

# Bibliology:

## *The Doctrine of the Written Word*

### Contents

Introduction .....	2
Terms Used for the Bible.....	3
Attitudes or Viewpoints Toward the Bible.....	7
The Bible: The Written Word of God.....	4
The Bible: God's Special Revelation.....	9
The Bible: The Inspired Revelation of God.....	12
The Bible: The Inerrant Word of God .....	18
The Bible: The Holy Canon of Scripture.....	21
The Bible: Understanding Its Message.....	27
The Bible: Alive and Powerful (Animation) .....	30
Concluding Thoughts .....	31

# Bibliology: The Doctrine of the Written Word

## Introduction

Of all the doctrines of the Bible, none is more important or foundational than bibliology, the doctrine of the Bible. The reason for this is simple. The Bible's witness to itself is that it is God's Word and thus, our authority for belief and practice. Our understanding of God, of man, and of the salvation He offers mankind in Christ is all very much dependent on how much men believe and know the Bible.

God has revealed Himself in a number of ways: in creation, in history, in miracles, visions given directly to the prophets. But primarily, God has revealed Himself in the person of Christ, the Living Word, and in the Bible, the Written Word. But what we learn about the person and work of Jesus Christ, we learn from the Bible in both the Old and New Testaments. The majority of that which we can know about God comes from the Bible. If men do not hold the Bible in high esteem as the inspired and inerrant Word of God and fail to handle it properly (interpretation and application), then they will turn to other sources as their authority (human reason alone, science, tradition, the church, mysticism, experiences) for what they believe and practice. Consequently, if men do not hold to the Scripture as the *complete, sufficient, clear, authoritative, and adequate rule of faith*, they will reject the Bible's truth either completely or partly and in the process miss its message of salvation and deliverance from sin, which it offers them in the person of Jesus Christ.

For example, neoorthodoxy's basis of authority is Christ, which sounds good until you begin to investigate how substantial their idea really is. The Barthian (another name for neoorthodoxy) says that his authority is Christ and not the Bible, for that is a fallible book. But since it is a book full of errors (and if it is our only source of information about Christ), then how do we know that Christ has any authority unless we arbitrarily assign Him authority on the basis of our faith or of our reasoning? ...<sup>1</sup>

Our view, approach, and attitude toward the Bible is foundational. If our view of the Bible is inadequate we will naturally handle the Bible accordingly. If I do not think it is God-breathed, I won't think it is profitable and vital. If I think it might contain errors, or that only some of it is inspired, say the thoughts, not the words, then I am left with a dilemma and I must approach it much like a cafeteria line, choosing according to my own likes or bias. What do I believe and not believe? If it is wrong in some places, then how can I be sure what it says about Jesus is true? On the other hand, if I believe it is God's infallible and inerrant Word, as the evidence supports, then I should accept it all and study it carefully. An unfortunate element very obvious today within the evangelical community is that most who call themselves evangelicals will theoretically, at least, claim allegiance to the Bible as the all-sufficient and authoritative rule of faith, but in practice, many are raising other sources on a level with or even above the Scripture as their authority for what they believe and practice.

We believe that the Word contained in these books [of Scripture] has proceeded from God, and receives its authority from Him alone, and not from men. And inasmuch as it is the rule of all truth, containing *all that is necessary for the service of God and for salvation*, it is not lawful for men, nor even for angels, to add to it, to take away from it, to change it. Whence it follows that *no authority, whether of antiquity, or custom, or numbers, or human wisdom, or judgments, or proclamations or edicts or decrees, or councils, or visions, or miracles, should be opposed to these Holy Scriptures, but on the contrary, all things should be examined, regulated, and reformed according to them.* (Italics added)<sup>2</sup>

But, as Armstrong points out in the introduction to *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, new authorities are threatening the church today.

These authorities are often grounded in what the above confession calls "custom, or numbers, or human wisdom, or judgments ... or visions, or miracles," and they must be challenged when they stand against the authority of the Word and Gospel of Christ."<sup>3</sup>

Again, we need to recognize that the doctrine of bibliology (the doctrine of the Scriptures) is a vital and fundamental doctrine. In fact, so important is this truth that one of the battle cries of the reformers was *sola Scriptura*, "Scripture only." What this meant for the reformers was that "the church should not preach, teach, command, or practice anything contrary to the written Scriptures of the biblical canon."<sup>4</sup> It became the basis for the reformation.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *A Survey of Bible Doctrine*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1972, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, John H. Armstrong, general editor, Moody Press, Chicago, 1996, p. 20 quoting the *French Confession of Faith*, Article V (1559).

<sup>3</sup> Armstrong, p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> Armstrong, p. 19.

## Terms Used for the Bible

### Bible

Our English term *bible* is from the Greek word *biblion*, which means “book” or “roll.”

The name comes from *byblos*, which denoted the papyrus plant that grew in marshes or river banks, primarily along the Nile. Writing material was made from the papyrus plant by cutting the pith of the plant in one foot strips and setting it in the sun to dry. The strips were then laid in horizontal rows with rows of vertical strips glued to the horizontal rows in a criss-cross fashion similar to the way plywood is constructed today. The horizontal rows were smoother and became the writing surface. Sections of these strips were glued together to form a scroll up to thirty feet in length. Eventually, the plural form *biblia* was used by Latin-speaking Christians to denote all the books of the Old and New Testaments.<sup>5</sup>

### Scripture

Another term used for the Bible is the word, “Scripture,” from the Greek *graph*, meaning “a writing, that which is written.” The plural is used collectively of the sacred writings as a whole, *the Scriptures* (i.e., the Old Testament, Matt. 21:42; 26:54; John 5:39; Rom. 15:4). The singular is sometimes used of the sacred writings as a whole (Rom. 4:3; John 7:42) and sometimes of a specific passage (Mark 12:10; 15:28; Luke 4:21). In the New Testament this term is used exclusively of the Scripture.

In the Old Testament this writing was recognized as carrying great authority (e.g. 2 Kings 14:6; 2 Chron. 23:18; Ezra 3:2; Neh. 10:34). The “writings” of the Old Testament were eventually collected into three groups called the law, prophets, and writings (or psalms). This was originally organized in a twenty-four book division beginning with Genesis and ending with 2 Chronicles. It contained the same books or content as the present thirty-nine book arrangement of the Old Testament, but with a different arrangement and division. These writings were formally combined into Old Testament canon. The statement, “the Scripture says,” is equivalent to “God says” (cf. Rom. 4:3; 9:17; 10:11; Gal. 4:30; 1 Tim. 5:18). To stress the character of these writings as sacred and unique, they are also described as “holy” or “sacred” (Rom. 1:2; 2 Tim. 3:15), and stated to be “inspired of God,” literally, “God-breathed.” Consequently, with God as the author behind the human authors, the Bible is both profitable and authoritative. The noun form, *scripture*, occurs fifty times in the New Testament (used mostly of the Bible) and the verb form, often found in a form meaning “it is written” or “it stands written,” is used about ninety times.

### The Word of God

“The word of God” is another title used of the Bible in both the Old and New Testaments. This expression highlights the nature of the Bible as the revelation of God in written form as well as its source; it is the revelation from God. The Greek term used is *logos*, which means “a word as embodying a conception or idea, speech or discourse.” But it is also used of the “revelation of God, of God’s word, God’s command.” In Mark 7:13, “the word of God” is used of Moses’ command regarding honoring father and mother and is seen as equivalent to the phrase, “the commandment of God” (vs. 8). In Matthew 15:6, this expression is used specifically of the Law of Moses. In John 10:35, it is used of the Old Testament and further defined as Scripture. In Hebrews 4:12, the “word of God” is used of all Scripture, referring to both the Old and New Testaments.

### The Oracles of God

Another term used of the Bible, especially of the Old Testament Scripture, is *logion*, a diminutive form of *logos* meaning, “an oracle, divine response or utterance.” It is used of Scripture in Romans 3:2 and Acts 7:38 where it is translated *oracles*. In Acts 7:38 the Old Testament law received on Mount Sinai is referred to as the *living oracles*.

### Testament

A less common term for Scripture is the word *testament*. The Greek word is *diathkh*, “covenant, testament, will.” This term is used to distinguish between the Old and New Covenants, the Old Testament and the New Testament. In particular, the word is used in dealing with the specific, unique covenants of Scripture, but since these covenants are contained in God’s revelation, it is a synonym of the Scripture. Paul wrote about the “reading of the old covenant” (2 Cor. 3:14).

### The Law

Another term often used in the New Testament for the Old Testament Scripture is *the law*. On the principle that the most authoritative part gives its name to the whole, sometimes the expression *the law* refers to the entire Old Testament. Under this principle and because the whole of the Old Testament is authoritative as God’s Word of in-

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1989, p. 153.

struction to men, Jesus quoted from Psalm 82 in John 10:34 and referred to it as *the law*. In John 12:34, the multitudes answered Jesus and said, “We have heard out of the law that the Christ is to remain forever.” Here again *the law* is used of the entire Old Testament for the passages in mind included other portions like Psalm 110:4, Isaiah 9:7, and Ezekiel 37:25, and the first five books of Moses.

## The Law and the Prophets

Another expression used for the entire Old Testament is *the law and the prophets*. This particular expression looks at the Old Testament from the standpoint of its divisions—the law, the prophets, and the writings. Compare Matthew 5:17; 7:12; Luke 16:16; Romans 3:21. See also Luke 24:27 and 44.

## Other Terms Used of the Old Testament

Psalm 19:7-9 presents us with a number of synonyms in a six-fold description of God’s special revelation, the Word of God. It is called *law*, God’s revealed direction, or will; *testimony*, a witness of God’s person and purpose; *precepts*, a general term for the responsibilities of God’s people; *commandments*, God’s authoritative words of instruction; *fear*, reverential trust that the Word produces in God’s people; *judgments*, specific directions relating to different human circumstances.

Psalm 119, where devotion to the Word of God is the dominant theme, has even more terms used for the Word of God. The multiple terms used by the Psalmist convey the truth that the Word of God contains all we need for the life God wants to give us. At least nine different terms may be seen in Psalm 119—*law*, *testimonies*, *ways*, *precepts*, *statutes*, *commandments*, *judgments*, *word*, and *path*. Focusing on eight of these terms, the NIV Bible Commentary comments:

The psalmist uses eight words for God’s law:

1. “Law” (*torah*) occurs twenty-five times. In the broad sense it refers to any “instruction” flowing from the revelation of God as the basis for life and action. In the narrow sense it denotes the Law of Moses, whether the Pentateuch, the priestly law, or the Deuteronomic law.
2. “Word” (*dabar*) is any word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord. It is a general designation for divine revelation.
3. “Laws” (*mishpatim*) pertain to particular legal issues (“case laws”) that form the basis for Israel’s legal system. God himself is the Great Judge.
4. “Statute(s)” (*eduth/edoth*) derives from the word that means “witness,” “testify”; “testimony” is often synonymous with “covenant” (cf. 25:10; 132:12). The observance of the “statutes” of the Lord signifies loyalty to the terms of the covenant between God and Israel.
5. “Command(s)” (*mitswah/mitswoth*) is a frequent designation for anything that the Lord, the covenant God, has ordered.
6. “Decrees” (*huqqim*) is derived from the root for “engrave,” “inscribe.” God reveals his royal sovereignty by establishing his divine will in nature and in the covenant community.
7. “Precepts” (*piqqudim*) occurs only in the book of Psalms and appears to be synonymous with “covenant” (103:18) and with the revelation of God (111:7). Its root connotes the authority to determine the relationship between the speaker and the object.
8. “Word” or “promise” (*imrah*) may denote anything God has spoken, commanded, or promised.<sup>6</sup>

## The Bible: The Written Word of God

### The Claim of the Bible

Even a casual reader of the Bible will soon discover he is reading a very unusual book. Even though he may not accept its claims, a careful and reflective reading will demonstrate, for most at least, that this book is not only unique, but makes some very unique claims. The following are a number of evidences that support this uniqueness.

#### *Internal Evidence*

In hundreds of passages, the Bible declares or takes the position explicitly or implicitly that it is nothing less than the very Word of God.

Some thirty-eight hundred times the Bible declares, “God said,” or “Thus says the Lord” (e.g. Ex. 14:1; 20:1; Lev. 4:1; Num. 4:1; Deut. 4:2; 32:48; Isa. 1:10, 24; Jer. 1:11; Ezek. 1:3; etc.). Paul also recognized that the things he was writing were the Lord’s commandments (1 Cor. 14:37), and they were acknowledged as such by the believers (1 Thess. 2:13). Peter proclaimed the certainty of the Scriptures and the necessity of heeding the unalterable and certain Word of God (2 Pet. 1:16-21).

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<sup>6</sup> NIV Bible Commentary, Zondervan New Media, Grand Rapids, 1997, electronic media.

John too recognized that his teaching was from God; to reject his teaching was to reject God (1 John 4:6).<sup>7</sup>

For other passages which either declare or assume the Bible as God's Word see Deuteronomy 6:6-9, 17-18; Joshua 1:8-9; 8:32-35; 2 Samuel 22:31; Ps. 1:2; 12:6; 19:7-11; 93:5; 119:9, 11, 18, 89-93, 130; Prov. 30:5-6; Matthew 5:17-19; 22:29; Mark 13:31; Luke 16:17; John 2:22; 5:24; 10:35; Acts 17:11; Romans 10:17; Colossians 3:16; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Timothy 2:15; 3:15-17; 1 Peter 1:23-25; 2 Peter 3:15-16; Revelation 1:2; 22:18.

But isn't this a circular kind of argument, and is that a valid argument? In a court of law, the accused has the right to testify on his own behalf. That testimony should be considered in the light of the evidence. In this case, the evidence, both external and internal, strongly supports the claims of the Bible.

In response to those who would reject the above-mentioned argument, it should be noted that the writers who made those claims for the Scripture were trustworthy men who defended the integrity of the Scripture at great personal sacrifice. Jeremiah received his message directly from the Lord (Jer. 11:1-3), yet because of his defense of the Scripture some attempted to kill him (Jer. 11:21); even his family rejected him (Jer. 12:6). Counterfeit prophets were readily recognized (Jer. 23:21, 32; 28:1-17). However, the Bible's claims should not be understood as arguing in a circle or by circular reasoning. The testimony of reliable witnesses—particularly of Jesus, but also of others such as Moses, Joshua, David, Daniel, and Nehemiah in the Old Testament, and John and Paul in the New Testament—affirmed the authority and verbal inspiration of the Holy Scriptures.<sup>8</sup>

The ever present assumption of the writers of the Bible is that the Bible is the God-breathed Word of God. A good illustration is seen in Psalm 19:7-11 which not only declares the Bible to be the Word of God, but identifies six perfections with corresponding transformations of human character that the Bible will produce in those who study and apply it in faith.

