aeschylus, *The Suppliants*, 50–57.

30 John C. Poirier, *The Invention of the Inspired Text: Philological Windows on the Theopneustia of Scripture* (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 115.

inspiration of Scripture. It also suggests that a vivificationist understanding held sway beyond Jewish and Christian contexts.”³¹

Poirier argues that the Bible is life-giving because it reveals the gospel.³² While I appreciate the depth of his philological study, I disagree with his interpretation. Scripture consistently portrays God’s breath as the source of life, not the object being breathed upon. Jesus affirms this in John 5:39, stating that life comes from him, not from Scripture itself. Thus, the vivificationist view holds that the Bible is not inherently inspired, life-giving, or inerrant but becomes inspired as God’s Spirit actively animates it.

The Understanding of Inspiration

Inspiration: Understanding *theopneustos* as God’s breath, bringing life to the lifeless, aligns with the prevalent understanding of divine breath and inspiration in the first century.

Plato likely shares the common view of inspiration in the Greek world when he talks about Tynnichos of Chalcis who never produced a beautiful melody, yet once, under the inspiration of the gods, produced the most beautiful melody ever created.³³ The inspired object is not transformed but is temporarily used by the gods to bring forth something of great value.

One image used by the early church fathers to describe inspiration was that of a flute. Talking about God’s inspiration, Basil of Caesarea described the prophets of God as flutes that need wind to produce a melody.³⁴ God’s Spirit is this air that temporarily causes the instrument to sound. Whatever is inspired does not undergo transformation in essence but becomes a vehicle that God utilizes to communicate.

Likewise, Athenagoras (second-century apologist) compares the Spirit inspiring scripture to a flute player playing his flute. The late-second-century apologist Theophilus also affirms this (*Ad Autolyicum* 2.9–22).³⁵ Just as a musician uses breath to make a lifeless instrument “alive,” so God

31 Poirier, *Invention*, 46.

32 Poirier, *Invention*, 108.

33 Plato, *Ion*, 534c–d.

34 *Homilies on the Psalms* 30 [29].7; 224.

35 Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Thiselton Companion to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 484.

breathes his Spirit into the biblical texts, bringing them to life for us and enabling them to fulfill their intended purpose.

In Accordance with God's Decision to Work in Partnership with Humans

The idea that the Bible is an inerrant book, devoid of human error and entirely dictated by God, conveys a deity who independently controls all things and determines the outcome of all things. According to this perspective, he is the sole sovereign force behind the creation of a divine and flawless Bible. This perspective aligns closely with Islam's understanding of the Qur'an, viewed as inerrant because it was dictated directly by Allah through the angel Jibril.³⁶ However, such a view of God is in stark contrast to the humble God portrayed in the Bible who, rather than ruling unilaterally, chose to create humans in his image (Gen 1:26) and gave them authority to co-rule this world alongside him (Gn 1:28; 2:15; Ps 8:6; 1 Cor 6:3; Rv 22:5). As aptly summarized by N.T. Wright:

God ordered His world in such a way that His own work in that world takes place through one of his creatures—the human beings who reflect his image. That, I believe, is central to the notion of being made in God's image. God intends His wise, creative, loving presence and power to be *reflected*—imaged, if you like—into his world *through* His human creatures. He has enlisted us to act as his stewards in the project of creation. Following the disaster of rebellion and corruption, he has built into the gospel message the fact that through the work of Jesus and the power of the Spirit, He equips humans to help in the work of getting the project back on track.³⁷

Such a decision naturally entails God relinquishing complete control, requiring him to work within the context of our actions. Thus, the Bible reveals a God who works alongside humans and operates in and through people's imperfections and weaknesses.

36 Sherene N. Khouri, "The Classical Islamic Model of Revelation: A Critique," *The Evangelical Review of Theology and Politics* 8 (2020): 47.

37 N.T. Wright, "To Inaugurate His Kingdom: His Deeds, Death and Resurrection," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, ed. R. D. Winter, S. C. Hawthorne (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2009), 96.

