

Foundations of Christian Theology

Lesson 3

The Doctrine of Scripture: How Do We Know God?

Goal: To understand the kind of revelation God has given us in the Bible, and to increase our trust in his Word as necessary, sufficient, clear, and authoritative.

I. Review

God is a revealing God, who has made himself know, primarily through words.

God, in his wisdom and kindness, determined for those words to be written down for his people, which we now have in the 66 books of the Bible.

II. What is the content of God's revelation in the Bible?

WSC Q. 2. What rule has God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him?

A. The Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.

WSC Q. 3. What do the Scriptures principally teach?

A. The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.

John 20:30-31, Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

2 Timothy 3:15, From childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

1 Corinthians 10:11, Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction.

This gives us insight into the intention and scope of Scripture. Scripture is not intended to tell us everything about everything.

III. Which words are from God? The question of canon¹

WCF 1.2, Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the books of the Old and New Testaments, which are these... [the 39 Old Testament books and 27 New Testament books]. All which are given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life.

WCF 1.3, The books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are no part of the canon of the Scripture, and therefore are of no authority in the church of God, nor to be any otherwise approved, or made use of, than other human writings.

WCF 1.4, The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.

WCF 1.5, 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.

IV. What kind of Bible did God give us?

God has chosen to speak to us in many different ways in the Bible itself—historical narrative, direct teaching, laws, poetry, songs, proverbs, parables, letters, and prophetic explanation, prediction, and promises.

The Bible is God's inspired Word, and so it is inerrant and infallible. And as we look at what God says about the Bible in the Bible, he tells us that it is necessary, sufficient, clear (i.e., perspicuous), and authoritative.² These are the classic attributes of Scripture.

¹ For more on the formation of the canon and its reliability, see Michael Kruger's article: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-biblical-canon/> and his book, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origin and Authority of the New Testament Books* (Crossway, 2012). You can also see the class we taught in CE on the canon here: <https://trinitymboro.com/media/6fwq7rz/class-4-the-canon-of-scripture>

² It is common to hear people refer to these with the acronym SPAN (sufficient, perspicuous, authoritative, necessary). However, I want to take them in a different order, and it only works if you remember "perspicuous."

V. Verbal Plenary Inspiration

2 Timothy 3:15-17, “From childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God (θεοπνευστος; θεος + πνεω) 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.”

2 Peter 1:19-21, And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, ²⁰ knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. ²¹ For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

The words of Scripture are the very words of God (Heb. 3:7; Matt. 19:4-5). **Verbal plenary inspiration** specifically means that God superintended the writing of Scripture down to the very choice of words, not merely to overarching themes or concepts.

“The whole of Scripture and all its parts, down to the very words of the original, were given by divine inspiration.” – Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978), Article VI

Included in this understanding (as seen in 2 Pet. 1:21) is the fact that God used human authors to write the Scriptures. This is sometimes referred to as “concurative operation” and sometimes as “organic inspiration.” What is intended in both these terms is that God did not typically dictate his words to the human authors, but rather worked through their particular styles and life experiences. The text is truly the work of the human authors but is just as God-breathed as a dictated Scripture would have been.

“It is with the traditional doctrine of the Reformed Churches, however, that we are concerned; and that we understand to be simply this: Inspiration is that extraordinary, supernatural influence (or, passively, the result of it,) exerted by the Holy Ghost on the writers of our Sacred Books, by which their words were rendered also the words of God, and, therefore, perfectly infallible.” – B.B. Warfield (1851-1921), “Inspiration and Criticism”

“[Inspiration is to be defined as] a supernatural, providential influence of God’s Holy Spirit upon the human authors which caused them to write what he wished to be written for the communication of revealed truth to others.” – J.I. Packer (1926-2020), *“Fundamentalism” and the Word of God*

VI. Inerrancy & Infallibility

These terms were the battle ground in 20th Century debates on the nature of Scripture, beginning with the writings of Benjamin B. Warfield (1851-1921), professor at Princeton Seminary, and culminating in the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, which was drafted by evangelicals such as R.C. Sproul, Francis Schaeffer, James Montgomery Boice, D. James Kennedy, J.I. Packer, and John MacArthur.

Infallible – it does not deceive, it does not and cannot fail

Inerrancy – it cannot assert any errors of fact

“We affirm that Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit. We deny that Biblical infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious, or redemptive themes, exclusive of assertions in the fields of history and science.” – Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978), Article XII

Hebrews 6:17-19a, ¹⁷ So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, ¹⁸ so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. ¹⁹ We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul... (cf. Rom. 3:4; Tit. 1:2)

Matthew 5:17-19, ¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

“When we deny the complete trustworthiness of the Scriptures, then we are forced to accept one of two conclusions: either the Scripture is not all from God, or God is not always dependable.” – Kevin DeYoung, *Daily Doctrine*, 18