### ***External Evidence***

**(1) The continuity of the Bible.** One of the amazing facts about the Bible is that though it was written by a wide diversity of authors (as many as 40) over a period of 1600 years, from many different locations and under a wide variety of conditions, the Bible is uniquely one book, not merely a collection of sixty-six books. Its authors came from all walks of life. Some were kings, some peasants, still others were philosophers, fishermen, physicians, statesmen, scholars, poets, and farmers. They lived in a variety of cultures, in different experiences and often were quite different in their make up. Regardless of this diversity, as one book, it is:

... bound together by historical sequence, type and antitype, prophecy and fulfillment, and by the anticipation, presentation, realization, and exaltation of the most perfect Person who ever walked on earth and whose glories are manifest in heaven.<sup>9</sup>

Enns has an interesting comparison as it pertains to the Bible's continuity. He writes:

The divine origin of the Bible is further seen in considering the continuity of its teaching despite the unusual nature of its composition. It stands distinct from other religious writings. For example, the Islamic Koran was compiled by an individual, Zaid ibn Thabit, under the guidance of Mohammed's father-in-law, Abu-Bekr. Additionally, in A.D. 650, a group of Arab scholars produced a unified version and destroyed all variant copies to preserve the unity of the Koran. By contrast, the Bible came from some forty different authors from diverse vocations in life. For instance, among the writers of Scripture were Moses, a political leader; Joshua, a military leader; David, a shepherd; Solomon, a king; Amos, a herdsman and fruit pincher; Daniel, a prime minister; Matthew, a tax collector; Luke, a medical doctor; Paul, a rabbi; and Peter, a fisherman.<sup>10</sup>

Summing up the significance of the Bible's continuity, Enns writes,

It is apparent that many of the writers did not know of the other writers of Scripture and were unfamiliar with the other writings, inasmuch as the writers wrote over a period of more than fifteen hundred years, yet the Bible is a marvelous, unified whole. There are no contradictions or inconsistencies within its pages. The Holy Spirit is the unifier of the sixty-six books, determining its harmonious consistency. In unity these books teach the trinity of God, the deity of Jesus Christ, the personality of the Holy Spirit, the fall and depravity of man, as well as salvation by grace. It quickly becomes apparent that no human being(s) could have orchestrated the harmony of the teachings of the Scripture. The divine authorship of the Bible is the only answer.<sup>11</sup>

Speaking of the Bible as "a phenomenon which is explainable in but one way—it is the word of God," the late Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer wrote, "It is not such a book as man would write if he *could*, or could write if he

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 154.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Chafer, p. 52.

<sup>10</sup> Enns, pp. 154-155.

<sup>11</sup> Enns, p. 155.

would.”<sup>12</sup> It is beyond the scope of man’s capacity to write a book like the Bible under the conditions describes above apart from its divine origin.

**(2) The Bible’s revelation of God.** The Bible’s revelation of God is unique among all the religious writings of either antiquity or of more modern times. While the Bible is a very ethical book, it never divorces its code of morality from a personal relationship with the God of the Bible, teaching that God’s laws are not meant to hinder joy and pleasure, but to enhance man’s capacity to know and love God and people. Morality is to be a product of knowing and loving the God of the Bible (Deut. 4:4-6; Matt. 22:36-40; Mark 12:28-31).

In addition, no other religious writing presents both the absolute holiness of God combined with God’s love, mercy, and grace that reaches out to sinful man who has been separated from God not only because of man’s sin, but because of God’s absolute holiness. One of the great revelations and themes of the Bible is that which is expressed by Isaiah, “holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts” (Isa. 6:3; Hab. 1:13a).

While other contemporary writers were primarily polytheistic, the Bible is monotheistic. It presents a monotheistic concept of God rather than the polytheism which was so flagrant in the days when the Scriptures were written. Furthermore, when later holy books like the Koran and others presented a monotheistic concept of God, the Bible remained unique because it is the only book about God that presents God as one (monotheism) yet one in three persons, the Triunity or Trinity. Indeed, the Bible’s revelation of God is one that is starkly different from the ones depicted in all other holy books whether of antiquity or of modern times.

**(3) The nature, condition, and cure for man’s sin.** Only the Bible describes man’s condition in sin as it really is and demonstrates the impossibility for man to deal with his sin and sinfulness apart from God’s grace solution in the person and death of His Son. Every other religion in the world, past and present, has man seeking to obtain his own salvation or gain God’s favor by some form of human works or religious activity. Only the Bible presents a solution for man’s sin that is truly life changing, when properly embraced and believed.

**(4) The ethics and morals of the Bible.** The ethics and morals of the Bible cover all areas of human conduct from the home, the husband/wife relationships, parent/child relationships, to human conduct in society as with employers and employees, neighbors and enemies, and the state and its citizens. It covers morals on all levels as well as business, economic, and social spheres. But as mentioned previously, the ethics and morals of the Bible are unique in that they are always related to one’s belief in the existence of God and one’s relationship with Him; in this way, the motives themselves are judged. Ethics and morals are never simply a matter of outward conformity to the moral standards of Scripture as other religions or religious books do. The emphasis of the Bible is “search me O God, and know my heart.”

**(5) Fulfilled prophecy.** Another amazing illustration of the divine origin and uniqueness of the Bible is its many fulfilled prophecies.

Throughout Scripture, hundreds of prophecies were made by Old Testament writers concerning the Messiah, the future kingdom on earth, the restoration of Israel as a nation, and their return to their Promised Land. In the New Testament also many predictions are made of events to come. As Scripture unfolds, about half of these prophecies have already been fulfilled, but others, following the same pattern of literal fulfillment, are subject to fulfillment in the future. The perfect precision of prophecy extending to such details as the place of Christ’s birth, the character of His execution, the very words He would speak on the cross testify to the absolute accuracy of the Word of God. In Scripture, prophecy is just as accurate as history.<sup>13</sup>

**(6) The Bible as Revelation Beyond Human Comprehension.**

The extent of Bible revelation is beyond human comprehension. Like a telescope, the Bible reaches beyond the stars and penetrates the heights of heaven and the depths of hell. Like a microscope, it discovers the minutest details of God’s plans and purposes as well as the hidden secrets of the human heart. The Bible deals as freely with things unknown as it does with the known. It can speak with complete freedom and assurance about situations and events outside the realm of human experience. The Bible knows no limits to the infinite knowledge of God who guided its writers. It permits its readers to gaze on events in eternity past as well as in eternity future. The comprehension of divine revelation is utterly beyond the capacity of even the most brilliant men unaided by the Spirit of God.<sup>14</sup>

Other unique features of the Bible that give evidence of its divine origin are its *types and antitypes*, its nature as unique *literature*, its *scientific accuracy* when compared to true science, its *enduring freshness*, and its *power to change lives*.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Vol 1, Kregel, Grand Rapids, 1947-48, p. 22.

<sup>13</sup> *Lewis Sperry Chafer Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, Abridged Edition, Walvoord, Campbell, Zuck, p. 53.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>15</sup> For further reading on these and the features mentioned above see Chafer’s *Systematic Theology*, pp. 22-36, or the Abridged Edition of *Chafer’s Theology* by Walvoord, Zuck, and Campbell, pp. 48-55.

## Attitudes or Viewpoints Toward the Bible

In the study of bibliology it is important to be aware of the various attitudes people either have or with which they approach the Scriptures. We will divide these attitudes toward the Bible into six different categories.

**(1) Rationalism.** The philosophy behind rationalism is “The theory that the exercise of reason, rather than the acceptance of empiricism, authority, or spiritual revelation, provides the only valid basis for action or belief and that reason is the prime source of knowledge and of spiritual truth.”<sup>16</sup> The rationalistic approach toward the Bible may be extreme or moderate.

In its extreme form it denies divine revelation and represents the belief of atheists and agnostics. Moderate rationalism may admit divine revelation but tends to accept only those parts of divine revelation that personal reason approves. Under this approach the Bible is not viewed as authoritative, but the moderated rationalist seeks to eliminate or honor various Scriptures as he may choose. This is often the attitude of modern liberals.<sup>17</sup>

The issue in rationalism is that the *mind* is supreme and becomes the final authority.

**(2) Mysticism.** Mysticism also falls into a two-fold classification, a false mysticism and a true mysticism. The fundamental premise in false mysticism is that divine revelation is not limited to the Bible, but that God continues to give new truth beyond the Bible. In the final analysis, false mysticism makes human *experience* supreme; one’s personal experiences become the final authority rather than the Bible. If it fits with one’s experience, then it is accepted as valid; but if it does not fit one’s experience, it is rejected as invalid. For this kind of mystic, the Bible is not complete or final. God is still in the business of giving truth if one is only receptive to its revelation. Those holding to some form of false mysticism believe spiritual truth is being added beyond the Scriptures. This type of false mysticism is seen in the ideas of pantheism, theosophy, modern-day spiritism, Seventh-day Adventism, new thought, Christian Science, Swedenborgianism, Mormonism, Quakerism, and Millennial Dawnism (Jehovah’s Witnesses).

In addition, it can be seen in the beliefs of some forms of the modern-day charismatic movement. Some non-cessationists believe all the gifts mentioned in the New Testament are operative today. Some believe that God is still speaking through present day prophets, and some even go a step further and claim that the revelation coming to and from these prophets is equal in authority with the Bible. This is a growing movement within some circles of the evangelical church. In the conclusion of the chapter, “Does God Speak Today Apart from the Bible,” E. Fowler White, one of the contributors in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, writes:

Some present-day evangelicals, Jack Deer and Wayne Grudem among them, believe and teach that God speaks today apart from the Bible. According to these teachers, God gives words of personal or ministry direction to His people using all the same means that He used in the past. Yet, when we consider the evidence for these views, we find that their resemblance to what the Bible actually depicts is more apparent than real. Whatever else Deer is teaching, he is not teaching the model of hearing God’s voice as practiced in the Bible itself.<sup>18</sup>

In my judgment, what these teachers and their disciples fail to appreciate is that, in the Bible, God’s activity of speaking apart from the Scriptures occurred at a time when those documents were still being written. Interestingly, during that long history of Scripture writing, God’s people did live by a “Scripture plus” principle of authority, and, in keeping with that principle, God employed various means to speak His extrascriptural words to them. But today the church is faced with a new situation; now, with centuries of Christian orthodoxy, we confess that the writing of Scripture is finished, and that the canon is actually closed.<sup>19</sup>

There is, however, a form of true mysticism which stems from the indwelling and teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit illuminates the minds of believers to enable them to grasp and apply the truth of the Scripture. As Hebrews 12:25 affirms, God is speaking today, but He does so through the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit to the truths of the completed canon of Scripture. This is the work of illumination, leading, and conviction, but this must be distinguished from the Spirit’s work of revelation. Speaking of this ministry of the Spirit, Chafer/Walvoord writes:

By contrast, true mysticism is the proper approach of systematic theologians who believe the Bible. It involves the fact that all believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and therefore are able to be enlightened directly by the Spirit in their understanding of divine revelation. Such revelation does not exceed what the Scriptures reveal; it consists in making known divine truth recorded in Scrip-

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<sup>16</sup>*The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition* copyright © 1992 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Electronic version licensed from INSO Corporation. All rights reserved.

<sup>17</sup> *Lewis Sperry Chafer Systematic Theology*, Abridged Edition, Vol. 1, John F. Walvoord, editor, Donald K. Campbell, Roy B. Zuck, consulting editors, Victor Books, Wheaton, IL, 1988, p. 41.

<sup>18</sup> For the discontinuity between the gifts practiced in the early church and those being claimed today, as with the gifts of miracles and prophecy, see the article by Dr. Dan B. Wallace on this web site, “Two Views on the ‘Sign Gifts:’ Continuity VS Discontinuity” at [www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org).

<sup>19</sup> Armstrong, p. 86. The issue of canonicity will be addressed in the material below.

ture. True mysticism extends to what may be called normative revelation, but it does not exclude God's application of scriptural truth to an individual seeking guidance. Guidance is always in keeping with the Scriptures themselves (John 16:13; 1 Cor. 2:9-10).<sup>20</sup>

A true mystic in the biblical sense believes that the Bible is our final authority and seeks to always judge personal experience by the Bible. He does not allow experience to either take precedence over the Bible nor does he judge the Bible or what is biblical by his experience.<sup>21</sup>

**(3) Romanism.** In Romanism, the Roman Catholic Church is both the channel of divine revelation and the final authority for how the Bible is to be interpreted in faith and practice. Since the Bible is the product of the church, and since the Scriptures are obscure (another teaching of Romanism), only the church can properly interpret the Scriptures. In Romanism, the Bible is viewed as incomplete; there is more truth available, but it can only come through the church. "Furthermore, the traditions of the church are, along with the Bible, a source of divine revelation. Ecumenical councils and popes have from time to time made pronouncements that are considered infallible and therefore binding on church members."<sup>22</sup>

Particularly objectionable is the concept that the church can supersede Scripture itself. As a part of this approach to divine revelation, tradition must also be examined and should be studied in the light of important Scriptures (Gal. 1:14; 2 Thes. 2:15; 3:6). In His earthly ministry, Christ repeatedly had to contradict the traditions of men in affirming the truth of the Word of God.<sup>23</sup>

**(4) Neoorthodoxy.** Karl Barth (1886-1968), often viewed as the father of neoorthodoxy, believed that the basis of authority is the Word, but for Barth, the Word is mainly Christ. The Bible only witnesses to the Word and only becomes authoritative when it speaks to the individual. This means that the Bible's witness to Christ is fallible. The individual must determine what is the word of God within the Bible and what is not. To clearly grasp what is and what is not, there is the need for some type of divine encounter. In short, neoorthodoxy does not believe that the Bible *is* the word of God, only that it *contains* the word of God. This means the individual becomes the final judge as to what in the Bible is the word of God and what is not. Since in neoorthodoxy the encounter is primary, the encounter actually becomes the authority and anyone can have his or her own encounter and come up with totally different conclusions.

**(5) Cultism.** Many of the cults teach that the Bible *along with some other writing* is supreme and authoritative. A key characteristic of the cults, however, is that though they make a claim to believe the Bible is God's word, they either affirm another writing as having equal authority or raise the other writing as more important or authoritative than the Bible itself. The perfect illustration of this is Mormonism and the *Book of Mormon* which Mormonism views as inspired. Christian Science views Mary Baker Eddy's book, *The Key to the Scriptures*, as equally inspired. In the final analysis, the Bible is not the only authority; in matter of fact it is relegated to a lower position of importance.

**(6) Conservative Protestantism (the Orthodox Position).** The conservative or orthodox position is that the *Bible alone is our final authority for faith and practice*. For the conservative believer, the Bible is the infallible word of God. It is inspired in the original autographs and is without error. This means that, while it will record the lies of Satan who deceived Eve in Genesis 3, it records it as a lie. The Bible is true in everything it affirms to be true.

Concerning the mind or reason, it must be subservient to the word of God. If the mind is thinking in terms which are contrary to the Scriptures, it is not the mind that judges the Scriptures, but the Scriptures judge the thoughts of the mind. Concerning the experience of Mysticism, the Bible is the final judge of experience, and experience cannot determine the truth of Scripture. Concerning Romanism, it is not the church that determines the meaning of the Bible but, rather, the Bible determines the proper place of the Church. Concerning the encounter, a man does not need a unique encounter before he can comprehend what is the word of God in the Scriptures.... Concerning the issue of the cults, the answer of Orthodoxy is that the Bible, and the *Bible alone, is* supreme, and the 66 books of the Scriptures are all that has been inspired by God in written form. Any other writing is the writing of a false prophet or false prophetess. We who hold to the supremacy of the Bible believe that knowledge is subject to the Bible, and there is no inner light that adds revelation beyond the Bible.<sup>24</sup>

Concerning the conservative Protestant position, Ryrie writes:

"Conservative" eliminates liberalism's humanistic and subjective bases of authority, and "protestantism" removes the church as a base of authority. So one would agree that "orthodoxy is that branch of Christendom which limits the ground of religious authority to the Bible" (Edward John Carnell, *The Case for Orthodox Theology* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969], p. 13). The Scrip-

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<sup>20</sup> Chafer, p. 42.

<sup>21</sup> The issue of illumination will be covered later in this study, but see also Wallace's article, "The Holy Spirit and Hermeneutics" in the Prof's Soapbox section on this web site at [www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org).

<sup>22</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, Victor Books, Wheaton, IL, 1987, electronic media.

<sup>23</sup> Chafer, p. 42.

<sup>24</sup> Dr. Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Ariel's Radio Ministry*, The Messianic Bible Study.

tures contain the objective revelation of God and are therefore the basis of authority for the conservative Protestant.

To be sure, understanding God's revelation in the Bible involves using the rational processes of a redeemed mind, a commitment of faith in matters not revealed or not understood, a dependence on the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit, a conscience clear before God, and some insight into the lessons of history.