Accordingly, the Bible consists of human words because any collaborative effort between humans and God will inevitably reflect human characteristics. As Karl Barth argued, the Bible is “human words written in human speech,”³⁸ not the ultimate revelation but a witness to Christ, the ultimate revelation. Consequently, Barth maintained that “inspiration does not mean the infallibility of the biblical word in its linguistic, historical, and theological character as a human word. It means that the fallible and faulty human word is as such used by God and has to be received and heard in spite of its human fallibility.”³⁹

Arguably, it seems reasonable to view any human descriptions of God as accommodated language, considering the limitations of humans in comprehending God’s unfathomable beauty and glory.

Far from diminishing its value or authority, the Bible’s “messiness” witnesses God’s choice to work through imperfect humans. The vivificationist understanding aligns well with the humble character of God, his decision to work through human agents, and his commitment to redeem flawed humans and use them for his glory.

In Accordance with How the First Christians Interpreted Scripture

“It is evident that the church has always, and should always, aspire to interpret Scripture and carry out its theological reflections in a thoroughly Christocentric way.”⁴⁰ This tradition started with Jesus, who clarified that “the key to understanding the Old Testament was located in his own life and work, for everything pointed to himself.”⁴¹ The Gospel writers also prioritized showing how Old Testament passages pointed to Christ, often being more concerned with the christological significance than with the passages’ original intent.⁴² Led by the Holy Spirit, the early church “began from Jesus—from his known character and mighty deeds and sayings, and

38 Barth, *CD*, 463.

39 Barth, *CD*, 533.

40 Gregory A. Boyd, *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Interpreting the Old Testament’s Violent Portraits of God in Light of the Cross*, vols. 1 and 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 137.

41 David S. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now: Contemporary Hermeneutics in the Light of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 26.

42 Boyd, *Crucifixion*, 105.

his death and resurrection; and with these they went to the scriptures, and found that God's dealings with his People and his intentions for them there reflected did, in fact, leap into new significance in the light of these recent happenings."⁴³ Origen, emphasizing the role of the Spirit, declared, "If I find in Moses and the prophets the thought of Christ, I speak not according to my own heart but from the Holy Spirit"⁴⁴ (*Homilies on Ezekiel* 2.2). Augustine insisted that "the very fabric of the entire Old Testament is christological, for every thread and theme leads to and centres in the crucified and risen Christ."⁴⁵ This focus on Christ as the fulfillment and key to understanding all Scripture reflected a broader Jewish expectation: that the Messiah would one day unlock the Scriptures, revealing their hidden meanings.⁴⁶ Hence, the early church began with the revelation of Jesus as God's ultimate Word and interpreted the Old Testament in alignment with him. This approach aligns with the vivificationist understanding of *theopneustos*, in which believers rely on the Spirit to make Scripture continually alive and Christ-centered.

COMPARISON OF THE VIVIFICATIONIST AND THE INERRANCY FRAMEWORK

Lastly, this section compares the vivificationist and inerrancy frameworks of inspiration. To begin, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of inerrancy as used here. Although many nuanced definitions exist, these are typically familiar only to a small group of theologically informed Christians. By contrast, the understanding expressed in the 1978 *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* remains widespread among Evangelicals and will serve as the basis for this discussion. Interpreting Scripture through this particular inerrantist lens often results in specific hermeneutical approaches, many of which are formalized in the 1982 *Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics*.

43 C.F.D. Moule, *The Birth of the New Testament* (London: Black; New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 57–58.

44 Kenneth Stevenson and Michael Glerup, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Ezekiel, Daniel* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 45.

45 Arthur A. Just Jr., ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Luke* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 378.

46 Boyd, *Crucifixion*, 46.

This comparison focuses on four key articles from that document, each especially pertinent to those experiencing faith deconstruction.

