

## The Doctrine of the Word of God

Of all the forms of the Word of God, the focus of our study in systematic theology is God's Word in written form, that is, the Bible, which tells us about and points us to the Word of God as a person, namely Jesus Christ, whom we do not now have present in bodily form on earth.

The five characteristics of Scripture we will be studying are as follows:

1. Authority
2. Inerrancy
3. Clarity
4. Necessity
5. Sufficiency

### The Authority of the Scriptures

*The authority of the Scriptures means that all the words in Scripture are God's words in such a way that to disbelieve or disobey any word of Scripture is to disbelieve or disobey God.<sup>1</sup>*

#### A. All the Words in Scripture are God's Words

1. This is what the Bible claims for itself

There are frequent claims in the Bible that all the words of Scripture are God's words. In the OT, this is frequently seen in the introductory phrase, "Thus says the LORD."

- In the world of the OT, this phrase would have been recognized as the identical to the phrase, "Thus says king...," which used to preface the edict of a king to his subjects, an edict that could not be challenged or questioned but that simply had to be obeyed.

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<sup>1</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 73.

- Thus, when the prophets say, “Thus says the LORD,” they are claiming to be messengers from the sovereign King, and that their words are thus the authoritative words of God Himself.
  - Therefore, to disbelieve or disobey anything a prophet says is to disbelieve or disobey God Himself.
    - ➔ Deut. 18:19; 1 Sam. 10:8; 13:13-14; 15:3, 23, etc.

In the NT, a number of passages indicate that all of the OT writings are declared to be God’s words.

- 2 Tim. 3:16-17 – “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”
  - The Greek word *graphē* (γραφή) most likely refers to the OT canon, for this is what it refers to in *every one* of its 51 uses in the NT.
    - ➔ This verse thus states in brief form what was evident in many passages in the OT: the OT Scriptures are regarded as God’s own Word in written form. For every<sup>2</sup> word of the OT, God is the one who spoke it (although He used human agents to write these words down).
- 2 Pet. 1:21 – speaking of the prophecies of Scripture (v.20), which means at least the OT Scriptures to which Peter encourages his readers to give careful attention (v.19), Peter says that none of these prophecies ever came by the “will” of man, but that “men carried along by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”

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<sup>22</sup> Some liberals who deny the orthodox, evangelical understanding of the Scriptures try to translate the verse as follows: “Every word that God breathed out is profitable...” The problem, however, is that this leaves them in the driver’s seat to determine *which* Scriptures indeed God has breathed out, and which He hasn’t. Conveniently, this allows them to deny any text that doesn’t fit into their theology. Without getting into messy Greek syntax, their translation is a *very* unlikely rendering of the Greek. The simplest and best translation is what all evangelical translations render it: “All Scripture is breathed out by God...”

- It is not Peter's intention to deny completely human volition or personality in the writing of Scripture, but rather to say that the ultimate source of every prophecy was never a man's decision about what he wanted to write, but rather the Holy Spirit's action in the prophet's life, carried out in ways unspecified here.
  - ➔ With Paul, the apostle Peter affirms that all the prophecies of the OT (and in light of vv.19-20, probably including all the Scripture) are spoken from God. That is, they are God's words.
- In Matt. 19:5, Jesus attributes the words in Gen. 2:24 not to Moses or any other human author, but simply and clearly to God Himself.
- In Acts 1:16, the words of Psalms 69 and 109 are said to be words which "the Holy Spirit spoke" beforehand by the mouth of David.
- In Acts 2:16-17, in quoting "what was spoken by the prophet Joel" in Joel 2:28-32, Peter inserts "God declares," thus attributing Joel's words ultimately to God Himself.
- Many other passages could be cited<sup>3</sup>, but the pattern of attributing to God the words of OT Scripture should be very clear.

But if Paul meant only the OT writings when he spoke of "Scripture" in 2 Tim. 3:16, how can this verse apply to the NT writings as well?

- i. The apostles regarded their own writings as authoritative
  - 1 Cor. 14:37-38 – "If anyone thinks he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you *are a commandment of the Lord*. If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized."

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<sup>3</sup> E.g. Luke 1:70; 24:25; John 5:45-47; Acts 3:18, 21; 4:25; 13:47; 28:25; Rom. 1:2; 3:2; 9:17; 1 Cor. 9:8-10; Heb. 1:1-2, 6-7, etc.