Sometimes in practice, though not in theory, conservatives can and do deny that the Bible is their sole basis of authority.

(1) In practice, some traditions or denominations give their creeds coordinate authority with the Bible. Creeds can provide helpful statements of truth; but creeds can never be the authoritative judge of truth. Credal statements must always be considered fallible, in need of possible revision, and subservient to biblical authority.

(2) In practice, some groups give tradition and accepted practice coordinate authority with the Bible. A church has a divine mandate to set authoritative guidelines for its members (Heb. 13:7, 17), but these too are fallible, in need of periodic revision, and always subservient to biblical authority.

(3) In practice, some conservatives make religious experience authoritative. Healthy experience is the fruit of allegiance to biblical authority, but all experiences must be guided, governed, and guarded by the Bible. To make experience normative and authoritative is to commit the same error as liberalism by replacing an objective criterion with subjective existentialism.<sup>25</sup>

## The Bible: God's Special Revelation

### Definition of Revelation

The term revelation comes from the Greek word *apokalupsis*, which means "a disclosure" or "an unveiling." It is used in the New Testament of the disclosure of truth in general (Luke 2:32; Rom. 16:25; Eph. 1:17), of the disclosure of a specific area of truth (2 Cor. 12:1; Gal. 1:12; 2:2; Eph. 3:3), of the second coming of Christ (1 Cor. 1:7; 1 Pet. 1:7, 13; 4:13), and of the book of Revelation (Rev. 1:1). Theologically, Bible students use this word to signify God's work of revealing Himself to mankind through the various sources of revelation as in creation (Rom. 1:18-21; Ps. 19), in providential acts (Acts 14:17; Rom. 8:28), in miracles (John 20:30-31), through direct acts of communication (Ex. 3:1-9; Acts 22:17-21), through the person of Christ (John 1:14, 18), and through the Bible.

What then is revelation? Thiessen defines it as:

... that act of God whereby he discloses himself or communicates truth to the mind; whereby he makes manifest to his creatures that which could not be known in any other way. The revelation may occur in a single, instantaneous act, or it may extend over a long period of time; and this communication of himself and his truth may be perceived by the human mind in varying degrees of fullness.<sup>26</sup>

Erickson defines "revelation" as: "By special revelation we mean God's manifestation of himself to particular persons at definite times and places, enabling those persons to enter into a redemptive relationship with him."<sup>27</sup>

The concept of revelation falls into two principal divisions or areas: (1) general, natural, or original, and (2) special, supernatural, or soteriological. The first pertains to revelation revealed through nature and history, the second to what God has revealed as He intervenes in human history to reveal Himself in supernatural ways.

### General or Natural Revelation

By general revelation, we mean revelation that is simply general in its extent. Ryrie explains:

General revelation is exactly that—general. It is general in its scope; that is, it reaches to all people (Matt. 5:45; Acts 14:17). It is general in geography; that is, it encompasses the entire globe (Ps. 19:2). It is general in its methodology; that is, it employs universal means like the heat of the sun (vv. 4-6) and human conscience (Rom. 2:14-15). Simply because it is a revelation that thus affects all people wherever they are and whenever they have lived it can bring light and truth to all, or, if rejected, brings condemnation.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ryrie, electronic media.

<sup>26</sup> Henry Clarence Thiessen, *Introductory Lectures in systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1949, p. 31.

<sup>27</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1983, p. 175.

<sup>28</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, Victor Books, Wheaton, IL, 1987, electronic media.

General revelation comes to mankind in a number of ways (creation, order and design, the nature of man as an intelligent being), but the most obvious and powerful means of general revelation is nature or creation. As powerful and universal as this is, however, it is inadequate or has certain limitations. It cannot tell us about the love and grace of God nor of His perfect holiness. Furthermore, creation does not tell us of God's plan of salvation nor how man may procure that salvation. Still, general revelation "is nonetheless an important antecedent to salvation. General revelation is God revealing certain truths and aspects about His nature to all humanity, which revelation is essential and preliminary to God's special revelation."<sup>29</sup>

### **Creation**

Creation as a part of God's general revelation affirms certain facts about God. Two key passages emphasize God's general revelation in creation:

**(1) Psalm 19:1-6** affirms (a) the heavens declare the fact of God's glory to the human race throughout the earth (vs. 1), (b) that this revelation is constant, occurring "day to day" and "night to night" (vs. 2), that (c) it is a nonverbal revelation, "there is no speech, nor are there words, their voice is not heard," (v. 3), and (d) its scope is worldwide, "Their line [sound] has gone out through all the earth, And their utterance to the end of the world" (v. 4). "Being unrestricted by the division of languages, natural revelation transcends human communication without the use of speech, words, and sounds. To those who are inclined to hear, revelation comes with no regard for linguistic or geographical barriers."<sup>30</sup>

No one is excluded from this revelation of God. Wherever man peers at the universe, there is orderliness. At a distance of ninety-three million miles from the earth, the sun provides exactly the right temperature environment for man to function on earth. Were the sun closer, it would be too hot to survive, and were it further away it would be too cold for man to function. If the moon were closer than two hundred forty thousand miles the gravitational pull of the tides would engulf the earth's surface with water from the oceans. Wherever man looks in the universe, there is harmony and order. Similarly, God has revealed Himself on earth (v. 1). The magnificence of the human body is perhaps the best evidence of general revelation on earth. The entire human body—its cardiovascular system, the bone structure, the respiratory system, the muscles, the nervous system including its center in the brain—reveals an infinite God.<sup>31</sup>

**(2) Romans 1:18-21** develops the truth of general revelation through creation even further. It draws our attention to four vital characteristics of what the revelation of God in creation does. (a) It is a clear testimony, being clearly seen by the things which are made (vss. 19 and 20). (b) The word "understood" (*noew*, "of rational reflection, inner contemplation, *perceive, apprehend, understand ...*")<sup>32</sup> indicates this general revelation goes beyond mere perception; creation's revelation is such that it is expected to result in reflection so there is a conclusion drawn about the Creator. (c) As Psalm 19 affirms, this testimony is constant being witnessed "since the creation of the world" (vs. 20). And (d) it is limited in what it reveals; only certain aspects about God's invisible qualities or nature are revealed, specifically, "his eternal power and divine nature."

As mentioned previously, to learn of God's love, grace, and plan of salvation, one must turn to God's special revelation, the Bible, and the revelation of His Son (John 1:14, 18). Natural revelation, however, is more than sufficient to make mankind responsible and to show he is "without excuse" for his indifference and failure to seek to know God and to be thankful.

### **Providence and Human Conscience**

In addition to creation, God has also revealed Himself to the human race through His providential goodness in the world and through the human conscience.

It is through His providential goodness in supplying people with sunshine and rain that enables them to live and function (Matt. 5:45; Acts 14:15-17). Paul reminds the people at Lystra that God's providential goodness was a witness to them (Acts 14:17). God's providential control is also evident in His dealing with the nations. He disciplined His disobedient people Israel (Deut. 28:15-68) but will also restore them (Deut. 30:1-10); He judged Egypt for sinning against Israel (Ex. 7-11); He raised the nations to power and also caused their demise (Dan. 2:21a, 31-43).

Further, God has revealed Himself through conscience. Romans 2:14-15 indicates God has placed intuitional knowledge concerning Himself within the heart of man. "Man intuitively knows not only that God values goodness and abhors evil but also that he is ultimately accountable to such a righteous Power." (Bruce A. Demarest, *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982, p. 231.) While the Jews will be judged according to the written law, Gentiles, who do not have the written Law, will be judged according to an unwritten

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<sup>29</sup> Enns, p. 156.

<sup>30</sup> *NIV Bible Commentary*, Kenneth Barker & John Kohlenberger III, Consulting Editors, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, 1994, electronic media.

<sup>31</sup> Enns, pp. 156, 158.

<sup>32</sup> Walter Bauer, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1979, electronic version.

law, the law of conscience written on their hearts. Moreover, Paul says the conscience acts as a legal prosecutor (v. 15). "Conscience may be regarded as an inner monitor, or the voice of God in the soul, that passes judgment on man's response to the moral law within" (Ibid., pp. 232-33).<sup>33</sup>

While God has revealed Himself in His creation, which gives us general revelation about God, and in the person of Jesus Christ, which gives us revelation of God incarnate, our focus in bibliology is on the revelation of God in the Bible, the written Word of God. As God's Word the Bible reveals much more about God than can be known from nature or creation or even through the person Christ.

Accordingly, the Bible may be regarded as completing the intended divine revelation of God partially revealed in nature, more fully revealed in Christ, and completely revealed in the written Word.

## **Special Revelation**

### ***The Nature of Special Revelation***

This section will examine how God has revealed Himself in special revelation. The nature of this mode of revelation is that it consists primarily of *words*. The author of Hebrews reminds us that God has made Himself known by speaking long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, and in these last days has spoken to us in *His Son* (Heb. 1:1-2a). There are three elements to special revelation: specific times, specific modes, and specific persons. Later, still dealing with this special revelation that reveals our "so great salvation," the author of Hebrews says:

After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will (Heb. 1:1-2).

Again we see the same elements: a *specific mode* (special revelation embodied in words), at a *specific time* (during the life of Christ and the apostles), and in *specific persons* (those who heard the Lord, His apostles whose teaching or words were confirmed by signs and wonders). This was precisely in keeping with Christ's own words in John 16:12-15.

Special revelation involves a narrower focus than general revelation and is restricted to Jesus Christ and the Scriptures. Of course, all that is known of Christ is through the Scriptures; therefore, it can be said that special revelation is restricted to the Scriptures.<sup>34</sup>

### ***The Necessity of Special Revelation***

Why does man need special revelation? Special revelation is needed because of man's blind and sinful condition caused by his fall as recorded in Genesis 3, a blindness that is made even stronger by the blinding activity of Satan (cf. Eph. 4:17-19 with 2 Cor. 4:4). This necessitated the need for special revelation so God could reveal Himself and His plan of salvation that man in turn might be reconciled from his condition of alienation and restored to fellowship with God.

God's special revelation of Himself centers in the Person of Jesus Christ as the only One who fully reveals both God and His plan of salvation; Jesus is the heart and testimony of Scripture in its promises and fulfillment and the means of salvation (John 1:14, 18; 3:16-18; 6:63; 14:6; Heb. 1:3; 2:3; Rev. 19:10).

In addition to the above, man needs special revelation for two more important reasons. First, so he correctly interpret the truths revealed in general revelation, and second, because these general truths are very limited. As is obvious from the many religions of the world, man consistently misinterprets what he can learn from creation or providence. Therefore, man desperately needs God's special or supernatural revelation.

### ***The Avenues of Special Revelation***

Drawing on his knowledge of the Old Testament and the testimony of those who had personally heard the Lord Jesus, the author of Hebrews speaks of the various ways God has spoken to reveal Himself in history through the prophets and then through His Son who is the very outshining of God (Heb. 1:1-2). Ryrie gives us an excellent summary of the various avenues God has used to reveal Himself.

A. The Lot: While today we would not highly regard the use of the lot, it did serve sometimes to communicate the mind of God to man (Prov. 16:33; Acts 1:21-26).

B. The Urim and Thummim: The breastplate which the high priest wore in the Old Testament was a square piece of beautiful material which was folded in half and open at the top like a pouch. It was adorned with twelve precious stones on which were engraved the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. The Urim and Thummim possibly were two precious stones placed inside the pouch which were used, like the lot, to determine God's will (Ex. 28:30, Num. 27:21, Deut. 33:8; 1 Sam. 28:6, Ezra 2:63).

C. Dreams: God apparently used dreams to communicate many times during the Old Testament period, and He will do so again at the time of the second coming of Christ (Gen. 20:3, 6; 31:11-13, 24; 40-41; Joel 2:28). Nonbelievers as well as believers experienced God-given dreams (Gen.

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<sup>33</sup> Enns, p. 158.

<sup>34</sup> Enns, p. 158.

20:3; 31:24). Though a common experience, dreams were used by God in this special way to reveal truth.

D. Visions: In a vision the emphasis seems to be on what is heard, while in a dream, on what is seen. Also the human being involved seems to be more active in receiving a vision (Isa. 1:1; 6:1; Ezek. 1:3).

E. Theophanies: Before the Incarnation, theophanies were associated with the appearance of the Angel of the Lord who communicated the divine message to people (Gen. 16:7-14; Ex. 3:2; 2 Sam. 24:16; Zech. 1:12).

F. Angels: God also uses created angels to carry His message to people (Dan. 9:20-21, Luke 2:10-11, Rev. 1:1). (Notice Rev. 19:17 where God will use an angel to communicate to birds!)

G. The Prophets: Old Testament prophets brought God's message to mankind (2 Sam. 23:2; Zech. 1:1) as did New Testament prophets (Eph. 3:5). They spoke with authority because they were communicating the Word of the Lord. A preacher or teacher today does not qualify as a prophet since he proclaims or explains God's Word, previously given and encoded.

H. Events: God's activity in history also constitutes a channel of revelation. Delivering the people of Israel from Egypt revealed the righteous acts of the Lord, according to Micah 6:5. Acts of judgment reveal who God is (Ezek. 25:7). And, of course, the incarnation of Christ exegeted God (John 1:14). It does not go without saying today that these events have to be historical and factual in order also to be communicative; for today some are putting existential faith before the historical. In other words, they are attempting to create revelation apart from historical facts. Such existential historiography was never a part of the framework of the biblical writers.

Not only must the events be historical, but they also need to be interpreted through divine inspiration if we are to understand accurately their meaning. For example, many people were crucified; how do we know that the crucifixion of one Jesus of Nazareth paid for the sins of the world? The Word of special revelation clarifies and correctly interprets the obscurity of the meaning of events.

I. Jesus Christ: Undebatably the incarnation of Jesus Christ was a major avenue of special revelation. He exegeted the Father (John 1:14), revealing the nature of God (14:9), the power of God (3:2), the wisdom of God (7:46), the glory of God (1:14), the life of God (1 John 1:1-3), and the love of God (Romans 5:8). Our Lord did all this by both His acts (John 2:11) and His words (Matt. 16:17).

J. The Bible: Actually the Bible serves as the most inclusive of all the avenues of special revelation, for it encompasses the record of many aspects of the other avenues. Though God undoubtedly gave other visions, dreams, and prophetic messages that were not recorded in the Bible, we know no details of them. Too, all that we know about the life of Christ appears in the Bible, though, of course, not all that He did or said was recorded in the Scriptures (John 21:25). But the Bible is not simply the record of these other revelations from God; it also contains additional truth not revealed, for example, through the prophets or even during the earthly life of Christ. So the Bible, then, is both the record of aspects of special revelation and revelation itself.

The revelation in the Bible is not only inclusive yet partial, it is also accurate (John 17:17), progressive (Heb. 1:1), and purposeful (2 Tim. 3:15-17).

Two approaches exist as to the credibility of the scriptural revelation. Fideists insist that the Scripture and the revelation it contains is self-authenticating, that is, autopistic. The infallibility of the Bible must be presupposed and can be because the Scripture says it is inspired and the Spirit accredits it. Empiricists, on the other hand, stress the intrinsic credibility of the revelation of the Bible as being worthy of belief, that is, axiopistic. The Bible's claim to authority is not in itself proof of its authority; rather there exist factual, historical evidences which constitute the Bible's credentials and validate the truth of its message. My feeling is that there is truth in both approaches so that both can and should be used.<sup>35</sup>

## **The Bible: The Inspired Revelation of God**

### **The Necessity of Inspiration**

As special revelation is God's communication to man of the truth he must know in order to be properly related to God, so inspiration deals with the preservation of that revelation so that what was received from God was accurately transmitted to others beyond the original recipient. In revelation we have the *vertical reception* of God's truth while in inspiration we have the *horizontal communication* of that revelation accurately to others. The question is how can we be sure the Bible is God's revelation to man and not merely the product of human ingenuity or merely human opinion? If what God revealed has not been accurately recorded, then that record is subject to question. The doctrine of inspiration answers that question and guarantees the accuracy of the Bible as God's special revelation.