Article 3: Jesus Christ is the Central Focus of the Entire Bible

Before considering their differences, it is important to note that both frameworks affirm that Jesus Christ is “the central focus of the entire Bible”⁴⁷ and “that any method of interpretation which rejects or obscures the Christ-centeredness of Scripture”⁴⁸ must be denied. John Calvin contended, “we ought to read *the Scriptures* with the express design of finding Christ in them. Whoever shall turn aside from this object, though he may weary himself throughout his whole life in learning, will never attain the knowledge of the truth.”⁴⁹ Martin Luther taught that the litmus test for evaluating all biblical texts is whether or not they witness Christ. For him, the center and purpose of the Bible was “*was Christum lehrt*” (what teaches Christ).⁵⁰ Since Jesus himself taught that all Scripture testifies to him (Jn 5:39), it follows that any sound interpretive framework must support a Christ-centered reading. Reflecting this sentiment, many deconstructionists insist that “Jesus is the authoritative lens through which God is seen and the Bible is interpreted.”⁵¹ While both frameworks uphold this principle, the comparisons below will demonstrate that the vivificationist framework more effectively supports a Christ-centered reading, whereas the inerrancy model may, at times, precisely undermine this crucial objective.

Article 15: The Literal Sense

Article XV affirms “the necessity of interpreting the Bible according to its literal, or normal, sense.” Arguably, the most distinctive feature of the inerrancy framework is its emphasis on the literal sense. Vanhoozer, pointing out the complexity of the literal sense, remarks, “Both exegetes and theologians often assume we know what ‘literal’ means. We do not.

47 Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics (1982), Article III.

48 Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics, Article III.

49 John Calvin and William Pringle, *Commentary on the Gospel according to John* (Bellingham: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 218.

50 Wilfried Härle, *Dogmatik*, 6th ed. (Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2022), 132.

51 McKnight, *Invisible*, 39.

In the history of ideas, literalism is an ‘essentially contested concept.’⁵² While some scholars offer nuanced understandings of literalism, many lay readers adopt a far simpler approach—equating the literal sense with whatever seems plainly evident to them. This is deeply problematic, as all readers interpret texts through the lens of their worldview, which inevitably leads to differing conclusions about what the plain reading of a text is. Smith has extensively addressed this “problem of pervasive interpretive pluralism.”⁵³ The assumption that every verse is inspired and therefore true in its literal sense can cause a wide variety of problems: for example, countless verses turn into apparent contradictions (such as Mk 2:26 vs 1 Sm 21:1; Mt 27:9-10 vs Zec 11:12-13; Nm 23:19 vs Jon 3:10). While these can be harmonized with thoughtful interpretation, they resist resolution under a rigid literalist reading. Again, the issue lies not in the texts themselves but in the hermeneutical lens applied to them. A case in point is 1 Peter 2:18–20, which, when read literally, commands slaves to obey even abusive masters. Verses such as this have been used to justify slavery, revealing how the plain-sense interpretation promoted by inerrancy can, at times, conflict with the teachings of Jesus and undermine a Christ-centered reading of Scripture.

Since the vivificationist view does not locate inspiration within the text, rendering each word inerrant, it allows interpreting problematic texts in other ways than the literal meaning. These may include seeking a deeper spiritual meaning—common among the church fathers—identifying the text as a divine accommodation, recognizing elements as the personal opinion of the author, or applying insights from historical-critical scholarship. In this way, apparent contradictions and errors usually can be reasonably explained without undermining the trustworthiness of Scripture. Within the vivificationist framework, such issues do not negate the Bible’s ability to bear witness to Christ and to accomplish its intended role.

Many deconstructionists, being deeply devoted to Jesus, found that the form of Christianity they were part of—often shaped by an inerrantist framework—lacked a clear focus on Christ and, in some cases,

52 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics: Transfiguring What It Means to Read the Bible Theologically* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2024), 107.

53 Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012).

even appeared to undermine his message and example.⁵⁴ This happens particularly when certain biblical texts are interpreted in a rigidly literal way and then used to override or undermine the life and teachings of Jesus. Such an approach not only distorts the priority Jesus gives to love, mercy, and justice but can also promote un-Christlike images of God—depictions that contradict the character of God revealed in Jesus. When this occurs, it risks leading believers away from the very heart of the Christian faith and can become a stumbling block that causes many to walk away from Christianity altogether. A commonly cited example in deconstruction literature may help illustrate this concern.