- Despite what some liberals assert, 1 Cor. 7:12 also conveys Paul's understanding that his words were indeed inspired and thus authoritative.
    - "To the rest I say, not the Lord" simply means that the command Paul is giving the Corinthians is not a direct quotation from the teachings of Jesus Himself. Since Jesus did not explicitly teach about this in the Scriptures, the Spirit inspired Paul to give instruction for the church here.
  - Referring back to 1 Pet. 1:21, Peter declares that the "prophetic word" they have "more fully confirmed" is not merely a suggestion from an apostle, but rather a commandment from God, to which his readers "will do well to pay attention to as a lamp shining in a dark place" (v.19).
- ii. The apostles regarded the writings of other apostles as authoritative.
- In 2 Pet. 3:16, Peter shows not only an awareness of the existence of written letters from Paul, but also a clear willingness to classify "all of his [Paul's] letters with "other Scriptures."
    - When we recall that *graphē* (γραφῆ) always refers to "God-breathed Scriptures" in the OT, this is a powerful argument that all of Paul's letters were just as God-breathed – and thus authoritative – as the OT Scriptures.
  - In 1 Tim. 5:18, Paul quotes Jesus' words as found in Luke 10:7 and calls them "Scripture" (*graphē* [γραφῆ]).
    - Cf. John 2:22 – the "word" that Jesus had spoken is just as authoritative as the OT text of Psa. 69:9.

- Cf. John 20:9 – this can refer just as much to Jesus’ words as to a specific OT quotation (another one of John’s *double entendres*).
- Finally, indications of a similar view of the NT writings are found in John 14:26 and 16:13, where Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would bring all the He had said to the disciples’ remembrance and would guide them into all the truth.
  - This indicates that a special superintending work of the Holy Spirit whereby the disciples would be able to remember and record without error all that Jesus had said.
    - ➔ Similar indications are also found in 2 Pet. 3:2; 1 Cor. 2:13; 1 Thes. 4:15; Rev. 22:18-19.

## 2. The Spirit convinces God’s people that the Scriptures are God’s Word

As Grudem states,

“It is one thing to affirm that the Bible *claims* to be the words of God. It is another thing to be personally convinced that those claims are true. Our ultimate conviction that the words of the Bible are God’s words comes only when the Holy Spirit speaks in and through the words of the Bible to our hearts and gives us an inner assurance that these are the words of our Creator speaking to us.”<sup>4</sup>

- 1 Cor. 2:6-16

Only the Spirit of God has the ability to convict, convince, and convert those whom the Bible says are by birth “dead in their sins”, and thus deaf and blind to God’s revelation.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *ST*, 77.

<sup>5</sup> See, for e.g. Eph. 2:1-3; Eze. 36:26; cf. Isa. 6:9-10, as quoted in John 12:37-40; Matt. 13:10-17, etc.; John 2:24-3:12.

- We need to remember many of the teachings and theologies of the Bible “overlap.”
  - The doctrine of radical depravity necessitates the prerequisite work of the Spirit’s illuminating and regenerating ministry.

The Scriptures, which God has “breathed out” by His Spirit, teach that the same Holy Spirit must make us alive to this “living Word” (cf. Heb. 4:12).

- Thus, “Apart from the work of the Spirit of God, a person will not receive spiritual truths and in particular will not receive or accept the truth that the words of Scripture are in fact the words of God.<sup>6</sup>
  - It is only by the Spirit that God’s elect sheep will be able to hear in the Word the voice of the Good Shepherd speaking to them (cf. John 10:3-6, etc.).

For those in whom God’s Spirit is working, there is a recognition that the words of the Bible are indeed the very words of God.

However, it is important to remember that this conviction that the words of Scripture are the words of God does *not* come *apart from* the words of Scripture or *in addition to* the words of Scripture.

- In the words of Grudem, “It is not as if the Holy Spirit one day whispers in our ear, ‘Do you see that Bible sitting on your desk? I want you to know that the words of that Bible are God’s words.’ It is rather as people read Scripture that they hear their Creator’s voice speaking to them in the words of Scripture and realize that the book they are reading is unlike any other book, that it is indeed a book of God’s own words speaking to their hearts.”<sup>7</sup>

Other evidence is useful but not finally convincing.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 77-78.

It is helpful for us to learn that the Bible is historically accurate, that it is internally consistent, that it contains prophecies that have been fulfilled hundreds of years later, that it has influenced the course of history more than any other book, that it has continued changing the lives of millions of people throughout history, that it has a supernatural majestic beauty, or that it has profound and helpful moral teachings that help us to live productive lives in this world.

All these arguments and others are useful to us and can help remove obstacles that can otherwise come in the way of our believing Scripture.

But all of these arguments taken individually or together cannot finally be convincing.

As the Westminster Confession of Faith nicely puts it:

We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture. And the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God: yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts. (chapter 1, paragraph 5)

### 3. The Words of Scripture are self-attesting

Thus, the words of Scripture are “self-attesting.”

- That is, they cannot be “proved” to be God’s words by any higher authority.

- For if an appeal to some higher authority (say, historical accuracy or logical consistency) were used to prove that the Bible is God's Word, then the Bible itself would not be our highest or absolute authority: it would be subordinate in authority to the thing which we appealed to prove it to be God's Word.
- If we ultimately appeal to human reason, or to logic, or to historical accuracy, or to scientific truth, as the authority by which Scripture is shown to be God's words, then we have assumed the thing to which we appealed to be a higher authority than God's words and one that is more true or more reliable.