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<sup>35</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, Victor Books, Wheaton, IL, 1987, electronic media.

## The Meaning of Inspiration

The English word *inspiration* has a number of connotations, the most fundamental being the act of drawing in, especially of the inhalation of air into the lungs. The word is also used of the stimulation of the mind or emotions to a high level of feeling or activity. Sometimes it is used of a work of art, as a painting full of inspiration. None of these really fit with the biblical concept.

In its theological usage inspiration is derived from the Latin Vulgate Bible where the verb *inspire* is used in 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:21. The word *inspiration* is used in 2 Timothy 3:16 to translate *qeo pneustos*, a word that occurs only here. *Qeo pneustos* is derived from *qeos*, “God,” and *pnew*, “to breath.” Literally, it means “God-breathed” and expresses the concept of exhalation by God. More accurately, it emphasizes that Scripture is the product of the breath of God. The Scriptures are not something breathed into by God, rather, the Scriptures have been breathed out by God.

## A Biblical Definition of Inspiration

Inspiration must be carefully defined because of the varied uses of this term and the wrong ideas about inspiration being promoted today, ideas that are inconsistent with what the Bible itself teaches regarding inspiration. Inspiration may be defined as “God’s superintendence of the human authors of Scripture so that using their own individual personalities, they composed and recorded without error His revelation to man in the words of the original autographs.”

If we break this definition down into its various parts, we note several elements, each of which is vital to understanding what the Bible teaches about inspiration.

(1) The word “superintendence” refers to the guiding relationships God had with the human authors of Scripture in the various material of the Bible. His superintendence varied in degree, but it was always included so that the Spirit of God guaranteed the accuracy of what was written.

(2) The word “composed” shows that the writers were not simply stenographers who wrote what God dictated to them. They were actively involved using their own personalities, backgrounds, and God’s working in their lives, but again, what was composed had the superintendence of God over the material written.

(3) “Without error” expresses what the Bible itself claims to be true regarding its record; it is God’s word and that word is truth (John 17:17; Ps. 119:160).

(4) Though our translations of the Bible are tremendously accurate, being based on thousands of manuscript witnesses, inspiration can only be ascribed to the *original autographs*, not to manuscript copies or the translations based on those copies.

The following represent a few of the definitions of prominent evangelical theologians:

Benjamin B. Warfield: “Inspiration is, therefore, usually defined as a supernatural influence exerted on the sacred writers by the Spirit of God, by virtue of which their writings are given Divine trustworthiness.”<sup>36</sup>

Edward J. Young: “Inspiration is a superintendence of God the Holy Spirit over the writers of the Scriptures, as a result of which these Scriptures possess Divine authority and trustworthiness and, possessing such Divine authority and trustworthiness, are free from error.”<sup>37</sup>

Charles C. Ryrie: “God superintended the human authors of the Bible so that they composed and recorded without error His message to mankind in the words of their original writings.”<sup>38</sup>

Millard J. Erickson: “By inspiration of the Scripture we mean that supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit upon the Scripture writers which rendered their writings an accurate record of the revelation or which resulted in what they wrote actually being the Word of God.”<sup>39</sup>

To these definitions, Enns adds this important word:

There are several important elements that belong in a proper definition of inspiration: (1) the divine element—God the Holy Spirit superintended the writers, ensuring the accuracy of the writing; (2) the human element—human authors wrote according to their individual styles and personalities; (3) the result of the divine-human authorship is the recording of God’s truth without error; (4) inspiration extends to the selection of words by the writers; (5) inspiration relates to the original manuscripts.<sup>40</sup>

## Biblical Data Supporting Inspiration

The concept that the Bible is inspired, breathed out of God, is not something man has forced on the Bible, but a concept fully in keeping with the claims of the Bible itself. Inspiration is the testimony of the Bible to itself. As in any just court of law, we need to allow the Bible to give testimony to itself.

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<sup>36</sup> B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, Presbyterian and Reformed, Philadelphia, 1948, p. 131.

<sup>37</sup> Edward J. Young, *Thy Word Is Truth*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1957, p. 27.

<sup>38</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, Victor Books, Wheaton, IL, 1987, electronic media.

<sup>39</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1983, p. 199.

<sup>40</sup> Enns, p. 160.

### **Key Facts About Inspiration (2 Timothy 3:16)**

The NASB reads, “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness.” The KJV has, “All Scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.” The NIV has, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”

A number of important things are stated in this passage regarding the inspiration of Scripture.

**(1) The fact of inspiration.** This verse unequivocally states that Scripture is God-breathed. The Apostle Paul, a man authenticated by signs and wonders (2 Cor. 12:12) and recognized as a writer of Scripture (2 Pet. 3:16), declares Scripture to be the product of the out-breathing of God. The question is, what of Scripture is inspired? “Our English word “inspire” carries the idea of breathing into something. But this word tells us that God breathed out something, namely, the Scripture. To be sure, human authors wrote the texts, but the Bible originated as an action of God who breathed it out.”<sup>41</sup>

**(2) The extent of inspiration.** This is stated in the words, “All Scripture is inspired.” The term “Scripture,” the Greek *graph*, is used exclusively in the New Testament of the sacred writings, of some portion of the Bible—sometimes of the whole Old Testament (Matt. 22:29; Mark 14:49; Luke 24:45; John 10:35), and sometimes of a specific passage (Matt. 12:10; Luke 4:21; John 13:8).

In addition, “Scripture” is even used of a specific New Testament passage and sometimes to a larger portion of the New Testament. In 1 Timothy 5:18, in support of paying elders for their work, Paul quoted Deuteronomy 25:4, but the words of Christ recorded in Matthew 10:10 and Luke 10:7 are also connected with Paul’s statement, “For the Scripture says.” This is probably the earliest instance of our Lord’s words being quoted as Scripture. While this support for a workman is also found in other Old Testament passages like Leviticus 19:13, the wording clearly is that of Christ recorded in Luke 10:7. Then in 2 Peter 3:16, Peter specifically refers to Paul’s writings as Scripture.

Some versions as the ASV and the NEB translate 3:16 as, “Every Scripture inspired of God *is* also profitable ...” implying some books are not inspired and do not belong in the canon of Scripture. Regarding this issue, Ryrie writes:

Most do not deny that 2 Timothy 3:16 includes all of the canonical books. Those who wish to try to reduce the amount of Scripture included in the verse do so by translating it this way: “All Scripture inspired by God is also profitable” (instead of “All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable”). In other words, whatever parts of Scripture that are inspired are profitable, but other uninspired parts are not profitable. That translation indicates that only part of the Bible is inspired. Such a translation is possible, but not required. Actually either translation can claim to be accurate. Both translations have to supply the word *is* since it does not appear in the original. The matter becomes a question of whether to supply “is” only one time or two times (“Every Scripture inspired by God is also profitable” or “All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable”). The preference goes to the latter translation for three reasons. First, by supplying “is” two times, both adjectives (“inspired” and “profitable”) are understood the same way, as predicate adjectives, which is more natural. Second, the connective word, though it may be translated “also,” much more frequently means “and.” Third, a similar construction occurs in 1 Timothy 4:4 where both adjectives are clearly predicate adjectives. Thus the preferred translation makes it quite clear that all the Bible is inspired.<sup>42</sup>

**(3) The value or purposes of inspiration:** This is seen in the second statement of 3:16, “and is profitable for teaching, ...” along with verse 17, “that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” Obviously, since all Scripture is God breathed, being the product of an all-wise, all-knowing, all-powerful and loving God, the Apostle Paul goes on to state that the entire Bible is profitable for four things:

**(a) Teaching**—“Teaching” is the Greek *didaskalia* and means “doctrine” or “teaching.” It is used in both the active sense (i.e., the act of teaching), and in the passive sense (what is taught, doctrine). In the pastoral epistles, Paul uses it of the act of teaching (1 Tim. 4:13, 17; 2 Tim. 3:10), and of what is taught as in sound doctrine (cf. 1 Tim. 1:10; 4:6, 16; 6:1, 3; 2 Tim. 4:3; Tit. 1:9; 2:1; 2:7, 10). As many of these passages show, especially Titus 2:1, theological teaching, if it is to be truly profitable, must be in accord with sound doctrine, truth from the inspired word. Ultimately, teaching or doctrine, which looks at the content, refers to God’s fundamental principles for man’s life both eternal and abundant. It gives us the basics, the fundamental truths upon which life is to be built.

**(b) Reproof**—“Reproof” is the Greek *elegmos* which means “proof, conviction, reproof.” The *mos* ending shows this is a passive noun which looks at the *result* of the process of the convicting ministry of the Spirit through the Word—personal conviction through exposure to truth. One might compare *elegmos* to another Greek word, *elenxis*, an active noun which looks at the *process* of reproving or exposing. Both need to go on in the life of a believer. The goal, however, is not simply the process. It’s the result—personal conviction. Like the light it is, the Bible reproveth and exposes us to the various ways we violate the plan and principles of God in all the relationships of life, with God and with people as in one’s family, in the church, and in society. Once we have been reproveth and

<sup>41</sup> Ryrie, electronic media.

<sup>42</sup> Ryrie, electronic media.

experience conviction (reproof) to the violations, we each face a very important decision. We can move toward God and **respond** to His correction and training, or we can **rebel** and **resist**. If we resist, then, as a Father, He disciplines us to draw us back to Him.

(c) **Correction**—This is the Greek *epanorqwsis* which means “setting up straight, setting right.” It stresses the restorative nature and capacity of Scripture and points to the more immediate work of the Word to set our feet back on course. The Psalmist wrote, “The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul” (Psa. 19:7a).

(d) **Training in righteousness**—“Training” is *paidia* which basically means “training, instruction, discipline,” not in the sense of punishment, but in the sense of the disciplines that train and develop character, strength, skill, etc. This is undoubtedly more long range and refers to those truths that develop godly character and spiritual strength—growth truths and procedures like Bible study, meditation, and prayer.

But these four objectives have a greater goal or purpose. The purpose is that “the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:17). The Bible offers us God’s comfort and His peace as it reveals His love, care, and mercy, but this is always in the context of conforming us into the image of His Son (Rom. 8:28-29) and equipping us for a life of good works (Eph. 2:10). Equipping us is designed to produce righteousness and ministry rather than self-indulgence.

The word “adequate” is the Greek *artios* which means “fit, complete, capable, sufficient: i.e., able to meet whatever is needed.” Being “fit” looks at the result or the intended result of a process, the aim in view. I think the process itself is seen in the word “equipped.” Note these three points about this word:

First, “Equipped” is the Greek *ezartizw* which means “to outfit, fully furnish, fully supply” as in fitting out a wagon or a ship for a long journey. It was actually used of outfitting a rescue boat.<sup>43</sup> We might compare our Coast Guard vessels and their crews that are so well equipped to go out and rescue ships in trouble.

Second, “Equipped” is an adverbial participle which points us to the mode or the means of becoming “adequate” “capable,” or “competent.” We might translate the verse as, “that the man of God may be capable, by having been thoroughly equipped.” In the context, the equipping comes from knowing this God-breathed book.

Third, the verb “equipped” is in the perfect tense which, in Greek, often looks at the results of preceding action or a process. In the context, the process is that of studying, knowing, and applying God’s inspired Word while the result is ability for ministry through spiritual growth.

God’s goal in giving us His Word and our goal in studying and knowing God’s Word is to thoroughly fit us out that we might become fully competent servants of God for every kind of good work in the midst of a dark and needy world, like thoroughly equipped rescue vessels on missions of mercy.

### ***The How of Inspiration (2 Pet. 1:20-21)***

20 Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. 21 For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:20-21 NIV).

The NIV translation above of verse 20 is much closer to the original Greek, more in accord with the preceding and following context, and clearly expresses the truth we need to grasp here. The statement, “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation,” simply declares that whatever the prophets wrote or whatever we find in the Word, it was not the product of the author’s own ideas or human opinion. In verses 16-19, the issue being discussed is the source of the apostolic message. Was it human fabric or was it from God? Verse 20 answers the first part of this question. It was not from man.

The second part of this question or issue is found in verse 21. Note the connecting and explanatory “For” of verse 21. This teaches us that both God and man were involved in the production of the Bible, but in such a way that God was the ultimate source (though man’s will was involved, Scripture was never the product of human will). God both directed the writing and guaranteed the accuracy of the product. The human authors actively spoke God’s Word and they were more than dictation machines, but to ensure the accuracy of what was spoken, the human authors were moved and carried along by the Holy Spirit. “Moved” is *feromenoi*, a Greek passive participle meaning, “to be carried, be borne along.” This word was used of a ship being carried along by the wind in its sail in Acts 27:15, 17.

Catching the import of this, Ryrie writes:

Though experienced men, the sailors could not guide it so they finally had to let the wind take the ship wherever it blew. In the same manner as that ship was driven, directed, or carried about by the wind, God directed and moved the human writers He used to produce the books of the Bible. Though the wind was the strong force that moved the ship along, the sailors were not asleep and inactive. Similarly, the Holy Spirit was the guiding force that directed the writers who, nevertheless, played their own active roles in writing the Scriptures.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Fritz Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key To The Greek New Testament*, edited by Cleon L. Rogers, Jr., Regency, Grand Rapids, 1976, p. 647.

<sup>44</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, Victor Books, Wheaton, IL, 1987, electronic media.

This verse, then, teaches us two things regarding the “How” of inspiration: (a) The will of the human authors never directed the writings of the Bible, and (b) the Holy Spirit as the ultimate source ensured the accuracy of what they wrote in every way.

### ***The Breadth of Inspiration***

#### **(1) 1 Corinthians 2:12-13**

12 Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual *thoughts* with spiritual *words*.

The subject in this passage is God’s revelation by which we know of the things of God, things which man cannot know by human wisdom. But the point we must not miss is that this revelation comes to us, not just in thoughts or concepts, but in specific words. This shows the fallacy of *concept inspiration*, that inspiration extends to the concepts, but not to the words. In its scope or breadth, by the Bible’s own explanation, inspiration extends to the very words of the Bible.

#### **(2) 2 Peter 1:3-4**

3 Seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. 4 For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, in order that by them you might become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust.

It is clear from verse 4 and the reference to “His precious and magnificent promises” that Peter has the Word of God in view in these two verses. First, there is the declaration that God “has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness.” Second, life and godliness come through the knowledge of God and the Lord Jesus, but such knowledge comes through the Word, the precious promises. In essence then, this points us to the breadth of what God’s Word covers, “everything pertaining to life and godliness.”

While God does not reveal everything that He could reveal, many things He has chosen to keep to Himself (Deut. 29:29), the Bible, in progressive fashion, does cover all that man needs for life and godliness through its revelation of God and of Jesus our Lord. We have everything we need, nothing is missing.

## **False Views of Inspiration**

### ***Natural Inspiration***

This view denies the supernatural element in biblical inspiration; the writers of Scripture were simply men of special genius who possessed unusual religious insight into moral and spiritual truth. Through their special abilities, they wrote the books of the Bible in much the same way as any individual might write any book. Through their religious insight, they wrote on religious subjects in the same way Shakespeare wrote literature. Writing by their own will, the writers conceived what they wrote.