One text many modern readers find troubling is God's command in Deuteronomy 7:1–2 to destroy (Hebrew: *hērem*) the Canaanites completely without mercy. The vast scholarly attention this issue has received in recent years highlights its ongoing interpretive significance. Under the inerrancy framework, readers are compelled to believe that God directly commanded genocide. While most Christians would oppose such commands if found in another religion's scriptures, many accept them in the Bible without question. Yet for many today, such depictions of God are morally irreconcilable—not only with their ethical intuitions, but also with the portrayal of God in Jesus.

In Matthew 5, Jesus describes the perfection of God as loving one's enemies and extending forgiveness, a vision dramatically embodied on the cross, where Jesus forgives even his executioners. Orthodoxy affirms that God is unchanging; therefore, the God revealed in the Old and New Testaments must be consistent. Either God loves enemies and forgives sins—or he commands the merciless slaughter of entire populations, including children. The inerrancy framework forces readers to affirm the latter, which many find incompatible with Jesus's teaching. This dilemma often leads people either to abandon the faith entirely or to disregard the Old Testament—neither of which are satisfactory solutions.

The vivificationist view, however, allows readers to agree with Origen that “occasionally the records taken in a literal sense are not true, but actually absurd and impossible,”⁵⁵ and therefore the meaning must be found on a deeper level. Hence, the vivificationist framework opens interpretive

54 McKnight, *Invisible*, 25.

55 Butterworth, *De Principiis* 4.3.4, 293–294.

possibilities that avoid moral offense and uphold the teachings of Jesus. Deuteronomy 7:1-2, for instance, might be read as ancient war rhetoric, as exilic literature meant to encourage a displaced people, or as divine accommodation—a view Gregory Boyd explores in detail.⁵⁶ While each of these readings carries its own complexities, they avoid the theological crisis created by insisting on a literal genocide sanctioned by God. Thus, the inerrancy framework can become a stumbling block to a Christ-centered reading, whereas the vivificationist model provides space to read all of Scripture in light of Jesus.

Article 17: The Harmony and Consistency of Scripture

Longenecker argues that “mainline Jewish exegetes of the first century viewed their task as primarily that of adapting, reinterpreting, extending, and so reapplying sacred Scripture to the present circumstances of God’s people, both with respect to how they should live (*halakah*) and how they should think (*haggadah*).”⁵⁷ This foundational Jewish conviction—that Scripture must be continually reinterpreted in light of new contexts—is affirmed within the Bible itself. Many biblical scholars no longer regard Scripture as a single, unified rulebook that speaks with one voice on every issue. Likely, a more accurate metaphor is that of a library: a collection of texts containing diverse perspectives, genres, and theological insights, each shaped by distinct historical and cultural settings. These texts frequently engage with one another—some building upon, refining, or even challenging earlier ideas. As such, Scripture reflects an ongoing conversation, a layered tradition in which later voices often clarify, expand, or reframe earlier understandings.⁵⁸ This multivocality indicates the concept of progressive revelation, whereby God reveals truth gradually, accommodating the historical and cultural limitations of his people. Basil the Great described God’s way of guiding his people as a gradual process:

We were introduced to training for perfection in piety and were instructed in knowledge first in matters easy to grasp and proportionate to us. He

56 Boyd, *Crucifixion*, 962–1002.

57 Richard N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids; Vancouver: Eerdmans; Regent College Pub., 1999), xxvi.

58 Peter Enns, *How the Bible Actually Works* (New York: HarperOne, 2019), 77.

who directed us, as if we were eyes kept in darkness, led us up to the great light of truth accustoming us to it little by little. For by the sparing of our weakness, in the depth of the richness of his wisdom and in the unsearchable judgments of his intelligence he showed a guidance gentle and accommodating to us: he first trained us to see the shadows of bodies and to look at the sun in water, so that we not be blinded by wrecking ourselves on the vision of pure light. (On the Holy Spirit 14.33)

However, article XVII affirms “the unity, harmony and consistency of Scripture,” asserting that the Bible contains no conflicting viewpoints. This perspective implies there is a single, uniform biblical approach to various issues, consistently upheld across the entire canon. Such a claim presents several difficulties. Firstly, any approach different from the perceived biblical way is labeled “unbiblical” and therefore unworthy of serious reflection. Second, it can lead to the neglect of the evident progressive revelation within Scripture. Numerous theological and ethical themes—such as the sacrificial system, priesthood, temple, polygamy, or conceptions of God—clearly develop throughout the biblical narrative. Overlooking this development may result in serious misinterpretations and create pressure to preserve outdated moral frameworks or portrayals of God that are inconsistent with the trajectory of revelation revealed in Christ. It may also hinder readers from embracing their responsibility to discern what Christlike faithfulness looks like today.