Objection: this is a circular argument!

We believe that the Bible is God's Word because the Bible claims to be that. And we believe its claims because Scripture is God's Word.

However, as Sze Ten Bruggencate notes, not all circular arguments are invalid.

If we think about it, all arguments for an absolute authority must ultimately appeal to that very authority for proof: otherwise the 'authority' would not be the absolute or highest authority.

- It must be admitted that everyone (!) either implicitly or explicitly uses some kind of circular argument when defending their ultimate authority for belief:
  - "Reason is my ultimate authority, because it seems reasonable to make it so."
  - "I know there can be no ultimate authority because I do not know of any such ultimate authority."
  - "Science is my ultimate authority for discovering what is real and what is not,



B. Therefore to Disbelieve or Disobey Any Word of Scripture is to Disbelieve or Disobey God

Throughout the history of the church the greatest preachers have been those who have recognized they have no authority in themselves and have seen their task as being to explain the words of Scriptures and apply them clearly to the lives of their hearers.

C. Since God Cannot Lie, all the Words of Scripture are Completely True and Without Error.

As we have seen, the biblical writes repeatedly affirm that the words of the Bible, though human, are God's own words.

But can God make mistakes? What good is it if the God who gives us His words in the Bible can be wrong?

Fortunately, the Scriptures provide some passages that talk about the truthfulness of God's speech:

- In Titus 1:2, Paul encourages Timothy that he can count on God's promise of eternal life because He is, literally, "the unlying God."
  - Because God of the Bible is a God cannot lie, His words can always be trusted. Since all of Scripture is spoken by God, all of Scripture must therefore be "unlying", as God Himself is
- In Heb. 6:18, we are given assurance of God's keeping power to preserve His elect because of "His oath and promise." The reason we can trust Him to keep His promise to keep is because "it is impossible for God to lie."<sup>8</sup>
  - Cf. Num. 23:19 – "God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?"

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<sup>8</sup> The Textus Receptus, upon which the KJV relies, unfortunately omits the definite article. With the article, the text says in effect, "it is impossible for the God [i.e. 'this' God of the Hebrews] to lie."

- Cf. 1 Sam. 15:29 – “The Preeminent One of Israel does not go back on his word<sup>42</sup> or change his mind, for he is not a human being who changes his mind” (NET).

Since the words of the Bible are God’s words, and since God cannot lie or speak falsely, it is correct to conclude that there is no untruthfulness or error in any part of the words of Scripture.

We find this affirmed in several places in the Bible:

- Psa. 12:6 – “The words of the LORD are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace in the ground, purified seven times.”<sup>9</sup>
- Prov. 30:5 – “Every word of God proves true.”
- Psa. 119:89 – “Forever, O LORD, Your word is firmly fixed in the heavens.”
  - Cf. Matt. 24:35; 1 Pet. 1:23-25

God’s Words are thus our ultimate standard of truth.

- John 17:17 – “[God’s] Word is truth.”

Grudem helpfully notes, “Jesus does not use the adjective (“true”) here, but the noun “true.” Jesus is saying that God’s Word is not simply “true,” but that it is *truth itself!*<sup>10</sup>

- The difference is significant, for this statement encourages us to think of the Bible not simply as being “true” in the sense that it conforms to some higher standard of truth, but rather to think of the Bible as being itself the final standard of truth.
  - This means that the Bible is the ultimate reference point by which every other claim to truthfulness is to be measured.

What then is truth? Truth is what God says in His Word, the Bible.

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<sup>9</sup> The NET conveys the Hebrew well in its paraphrase: “The LORD’s words are absolutely reliable. They are as untainted as silver purified in a furnace on the ground, where it is thoroughly refined.” In contrast to the flattering and falsity of the evildoers in v.2, YHWH’s words are untainted by falsehood or deception.

<sup>10</sup> Grudem, 83.

We may close our study on the Authority of the Scripture with words from Kevin DeYoung:

All religion rests on authority. In fact, every academic discipline and every sphere of human inquiry rests on authority. Whether we realize it or not, we all give someone or something the last word – our parents, our culture, our community, our feelings, the government, peer-reviewed journals, opinion polls, impressions, or a holy book. We all have someone or something that we turn to as the final arbiter of truth claims. For Christians, this authority is the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Of course, we can misunderstand and misapply the word of God. But when interpreted correctly – paying attention to the original context, considering the literary genre, thinking through authorial intent – the Bible is never wrong in what it affirms and must never be marginalized as anything less than the last word on everything it teaches.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Kevin DeYoung, *Taking God at His Word* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 78. His comparison of the authority of the Word of God amongst Catholics, Liberals, and Protestants is sobering (see pp. 76-77).