### ***Spiritual or Mystical Illumination***

Regarding this view, Ryrie writes:

This viewpoint goes a step farther than natural inspiration, for it conceives of the writers as more than natural geniuses in that they were also Spirit-filled and guided. “The inspiration of the books of the Bible does not imply for us the view that they were produced or written in any manner generically different from that of the writing of other great Christian books.... There is a wide range of Christian literature from the fifth to the twentieth century which can with propriety be described as inspired by the Holy Spirit in precisely the same formal sense as were the books of the Bible” (Alan Richardson, *Christian Apologetics* [New York: Harper, 1948], p.207). Thus, (a) other Christian writings are as inspired as the Bible; (b) the Bible books are not infallible even though (c) they represent great religious literature that may even contain messages from God.<sup>45</sup>

In this view any Christian, if illuminated by the Holy Spirit, could be the author of inspired Scripture. Those who hold to this view teach that it is the writers who are inspired, not the writings themselves. Schleiermacher taught this view on the Continent while Coleridge propounded it in England.<sup>46</sup>

### ***Degree Inspiration***

This view holds to the inspiration of Scripture, but it holds that some parts are more inspired than others. It is true that some parts of Scripture are more relevant than others, but all of Scripture is equally inspired and accurate, and it all has an important place in the overall revelation of God.

### ***Partial Inspiration***

The partial inspiration theory teaches that some parts of the Bible are inspired and some parts are not. Those parts related to matters of salvation and faith are inspired, but those parts that deal with history, science, chronology, or other non-faith matters may be in error. This view maintains that though some material may be in error,

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<sup>45</sup> Ryrie.

<sup>46</sup> Enns, p. 161.

God still preserves the message of salvation. We can trust the Bible in spiritual matters, but in some areas, there may be error.

The partial theory rejects both verbal inspiration (that inspiration extends to the words of Scripture) and plenary inspiration (that inspiration extends to the entirety of Scripture). Despite the presence of errors in Scripture, partial theorists teach that an imperfect medium is a sufficient guide to salvation.<sup>47</sup>

But this creates real problems regarding the trustworthiness of Scripture. Ryrie writes:

But is not the biblical teaching about salvation based on historical facts? Suppose those facts are inaccurate? Then our understanding about salvation might also be erroneous. You cannot separate history and doctrine and allow for errors (however few) in the historical records and at the same time be certain that the doctrinal parts are true.<sup>48</sup>

The basic question then is what parts of the Bible can we trust and what parts are in error? Furthermore, who decides these questions?

### ***Conceptual Inspiration***

This view says that the concepts or ideas of the writers are inspired but not the words. God communicated the concepts to the human author, but not the words. It is true that a correct doctrine of inspiration does not include dictation, but God did superintend the authors so that the words they used from their own vocabularies were guided by the Holy Spirit. In response, how are concepts expressed, if they are to be expressed accurately? Through carefully chosen words. Further, both Jesus and Paul affirmed the concept of verbal inspiration (See Matt. 5:18 and Gal. 3:16).

### ***Divine Dictation***

The mechanical or dictation view teaches that the whole Bible was dictated word for word by God; the writers were passive, much like secretaries or stenographers who sat and wrote down what was given to them. Concerning this view, Enns remarks:

This claim would render the Bible similar to the Koran which supposedly was dictated in Arabic from heaven. Although some parts of the Bible were given by dictation (cf. Ex. 20:1, "Then God spoke all these words"), the books of the Bible reveal a distinct contrast in style and vocabulary, suggesting the authors were not mere automatons. The beginning student in Greek will quickly discover the difference in style between the gospel of John and the gospel of Luke. John wrote in a simple style with a limited vocabulary, whereas Luke wrote with an expanded vocabulary and a more sophisticated style. If the dictation theory were true, the style of the books of the Bible should be uniform.<sup>49</sup>

### ***Neo-orthodox or Barthian View***

This final view is a very dangerous view because those who hold it often sound evangelical, but they are actually often very liberal in their theology. This view teaches the Bible is not the Word of God, but only becomes the Word of God through a special encounter when God speaks to a person in some kind of subjective experience. In other words, the Bible only witnesses to the Word of God, but it is not the Word of God.

Moreover, the Bible is enshrouded in myth necessitating a demythologizing of the Bible to discover what actually took place. The historicity of the events is unimportant. For example, whether or not Christ actually rose from the dead in time and space is unimportant to the neo-orthodox adherent. The important thing is the experiential encounter that is possible even though the Bible is tainted with factual errors. In this view the authority is the subjective experience of the individual rather than the Scriptures themselves.<sup>50</sup>

Ryrie concludes his comments on Barthianism with these words:

Can such a Bible have any kind of authority? Yes, declares the Barthian. Its authority is in the encounter of faith with the Christ of Scripture. The Bible, because it points to Christ, has instrumental authority, not inherent authority. And those parts which do point to Christ have more authority than those which do not. Yet all the parts contain errors.

To sum up: Barthianism teaches that the Bible (B) points to Christ the Word (C). But in reality we do not know anything about C apart from B. It is not that we already have a clear concept of C by which we can test the accuracy of B, the pointer. Actually the Bible is the *painter* of C; that is, what we know about Christ comes from the Bible. So if the Bible has errors in it, the portrait of Christ is erroneous. And make no mistake about it, the Barthian Bible does have errors in it.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Enns, p. 161.

<sup>48</sup> Ryrie.

<sup>49</sup> Enns, p. 161-162.

<sup>50</sup> Enns, p. 162.

<sup>51</sup> Ryrie.

Regardless of whether a person responds or has an encounter with God through the Bible, it is the objective and authoritative Word of God. The Thessalonian Christians accepted it as the Word of God, but Paul's comment regarding their response was not that they had an encounter so that their message became the word of God, but rather "when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe" (1 Thess. 2:13). They did come to know God through the Word, but Paul emphatically affirms it was the Word of God regardless.

In conclusion, the strongest defense for the verbal plenary inspiration of the Scriptures is the testimony of Jesus Christ. He testified to the inspiration of the entire Scriptures, the various books of the Old Testament and the actual words of Scripture as they were originally recorded. The fact that He based His arguments on the precise wording of Scripture testifies to His exalted view of Scripture. We will demonstrate Christ's view of Scripture under the concept of inerrancy. In addition, Paul declared all Scripture to be God-breathed; man was God's instrument, being guided by God in the writing of Scripture. Peter confirmed the truth by emphasizing that the authors were carried along by the Holy Spirit in the writing of Scripture. The testimony of each of these witnesses draws attention to the verbal plenary inspiration of Scripture.

## The Bible: The Inerrant Word of God

### A Definition of Inerrancy

The word inerrancy means "freedom from error or untruths." Synonyms include "certainty, assuredness, objective certainty, infallibility." But doesn't the concept of inspiration automatically imply inerrancy? So we might ask the question, "Why this section on the inerrancy of the Bible?" Ryrie has an excellent explanation in answer to this question.

Formerly all that was necessary to affirm one's belief in full inspiration was the statement, "I believe in the inspiration of the Bible." But when some did not extend inspiration to the words of the text it became necessary to say, "I believe in the verbal inspiration of the Bible." To counter the teaching that not all parts of the Bible were inspired, one had to say, "I believe in the verbal, plenary inspiration of the Bible." Then because some did not want to ascribe total accuracy to the Bible, it was necessary to say, "I believe in the verbal, plenary, infallible, inerrant inspiration of the Bible." But then "infallible" and "inerrant" began to be limited to matters of faith only rather than also embracing all that the Bible records (including historical facts, genealogies, accounts of Creation, etc.), so it became necessary to add the concept of "unlimited inerrancy." Each addition to the basic statement arose because of an erroneous teaching.<sup>52</sup>

Clarifying the definition of inerrancy has become necessary because many have, in very subtle ways, retained words like inspiration, infallible, and even inerrant in speaking about the Bible while denying its freedom from error.

E. J. Young, in his classic work on the inspiration of the Bible, gives us good definition of inerrancy: "By this word we mean that the Scriptures possess the quality of freedom from error. They are exempt from the liability to mistake, incapable of error. In all their teachings they are in perfect accord with the truth."<sup>53</sup>

Concerning the definition of inerrancy, Ryrie explains:

Definitions of inerrancy are not plentiful! Errantists equate inerrancy with infallibility and then limit its scope to matters of faith and practice or to revelational matters or to the message of salvation. An example of this: "The Bible is infallible, as I define that term, but not inerrant. That is, there are historical and scientific errors in the Bible, but I have found none on matters of faith and practice" (Stephen T. Davis, *The Debate about the Bible* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977], p. 115). At least this is an honest distinction between infallibility and inerrancy.<sup>54</sup>

In view of this, when defining inerrancy, it is always important to state clearly what it means and what it does not mean.

It does not demand rigidity of style and verbatim quotations from the Old Testament. "The inerrancy of the Bible means simply that the Bible tells the truth. Truth can and does include approximations, free quotations, language of appearances, and different accounts of the same event as long as those do not contradict." (Charles C. Ryrie, *What You Should Know About Inerrancy*, p. 16). At the Chicago meeting in October 1978, the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy issued the following statement on inerrancy: "Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God's acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to

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<sup>52</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, Victor Books, Wheaton, IL, 1987, electronic media.

<sup>53</sup> E. J. Young, *Thy Word Is Truth*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1957, p. 113.

<sup>54</sup> Ryrie, electronic media.

God's saving grace in individual lives' (James Montgomery Boice, *Does Inerrancy Matter?*, Oakland: International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, 1979, p. 13.)<sup>55</sup>

Ryrie makes an important comment regarding the statement at Chicago.

The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy in its Chicago statement affirmed inerrancy in a brief statement that the "Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching...." Then followed nineteen articles to further describe and explain inerrancy.

This brief statement would be unsatisfactory to errantists. If there were any doubt about that, certainly the nineteen-article elaboration would exclude errantists' agreeing with it.<sup>56</sup>

It is important to bear in mind that belief in inerrancy is in keeping with the character of God. If God is true and He is (Rom. 3:4), and if God breathed out the Scripture, then the Scripture, being the product of God, must also be true. This is why the Psalmist affirms, "All your words are true" (Ps. 119:160a).

### **Clarifications Regarding Inerrancy**

A number of different issues invariably come up when considering the doctrine of inerrancy. What about the variety of styles, or the varying ways certain events are described, or the different reports of events? How does this mesh with the concept of inerrancy? Paul Enns has done an excellent job in summarizing these fundamental issues.

*Inerrancy allows for variety in style.* The gospel of John was written in the simple style one might expect of an unlearned fisherman; Luke was written with a more sophisticated vocabulary of an educated person; Paul's epistles reflect the logic of a philosopher. All of these variations are entirely compatible with inerrancy.

*Inerrancy allows for variety in details in explaining the same event.* This phenomenon is particularly observed in the synoptic gospels. It is important to remember that Jesus spoke in Aramaic and the writers of Scripture wrote their accounts in Greek, meaning they had to translate the original words into Greek. One writer would use slightly different words to describe the same incident, yet both would give the same meaning, albeit with different words. There is an additional reason for variety in details. One writer might have viewed the event from one standpoint while the other gospel writer viewed it from another standpoint. This would make the details appear different, yet both would be accurate.

*Inerrancy does not demand verbatim reporting of events.* "In times of antiquity it was not the practice to give a verbatim repetition every time something was written out" (E. J. Young, *Thy Word Is Truth*, p. 119). A verbatim quote could not be demanded for several reasons. First, as already mentioned, the writer had to translate from Aramaic to Greek in recording Jesus' words. Second, in making reference to Old Testament texts it would have been impossible to unroll the lengthy scrolls each time to produce a verbatim quote; furthermore, the scrolls were not readily available, hence, the freedom in Old Testament quotes (William R. Eichhorst, *The Issue of Biblical Inerrancy: In Definition and Defence*, Winnipeg, Man.: Winnipeg Bible College, n.d., p. 9).

*Inerrancy allows for departure from standard forms of grammar.* Obviously it is wrong to force English rules of grammar upon the Scriptures. For example, in John 10:9 Jesus declares, "I am the door," whereas in verse 11 He states, "I am the Good Shepherd." In English this is considered mixing metaphors, but this is not a problem to Greek grammar or Hebrew language. In John 14:26 Jesus refers to the Spirit (*pneuma* = neuter) and then refers to the Spirit as "He" (*ekeinos* = masculine). This may raise an English grammarian's eyebrows, but it is not a problem of Greek grammar.

*Inerrancy allows for problem passages.* Even with so vast a work as the Holy Scriptures it is impossible to provide solutions to all the problems. In some cases the solution awaits the findings of the archaeologist's spade; in another case it awaits the linguist's research; in other cases the solution may never be discovered for other reasons. The solution to some problems must be held in abeyance. The answer, however, is never to suggest there are contradictions or errors in Scripture. If the Scriptures are God-breathed they are entirely without error.

*Inerrancy demands the account does not teach error or contradiction.* In the statements of Scripture, whatever is written is in accord with things as they are. Details may vary but it may still reflect things as they are. For example, in Matthew 8:5-13 it is noted that the centurion came to

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<sup>55</sup> Enns, p. 167.

<sup>56</sup> Ryrie, electronic media.

Jesus and said, “I am not qualified.” In the parallel passage in Luke 7:1-10 it is noted that the elders came and said concerning the centurion, “He is worthy.” It appears the elders first came and spoke to Jesus, and later the centurion himself came. Both accounts are in accord with things as they are.<sup>57</sup>

## What Happens If Inerrancy Is Denied?

How important is inerrancy? What happens when this doctrine is denied? There are those (and some are even evangelicals) who believe that inerrancy is not important. We do not need to defend the Bible, particularly as it relates to the details of chronology, geography, history, or cosmology or the so-called alleged discrepancies. But how sound is this kind of thinking and how does it stack up with the teaching of the Bible and particularly with what Christ taught?

If the Bible teaches inerrancy, then to deny it is to deny that which the Scripture claims is true. Further, if the Bible contains some errors, how can we be sure that its claims concerning Christ, salvation, man, etc., are true? Also, the chronology, geography, and history of the Bible are often woven together like strands of a basket with vital spiritual truths. As you cannot start pulling strands out of a woven basket without doing damage to the whole, so it is with the Bible.

For instance, is the history of Adam and Eve important? Absolutely, for Paul developed a theological analogy between Adam and Christ which essentially breaks down if it is historically not true. The Old Testament has dozens of prophecies of the coming Messiah that detail his lineage. If the genealogy of Matthew 1 and Luke 3 are historically inaccurate, then this raises questions about whether Jesus is the one anticipated as well as about the rest of His life.

As Ryrie points out, “Even if the errors are supposedly in ‘minor’ matters, any error opens the Bible to suspicion on other points which may not be so ‘minor.’ If inerrancy falls, other doctrines will fall too.”<sup>58</sup> If we can’t trust Scripture in things like geography, chronology, and history, then how can we be sure we can trust it in its message of salvation and sanctification?

I recently received an email question regarding the story recorded in the gospels where Jesus delivered two demon possessed men and sent the demons into a herd of swine. Assuming that the owners of the pigs were Jews (which they were not), the person sending the email doubted the historicity of the account because they could not imagine Jews raising pigs since it was contrary to the law for them to eat pork. A person believing in the inerrancy of the Bible, would know that the account was historical and accurate. Therefore, the apparent problem was not in the accuracy of the Scripture, but in their understanding of the event, which was precisely the case.

A denial of inerrancy is a serious matter and will lead to the following kinds of problems doctrinally and practically:

When inerrancy is denied one may expect some serious fallout in both doctrinal and practical areas.

Some doctrinal matters which may be affected by denying inerrancy include the following.

- (1) A denial of the historical fall of Adam.
- (2) A denial of the facts of the experiences of the Prophet Jonah.
- (3) An explaining away of some of the miracles of both the Old and New Testaments.
- (4) A denial of the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch.
- (5) A belief in two or more authors of the Book of Isaiah.
- (6) A flirting with or embracing of liberation theology with its redefining of sin (as societal rather than individual) and salvation (as political and temporal rather than spiritual and eternal).

Some lifestyle errors that may follow a denial of inerrancy include the following.

- (1) A loose view of the seriousness of adultery.
- (2) A loose view of the seriousness of homosexuality.
- (3) A loose view of divorce and remarriage.
- (4) “Cultural” reinterpretation of some of the teachings of the Bible (e.g., teaching on women, teaching on civil obedience).
- (5) A tendency to view the Bible through a modern psychological grid.