The vivificationist framework recognizes the progressive revelation across Scripture not as a problem to be explained away but as a beautiful witness to God’s humility—his willingness to stoop down, accommodate our limitations, and work through imperfect human agents. The vivificationist model encourages reading the Bible prayerfully, asking the Spirit to breathe life into the text so it speaks to our present context, guiding us in following Jesus today without requiring us to adopt ancient frameworks that might undermine his life and teachings. Yes, this seems risky—even dangerous. Yet to reject it on those grounds reveals a deeper issue: a lack of trust in the Spirit’s ability to guide us. Jesus promised that the Spirit would lead us into all truth (Jn 16:13). The question, then, is whether we truly trust the Spirit to fulfill that promise, or whether we bypass the Spirit and relay his task to the Bible because it seems safer and allows us to maintain more control.

Article 22: Genesis 1–11

Established scientific and historical evidence often conflicts with literal interpretations of biblical accounts, leaving inerrantists either to dismiss rational thought or wage a constant fight against science to defend their reading of Scripture. This antagonism can undermine the credibility of the Bible, subject Christians to ridicule, and present significant barriers to nonbelievers. A key battleground in this conflict is Genesis 1–3. Article XXII asserts that Genesis 1–11 is factual, not mythical, thereby compelling readers to reject evolutionary theory and an old earth in favor of a young-earth view. Such insistence has led many who accept evolutionary science to dismiss the Bible as a collection of myths. By contrast, the vivificationist view does not depend on a literal reading of such texts to uphold their authority. It allows for recognizing some passages, including Genesis 1–3, as carefully crafted stories—perhaps mythical in form—yet still conveying profound truths. What ultimately matters is the truth they communicate, not their historicity. This interpretive flexibility enables readers to take the Bible seriously without dismissing well-established scientific evidence, thus resolving the unnecessary conflict between Scripture and science.

CONCLUSION

Asia can avoid the theological pitfalls of the West by cultivating a healthier path shaped by Scripture and the guiding of the Spirit. The future of theology in Asia depends not on defending Western formulations but on discerning how the Spirit is breathing new life into Scripture among Asian believers today. The vivificationist understanding of *theopneustos* highlights the Spirit's ongoing work of breathing life into Scripture. Rather than treating inspiration as a static quality, it presents Scripture as a dynamic, Spirit-empowered witness to Christ. By affirming that God's breath makes "dead" texts come alive, this view resonates with the broader biblical theme of the Spirit as life-giving and transformative. This model frees believers from having to defend immoral, illogical, or un-Christlike passages, and instead encourages them to engage Scripture through a Christ-centered hermeneutic. It acknowledges the complexity of Scripture as a human-divine collaboration—along with its historical and scientific challenges—while fully affirming that Scripture remains entirely sufficient to accomplish

its intended purpose. It fosters a mature faith that can resist legalism, fundamentalism, and distorted depictions of God.

The *Handbook on Paul's Letters to Timothy and to Titus*, published by the United Bible Societies, suggests this translation for 2 Timothy 3:16: "God makes all Scriptures alive by his living spirit."⁵⁹ Such a rendering upholds God's humble character, aligns with the biblical depiction of God's breathing, honors the complexity of Scripture, and reflects a God who works not through coercion, but in partnership with flawed human agents. To conclude, I echo Bonhoeffer's words: "The Bible remains a book like other books. ... But it is through the Bible, with all its flaws, that the risen one encounters us."⁶⁰

About author

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59 Daniel C. Arichea and Howard Hatton, *A Handbook on Paul's Letters to Timothy and to Titus* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1995), 236–237.

60 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Centre* (London: Harper, 1978), 74.