

Chapter 4

The Four Characteristics of Scripture: (1) Authority

How do we know that the Bible is God's Word?

In the previous chapter our goal was to determine which writings belong in the Bible and which writings do not. But once we have determined what the Bible is, our next step is to ask what it is like. What does the whole Bible teach us about itself?

The major teachings of the Bible about itself can be classified into four characteristics (sometimes termed attributes): (1) the authority of Scripture; (2) the clarity of Scripture; (3) the necessity of Scripture; and (4) the sufficiency of Scripture.

With regard to the first characteristic, most Christians would agree that the Bible is our authority in some sense. But in exactly what sense does the Bible claim to be our authority? And how do we become persuaded that the claims of Scripture to be God's Word are true? These are the questions addressed in this chapter.

EXPLANATION AND SCRIPTURAL BASIS

The authority of Scripture 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.

This definition may now be examined in its various parts.

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 (as well as words that were written down by men).¹ In the Old Testament, this is

frequently seen in the introductory phrase, "Thus says the LORD," which appears hundreds of times. In the world of the Old Testament, this phrase would have been recognized as identical in form to the phrase, "Thus says king . . .," which was 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.² Thus, when the prophets say, "Thus says the Lord," they are claiming to be messengers from the sovereign King of Israel, namely, God himself, and they are claiming that their words are the absolutely authoritative words of God. When a prophet spoke in God's name in this way, every word he spoke had to come from God, or he would be a false prophet (cf. Num. 22:38; Deut. 18:18–20; Jer. 1:9; 14:14; 23:16–22; 29:31–32; Ezek. 2:7; 13:1–16).

Furthermore, God is often said to speak "through" the prophet (1 Kings 14:18; 16:12, 34; 2 Kings 9:36; 14:25; Jer. 37:2; Zech. 7:7, 12). Thus, what the prophet says in God's name, God says (1 Kings 13:26 with v. 21; 1 Kings 21:19 with 2 Kings 9:25–26; Hag. 1:12; cf. 1 Sam. 15:3, 18). In these and other instances in the Old Testament, words that the prophets spoke can equally be referred to as words that God himself spoke. Thus, 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, 19, 23; 1 Kings 20:35, 36).

¹ Of course, I do not mean to say that every word in Scripture was audibly spoken by God himself, since the Bible records the words of hundreds of different people, such as King David and Peter and even Satan himself. But I do mean that even the quotations of other people are God's reports of what they said, and, rightly interpreted in their contexts, come to us with God's authority.

² See Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1982), pp. 12–13; also Wayne Grudem, "Scripture's Self-Attestation," in *Scripture and Truth* ed. D.A. Carson and J. Woodbridge, pp. 21–22.

These verses of course do not claim that *all* the words in the Old Testament are God's words, for these verses themselves are referring only to specific sections of spoken or written words in the Old Testament. But the cumulative force of these passages, including the hundreds of passages that begin "Thus says the Lord," is to demonstrate that within the Old Testament we have written records of words that are said to be God's own words. These words when written down constitute large sections of the Old Testament.

In the New Testament, a number of passages indicate that all of the Old Testament writings are thought of as God's words. [2 Timothy 3:16](#) says, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (NIV).³ Here "Scripture" (γραφή, G1210) must refer to the Old Testament written Scripture, for that is what the word γραφή refers to in every one of its fifty-one occurrences in the New Testament.⁴ Furthermore, the "sacred writings" of the Old Testament are what Paul⁵ has just referred to in

verse 15.

Paul here affirms that all of the Old Testament writings are θεόπνευστος (G2535) "breathed out by God." Since it is *writings* that are said to be "breathed out," this breathing must be understood as a metaphor for speaking the words of Scripture. This verse thus states in brief form what was evident in many passages in the Old Testament: the Old Testament writings are regarded as God's Word in written form. For every word of the Old Testament, God is the one who spoke (and still speaks) it, although God used human agents to write these words down.⁶

A similar indication of the character of all Old Testament writings as God's words is found in [2 Peter 1:21](#). Speaking of the prophecies of Scripture (v. 20), which means at least the Old Testament Scriptures to which Peter encourages his readers to give careful attention (v. 19), Peter says that none of these prophecies ever came "by the impulse of man," but that "men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." It is not Peter's intention to deny completely human volition

³ Some have suggested an alternative translation, namely, "Every God-breathed Scripture is also profitable for teaching ..." However, this translation is highly unlikely because it makes the καί (G2779, "also") extremely awkward in the Greek sentence. In coherent speech, one must say that something that has one characteristic before saying that it "also" has another characteristic. The "also" must indicate an addition to something that has previously been predicated. Thus, θεόπνευστος (G2535, "God-breathed") and ωφέλιμος (G6068, "profitable") are both best understood as predicate adjectives, and the best translation is, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is profitable for teaching ..."