Inerrancy is an important doctrine, the denial or even diluting of which may result in serious doctrinal and life errors.<sup>59</sup>

## Support for Inerrancy from the Teachings of Christ

A study of what Jesus said about the Bible reveals not only His belief in its verbal, plenary inspiration, but that He also believed it was inerrant. In fact, the greatest testimony to the authenticity of the Bible as God’s inspired

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<sup>57</sup> Enns, pp. 167-168.

<sup>58</sup> Ryrie, electronic media.

<sup>59</sup> Ryrie, electronic media.

and inerrant Word is the Lord Jesus. Why is His testimony so important? Because God authenticated and proved Him to be His own divine Son by the resurrection (cf. Acts 2:22-36; 4:8-12; 17:30-31; Rom. 1:4). Christ not only clearly confirmed the authority of the Old Testament, but He specifically promised the New Testament.

Note what Christ taught about the inspiration of the Old Testament:

(1) **Its entirety**; the whole of the Bible is inspired (Matt. 4:4; 5:17-18). In Matthew 4:4, Jesus responded to Satan's temptation by affirming verbal plenary inspiration when He said, man is to live by *every word* (plenary) that proceeds out of the *mouth of God* (inspiration). In Matthew 5:17-18, Christ promised that the entire Old Testament, the Law and the Prophets, would be fulfilled, not abolished. In fact, He declared that not even the smallest Hebrew letter, the *yodh*, which looks like an apostrophe ('), or stroke of a letter, a small distinguishing extension or protrusion of several Hebrews letters (cf. the extension on the letter R with its absence on the letter P), would pass away until all is fulfilled. Christ's point is that it is all inspired and true and will be fulfilled.

(2) **Its historicity**; He spoke of the Old Testament in terms of actual history. Adam and Eve were two human beings, created by God in the beginning, who lived and acted in certain ways (Matt. 19:3-5; Mark 10:6-8). He spoke of Jonah and his experience in the belly of the great fish as an historical event (Matt. 12:40). He also verified the events of the flood in Noah's day along with the ark (Matt. 24:38-39; Luke 17:26-27). He verified God's destruction of Sodom and the historicity of Lot and his wife (Matt. 10:15; Luke 17:28-29). These are only a few illustrations; many others exist.

(3) **Its reliability**; because it is God's word, the Scripture must be fulfilled (Matt. 26:54).

(4) **Its sufficiency**; it is sufficient to witness to the truth of God and His salvation (Luke 16:31).

(5) **Its indestructibility**; heaven and earth will not pass away until it is all fulfilled. Nothing can stop its fulfillment (Matt. 5:17-18).

(6) **Its unity**; the whole of the Bible speaks and witnesses to the person and work of Christ (Luke 24:27, 44).

(7) **Its inerrancy**; men are often in error, but the Bible is not; it is truth (Matt. 22:29; John 17:17).

(8) **Its infallibility**; the Bible cannot be broken, it always stands the test (John 10:35).

## The Bible: The Holy Canon of Scripture

### Introduction

The fact of the inspiration of the Bible as God's special revelation to man naturally leads to the question (since many other religious books were written during both the Old and New Testament periods) what particular books are canonical, that is, what books are inspired and should be recognized as a part of God's authoritative revelation? Are any inspired books missing? Are any books included that should not be in our Bible? Is our Old Testament Bible the same as the Lord's and is our New Testament the same as the Bible of the church fathers? These are obviously vital questions for the people of God to determine.

### Meaning of "Canon" or "Canonicity"

The word *canon* is used to describe those books recognized as inspired of God. The word comes from the Greek *kanwn* and most likely from the Hebrew *qaneh* and Akkadian, *qanu*. Literally, it means (a) a straight rod or bar; (b) a measuring rule as a ruler used by masons and carpenters; then (c) a rule or standard for testing straightness.

Historically, the word was first used by the church of those doctrines that were accepted as the rule of faith and practice. The term came to be applied to the decisions of the Councils as rules by which to live. All these employ the word in the metaphorical sense of a rule, norm, or standard.

In the course of time, the terms *canon* and *canonical* came to be applied to the catalogue or list of sacred books distinguished and honored as belonging to God's inspired Word. "Greek Christians by the fourth century A.D. had given the word a quasi-technical religious meaning, applying it to the Bible, especially to the Jewish books."<sup>60</sup>

... It is important to note that religious councils at no time had any power to cause books to be inspired, rather they simply recognized that which God had inspired at the exact moment the books were written.

Jews and conservative Christians alike have recognized the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament as inspired. Evangelical Protestants have recognized the twenty-seven books of the New Testament as inspired. Roman Catholics have a total of eighty books because they recognize the Apocrypha as semicanonical.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Merrill F. Unger, *Introductory Guide to the Old Testament*, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, 1951, p. 47.

<sup>61</sup> Enns, p. 170.

## The Logical Necessity for a Canon of Scripture and Its Preservation

That God would provide and preserve a Canon of Scripture without addition or deletion is not only necessary, but it is logically credible. If we believe that God exists as an almighty God, then revelation and inspiration are clearly possible. If we believe in such a God, it is also probable that He would, out of love and for His own purposes and designs, reveal Himself to men. Because of man's obvious condition in sin and his obvious inability to meet his spiritual needs (regardless of all his learning and technological advances), special revelation revealed in a God-breathed book is not only possible, logical, and probable, but a necessity.

The evidence shows that the Bible is unique and that God is its author. The evidence declares that "all Scripture is God breathed and profitable ..." (2 Tim. 3:16) and that "no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Pet. 1:20-21). In view of this, the logical question is: "Would it not be unreasonable for God to fail to providentially care for these inspired documents to preserve them from destruction and so guide in their collection and arrangement that they would all be present with none missing and none added that were not inspired?"<sup>62</sup>

## Important Considerations

There are a number of important considerations that must be kept in mind when considering the issue of canonicity or how the books of the Bible came to be recognized and held to be a part of the Bible. Ryrie summarizes these issues as follows:

1. *Self-authentication.* It is essential to remember that the Bible is self-authenticating since its books were breathed out by God (2 Tim. 3:16). In other words, the books were canonical the moment they were written. It was not necessary to wait until various councils could examine the books to determine if they were acceptable or not. Their canonicity was inherent within them, since they came from God. People and councils only recognized and acknowledged what is true because of the intrinsic inspiration of the books as they were written. No Bible book became canonical by action of some church council.

2. *Decisions of men.* Nevertheless, men and councils did have to consider which books should be recognized as part of the canon, for there were some candidates that were not inspired. Some decisions and choices had to be made, and God guided groups of people to make correct choices (not without guidelines) and to collect the various writings into the canons of the Old and New Testaments.

3. *Debates over canonicity.* In the process of deciding and collecting, it would not be unexpected that some disputes would arise about some of the books. And such was the case. However, these debates in no way weaken the authenticity of the truly canonical books, nor do they give status to those which were not inspired by God.

4. *Completion of canon.* Since A.D. 397 the Christian church has considered the canon of the Bible to be complete; if it is complete, then it must be closed. Therefore, we cannot expect any more books to be discovered or written that would open the canon again and add to its sixty-six books. Even if a letter of Paul were discovered, it would not be canonical. After all, Paul must have written many letters during his lifetime in addition to the ones that are in the New Testament; yet the church did not include them in the canon. Not everything an apostle wrote was inspired, for it was not the writer who was inspired but his writings, and not necessarily all of them.

The more recent books of the cults which are placed alongside the Bible are not inspired and have no claim to be part of the canon of Scripture. Certainly so-called prophetic utterances or visions that some claim to be from God today cannot be inspired and considered as part of God's revelation or as having any kind of authority like that of the canonical books.<sup>63</sup>

## Canonicity of the Old Testament

The Hebrew Bible of today is substantially the same as the original writings, with only physical changes like the addition of vowel pointings, reading aids in the margins, and a change to a more open form of the letters, etc. In Romans 3:2 we are told that the "oracles of God," the Old Testament Scripture, had been entrusted to the Jews; they were to be the custodians of the Old Testament. This precisely fits what we know about the Jews and the Old Testament. They have always been a people of one book who have guarded it with extreme care and precision. From the time of Ezra and even before, there were priests (Deut. 31:24-26) and later scribes called *sopherim* who

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<sup>62</sup> For an excellent treatment of these evidences, see Josh McDowell's book, *Evidence Demands a Verdict, Historical Evidences for the Christian Faith*, Revised Edition, Here's Life Publishers, Inc. San Bernardino, CA, 1979.

<sup>63</sup> Ryrie, electronic media. For other articles on canonicity, see our web page at [www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org) under "Theology," and then under "Bibliology--The Doctrine of the Written Word."

were given the responsibility to copy and meticulously care for the sacred text so they could hand down the correct reading.

To ensure this accuracy, later scribes known as the Masoretes developed a number of strict measures to ensure that every fresh copy was an exact reproduction of the original. They established tedious procedures to protect the text against being changed. For instance, (a) when obvious errors were noted in the text, perhaps because a tired scribe nodded, the text was still not changed. Instead, a correction was placed in the margin called *qere*, “to be read,” and that which was written in the text was called, *kethibh*, “to be written.” (b) When a word was considered textually, grammatically, or exegetically questionable, dots were placed above that word. (c) Minute statistics were also kept as a further means of guarding against errors: in the Hebrew Bible at Leviticus 8:8, the margin has a reference that this verse is the middle verse of the Torah. According to the note at Lev. 10:16 the word *darash* is the middle word in the Torah, and at 11:42 we are assured that the *waw* in a Hebrew word there is the middle letter. At the end of each book are statistics as: the total number of verses in Deuteronomy is 955, the total in the entire Torah is 5,845; the total number of words is 97, 856, and the total number of letters is 400,945.<sup>64</sup>

In this we see something of the painstaking procedures the Jews went through to assure the accurate transmission of the text. Our English Bible is a translation of this Hebrew text which has been handed down to us. God made the Jews the custodians of the Old Testament record. Though their eyes may be blind to its truth (Isa. 6:10; John 12:40; Rom. 10:1-3; 11:7), they have guarded its transmission with great accuracy.

The original copies of the Old Testament were written on leather or papyrus from the time of Moses (c. 1450 B.C.) to the time of Malachi (400 B.C.). Until the sensational discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 we did not possess copies of the Old Testament earlier than A.D. 895. The reason for this is simply that the Jews had an almost superstitious veneration for the text which impelled them to bury copies that had become too old for use. Indeed, the Masoretes (traditionalists) who between A.D. 600 and 950 added accents and vowel points and in general standardized the Hebrew text, devised complicated safeguards for the making of copies (*as described above*) ... When the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, they gave us a Hebrew text from the second to first century B.C. of all but one of the books (Esther) of the Old Testament. This was of the greatest importance, for it provided a much earlier check on the accuracy of the Masoretic text, which has now proved to be extremely accurate.

Other early checks on the Hebrew text include the Septuagint translation (middle of third century B.C.), the Aramaic Targums (paraphrases and quotes of the Old Testament), quotations in early Christian writers, and the Latin translation of Jerome (A.D. 400) which was made directly from the Hebrew text of his day. All of these give us the data for being assured of having an accurate text of the Old Testament.<sup>65</sup>

### ***The Three-fold Division***

The Masoretic text of the Hebrew Old Testament contains twenty-four books, beginning with Genesis and ending with 2 Chronicles. Though this arrangement of the Old Testament is in only twenty-four books, the subject matter is identical with the thirty-nine book division of our Protestant English Bible. The difference is in the *order* and *division* of the arrangement of the books. The reason for this is that the Protestant canon of the Old Testament has been influenced by the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX) made about 250-160 B.C.

The Septuagint divided the books of Samuel, Kings, Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah each into two, which makes eight instead of four. The Twelve Minor Prophets were divided into twelve, instead of being counted as one book as in the twenty-four book division. This adds fifteen making a total of the thirty-nine books as in the Protestant English Bible.

Since the year 1517, modern Hebrew Bibles divided the books into thirty-nine, but kept the three-fold division including the arrangement of the books (Genesis through 2 Chronicles) as in the ancient Hebrew Bible. In Matthew 23:35, Jesus said, “that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.” The murder Jesus spoke of is recorded in 2 Chronicles 24:20-22. Abel’s death is recorded in Genesis and in the Hebrew Bible 2 Chronicles is the last book. In essence then, Christ was saying “from the first to the last murder in the Bible.” This was equivalent to saying from Genesis to Malachi and demonstrated what He considered as the canon of the Old Testament.

This twenty-four book division in its three-fold division which became the thirty-nine book division is as follows:

- (1) *The Law* or The Pentateuch (5 books)—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
- (2) *The Prophets* (originally 8 books, then 21)
  - The Former Prophets (originally 4 books, then 6)—Joshua, Judges, Samuel (1 & 2), Kings (1 & 2)

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<sup>64</sup> Frederick W. Danker, *Multipurpose Tools For Bible Study*, Concorida Publishing House, St. Louis, 1960, p. 57.

<sup>65</sup> Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *A Survey of Bible Doctrine*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1972, pp. 45-46.

- The Latter Prophets (originally 4 books, then 15)  
Major: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel (3 books)  
Minor: The 12 (originally 1 book, then 12)  
(3) *The Writings* (originally 11 books, then 13)
- Poetical (3 books) —Psalms, Proverbs, Job
- The Rolls (5 books) —Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther
- Historical (originally 3 books, then 5) —Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah (2), Chronicles (1 & 2)  
... By the time of the New Testament this three-fold division was recognized (Luke 24:44). Other designations such as “The Scripture” (John 10:35) and “The Sacred Writings” (2 Tim. 3:15) suggest a generally accepted Old Testament canon. This three-fold division was also attested to by Josephus (A.D. 37-95), Bishop Melito of Sardis (ca. A.D. 170), Tertullian (A.D. 160-250), and others (Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, Moody, Chicago, 1964, pp. 62-65). The Council of Jamnia in A.D. 90 is generally considered the occasion whereby the Old Testament canon was publicly recognized (while debating the canonicity of several books). There is evidence of the manner in which the Old Testament books were recognized as canonical. Laird Harris (R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1969, pp. 62-65), traces the continuity of recognition: Moses was recognized as writing under the authority of God (Ex. 17:14; 34:27; cf. Josh. 8:31; 23:6). The criterion for acknowledging the Pentateuch was whether it was from God’s servant, Moses. Following Moses, God raised up the institution of prophecy to continue revealing Himself to His people (cf. Deut. 18:15-19; Jer. 26:8-15). The prophets to whom God spoke also recorded their revelation (cf. Josh. 24:26; 1 Sam. 10:25; Isa. 8:1; Ezek. 43:11). Harris concludes, “The law was accorded the respect of the author, and he was known as God’s messenger. Similarly, succeeding prophets were received upon due authentication, and their written works were received with the same respect, being received therefore as the Word of God. As far as the witness contained in the books themselves is concerned, this reception was immediate.” (Ibid., p. 167).<sup>66</sup>

### ***The Tests of Canonicity***

Specific tests to consider canonicity may be recognized.

(1) Did the book indicate God was speaking through the writer and that it was considered authoritative? Compare the following references: (a) God was speaking through the human author—Ex. 20:1; Josh. 1:1; Isa. 2:1; (b) that the books were authoritative—Joshua 1:7-8; 23:6; 1 Kings 2:3; 2 Kings 14:6; 21:8; 23:25; Ezra 6:18; Nehemiah 13:1; Daniel 9:11; Malachi 4:4. Note also Joshua 6:26 compared with 1 Kings 16:34; Joshua 24:29-33 compared with Judges 2:8-9; 2 Chronicles 36:22-23 compared with Ezra 1:1-4; Daniel 9:2 compared with Jeremiah 25:11-12.