“Any degree of skepticism about the portrait of Christ, the promises of God, the principles of godliness, and the power of the Holy Spirit, as biblically presented, has the effect of enslaving us to our own alternative ideas about these things, and thus we miss something of the freedom, joy, and vitality that the real Christ bestows. God is very patient and merciful, and I do not suggest that those who fall short here thereby forfeit all knowledge of Christ, though I recognize that when one sits loose to Scripture this may indeed happen. But I do maintain most emphatically that one cannot doubt the Bible without far-reaching loss, both of fullness of truth and of fullness of life. If therefore we have at heart spiritual renewal for society, for churches and for our own lives, we shall make much of the entire trustworthiness—that is, the inerrancy—of Holy Scripture

as the inspired and liberating Word of God.” – J.I. Packer (1926-2020), *Truth and Power: The Place of Scripture in the Christian Life*, 55

Think–Pair–Share: Where do you see the trustworthiness of Scripture being denied or eroded by Christians in our own time? Where do you see yourself tempted to do the same?

“A... clarification about inerrancy is important. Belief in biblical inerrancy naturally takes account of a number of features of Scripture that flow from the fact that it is written in ordinary human language, using the everyday features of ordinary language. These include the use of round numbers and colloquial approximations; loose and free quotations (especially of Old Testament in the New); some unusual (and, strictly speaking, wrong) grammatical forms; and figures of speech such as metaphor, parable, hyperbole and so on. None of these features counts against the claim that Scripture does not err in everything it affirms. Rather it is by taking full account of these features that we shall be able to discern what in fact God is and is not asserting in Scripture.” – Timothy Ward, *Words of Life*, 133

VII. Attribute #1: Necessity

1. Knowledge of God is **necessary** because we were made for God

“Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” – WSC 1

“You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.” – Augustine (354-430 A.D.), *Confessions*, 1.1

2. God’s revelation is **necessary** because we cannot access God on our own (see section I above)
3. God’s special revelation is **necessary** because general revelation is not sufficient to give us knowledge of God’s salvation (see section II above)
4. Written Scripture is **necessary** because God has chosen to commit his special revelation in history to writing (i.e., he has ceased to reveal himself in the same way he did in former times)

WCF 1.1 (continued), ... and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing: which maketh the Holy Scripture to be **most necessary**; those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.

WCF 1.6, The whole counsel of God concerning all things **necessary** for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture...

VIII. Attribute #2: Sufficiency

WCF 1.6, The whole counsel of God concerning **all things necessary** for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which **nothing at any time is to be added**, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward **illumination** of the Spirit of God to be **necessary** for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by **the light of nature**, and **Christian prudence**, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.

There is no revelation of God outside of the words of Scripture that is necessary “for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life” (WCF 1.6). God’s word is enough.

Sufficient for what?

- a. Baking a cake?
- b. Eating healthy?
- c. Raising children?
- d. Building a house?
- e. Leading a city council?

God’s glory, man’s salvation, faith and life.

“If you want to know what will ‘thoroughly equip’ you for salvation, for faith, or for life, you will find it in Scripture (2 Tim. 3:15-17). If you want to know what God considers essential for his own glory, you will find it in the Bible. In fact ‘the whole counsel [or plan] of God’ concerning all these necessary things is revealed in God’s Word.” – Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, 16

However, the written record of God’s word is not sufficient for salvation without “the inward illumination of the Spirit of God” (WCF 1.6). Notice that this is not additional revelation, but a turning on of the light, to both understand and trust in the objective revelation of God in Scripture.

“It should be clearly noted here that the key issue at stake in the Protestant doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture is the nature of the Holy Spirit’s ongoing activity in relation to Scripture.” – Timothy Ward, *Words of Life*, 111

“There was no debate during the Reformation over the nature, authority, and inerrancy of Scripture. This was accepted on both sides. Differences turned on the sufficiency of Scripture—particularly the relationship between Scripture and tradition.” – Michael Horton, *Pilgrim Theology*, 65

The Confession says what it is arguing against in the area of sufficiency—the Holy Spirit speaking to the church outside of Scripture. “Nothing [i.e., no revelation] at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit [this was held by Anabaptists], or traditions of men [this was held by Roman Catholics]” (WCF 1.6).

“We are assailed by two sects, which seem to differ most widely from each other. For what similitude is there in appearance between the Pope and the Anabaptists? And yet, that you may see that Satan never transforms himself so cunningly, as not in some measure to betray himself, the principal weapon with which they both assail us is the same. For when they boast extravagantly of the Spirit, the tendency certainly is to sink and bury the Word of God, that they may make room for their own falsehoods.” – John Calvin (1509-1564), “Reply to Cardinal Sadeleto”

IX. Attribute #3: Perspicuity (i.e., clarity)

WCF 1.7, All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so **clearly propounded**, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

The Confession is arguing that Scripture is not fundamentally obscure, but clear and able to be understood. However, note the nuance. It is not equally clear in every part (2 Pt. 3:15-16). It is also not equally clear to every person. But please understand that the people who are able to understand Scripture better are not those infused with a secret knowledge or code, but those who make especially good use of the ordinary means (Acts 8:31; 17:11; Lk. 24:27). This must be held together with “the inward illumination of the Spirit of God” (WCF 1.6).

“Roman Catholics, ‘with the exaggeration that often accompanies an important insight’, tell us that we *need* the church to understand the Bible. Various cults tell us we need their literature. The truth is that while good guidance can be helpful in reading the Scriptures, the Scriptures themselves are clear in addressing every significant subject about which they speak. Therefore nothing must be more foundational than the Scriptures in our interpretation of them, and in our endeavor to establish doctrine.” – Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, 25

“The task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted **exclusively** to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ.” – Vatican II (1965), *Dei verbum*, II.10

“Behind the argument about the clarity of Scripture is an argument about whom Scripture belongs to and whether it is a means of control.” – John Goldingay, *Models for Scripture*, 345

Who has the ability and/or the authority to interpret the Scriptures?

- Follow up question: To what extent?

WCF 1.8, The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time of the writing of it, was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God, and, by his singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentic; so as, in all controversies of religion, the church is finally to appeal unto them. But, because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God, **who have right unto, and interest in the Scriptures, and are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search them**, therefore they are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come, **that, the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship him in an acceptable manner; and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope.**

- Does it help to know Greek and Hebrew when studying Scripture? Yes.
- Does it help to have advanced understanding of syntax and grammatical constructions, like how different prepositional phrases function? Yes.
- Does it help to understand literary genres like poetry, irony, parable, etc.? Yes.
- Does it help to understand some of the historical context of Colossae when reading Paul’s letter to the Colossians, or Ancient Near Eastern creation accounts when reading Genesis 1-3, or Canaanite religious practices when reading 1 & 2 Kings? Yes.
- Does it help to understand how the church has interpreted a particular passage throughout the ages? Yes.
- Are any of those things strictly necessary to understand the basic meaning of a passage of Scripture? No.

WCF 1.9, The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.

- In order to interpret a particular passage of Scripture correctly what is most important? Knowing what the rest of Scripture says.

X. Attribute #4: Authority

WCF 1.10, The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.

Excursus: Is Scripture the *only* authority? (Tradition 1, 2, and 0³)

Tradition 1—Tradition is a tool to aid in the faithful interpretation of Scripture. Scripture is to be interpreted in and by the church within the context of the rule of faith (*regula fidei*; the church's summary of the basic message of Scripture, i.e., Apostles' Creed), yet neither the church nor the rule of faith is considered a *second* supplementary sources of revelation. Rather, Scripture remains the only source of infallible divine revelation.

Tradition 2—There are two distinct sources of divine revelation, Scripture and church tradition, with the latter being handed down either orally or through customary church practices.

Tradition 0—Scripture is not merely the only infallible authority but it is the only authority altogether. The true but subordinate authority of the church and the rule of faith are rejected altogether. According to this view, there is no real sense in which tradition has any authority. Instead, the individual believer requires nothing more than the Holy Spirit and the Bible.

"Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And, I suppose I should add, it is traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name." – Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (1984), 65

"Like it or not, we are heirs to this host of diverse and even contradictory witnesses. Some of their actions we may find revolting, and others inspiring. But all of them form part of our history. All of them, those whose actions we admire as well as those whose actions we despise, brought us to where we are now... When we read, for instance, that "the just shall live by faith," Martin Luther is whispering at our ear how we are to interpret those words—and this is true even for those of us who have never even heard of Martin Luther. When we hear that "Christ died for our sins," Anselm of Canterbury sits in the pew with us, even though we may not have the slightest idea who Anselm was. When we stand, sit, or kneel in church; when we sing a hymn, recite a creed (or

³ "Tradition 1 and 2" originally come from Heiko Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology* (1963). The inclusion of "Tradition 0" comes from Keith Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (2001). I came across all of these in *Words of Life*, Timothy Ward (2009). We will come back to this idea when we begin looking at Church History and how we relate to the church in Class 15, "The Story of the Church."

refuse to recite one); when we build a church or preach a sermon, a part of which we may not be aware is one of the factors influencing our actions. The notion that we read the New Testament exactly as the early Christians did, without any weight of tradition coloring our interpretation, is an illusion. It is also a dangerous illusion, for it tends to make us so confident in our interpretation, that we begin to think of our interpretation as the Word of God.” – Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity, Vol. 1* (2010), 3

Discussion Groups

- **Inward Application:** Which attribute of Scripture gives you the most help in your own Bible reading?
- **Outward Application:** How does our understanding of the nature of Scripture encourage you to use Scripture in your evangelism or conversations with unbelievers?
- **Basic Understanding:** Clarifying questions.
- **Further Understanding:** How does Tradition 1 help protect us against the errors of Tradition 2 or Tradition 0.
- **Reading Scripture:** 2 Timothy 3:15-17.