⁴ In at least two cases, [1 Tim. 5:18](#) and [2 Peter 3:16](#), γραφή (G1210) also includes some of the New Testament writings along with the Old Testament writings that it is referring to (see discussion below).

⁵ I assume Pauline authorship of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus throughout this book. For recent arguments defending

Pauline authorship see George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles NIGTC* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, and Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992), pp. 4–54.

⁶ Older systematic theologies used the words *inspired* and *inspiration* to speak of the fact that the words of Scripture are spoken by God. This terminology was based especially on an older translation of [2 Tim. 3:16](#), which said, "All scripture is given by inspiration of God ..." (KJV). However, the word *inspiration* has such a weak sense in ordinary usage today (every poet or songwriter claims to be "inspired" to write, and even athletes are said to give "inspired" performances) that I have not used it in this text. I have preferred the NIV rendering of [2 Tim. 3:16](#), "God-breathed," and have used other expressions to say that the words of Scripture are God's very words. The older phrase "*plenary* inspiration" meant that all the words of Scripture are God's words (the word *plenary* means "full"), a fact that I affirm in this chapter without using the phrase.

or personality in the writing of Scripture (he says that the men “spoke”), 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 (or, in fact, elsewhere in Scripture). This indicates a belief that all of the Old Testament prophecies (and, in light of vv. 19–20, this probably includes all of the written Scripture of the Old Testament) are spoken “from God”: that is, they are God’s own words.

Many other New Testament passages speak in similar ways about sections of the Old Testament. In [Matthew 1:22](#), Isaiah’s words in [Isaiah 7:14](#) are cited as “what *the Lord had spoken* by the prophet.” In [Matthew 4:4](#) Jesus says to the devil, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by *every word that proceeds from the mouth of God*.” In the context of Jesus’ repeated citations from Deuteronomy to answer every temptation, the words that proceed “from the mouth of God” are the written Scriptures of the Old Testament.

In [Matthew 19:5](#), the words of the author in [Genesis 2:24](#), not attributed to God in the Genesis narrative, are quoted by Jesus as words that God “said.” In [Mark 7:9–13](#), the same Old Testament passage can be called interchangeably “the commandment of God,” or what “Moses said,” or “the word of God.” 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.” Words of Scripture are thus said to be spoken by the Holy Spirit. 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 to God words written by Joel, and claiming that God is presently saying them.

Many other passages could be cited (see [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](#)), but the pattern of attributing to God the words of Old Testament Scripture should be very clear. Moreover, in

several places it is *all* of the words of the prophets or the words of the Old Testament Scriptures that are said to compel belief or to be from God (see [Luke 24:25](#), [27](#), [44](#); [Acts 3:18](#); [24:14](#); [Rom. 15:4](#)).

But if Paul meant only the Old Testament writings when he spoke of “Scripture” in [2 Timothy 3:16](#), how can this verse apply to the New Testament writings as well? Does it say anything about the character of the New Testament writings? To answer that question, we must realize that the Greek word γραφή (G1210, “scripture”) was a technical term for the New Testament writers and had a very specialized meaning. Even though it is used fifty-one times in the New Testament, every one of those instances uses it to refer to the Old Testament writings, not to any other words or writings outside the canon of Scripture. Thus, everything that belonged in the category “scripture” had the character of being “God-breathed”: its words were God’s very words.

But at two places in the New Testament we see New Testament writings also being called “scripture” along with the Old Testament writings. As we noted in chapter 3, in [2 Peter 3:16](#), Peter shows not only an awareness of the existence of written epistles from Paul, but also a clear willingness to classify “all of his [Paul’s] epistles” with “the other scriptures.” This is an indication that very early in the history of the church all of Paul’s epistles were considered to be God’s written words in the same sense as the Old Testament texts were. Similarly, in [1 Timothy 5:18](#), Paul quotes Jesus’ words as found in [Luke 10:7](#) and calls them “scripture.”⁷

These two passages taken together indicate that during the time of the writing of the New Testament documents there was an awareness that *additions* were being made to this special category of writings called “scripture,” writings that had the character of being

⁷ See chapter 3, pp. 61–62, for discussion of [2 Peter 3:16](#) and [1 Tim. 5:17–18](#).

God's very words. Thus, once we establish that a New Testament writing belongs to the special category "scripture," then we are correct in applying [2 Timothy 3:16](#) to that writing as well, and saying that that writing also has the characteristic Paul attributes to "all scripture": it is "God-breathed," and all its words are the very words of God.

Is there further evidence that the New Testament writers thought of their own writings (not just the Old Testament) as being words of God? In some cases, there is. In [1 Corinthians 14:37](#), Paul says, "If any one thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that *what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord.*" Paul has here instituted a number of rules for church worship at Corinth and has claimed for them the status of "commands of the Lord," for the phrase translated "what I am writing to you" contains a plural relative pronoun in Greek (ᾧ) and is more literally translated "*the things* I am writing to you are a command of the Lord."

One objection to seeing the words of New Testament writers as words of God is sometimes brought from [1 Corinthians 7:12](#), where Paul distinguishes his words from words of the Lord: "To the rest I say, not the Lord ..." A proper understanding of this passage is gained from verses [25](#) and [40](#), however. In verse [25](#) Paul says he has no command of the Lord concerning the unmarried but will give his own opinion. This must mean that he had possession of *no earthly word that Jesus had spoken on this subject* and probably also that he had received no subsequent revelation about it from Jesus. This is unlike the situation in verse [10](#) where he could simply repeat the content of Jesus' earthly teaching, "that the wife should not separate from her husband" and "that the husband should not divorce his wife." Thus, verse [12](#) must mean that Paul has *no record of any earthly teaching of Jesus* on the subject of a believer who is married to an unbelieving spouse. Therefore, Paul gives his own instructions: "To the rest I say, *not the Lord* that if any brother has a wife who is

an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her" ([1 Cor. 7:12](#)).

It is remarkable therefore that Paul can go on in verses [12–15](#) to give several specific ethical standards for the Corinthians. What gave him the right to make such moral commands? He said that he spoke as one "who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy" ([1 Cor. 7:25](#)). He seems to imply here that his considered judgments were able to be placed on the same authoritative level as the words of Jesus. Thus, [1 Corinthians 7:12](#), "To the rest I say, not the Lord," is an amazingly strong affirmation of Paul's own authority: if he did not have any words of Jesus to apply to a situation, he would simply use his own words, for his own words had just as much authority as the words of Jesus!

Indications of a similar view of the New Testament writings are found in [John 14:26](#) and [16:13](#), where Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would bring all that he had said to the disciples' remembrance and would guide them into all the truth. This indicates 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 Peter 3:2](#); [1 Corinthians 2:13](#); [1 Thessalonians 4:15](#); and [Revelation 22:18–19](#).

2. We Are Convinced of the Bible's Claims to Be God's Words as We Read the Bible. It is one thing to affirm that the Bible *claims* to be the words of God. It is another thing to be 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. Just after Paul has explained that his apostolic speech consists of words taught by the Holy Spirit ([1 Cor. 2:13](#)), he says, "The natural man does not receive the things⁸ of the Spirit of

⁸ I have translated the verse "things of the Spirit of God"

God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14). 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.

But for those in whom God’s Spirit is working there is a recognition that the words of the Bible are the words of God. This process is closely analogous to that by which those who believed in Jesus knew that his words were true. He said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27). Those who are Christ’s sheep hear the words of their great Shepherd as they read the words of Scripture, and they are convinced that these words are in fact the words of their Lord.

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. 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.

3. Other Evidence Is Useful but Not Finally

Convincing. The previous section is not meant to deny the validity of other kinds of arguments that may be used to support the claim that the Bible is God’s words.

because the Greek text has only the neuter plural definite article (τά from ὁ, G3836) used as a substantive, and no specific noun is given. Thus, the RSV translation “the gifts of the Spirit of God” is more restrictive in subject matter than the actual words would justify and is certainly not required by the context.

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 human history more than any other book, that it has continued changing the lives of millions of individuals throughout its history, that through it people come to find salvation, that it has a majestic beauty and a profound depth of teaching unmatched by any other book, and that it claims hundreds of times over to be God’s very words. All of these arguments and others are useful to us and remove obstacles that might 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 said in 1643–46,

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. (chap. 1, para. 5)

4. The Words of Scripture Are Self-Attesting. Thus, the words of Scripture are “self-attesting.” They cannot be “proved” to be God’s words by appeal to 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 to 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.

5. Objection: This Is a Circular Argument. Someone may object that to say Scripture proves itself to be God's words is to use a circular argument: we believe that Scripture is God's Word because it claims to be that. And we believe its claims because Scripture is God's Word. And we believe that it is God's Word because it claims to be that, and so forth.

It should be admitted that this is a kind of circular argument. However, that does not make its use invalid, for all arguments for an absolute authority must ultimately appeal to that authority for proof: otherwise the authority would not be an absolute or highest authority. This problem is not unique to the Christian who is arguing for the authority of the Bible. Everyone either implicitly or explicitly uses some kind of circular argument when defending his or her ultimate authority for belief.

Although these circular arguments are not always made explicit and are sometimes hidden beneath lengthy discussions or are simply assumed without proof, arguments for an ultimate authority in their most basic form take on a similar circular appeal to that authority itself, as some of the following examples show:

"My reason is my ultimate authority because it seems reasonable to me to make it so."

"Logical consistency is my ultimate authority because it is logical to make it so."

"The findings of human sensory experiences are the ultimate authority for discovering what is real and what is not, because our human senses have never discovered anything else: thus, human sense experience tells me that my principle is true."

"I know there can be no ultimate authority because I do not know of any such ultimate authority."

In all of these arguments for an ultimate standard of truth, an absolute authority for what to believe, there is an element of circularity involved.⁹

How then does a Christian, or anyone else, choose among the various claims for absolute authorities? Ultimately the truthfulness of the Bible will commend itself as being far more persuasive than other religious books (such as the *Book of Mormon* or the *Qur'an*), or than any other intellectual constructions of the human mind (such as logic, human reason, sense experience, scientific methodology, etc.). It will be more persuasive because in the actual experience of life, all of these other candidates for ultimate authority are seen to be inconsistent or to have shortcomings that disqualify them, while the Bible will be seen to be fully in accord with all that we know about the world around us, about ourselves, and about God.

The Bible will commend itself as being persuasive in this way, that is, if we are thinking rightly about the nature of reality, our perception of it and of ourselves, and our perception of God. The trouble is that because of sin our perception and analysis of God and creation is faulty. Sin is ultimately irrational, and sin makes us think incorrectly about God and about creation. Thus, in a world free from sin, the Bible would commend itself convincingly to all people as God's Word. But because sin distorts people's perception of reality, they do not recognize Scripture for what it really is. Therefore it requires the work of the [Holy Spirit](#), overcoming the effects of sin, to enable us to be persuaded that the Bible is indeed the Word of God and

⁹ This point has been made well by John M. Frame, "[God and Biblical Language: Transcendence and Immanence](#)," in *God's Inerrant Word* ed. John Warwick Montgomery (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974), pp. 159–77. See also J.P. Moreland, "[The Rationality of Belief in Inerrancy](#)," *TrinJ* 7:1 (1986), 75–86, for a helpful discussion of the way we reach convictions about issues of major significance in our lives.

that the claims it makes for itself are true.

Thus, in another sense, the argument for the Bible as God's Word and our ultimate authority is *not* a typical circular argument. The process of persuasion is perhaps better likened to a spiral in which increasing knowledge of Scripture and increasingly correct understanding of God and creation tend to supplement one another in a harmonious way, each tending to confirm the accuracy of the other. This is not to say that our knowledge of the world around us serves as a higher authority than Scripture, but rather that such knowledge, if it is correct knowledge, continues to give greater and greater assurance and deeper conviction that the Bible is the only truly ultimate authority and that other competing claims for ultimate authority are false.

6. This Does Not Imply Dictation From God as the Sole Means of Communication. The entire preceding part of this chapter has argued that all the words of the Bible are God's words. At this point a word of caution is necessary. The fact that all the words of Scripture are God's words should not lead us to think that God dictated every word of Scripture to the human authors.

When we say that all the words of the Bible are God's words, we are talking about the *result* of the process of bringing Scripture into existence. To raise the question of dictation is to ask about the *process* that led to that result or the manner by which God acted in order to ensure the result that he intended.¹⁰ It must be emphasized that the Bible does not speak of only one type of process or one manner by which God communicated to the biblical authors what he wanted to be said. In fact, there is indication of *a wide variety of processes* God used to bring about the desired result.

¹⁰ In some systematic theologies, this process by which God used human authors to write his very words is called "the mode of inspiration." I have not used this terminology in this book, since it does not seem to be a readily understandable phrase today.

A few scattered instances of dictation are explicitly mentioned in Scripture. When the apostle John saw the risen Lord in a vision on the island of Patmos, [Jesus](#) spoke to him as follows: "To the angel of the church in Ephesus *write* ..." ([Rev. 2:1](#)); "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna *write* ..." ([Rev. 2:8](#)); "And to the angel of the church in Pergamum *write* ..." ([Rev. 2:12](#)). These are examples of dictation pure and simple. The risen Lord tells John what to write, and John writes the words he hears from [Jesus](#).

Something akin to this process is probably also seen occasionally in the Old Testament prophets. We read in Isaiah, "Then the word of the Lord came to Isaiah: "Go and say to Hezekiah, Thus says the Lord, the God of David your father: I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; behold, I will add fifteen years to your life. I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and defend this city" ' ([Isa. 38:4-6](#)). The picture given us in this narrative is that Isaiah heard (whether with his physical ear or with a very forceful impression made upon his mind is difficult to say) the words God wanted him to say to Hezekiah, and Isaiah, acting as God's messenger, then took those words and *spoke* them as he had been instructed.

But in many other sections of Scripture such direct dictation from God is certainly not the manner by which the words of Scripture were caused to come into being. The author of Hebrews says that God spoke to our fathers by the prophets "in many and various ways" ([Heb. 1:1](#)). On the opposite end of the spectrum from dictation we have, for instance, Luke's ordinary historical research for writing his gospel. He says:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent

Theophilus ...” (Luke 1:1–3)

This is clearly not a process of dictation. Luke used ordinary processes of speaking to eyewitnesses and gathering historical data in order that he might write an accurate account of the life and teachings of Jesus. He did his historical research thoroughly, listening to the reports of many eyewitnesses and evaluating his evidence carefully. The gospel he wrote emphasizes what he thought important to emphasize and reflects his own characteristic style of writing.

In between these two extremes of dictation pure and simple on the one hand, and ordinary historical research on the other hand, we have many indications of various ways by which God communicated with the human authors of Scripture. In some cases Scripture gives us hints of these various processes: it speaks of dreams, of visions, of hearing the Lord’s voice or standing in the council of the Lord; it also speaks of men who were with Jesus and observed his life and listened to his teaching, men whose memory of these words and deeds was made completely accurate by the working of the Holy Spirit as he brought things to their remembrance (John 14:26). Yet in many other cases the manner used by God to bring about the result that the words of Scripture were his words is simply not disclosed to us. Apparently many different methods were used, but it is not important that we discover precisely what these were in each case.

In cases where the ordinary human personality and writing style of the author were prominently involved, as seems the case with the major part of Scripture, all that we are able to say is that God’s providential oversight and direction of the life of each author was such that their personalities, their backgrounds and training, their abilities to evaluate events in the world around them, their access to historical data, their judgment with regard to the accuracy of information, and their individual circumstances when they wrote,¹¹ were all exactly what God wanted them to be,

so that when they actually came to the point of putting pen to paper, the words were fully their own words but also fully the words that God wanted them to write, words that God would also claim as his own.

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

The preceding section has argued that all the words in Scripture are God’s words. Consequently, to disbelieve or disobey any word of Scripture is to disbelieve or disobey God himself. Thus, Jesus can rebuke his disciples for not believing the Old Testament Scriptures (Luke 24:25). Believers are to keep or obey the disciples’ words (John 15:20: “If they kept my word, they will keep yours also”). Christians are encouraged to remember “the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles” (2 Peter 3:2). To disobey Paul’s writings was to make oneself liable to church discipline, such as excommunication (2 Thess. 3:14) and spiritual punishment (2 Cor. 13:2–3), including punishment from God (this is the apparent sense of the passive verb “he is not recognized” in 1 Cor. 14:38). By contrast, God delights in everyone who “trembles” at his word (Isa. 66:2).

Throughout the history of the church the greatest preachers have been those who have recognized that they have no authority in themselves and have seen their task as being to explain the words of Scripture and apply them clearly to the lives of their hearers. Their preaching has drawn its power not from the proclamation of their own Christian experiences or the experiences of others, nor from their own opinions, creative ideas, or rhetorical skills, but from God’s powerful words.¹² Essentially they stood in the pulpit,

¹¹ This would also include even the influence of a secretary (technically called an amanuensis) on the wording of a book: see the greeting from Tertius in Rom. 16:22.

¹² I am not denying that good speaking ability or creativity or telling of personal experiences have a place in preaching, for

pointed to the biblical text, and said in effect to the congregation, “This is what this verse means. Do you see that meaning here as well? Then you must believe it and obey it with all your heart, for God himself, your Creator and your Lord, is saying this to you today!” Only the written words of Scripture can give this kind of authority to preaching.

C. The Truthfulness of Scripture

1. God Cannot Lie or Speak Falsely. The essence of the authority of Scripture is its ability to compel us to believe and to obey it and to make such belief and obedience equivalent to believing and obeying God himself. Because this is so, it is needful to consider the truthfulness of Scripture, since to believe all the words of Scripture implies confidence in the complete truthfulness of the Scripture that we believe. Although this issue will be dealt with more fully when we consider the inerrancy of Scripture (see chapter 5), a brief treatment is given here.

Since the biblical writers repeatedly affirm that the words of the Bible, though human, are God’s own words, it is appropriate to look at biblical texts that talk about *the character of God’s words* and to apply these to the character of the words of Scripture. Specifically, there are a number of biblical passages that talk about the truthfulness of God’s speech. [Titus 1:2](#) speaks of “God, who never lies,” or (more literally translated), “the unlying God.” Because God is a God who cannot speak a “lie,” his words can always be trusted. Since all of Scripture is spoken by God, all of Scripture must be “unlying,” just as God himself is: there can be no untruthfulness in Scripture.¹³

good preaching will include all of these (see [Prov. 16:21, 23](#)). I am saying that the power to change lives must come from the Word itself, and it will be evident to the hearers when a preacher really believes this.

¹³ Some scholars object that it is “too simplistic” to argue as follows: “The Bible is God’s words. God never lies.

[Hebrews 6:18](#) mentions two unchangeable things (God’s oath and his promise) “in which *it is impossible for God to lie* (author’s translation).” Here the author says not merely that God does not lie, but that it is not possible for him to lie. Although the immediate reference is only to oaths and promises, if it is impossible for God to lie in these utterances, then certainly it is impossible for him ever to lie (for [Jesus](#) harshly rebukes those who tell the truth only when under oath: [Matt. 5:33–37](#); [23:16–22](#)). Similarly, David says to God, “You are God, and *your words are true*” ([2 Sam. 7:28](#)).

2. Therefore All the Words in Scripture Are Completely True and Without Error in Any Part.

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 several places in the Bible. “The words of the LORD are *words that are pure* silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times” ([Ps. 12:6](#), author’s translation). Here the psalmist uses vivid imagery to speak of the undiluted purity of God’s words: there is no imperfection in them. Also in [Proverbs 30:5](#), we read, “*Every word of God proves true*; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.” It is not just some of the words of Scripture that are true, but every word. In fact, God’s Word is fixed in heaven for all eternity: “For ever, O LORD, *your word is firmly fixed in the heavens*” ([Ps. 119:89](#)). [Jesus](#) can speak of the eternal

Therefore the Bible never lies.” Yet it is precisely that kind of argument that Paul uses in [Titus 1:2](#). He refers to the promises of eternal life made “ages ago” in Scripture and says the promises were made by God “who never lies.” He thus calls on the truthfulness of God’s own speech to prove the truthfulness of the words of Scripture. A “simple” argument this may be, but it is scriptural, and it is true. We should therefore not hesitate to accept it and use it.

nature of his own words: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Matt. 24:35). God’s speech is placed in marked contrast to all human speech, for “God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should repent” (Num. 23:19). These verses affirm explicitly what was implicit in the requirement that we believe all of the words of Scripture, namely, that there is no untruthfulness or falsehood affirmed in any of the statements of the Bible.

3. God’s Words Are the Ultimate Standard of Truth.

In John 17 Jesus prays to the Father, “Sanctify them in the truth; *your word is truth*” (John 17:17). This verse is interesting because Jesus does not use the adjectives ἀληθινός (G240) or ἀληθής (G239, “true”), which we might have expected, to say, “Your word is true.” Rather, he uses a noun, ἀλήθεια (G237, “truth”), to say that God’s Word is not simply “true,” but it is truth itself.

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. The Bible is God’s Word, and God’s Word is the ultimate definition of what is true and what is not true: God’s Word is itself *truth*. Thus we are to think of the Bible as the ultimate standard of truth, the reference point by which every other claim to truthfulness is to be measured. Those assertions that conform with Scripture are “true” while those that do not conform with Scripture are not true.

What then is truth? Truth is what God says, and we have what God says (accurately but not exhaustively) in the Bible.

4. Might Some New Fact Ever Contradict the Bible?

Will any new scientific or historical fact ever be discovered that will contradict the Bible? Here we can say with confidence that this will never happen—it is in fact impossible. If any supposed “fact” is ever

discovered that is said to contradict Scripture, then (if we have understood Scripture rightly) that “fact” must be false, because God, the author of Scripture, knows all true facts (past, present, and future). No fact will ever turn up that God did not know about ages ago and take into account when he caused Scripture to be written. Every true fact is something that God has known already from all eternity and is something that therefore cannot contradict God’s speech in Scripture.

Nevertheless, it must be remembered that scientific or historical study (as well as other kinds of study of creation) can cause us to reexamine Scripture to see if it really teaches what we thought it taught. The Bible certainly does not teach that the earth was created in the year 4004 B.C., as some once thought (for the genealogical lists in Scripture have gaps in them).¹⁴ Yet it was in part historical, archaeological, astronomical, and geological study that caused Christians to reexamine Scripture to see if it really taught such a recent origin for the earth. Careful analysis of the biblical text showed that it did not teach this.

Similarly, the Bible does not teach that the sun goes around the earth, for it only uses descriptions of phenomena as we see them from our vantage point and does not purport to be describing the workings of the universe from some arbitrary “fixed” point somewhere out in space. Yet until the study of astronomy advanced enough to demonstrate the rotation of the earth on its axis, people *assumed* that the Bible taught that the sun goes around the earth. Then the study of scientific data prompted a reexamination of the appropriate biblical texts. Thus, whenever confronted with some “fact” that is said to contradict Scripture, we must not only examine the data adduced to demonstrate the fact in question; we must also reexamine the appropriate biblical texts to see if the Bible really teaches what we

¹⁴ See chapter 15, pp. 289–309, for discussion of the age of the earth, and pp. 290–91 for discussion of gaps in the genealogies.

thought it to teach.

We should never fear but always welcome any new facts that may be discovered in any legitimate area of human research or study. For example, discoveries by archaeologists working in Syria have brought to light the Ebla Tablets. These extensive written records from the period around 2000 B.C. will eventually throw great light on our understanding of the world of the patriarchs and the events connected with the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Should Christians entertain any lingering apprehension that the publication of such data will prove some fact in Genesis to be incorrect? Certainly not! We should eagerly anticipate the publication of all such data with the absolute confidence that if it is correctly understood it will all be consistent with Scripture and will all confirm the accuracy of Scripture. No true fact will ever contradict the words of the God who knows all facts and who never lies.

D. Written Scripture Is Our Final Authority

It is important to realize that the final form in which Scripture remains authoritative is its *written* form. It was the words of God *written* on the tablets of stone that Moses deposited in the ark of the covenant. Later, God commanded Moses and subsequent prophets to write their words in a book. And it was *written* Scripture (γραφή, G1210) that Paul said was “God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16). Similarly, it is Paul’s *writings* that are “a command of the Lord” (1 Cor. 14:37) and that could be classified with “the other scriptures” (2 Peter 3:16).

This is important because people sometimes (intentionally or unintentionally) attempt to substitute some other final standard than the written words of Scripture. For example, people will sometimes refer to “what Jesus really said” and claim that when we translate the Greek words of the Gospels back into the Aramaic language Jesus spoke, we can gain a better

understanding of Jesus’ words than was given by the writers of the Gospels. In fact, it is sometimes said that this work of reconstructing Jesus’ words in Aramaic enables us to correct the erroneous translations made by the gospel authors.

In other cases, people have claimed to know “what Paul really thought” even when that is different from the meaning of the words he wrote. Or they have spoken of “what Paul should have said if he had been consistent with the rest of his theology.” Similarly, others have spoken of “the church situation to which Matthew was writing” and have attempted to give normative force either to that situation or to the solution they think Matthew was attempting to bring about in that situation.

In all of these instances we must admit that asking about the words or situations that lie “behind” the text of Scripture may at times be helpful to us in understanding what the text means. Nevertheless, our hypothetical reconstructions of these words or situations can never replace or compete with Scripture itself as the final authority, nor should we ever allow them to contradict or call into question the accuracy of any of the words of Scripture. We must continually remember that we have in the Bible God’s very words, and we must not try to “improve” on them in some way, for this cannot be done. Rather, we should seek to understand them and then trust them and obey them with our whole heart.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. If you want to persuade someone that the Bible is God’s Word, what do you want that person to read more than any other piece of literature?
2. Who would try to make people want to disbelieve something in Scripture? To disobey something in Scripture? Is there anything in the Bible that you do not want to believe? To obey? If your answers to either of the preceding two questions were

positive, what is the best way to approach and to deal with the desires you have in this area?

3. Do you know of any proven fact in all of history that has shown something in the Bible to be false? Can the same be said about other religious writings such as the *Book of Mormon* or the *Qur'an*? If you have read in other books such as these, can you describe the spiritual effect they had on you? Compare that with the spiritual effect that reading the Bible has on you. Can you say that when you read the Bible you hear the voice of your Creator speaking to you in a way that is true of no other book?
4. Do you ever find yourself believing something not because you have external evidence for it but simply because it is written in Scripture? Is that proper faith, according to [Hebrews 11:1](#)? If you do believe things simply because Scripture says them, what do you think Christ will say to you about this habit when you stand before his judgment seat? Do you think that trusting and obeying everything that Scripture affirms will ever lead you into sin or away from God's blessing in your life?

SPECIAL TERMS

absolute authority
authority of Scripture
circular argument
dictation
God-breathed
inspiration
plenary inspiration
Scripture
self-attesting

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(For an explanation of this bibliography see the note on the bibliography to chapter 1, p. 38. Complete

bibliographical data may be found on pp. [1223–29](#).)

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SCRIPTURE MEMORY PASSAGE

2 Timothy 3:16: *All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.*

HYMN

“Standing on the Promises”

This hymn speaks of the promises of God’s Word as the eternally firm and unchanging foundation on which we can rest our faith. In the midst of doubt and fear these promises “cannot fail.” By standing firm on them we will be able to sing “Glory in the highest!” for all eternity. Yet the hymn speaks not merely of the promises of God’s Word, but of all the contents of Scripture: the Bible is “the living Word of God” by which we “prevail” in the midst of adversity (v. 2), and it is the “Spirit’s sword” by which we may be “overcoming daily” (v. 3). There is no other sure foundation on which to rest our faith than on the very words and promises of God. “I am standing on the promises of God!” is the joyful exclamation of a heart filled with faith, and it shall be our song throughout eternity.

Standing on the promises of Christ my King,
 Through eternal ages let his praises ring!
 Glory in the highest I will shout and sing
 Standing on the promises of God!

Chorus:

Standing, standing, standing on the promises of
 God my Savior;
 Standing, standing, I’m standing on the promises
 of God.

Standing on the promises that cannot fail
 When the howling storms of doubt and fear assail;
 By the living Word of God I shall prevail
 Standing on the promises of God!

Standing on the promises of Christ the Lord,
 Bound to him eternally by love’s strong cord,
 Overcoming daily with the Spirit’s sword
 Standing on the promises of God!

Standing on the promises I cannot fall,
 List’ning every moment to the Spirit’s call,
 Resting in my Savior as my all in all
 Standing on the promises of God!

AUTHOR: R. KELSO CARTER, 1886