(2) Was the human author recognized as a spokesman of God, that is, was he a prophet or did he have the prophetic gift? Compare Deuteronomy 18:18; 31:24-26; 1 Samuel 10:25; Nehemiah 8:3.

(3) Was the book historically accurate? Did it reflect a record of actual facts?

### ***Historical Evidence Supporting the Canonicity of the Old Testament***

There are a number of important historical evidences drawn from the ancient writings that give support to the Old Testament canon as we have it in our Protestant Bible.

1. *Prologue to Ecclesiasticus*. This noncanonical book refers to a threefold division of books (namely, the Law, the Prophets, and hymns and precepts for human conduct) which was known by the writer’s grandfather (which would be around 200 B.C.).

2. *Philo*. Philo (around A.D. 40) referred to the same threefold division.

3. *Josephus*. Josephus (A.D. 37-100) said that the Jews held as sacred only twenty-two books (which include exactly the same as our present thirty-nine books of the Old Testament).

4. *Jamnia*. Jamnia (A.D. 90), was a teaching house of rabbis who discussed canonicity. Some questioned whether it was right to accept (as was being done) Esther, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. These discussions concerned an existing canon.

5. *The church fathers*. The church fathers accepted the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament. The only exception was Augustine (A.D. 400) who included the books of the Apocrypha (those “extra” books that some Bibles include between the books of the Old and New Testaments). However, he did acknowledge that they were not fully authoritative. The books of the Apocrypha were not officially recognized as part of the canon until the Council of Trent (A.D. 1546) and then only by the Roman Catholic church.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Enns, p. 170-171.

<sup>67</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, Victor Books, Wheaton, IL, 1987, electronic media.

## ***New Testament Evidence for the Canonicity of the Old Testament***

(1) **Old Testament quotations in the New.** There are some 250 quotes from Old Testament books in the New Testament. None are from the Apocrypha. All Old Testament books are quoted except Esther, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon.

(2) **Old Testament quotations by Jesus Christ.** In Matthew 5:17-18, the Lord declared that the Law and the Prophets, a reference that includes all of the Old Testament, then summarized as “the Law” in verse 18, would be fulfilled. This declared it was therefore God’s authoritative Word. Christ’s statement in Matthew 23:35 about the blood (murder) of Abel to the blood of Zechariah clearly defined what Jesus viewed as the Old Testament canon. It consisted of the entire Old Testament as we know it in our Protestant English Bible. This is particularly significant in view of the fact there other murders of God’s messengers recorded in the Apocrypha, but the Lord excludes them suggesting He did not consider the books of the Apocrypha to belong in the Canon as with the books from Genesis to 2 Chronicles.

The above evidence shows the books of the Old Testament, as we have them in our Protestant Bible, were God breathed and therefore authoritative and profitable the very moment they were written. “There was human recognition of the writings; normally this was immediate as the people recognized the writers as spokesmen from God. Finally, there was a collection of the books into a canon.”<sup>68</sup>

## **Canonicity of the New Testament**

### ***Factors Leading to the Recognition of the New Testament Canon***

What were the factors that led to the recognition of a New Testament canon as we have it today? For almost twenty years after the ascension of Christ none of the books of the New Testament were even written and about sixty-five years elapsed before the last New Testament book was written. James was undoubtedly the first, being written between 45-50 A.D., and Revelation was most surely the last, being written about 90 A.D. But several things began to happen that promoted the formation of the New Testament canon. Enns summarizes these:

(1) Spurious writings as well as attacks on genuine writings were a factor. Marcion, for example, rejected the Old Testament and New Testament writings apart from the Pauline letters (he altered Luke’s gospel to suit his doctrine). (2) The content of the New Testament writings testified to their authenticity and they naturally were collected, being recognized as canonical. (3) Apostolic writings were used in public worship, hence, it was necessary to determine which of those writings were canonical. (4) Ultimately, the edict by Emperor Diocletian in A.D. 303, demanding that all sacred books be burned, resulted in the New Testament collection.<sup>69</sup>

### ***The Process of Recognition of the New Testament Canon***

(1) **In the Apostolic Era.** Since the books were inspired when they were written, they were already canonical and possessed authority as being a part of God’s Word. The responsibility of the church was simply to attest to the fact of their inspiration. This process began immediately with the writers recognizing that their own writings were the Word of God (Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 4:15). But they also recognized that other writings of the New Testament were Scripture and on a par with the Old Testament. In 1 Timothy 5:18 Paul quoted Deuteronomy 25:4 and Luke 10:7 and referred to both passages as Scripture. Peter likewise attested to Paul’s writings as Scripture in 2 Peter 3:15-16. Furthermore, the New Testament epistles were being read and circulated among the churches as authoritative revelation from God (cf. Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27).

#### **(2) In the Post-Apostolic Era.**

Clement of Rome (c. A.D. 95) mentioned at least eight New Testament books in a letter; Ignatius of Antioch (c. A.D. 115) also acknowledged about seven books; Polycarp, a disciple of John, (c. A.D. 108), acknowledged fifteen letters. That is not to say these men did not recognize more letters as canonical, but these are ones they mentioned in their correspondence. Later Irenaeus wrote (c. A.D. 185), acknowledging twenty-one books. Hippolytus (A.D. 170-235) recognized twenty-two books. The problematic books at this time were Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John. Even more important was the witness of the Muratorian Canon (A.D. 170), which was a compilation of books recognized as canonical at that early date by the church. The Muratorian Canon included all the New Testament books except Hebrews, James, and one epistle of John.

In the fourth century there was also prominent recognition of a New Testament canon. When Athanasius wrote in A.D. 367 he cited the twenty-seven books of the New Testament as being the only true books. In A.D. 363 the Council of Laodicea stated that only the Old Testament and the twenty-seven books of the New Testament were to be read in the churches. The Council of Hippo (A.D. 393) recognized the twenty-seven books, and the Council of Carthage (A.D. 397) affirmed that only those canonical books were to be read in the churches.<sup>70</sup>

Ryrie has an important note in connection with Martin Luther’s opinion of the epistle of James.

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<sup>68</sup> Enns, p. 171.

<sup>69</sup> Enns, p. 171.

<sup>70</sup> Enns, p. 172.

Sometimes it is claimed that Martin Luther rejected the Book of James as being canonical. This is not so. Here's what he wrote in his preface to the New Testament in which he ascribes to the several books of the New Testament different degrees of doctrinal value. "St. John's Gospel and his first Epistle, St. Paul's Epistles, especially those to the Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and St. Peter's Epistle—these are the books which show to thee Christ, and teach everything that is necessary and blessed for thee to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book of doctrine. Therefore, St. James' Epistle is a perfect straw-epistle compared with them, for it has in it nothing of an evangelic kind." Thus Luther was comparing (in his opinion) doctrinal value, not canonical validity.<sup>71</sup>

### ***The Tests For Canonicity***

The question naturally arises, what process and by what means did the early church recognize which books were canonical and which books were not? The following summarizes the tests used to discern which books were canonical.

**(1) Authentication on the Divine side—Inspiration.** Did the book give internal evidence of inspiration, of being God breathed? Was it of proper spiritual character? Did it edify the church? Was it doctrinally accurate? "The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha were rejected as a result of not meeting this test. The book should bear evidence of high moral and spiritual values that would reflect a work of the Holy Spirit."<sup>72</sup>

**(2) Authentication on the human side.** Three issues were important here: (a) Was the author an apostle or did he have the endorsement of an apostle? Mark wrote the gospel of Mark, but he did so under Peter's endorsement. Luke, as a close associate of the Apostle Paul, wrote under the endorsement of his authority. (b) Universal acceptance was another key factor. On the whole, was the book accepted by the church at large? The recognition given a particular book by the church was important. By this standard, a number of books were rejected. There were some books that enjoyed an acceptance by a few, but were later dropped for a lack of universal acceptance. Then there were a few books that some questioned because of doubts about the author, not the content, but were later accepted because the majority accepted them.<sup>73</sup>

### ***The Reliability of the New Testament***

Just how reliable are the New Testament documents?

There are now more than 5,300 known Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. Add over 10,000 Latin Vulgate and at least 9,300 other early versions (MSS) and we have more than 24,000 manuscript copies of portions of the New Testament. This means that no other document of antiquity even begins to approach such numbers and attestation. In comparison, the *Iliad* by Homer is second with only 643 manuscripts that still survive. The first complete preserved text of Homer dates from the 13th century.<sup>74</sup>

This contrast is startling and tremendously significant.

Perhaps we can appreciate how wealthy the New Testament is in manuscript attestation if we compare the textual material for other ancient historical works. For Caesar's *Gallic War* (composed between 58 and 50 B.C) there are several extant MSS, but only nine or ten are good, and the oldest is some 900 years later than Caesar's day. Of the 142 books of the Roman history of Livy (59 B.C-A.D 17), only 35 survive; these are known to us from not more than twenty MSS of any consequence, only one of which, and that containing fragments of Books III-VI, is as old as the fourth century. Of the fourteen books of *Histories* of Tacitus (c. A.D. 100) only four and a half survive; of the sixteen books of his *Annals*, ten survive in full and two in part. The text of these extant portions of his two great historical works depends entirely on two MSS, one of the ninth century and one of the eleventh.... The History of Thucydides (c. 460-400 B.C.) is known to us from eight MSS, the earliest belonging to about the beginning of the Christian era. The same is true of the History of Herodotus (c. 480-425 B.C.). Yet no classical scholar would listen to an argument that the authenticity of Herodotus or Thucydides is in doubt because the earliest MSS of their works which are of any use are over 1,300 years later than the originals.<sup>75</sup>

The fact of the many documents plus the fact that many of the New Testament documents are very early (hundreds of parchment copies from the 4th and 5th centuries with some seventy-five papyri fragments dating from A.D. 135 to the 8th century) assures us we have a very accurate and reliable text in the New Testament.

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<sup>71</sup> Ryrie, electronic media.

<sup>72</sup> Enns, p. 172-173.

<sup>73</sup> For more reading on canonicity, see the BSF web page under the Theology/Bibliology section at [www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org).

<sup>74</sup> Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands A Verdict, Historical Evidences for the Christian Faith*, Revised Edition, Here's Life Publishers, Inc., San Bernardino, 1979, p. 39.

<sup>75</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Are the New Testament Documents Reliable?*, InterVarsity, Chicago, 1943, p. 16-17.

## The Bible: Understanding Its Message

The Psalmist, affirming the Old Testament as God's Word, wrote, "Your word is a lamp to my feet, And a light to my path" (Ps. 119:105). Later in this same Psalm he wrote, "The unfolding of Your words gives light; It gives understanding to the simple" (vs. 130). Solomon wrote, "For the commandment is a lamp, and the teaching is light; And reproofs for discipline are the way of life" (Prov. 6:23). So David wrote, "The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes." Obviously God has revealed Himself to us in His inspired Word that it might give light to our innate blindness. However, for the Scripture to give us light, it must be understood properly, then believed and applied in faith. But for man to understand the Bible properly, he must have two things: (a) he needs the illuminating work of the Spirit of God, and (b) he needs the proper method of interpretation for without the right method of interpretation, one is left on a sea of uncertainty.

### Its Illumination

#### The Need for Illumination

Though the Bible is a pure light that can direct our paths and bring us into an understanding of God and His salvation in Christ, man needs special enablement from God due to the Bible's spiritual dimension that raises it above man's natural abilities. "For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man, which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God" (1 Cor. 2:11). Furthermore, Adam's fall into sin and his consequent spiritual death rendered man incapable of comprehending the truth of Scripture. Simply put, the "natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised" (1 Cor. 2:14). This means a special work of God is needed to make the Scripture understandable to both the natural man (unsaved) and to the saved. As seen in the way Jesus opened the eyes of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, the work of *illumination* is necessary to enable us to comprehend the Word of God (cf. Luke 24:44-45).

#### Definition of Illumination

*Illumination* can be defined as "the special ministry of the Holy Spirit whereby He enlightens men so they can comprehend the written Word of God." *Illumination* begins with the pre-salvation work of the Spirit to bring demonstrable proof of the claims of the gospel that people might trust in Christ (cf. John 1:9; 16:8-11; 2 Tim. 1:10; Heb. 6:4). Generally, *illumination* is used in reference to the ministry of the Holy Spirit in enabling believers to understand the Scripture (Eph. 1:18; 3:9).

#### Explanation of Illumination<sup>76</sup>

The doctrine of *illumination* must not be confused with *revelation* and *inspiration*. The following differences need to be understood:

(1) *Revelation* refers to the content of God's truth as it was revealed to the Old Testament and New Testament authors of Scripture.

(2) *Inspiration* refers to the accurate transmission of that content to men, first verbally (as with the prophets) and then in written form.

(3) *Canonization* refers to the recognition and collection of those inspired books into a canon, the Bible.

(4) *Illumination* refers to understanding of the Bible's message to believers. Unbelievers can only experience this work as it pertains to His convicting ministry in relation to the gospel message (John 16:8-11).

As the Spirit of truth, the Holy Spirit is the believer's means of spiritual illumination. Four New Testament passages focus on this ministry of the Spirit; these are John 16:12-15; 1 Corinthians 2:9-3:3; Ephesians 3:16-19; and 1 John 2:20 and 27. The essence of these passages is as follows:

(1) As the Spirit of truth and God's special anointing, He is our Teacher. This is not a privilege for a select few, but is available to all believers since He indwells all believers. The teaching ministry of the Spirit is thus guaranteed to all believers.

(2) Since indwelling is limited to believers, unbelievers can only experience the illuminating ministry of the Spirit in the matter of convicting and convincing them of the truth of the gospel message (John 16:8-11). This does not mean they cannot achieve a high level of understanding of the Bible, but its truth remains foolishness and they do not welcome it.

(3) As the extent of the Spirit's illumination, it encompasses the whole council of the Bible, Genesis to Revelation and salvation to things to come.

(4) Several things can hamper the Spirit's ministry of illumination. Carnality (1 Cor. 2:1-3), indifference (cf. Heb. 5:1f with 1 Pet. 2:2), tradition and preconceived ideas (Mark 7:7-13), ignorance (Mark 12:24; Luke 24:25-32; "foolish" in vs. 25 is the Greek, *anohtos*, "not understanding"), and poor methods of Bible study or interpretation (cf. Paul's exhortation in 2 Tim. 3:15).

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<sup>76</sup> See article by Dan Wallace, "The Holy Spirit and Hermeneutics," on *The Biblical Studies* web site, under Theology/Bibliology. Though this article pertains to the issue of the role of the Spirit in interpretation, it obviously applies to His ministry of illumination as well.

(5) The purpose of the Spirit's ministry is not to focus on Himself, but to disclose to us the glories and sufficiency of Christ and, as a result, to glorify Him (Eph. 3:16f; John 16:12-15).

(6) The Spirit uses those whom He has gifted with the gift of teaching in His ministry of illuminating others (Rom. 12:7; 1 John 2:27). 1 John 2:27 does not mean we do not need teachers. Otherwise, why would the Spirit give this gift? In the context, John was speaking of discerning truth from error.

Ryrie adds an important note about illumination and revelation.

The experience of illumination is not by "direct revelation." The canon is closed. The Spirit illumines the meaning of that closed canon, and He does so through study and meditation. Study employs all the proper tools for ascertaining the meaning of the text. Meditation thinks about the true facts of the text, putting them together into a harmonious whole and applying them to one's own life. The end result of the illumination ministry of the Spirit is to glorify Christ in the life, or to promote healthy doctrine—teaching that brings spiritual health and wholeness to the believer's life. Illumination is not concerned merely with understanding facts but with using those facts to promote Christlikeness.<sup>77</sup>

Historically, Protestant evangelicalism has affirmed that the Bible is the canon of Scripture, that it is our supreme authority in matters of faith and practice, and that the canon is now closed, but that God is still speaking today and that He does so by means of the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit through this completed canon. But a new proposition is being promoted today which states that God also speaks to His people today *apart* from the Bible. Most within the evangelical community would also add that, though He speaks *apart* from the Bible, He never *contradicts* what is in the Scriptures. But doesn't this new position threaten the sufficiency and finality of the Scripture? Many conservative scholars believe that it does.<sup>78</sup>

### Its Interpretation

If you will note, in the outline used here, *interpretation* has been placed on a level with *illumination* under the heading "Understanding the Bible." This is because the illuminating work of the Spirit goes hand-in-hand with the interpretation of Scripture. Although illumination is assured for believers, it does not always guarantee accurate interpretation. And if the interpretation is wrong, so will be the understanding of the passage in question. Many people approach the Bible with a false mysticism. Their attitude is, "The Holy Spirit will show what this means." But then they proceed to butcher the text and come up with some off-the-wall idea that completely misses what the Spirit is saying based on solid principles of Bible study or exegesis. The word that comes to mind here is *abuse*. In a chapter entitled, "Handling the Scriptures Accurately," Swindoll writes:

Ours is a day of abuse; sexual abuse, emotional abuse, verbal abuse. But what about *biblical* abuse? By that I mean being deceived by the improper use of Scripture. Who of us has not witnessed someone twisting Scripture, forcing it to mean something it does not mean?<sup>79</sup> Those who don't know better start believing it with all their heart, only to discover later on that both the interpretation and the application were fallacious ... perhaps dangerous to their spiritual health and growth.<sup>80</sup>

It is because of this very problem that the Apostle Paul, in a section where he was warning Timothy against false teaching that can lead to the ruin of the hearers, said, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, *handling accurately the word of truth*" (emphasis mine). Paul had in mind the important principle that we must correctly handle the Word of God in both its analysis (exegesis) and in its presentation (exposition) since Timothy was faced with the foolish interpretations of false teachers (as we often are). But the main emphasis is on the study and interpretation of the Word of God. What's involved here? Is this a matter of sincerity or of theology?

Now this has nothing to do with *sincerity*. Many, perhaps most, people who mishandle the Word are very sincere. And it really has little to do with *theology*. Some who have their theology fairly well in place can still mishandle Scripture. It also has nothing to do with *personality*. There are gifted teachers dripping with charisma who can sway an audience and hold them in the palm of their hand, yet be guilty of mishandling Scripture. It certainly has nothing to do with *popularity*. Famous, highly visible personalities in Christian circles who can draw large listening audiences can (and often *do*) mishandle Scripture. So let's put to bed, once for all, the idea that if a person just "loves the Lord," he or she will be preserved from mishandling Scripture. No, even those of us who believe in the inerrancy of Scripture and affirm the importance of sound doctrine can be guilty of biblical abuse.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ryrie, electronic media.

<sup>78</sup> For an excellent treatment of this issue and what the church is facing today, see *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, General editor, John H. Armstrong, published by Moody Press, 1996. Particularly important for the issue here is chapter 4, "Does God Speak Today Apart From the Bible" by R. Fowler White.

<sup>79</sup> See Wallace's article on "Scripture Twisting" under the section, "Prof's Soapbox," on our website.

<sup>80</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, *Growing Deep In The Christian Life*, Multnomah Press, Portland, 1986, p. 69.

<sup>81</sup> Swindoll, pp. 69-70.

Christians need to learn the basics of sound Bible study. Sound Bible study is that which is based on the fundamental principles of interpretation that will protect the student from Scripture abuse and that will provide a check on his or her own wild imagination. The following lists several important principles that are basic to the interpretation of Scripture.

### **The Plain or Normal Method of Interpretation**

The word *literal* is avoided here since it often leads to wrong ideas that must be later corrected. Rather, I am using the terms *plain* or *normal* to express the proper method of interpretation. By plain or normal we mean the words of Scripture are to be understood in their normal meaning just as we normally understand words in our normal, everyday communication. When we read the newspaper or a recipe in a cookbook, how do we read those words? We understand them according to their literal or normal meaning. If the recipe says two cups of flour, you don't symbolize that to mean, a great quantity to be chosen at your discretion. If, however, it calls for a pinch of salt, you understand it to be somewhat symbolical of a very small amount.

### **Justification for the Plain, Normal Method of Interpretation**

**(1) The very purpose and nature of language supports this method.** This is how we communicate in everyday life. God gave us language for the purpose of communicating with each other and with Him. Ryrie writes:

Two ramifications flow from this idea. First, if God originated language for the purpose of communication, and if God is all-wise, then we may believe that He saw to it that the means (language) was sufficient to sustain the purpose (communication). Second, it follows that God would Himself use and expect man to use language in its normal sense. The Scriptures do not call for some special use of language, implying that they communicate on some "deeper" or special level unknown to other avenues of communication.<sup>82</sup>

**(2) The need of control and objectivity.** Only the plain method of interpretation provides a check on the minds of men. The allegorical or spiritualizing method of interpretation leads to all kinds of abuse with one person seeing one kind of hidden meaning and another person seeing something entirely different. When interpreters disregard the normal meaning of words and look for supposedly hidden meanings, the true meaning of the Bible is lost; the Bible is abused; imagination and speculation go wild as the interpreter arbitrarily assigns this meaning and then that meaning to the text without any solid historical, grammatical, or lexical foundation for his interpretation.

**(3) The example of the Bible itself.** A precedence for interpreting the Bible in this manner can be seen in the way Old Testament prophecies like Psalm 22, Isaiah 7:14; 53:1-12; Micah 5:2 have all been fulfilled literally or according to their plain meaning. To this someone might argue, "Aren't some prophecies of the Old Testament fulfilled in a spiritual or typical sense in the New Testament?" To this question Ryrie says:

To be sure some prophecies of the Old Testament are given a typical fulfillment, only seven are cited as examples of a nonliteral hermeneutic. However, of the approximately twenty-four prophecies to which the New Testament gives a typical fulfillment, only seven are cited as examples of a nonliteral hermeneutic (and, of course, not all agree that these seven prove this). The seven are Matthew 2:15, 18, 23; 11:10; Acts 2:17-21; Romans 9:24-26; and Galatians 4:21-31. Remember, however, that we are not just comparing seven out of a total of twenty-four, but seven out of a total of hundreds, for almost all Old Testament prophecies are clearly fulfilled literally in the New Testament. To be sure, the New Testament may use the Old Testament in ways other than fulfillment, but I am here speaking of prophecies and their fulfillments. This is a strong support for the literal hermeneutics.<sup>83</sup>

### **Principles of the Plain, Normal Method of Interpretation**

**(1) We must interpret the Bible grammatically.** This is in keeping with the fact of *verbal* (words) *plenary* (full) inspiration. Every word of the Bible is important and though some words will hold more importance than others, all the words and sentences are a part of God's communication to us. "Only grammatical interpretation fully honors the verbal inspiration of Scripture."<sup>84</sup> Grammatical relationships are vital to sound interpretation because thoughts are expressed in words which stand in relationship to each other to express complete thoughts.

If we neglect the meanings of words and how they are used, we have no way of knowing whose interpretations are correct. The assertion, "You can make the Bible mean anything you want it to mean," is true only if grammatical interpretation is ignored.<sup>85</sup>

The hallmark of the Reformation was a return to the historical, grammatical interpretation of Scripture. This was in direct opposition to the approach to the Bible that had been in vogue for hundreds of years—the view that ignored the normal meaning of words in their grammatical sense and let words and sentences mean whatever the readers wanted them to mean.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Ryrie, electronic media.

<sup>83</sup> Ryrie, electronic media.

<sup>84</sup> Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, Victor Books, Wheaton, 1991, p. 99.

<sup>85</sup> Zuck, p. 99.

<sup>86</sup> Zuck, p. 98.

So, what is grammatical interpretation? Grammatical interpretation is the process that studies the text of Scripture (*exegesis*, the critical analysis of the text) to determine four important things: (a) the meaning of words (lexicology), (b) the form of words (morphology), (c) the function of words (parts of speech), and (d) the relationship of words (syntax). This means it is necessary to study the tenses of verbs, nouns and pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, and the ways these words are structured.

**(2) We must study the Bible historically.** As Enns points out, “The historical context is important as a framework from which to interpret the Scriptures. Every book of Scripture was written in a historical context that should be understood in order to help interpret the book accurately.”<sup>87</sup>

**(3) We must study the Bible contextually.** Every passage and all the words and sentences in that passage have a context. Take the passage out of the context, and you will miss its meaning and you may abuse the passage. “Words and sentences do not stand in isolation; therefore, the context must be studied in order to see the relation that each verse sustains to that which precedes and to that which follows. Involved are the immediate context and the theme and scope of the whole book.”<sup>88</sup>

**(4) We must interpret according to the analogy of Scripture.** This simply means, while always keeping in mind the context, etc., we also need to allow Scripture to interpret Scripture. If an interpretation of a passage contradicts other plain passages of the Bible, then something is wrong with the interpretation. Included here is a recognition of the dual authorship of the Bible.

The dual authorship of the Bible makes it necessary not only to know the human author’s meaning but also God’s. God’s meaning may not be fully revealed in the original human author’s writing but is revealed when Scripture is compared with Scripture. We must allow for a *sensus plenior* which allows for a fuller (though directly related) meaning in the mind of the divine Author of Scripture. We cannot say that the human authors of Scripture always understood the full implications of their own words. When we compare Scripture with Scripture, we can discover the fuller intention of the divine Author.<sup>89</sup>

**(5) We need to recognize the progressive nature of God’s revelation.** God did not reveal Himself or His plan all at once. The promise of salvation is revealed in seed form in Genesis 3:15, but it is expanded and developed throughout the Old Testament until we come to its fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ and its full explanation in the New Testament. Once more let me quote Dr. Ryrie:

To be able to interpret plainly and consistently, it is imperative to recognize that revelation was given progressively. This means that in the process of revealing His message to man, God may add or even change in one era what He had given in another. Obviously the New Testament adds much that was not revealed in the Old. What God revealed as obligatory at one time may be rescinded at another (as the prohibition of eating pork, once binding on God’s people, now rescinded, 1 Tim. 4:3).

To fail to recognize this progressiveness in revelation will raise unresolvable contradictions between passages if taken literally. Notice the following pairs of passages which will contradict if understood plainly unless one recognizes changes due to the progress of revelation: Matthew 10:5-7 and 28:18-20, Luke 9:3 and 22:36, Genesis 17:10 and Galatians 5:2; Exodus 20:8 and Acts 20:7. Notice too the crucial changes indicated in John 1:17; 16:24; 2 Corinthians 3:7-11. Those who will not consistently apply this principle of progressive revelation in interpretation are forced to resort to figurative interpretation or sometimes simply to ignore the evidence.<sup>90</sup>

Since the whole area of biblical interpretation is such an important subject and so determinative on properly understanding the Word of God, a short bibliography is attached to encourage further study in this area.<sup>91</sup>

## **The Bible: Alive and Powerful (Animation)**

Many theologies in discussing bibliology include a section called *Animation*. By animation we mean that quality of the Bible as it is expressed in passages like Hebrews 4:12, “For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” Another passage that speaks of the animating, life-giving, life-changing power of the Scripture is Psalm 19:7-9:

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<sup>87</sup> Enns, p. 176.

<sup>88</sup> Ryrie, electronic media.

<sup>89</sup> Ryrie, electronic media.

<sup>90</sup> Ryrie, electronic media.

<sup>91</sup> Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, Victor Books, 1991, Wheaton; Robert A. Traina, *Methodical Bible Study*, Bookroom, The Biblical Seminary, New York (this is a great classic), 1952; Howard G. Hendricks, William D. Hendricks, *Living By The Book*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1991; Irving L. Jensen, *Independent Bible Study*, Moody, Chicago, 1963; Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed., Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1963; Oletta Wald, *The Joy of Discovery in Bible Study*, rev. ed., Augsburg, Minneapolis, 1975.

7 The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple. 8 The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes. 9 The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; The judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether.

In addition, there is probably no passage that stresses the animating power and value of the Scripture like Psalm 119 which describes numerous attributes of God's Word as "faithful" (vs. 86), "exceedingly broad" (vs. 96), "right" (vs. 128), "wonderful" (vs. 129), "pure" (vs. 140), "truth," "everlasting" (vs. 160), and "righteousness" (vs. 172).

The doctrine of animation stresses the powerful and life-changing activity of the Scripture. Unlike any other book known to man, the Bible possesses a living quality that stems from its divine origin as the unique God-breathed book. This power is manifested in two primary ways.

First, the power of the Bible is seen in the way it reveals God and His glorious plan of salvation in the person and work of Jesus Christ; it is the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16). The stress here is on the power of the Bible on the unsaved. This truth is brought out for us in many ways, but the classic passage is 1 Peter 1:23, "for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and abiding word of God." The Word of God combined with the ministry of the Holy Spirit work together to bring people to faith in Christ and into the new birth so they become the children of God (John 3:5; 2 Tim. 3:15; Tit. 3:5; 2 Pet. 1:1-4).

Second, the power of the Word is seen in the lives of the saved as God uses it along with the illuminating and empowering ministry of the Spirit to conform us into the image of the Lord Jesus. Our Lord had this in mind in His prayer in John 17:17 when He prayed, "Sanctify them through Your truth, Your Word is truth." God's Word is truly alive and powerful.

I recently read an interesting illustration that is pertinent here. A Bible translator working with the Agta people shared this interesting insight. "Depending upon the context, the Agta word *madagat* can mean "stinging, venomous, or potent." A poisonous snake is *madagat*, but so are some medicines that can heal. The translation assistant explained his understanding of how the Word of God is potent: "It depends upon how we approach it. If we disregard it, it's like the poisonous snake. But if we live by it, its potency is like medicine."

Another illustration of the animating power of the Word may be seen in the many pictures God gives us in the Bible of what His Word can do. It is pictured as a sword (Heb. 4:12; Eph. 6:17), as a critic or judge (Heb. 4:12), as a lamp or a light (Ps. 19:8b; 119:105, 130; Prov. 6:23), as a mirror (1 Cor. 3:18; Jam. 22-25), as rain, snow, or water (Isa. 55:10-11; Jer. 17:5-8; Eph. 5:26), as food or bread from heaven (Deut. 8:3; Job. 23:12; Ps. 19:10b), and as gold (Ps. 19:10; 119:72, 127; Pr. 8:10, 11; Isa. 55:1-3; 1 Pet. 2:18). And these are not all of the pictures. For more detail on these pictures, their significance, and the animating actions of the Word, see Lesson 6, "The Word Filled Life" in Book 2, of the *ABCs for Christian Growth* series on our web site.

## Concluding Thoughts

As I sought to emphasize at the beginning of this study, nothing is more important to us than the Bible for all we believe basically hinges on its truth. The late Francis A. Schaeffer voiced concern over the growing tendency to elevate feelings—experience—to the throne of authority. In his book, *The New Superspirituality*, Schaeffer cautioned: "Beware! Neither experience nor emotion is the basis of faith. The basis for our faith is that certain things are true. The whole man, including the intellect, is to act upon the fact that certain things are true. That of course will lead to an experiential relationship with God, but the basis is content not experience."

In the dumbing down we have witnessed in America with its happy-clappy kind of Christianity so prevalent today, we are witnessing a growing anti-intellectualism in the church. For many of the present generation, experience has become more important than truth, but experience without truth is the menace and misery of a mindless Christianity, and one of the issues we face is that God's truth is found for us in the Bible. So not only have we been faced with a battle for the inerrancy of the Bible, but for the need to return to the Bible as God's holy Word as the foundation of our faith and experience. Let me conclude with these words from the Savior:

John 8: 31-32. Jesus therefore was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, "If you abide in My word, *then* you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

In praying for the disciples and for those who would believe after them (the church) He was praying that they might be protected from the evil influences of the world, the Savior said these vital words:

John 17:16-17. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. 17 Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth.