The Doctrine of Scripture: *An Introduction*

MARK D. THOMPSON

SHORT STUDIES *in* SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Edited by Graham A. Cole & Oren R. Martin

"The doctrine of Scripture remains a foundational—but also hotly contested—matter in Christian circles. Therefore there is a great need for works that are concise without omitting key issues, clear without being simplistic, and learned without being labyrinthine. Mark Thompson has provided such a work. As with other thoughtful and cogent expositions of orthodox doctrines in this series, this volume on Scripture draws on a wealth of historic and contemporary sources to provide the reader with a fine introduction to the topic. *The Doctrine of Scripture* will make a great volume for discussion groups or private study."

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"Mark D. Thompson has provided Christ followers with an illuminating and refreshing introduction to holy Scripture. This biblically informed and theologically shaped work unapologetically affirms the Bible's inspiration, truthfulness, and sufficiency, pointing readers to Christ and faithful Christian discipleship. Simply stated, *The Doctrine of Scripture* is an excellent contribution to Crossway's outstanding series. I enthusiastically and happily recommend this substantive, thoughtfully organized, and highly readable volume."

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Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Research Professor of Systematic Theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

"Given the current 'crisis of authority' all around us, the church desperately needs clear and faithful biblical and theological expositions of what Scripture is, along with a renewed commitment to God's most holy word. In this very accessible treatment of the nature of Scripture, Mark Thompson has almost achieved the unthinkable: he has described, explained, and defended all the crucial points needed for the church to understand and grasp what Scripture is for today. What is so helpful in his discussion is how he rightly grounds the doctrine of Scripture first in the doctrine of God, namely, the triune God who speaks. By doing so, he helps the church understand the Christ-centered nature of Scripture and why Scripture is utterly necessary, authoritative, and true. I cannot think of another book on Scripture that is so accessible to all Christians, faithful in its exposition, and wise in its conclusions. I highly recommend it!"

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The Doctrine of Scripture

An Introduction

Mark D. Thompson

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With deep gratitude
to my colleagues, past and present,
on the faculty of Moore Theological College, Sydney

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Series Preface

The ancient Greek thinker Heraclitus reputedly said that the thinker has to listen to the essence of things. A series of theological studies dealing with the traditional topics that make up systematic theology needs to do just that. Accordingly, in each of these studies, a theologian addresses the essence of a doctrine. This series thus aims to present short studies in theology that are attuned to both the Christian tradition and contemporary theology in order to equip the church to faithfully understand, love, teach, and apply what God has revealed in Scripture about a variety of topics. What may be lost in comprehensiveness can be gained through what John Calvin, in the dedicatory epistle of his commentary on Romans, called "lucid brevity."

Of course, a thorough study of any doctrine will be longer rather than shorter, as there are two millennia of confession, discussion, and debate with which to interact. As a result, a short study needs to be more selective but deftly so. Thankfully, the contributors to this series have the ability to be brief yet accurate. The key aim is that the simpler is not to morph into the simplistic. The test is whether the topic of a short study, when further studied in depth, requires some unlearning to take place. The simple can be amplified. The simplistic needs to be corrected. As editors, we believe that the volumes in this series pass that test.

While the specific focus varies, each volume (1) introduces the doctrine, (2) sets it in context, (3) develops it from Scripture, (4) draws the various threads together, and (5) brings it to bear on the Christian life. It is our prayer, then, that this series will assist the church to delight in her triune God by thinking his thoughts—which he has graciously revealed in his written word, which testifies to his living Word, Jesus Christ—after him in the powerful working of his Spirit.

Graham A. Cole and Oren R. Martin

Preface

Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, who would later pay for his Christian discipleship with his life in the turbulence of the sixteenth century, once asked, "How can anyone then say that they profess Christ and his religion, if they will not apply themselves, as far as they can or may conveniently, to read and hear, and so to know, the books of Christ's gospel and doctrine?"[1] Cranmer understood that following Christ involves living under the authority of his teaching, which comes to us in the Bible. The Bible is not an optional extra for Christians. Reading the Bible, or hearing it read (and expounded), is a serious business. The reason for that lies in convictions about what the Bible is and how it functions in the world, but, even more basically, in a confidence in the goodness of the one who has given us "God's word written," as Cranmer would name it elsewhere.[2]

Yet today it seems that such confidence is on the wane, and in many places those convictions have been discarded. Under relentless assault over the past two and a half centuries—from skeptical philosophy, scientific positivism, and more recently moral and ethical revisionism—the Bible is increasingly

1. Thomas Cranmer, "A Fruitful Exhortation to the Reading and Knowledge of Holy Scripture," in *Certain Sermons or Homilies Appointed to Be Read in Churches in the Time of Queen Elizabeth of Famous Memory* (repr., London: SPCK, 1864), 1. I have modernized the language a little from the Edwardian English of Cranmer.

2. Article 20 of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion.

displaced by other authorities. The voices of personal experience and the present cultural consensus appear to command more attention from many Christians. As this happens, the churches to which they belong, and in many cases lead, become an anemic reflection of the wider community's preoccupations and convictions.[3] As the German pietist Johann Albrecht Bengel wrote almost three hundred years ago, our attitude toward the Bible is a fairly reliable measure of the strength and faithfulness of the church:

> Scripture is the foundation of the Church: the Church is the guardian of Scripture. When the Church is in strong health, the light of Scripture shines bright; when the Church is sick, Scripture is corroded by neglect; and thus it happens, that the outward form of Scripture and that of the Church, usually seem to exhibit simultaneously either health or else sickness; and as a rule the way in which Scripture is being treated is in exact correspondence with the condition of the Church.[4]

It is my prayer that fresh attention to the Christian doctrine of Scripture in books like this one will, by God's grace, strengthen our conviction that the Bible is the word of the living God, completely reliable, powerful, and effective in all it teaches. It is the instrument the Spirit uses to change lives and to direct them in fruitful discipleship. We need a bold new con-

3. Some fascinating voices have protested the eclipse of the Bible. Czeslaw Milosz, an American-Polish poet and Nobel laureate, wrote, "The scriptures constitute the common good of believers, agnostics and atheists." Milosz, *Widzenia nad Zatoka San Francisco* (Paris: Insitytut Literacki, 1969), translated in Clive James, *Cultural Amnesia: Notes in the Margin of My Time* (London: Picador, 2007),486. James himself goes on to say, "You can be a non-believer, however, and still be amazed at how even the believers are ready to let the Bible go" (488).

4. Johann. A. Bengel, *Gnomon of the New Testament*, trans. and ed. Andrew R. Forrest, 5 vols. (Edinburgh: Clark, 1857–1858), 1:7. The English translation was modified in Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981), 7.

fidence that God is good and the word he has given us is a good gift to us.

What you have in your hands is not really an apologetic book, defending once again the reliability and relevance of the Bible. As Charles Spurgeon once quipped, "The answer to every objection against the Bible is the Bible."[5] Rather, the current work is intended as a theological account of Scripture, one that at each point relates it to the person and character of the God who has given it. I write as an unapologetic enthusiast for the Bible. I find the account I will sketch in the following pages compelling. Alongside this, though, I can testify that in the pages of Scripture I have been repeatedly addressed by my heavenly Father; confronted with the grace, mercy, and unparalleled authority of Jesus my Savior; and ministered to (with both comfort and challenge) by the Holy Spirit. The Christian doctrine of Scripture explains why this is so.

I am grateful to those who asked me to contribute to the Short Studies in Systematic Theology series. I am also grateful to generations of students at Moore Theological College and elsewhere, whose questions have sharpened my thinking on the subject and so prepared me for this assignment. I owe a particular debt to those I have served alongside, in the past and in the present, in the wonderful privilege of training the next generation of pastors and teachers. We share the conviction that what the world needs at this moment is men and women who have been mastered by the word of God and who will expend every ounce of energy they have to share that life-giving word with others as they direct people to Jesus. The Bible both challenges the world and nourishes Christ's disciples.

5. Charles Spurgeon, "Speech at the Annual Meeting of the British and Foreign Bible Society, May 5th 1875," in *Speeches by C. H. Spurgeon at Home and Abroad* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1878), 17.

Introduction

How Do We Give an Account of the Doctrine of Scripture?

In most Christian churches, whether Catholic or Protestant, Western or Eastern Orthodox, traditional or contemporary, the Bible has a central place. It is read out loud, expounded in sermons, discussed in small group meetings. In seminaries around the world, the curriculum includes a study of the biblical text, often in the languages in which it was originally given: Hebrew, Aramaic, and *Koinē* Greek. Commentaries on each book of the Bible continue to be published at an astonishing rate. More academic treatises and dissertations have been written about the Bible or parts of the Bible than about any other literary text.

The Bible has captivated the imaginations of Christians through the centuries. Augustine, the fifth-century bishop of Hippo Regis, wrote, "Holy Scripture, indeed, speaks in such a way as to mock proud readers with its heights, terrify the attentive with its depths, feed great souls with its truth, and nourish little ones with its sweetness."[1] Martin Luther, the sixteenth-century

1. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 5.3.6, trans. John Hammond Taylor (New York: Newman, 1982), 150.

Reformer, took his courageous stand at Worms on the teaching of Scripture: "I consider myself conquered by the Scriptures adduced by me and my conscience is captive to the word of God."[2] His highly influential contemporary John Calvin wrote, "No one can get even the slightest taste of right and sound doctrine unless he be a pupil of Scripture."[3] Across the channel, English archbishop Thomas Cranmer wrote, "Unto a Christian man there can be nothing either more necessary or profitable than the knowledge of holy Scripture. . . . [In it] is fully contained what we ought to do and what to eschew, what to believe, what to love, and what to look for at God's hands at length."[4] Karl Barth, one of the major theological voices of the twentieth century, once wrote, "Christianity has always been and only been a living religion when it is not ashamed to be actually and seriously a book-religion."[5] Famously, when quizzed about what was "the most momentous discovery of his long theological life, he replied 'Jesus loves me, this I know *for the Bible tells me so*.'"[6]

Why has there been such a sustained interest in this book, or anthology of books, over two thousand years? Why have men and women expended such energy to study it and teach it to others? Why were some, such as William Tyndale, willing to risk their lives by translating the Bible into the common tongue or by smuggling Bibles into places where there was no freedom of religion? Why are some today seeking with such ferocity to

2. Martin Luther, "Luther at Worms (1521)," in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 66 vols. to date (St. Louis: Concordia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1955–), 32:112.

3. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.6.2.

4. Thomas Cranmer, "A Fruitful Exhortation to the Reading and Knowledge of Holy Scripture," in *Certain Sermons or Homilies Appointed to Be Read in Churches in the Time of Queen Elizabeth of Famous Memory* (repr., London: SPCK, 1864), 1, 2.

5. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. T. Thomson and H. Knight (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 1/2:495.

6. Martin Rumscheidt, "Epilogue," in Karl Barth, *Fragments Grave and Gay*, ed. Martin Rumscheidt, trans. Eric Mosbacher (London: Collins, 1971), 124 (emphasis added).

exclude the Bible from all public discourse? In sum, why has this book aroused such hostility among some and generated such devotion among others? Another book, the little book you now hold in your hands, gives an answer to those questions. That answer lies in the Christian doctrine of Scripture.

A Christian Doctrine of Scripture

The Christian doctrine of Scripture arises from the gospel of Jesus Christ. When the apostle Paul summarized the Christian message, listing what he described as the things "of first importance," he wrote "that Christ died for our sins *in accordance with the Scriptures*, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day *in accordance with the Scriptures*, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the twelve" (1 Cor. 15:3–5). The Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament, provide the essential context in which to understand what Jesus came to do and its significance. The New Testament, a product of the apostolic mission initiated by Jesus at his ascension (Matt. 28:18–20), unfolds the meaning, connections, and consequences of the gospel with fairly constant reference back to the Old Testament. The apostle Paul's little refrain "What does the Scripture say?" (Rom. 4:3; Gal. 4:30) is a very obvious example. Why was this appeal so important? What does it mean? What are its consequences for life now between the resurrection and the return, and even for life on the other side of that great day? These are generative questions for a Christian doctrine of Scripture.

Christian interest in, and even devotion to, the teaching of the Bible is integral to Christian discipleship. It is difficult to sustain the claim to be a disciple of Jesus Christ if we do not take the words he endorsed (the Old Testament) and those he commissioned (the New Testament) seriously. The Christian disciple adopts the same attitude toward the Bible as Jesus did.

As in all other areas of life, we seek to have "the mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:16; Phil. 2:5–8). The apostle Paul wrote to his protégé Timothy—with reference, first of all, to the Old Testament but, by reasonable extension, to the New Testament as well—that these are the "sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15).[7] We may come to faith with the barest knowledge of what the Bible teaches, for, after all, it is by being introduced to Jesus and trusting him that we receive eternal life (John 3:16). It is not long, however, before we discover that to know and understand Jesus as he is, and not just as we imagine him to be, we must understand the promises of God concerning him and what he came to do, the difference his coming makes to life now, and the proper dimensions of the hope that he has secured for us. So we who follow Jesus soon find ourselves reading and delighting in the Bible.

The importance of this perspective lies in the way it keeps Jesus at the center of a Christian doctrine of Scripture.[8] When this is done, there can be no question of a conflict between the authority of Jesus and the authority of the words we have been given in the Bible. Jesus is understood in the categories provided for him by the Old Testament. The great messianic titles attributed to Jesus ("Son of David," "Son of Man," "Son of God," "suffering servant," "Lord," etc.) all have Old Testa-

7. The basis for this "reasonable extension" lies in such things as Paul's use of a quote from Luke's Gospel alongside Deuteronomy in 1 Tim. 5:18 (following the introductory formula "For the Scripture says"), his encouragement to the Colossians to read his letter when they gather and then pass it on to other congregations (and to read the letters he had sent to others) in Col. 4:16, and the apostle Peter's description of Paul's letters (even those that might be "hard to understand") alongside "the other Scriptures" in 2 Pet. 3:16.

8. Among those who have made this point with great clarity and persuasive power were J. Gresham Machen, "Shall We Defend the Bible?," reprinted in *Things Unseen: A Systematic Introduction to the Christian Faith and Reformed Theology* (Glenside, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2020), 45–47; and John W. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 9–10.

ment origins or anticipations. The words of the apostles carry the authority of Jesus because they are his appointed witnesses and spokesmen. The preaching of the gospel by the apostles can even be described as "the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17; Col. 3:16). Jesus himself spoke of how everyone who "hears *these words of mine* and does them" builds his or her house upon a rock that can withstand the strongest storm (Matt. 7:24–25). Yet we have those words of Jesus only in the written words of the Gospels. Jesus spoke of how the Scriptures testify about him (John 5:39–40) and taught his disciples from all the Scriptures "the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27), yet our access even to these words of Jesus, and his reading of the Old Testament that shows it centers on him, is found only in the New Testament. Critical here, as Jesus made clear, is the work of the Holy Spirit, about whom Jesus promised the apostles: "He will . . . bring to remembrance all that I have said to you" (John 14:26); "he will take what is mine and declare it to you" (John 16:15).

In some contemporary Christian circles, a line is drawn between the personal authority of Jesus Christ and the authority of Scripture. It is even suggested that "we follow Jesus, not the Bible."[9] Yet such a separation cannot be sustained. We do not worship a book. That is true and has never seriously been contested in two thousand years of Christian history. Even William Chillingworth's famous (or, in some circles, infamous) declaration "The Bible, I say, the Bible only, is the Religion of Protestants" needs to be read in context, where it becomes clear that he was not suggesting such a separation.[10] It is the person, Jesus

9. "Christians are not those who believe in the Bible, but those who believe in Christ." John Barton, *People of the Book? The Authority of the Bible in Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1988), 83. Cf. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 295–96.

10. William Chillingworth, *The Religion of Protestants a Safe Way to Salvation* (London: Clarke, 1664), 335. See Mark D. Thompson, "The Sufficient Word," in "*Tend My*

of Nazareth, the Christ of Israel and the Savior of the world, in whom and through whom we worship the living God. He is the Word of God, with a capital *W*. Martin Luther once mused upon the various ways the expression "word of God" could be used: of the gospel faithfully made known to us through the words of the prophets and the preaching of the apostles, of the words of Scripture, and of the person of Jesus Christ. But, he reminded his dinner guests, only one of those is "in substance God."[11]

Nevertheless, the point remains that to take the person seriously we need to take seriously the words he has given us. Just as it is pointless to claim you are taking me seriously if you regularly dismiss what I have to say, or twist my words to mean something other than what I intended, or even refuse to listen in the first place—most of us have had an experience of something like this—so it is with Jesus Christ. It is because he endorsed the Old Testament and commissioned the apostles and their mission, which produced the New Testament, that taking the Bible seriously *is* taking Jesus seriously. Likewise, as we shall see, if it is the Spirit of God who spoke through the prophets and who is integral to the production of Scripture that is genuinely God-breathed, then taking the Bible seriously *is* taking the Spirit and his ministry seriously too. Jesus's promise to the apostles that he would send the Spirit to them stands alongside the commission he gave them to take his words to the end of the earth and the end of the age as the real source of the New Testament.

Too often throughout Christian history, in attempts to answer those who have doubts about the authority of Scripture,

Sheep": The Word of God and Pastoral Ministry, ed. Keith G. Condie (London: Latimer Trust, 2016), 27–44.

11. Luther said this kind of thing a number of times in his career, from his early Psalms lectures in 1515–1516 to conversation over dinner in 1540. *Luther's Works*, 10:220; 54:395. The expression "in substance God" comes from the later conversation.

Christian theologians have begun their discussions of the nature and use of the Bible elsewhere. Sometimes they have begun with a discussion of how we know, how we can (or even whether we can) know God, the nature of religious texts, or the confessional statements of a particular theological tradition. Others have begun in a more apologetic mode, discussing the reliability of the Bible in terms of its description of historical events, the fulfillment of prophecy, its powerful impact on those who have read it over the centuries, or its explanatory power when it comes to the world as we know and experience it. None of these approaches is outright wrong, but they can turn out to be counterproductive. The appeal to external authorities (philosophical, historical, or any other) can in fact undermine the claim being made that the Bible is the final authority in matters of faith and Christian living.

The appeal to the nature of religious texts and how they function within religious systems fails to appreciate the uniqueness of the Bible: it is not simply the Christian alternative to the Qur'an or the Bhagavad Gita. Even Judaism, though the traditional custodian of Old Testament revelation and faith, approaches the text of the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings in a way that is significantly different from the way Christians do. It is certainly possible and appropriate to enter into discussion of theological matters from a number of different starting points (e.g., the person and nature of God, the nature of the theological task, the biblical starting point in creation, or even the end to which all things are heading). However, starting with Jesus ensures a distinctive and determined *Christian* approach to the discussion and avoids the danger of generic statements and abstractions.

Abstraction carries with it a particular danger. It is important to make a careful distinction between the person, words,

and work of Jesus and the theological concept of incarnation. While a study of Jesus's person under the heading of *incarnation* is warranted on the basis of John 1:14 and is extremely useful in a range of contexts, the Christian doctrine of Scripture is even more closely anchored in what this person actually said. Too hasty an appeal to incarnational theology has led to dubious conclusions for the doctrine of Scripture.[12] The unity of divinity and humanity in the person of Jesus Christ is unique (as Luther recognized) and cannot, without significant qualification, be likened to the identity of God's word and the words of the human biblical authors.[13] Attentiveness to the pattern of Jesus's ministry, as well as what he in fact taught his apostles about the Scriptures of his time and about their future ministry, assists us in avoiding the danger of inappropriate inferences from the incarnation.

A Biblical Doctrine of Scripture

Such a commitment to a Christian starting point necessarily involves appeal to the text of the Bible itself. After all, as we have seen, we know the person, words, and work of Jesus through the testimony of the biblical text, with only brief corroborative statements in other nearly contemporary texts, such as those by the Roman historian Publius Cornelius Tacitus (AD 56–120), the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (AD 37–100), and the Governor of Bithynia, Pliny the Younger (AD 61–112).[14] Jesus

12. E.g., Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005).

13. "There is no hypostatic union between the Divine and the human in Scripture; we cannot parallel the 'inscripturation' of the Holy Spirit and the incarnation of the Son of God." Benjamin B. Warfield, "Inspiration," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr (Chicago: Howard-Severance, 1915), 1473–83; reprinted as "The Biblical Idea of Inspiration," in Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), 162.

14. Tacitus, *Annals of Imperial Rome* 15.44. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.3.3 (disputed) and 20.9.1. Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 10.96.

himself made a clear appeal to the Old Testament in the face of the Pharisees' refusal to come to him—"You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me" (John 5:39)—and he commissioned the apostles to be his witnesses "in Jerusalem and in all Judaea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). We turn to the Bible to learn of Jesus, and it is the Jesus we find there who provides us with the appropriate attitude toward the Bible.

Yet are we simply arguing in a circle? The argument appears to boil down to this: the Bible is the word of God because in the Bible Jesus says it is, and the Bible's testimony to Jesus's position on this is authoritative because it is the word of God. The logic is flawed, it is sometimes argued, because it assumes the conclusion from the beginning. However, this charge of vicious circular reasoning can be answered on a number of levels.

First, as many have made clear, a degree of circularity is inevitable when we are arguing about final authorities. The rationalist argues for the ultimate authority of reason by using reason. The experientialist points to experience as the ultimate validation of the appeal to experience. As John Frame has written, "All systems of thought are circular in a sense when they seek to defend their ultimate criterion of truth," and "no system can avoid circularity, because all systems . . . —non-Christian as well as Christian—are based on presuppositions that control their epistemologies, argumentation, and use of evidence."[15] Not all circular arguments are vicious; that is, they don't all undermine their conclusion, especially when they are this kind

15. John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 734; Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), 130: "Circularity in a system is properly justified *only* at one point: in an argument for the *ultimate* criterion of the system."

of argument.[16] As Frame wrote in another place, "One cannot abandon one's basic authority in the course of arguing for it!"[17]

Second, the nature of the Bible as we have it needs to be taken into account. While we rightly speak of the Bible as a single work with an overarching narrative, a central figure, and a single primary author, it is at the same time a collection of writings from different human authors written over an extended period. Close examination also reveals a variety of genres (law, proverb, poetry, prophecy, epistle, and apocalyptic vision, as well as historical narrative), highlighting those multiple voices and perspectives that make up the whole. There is a texture and depth to the Bible, which raises questions about any suggestion that its self-testimony is viciously circular. An appeal to the Bible is in fact an appeal to the promises recorded in Genesis, played out in the history of Israel recorded centuries later, alluded to and reaffirmed by the prophets writing later still, with the poetic voice of David and the wise sayings of Solomon brought alongside at appropriate moments. It is an appeal to the New Testament fulfillment of that Old Testament promise and anticipation in the record of the life and ministry of Jesus, his words (and in some cases those of his opponents), and the words of his commissioned missionaries and spokesmen.

The New Testament stands in deep continuity with the Old, and yet with its own distinctive contribution. There is more in the fulfillment than might appear at first glance in the promise. The person of Jesus Christ and the apostolic mission to the nations certainly make sense against the backdrop of the Old

16. Philosopher John Greco has explored the issue of circularity more generally and in relation to the "agent reliabilism" associated with Laurence BonJour. John Greco, *Putting Skeptics in Their Place: The Nature of Skeptical Arguments and Their Role in Philosophical Inquiry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 186.

17. John M. Frame, "Review of Wenham's *Christ and the Bible*," *Banner of Truth Magazine* 118/119 (July–Aug. 1973): 40.

Testament but go beyond it in significant ways. The reality is bigger, better, and brighter than the anticipation. Jesus as the Messiah draws together several threads of Old Testament promise and prophecy and, in so doing, transcends any one of them. He is the great high priest who is also the sacrificial victim; the conquering King who is also the suffering servant; the prophet, like Moses, who speaks the words God gave him but is also the central focus and content of those words. In the Old Testament the nations are drawn to worship the Lord at Mount Zion (Ps. 86:9; Mic. 4:2—mission in a centripetal mode), while in the New Testament Jesus's disciples are thrust out to the ends of the earth (Matt. 28:18–20; Acts 1:8—mission in a centrifugal mode). Yet the differences Jesus brings make perfect sense and are even anticipated in the Old Testament itself (e.g., Gen. 12:3; Jonah).

In the New Testament too, various distinctive tones and emphases can be discerned. The voices of Peter, Paul, John, James, and the unnamed writer to the Hebrews have their own distinct timbres. Particular emphases and characteristic patterns of thought can be relatively easily discerned. A rich unity of focus and purpose across the entire New Testament exists alongside undeniable variety in expression and specific concern. The four Gospels present the person and ministry of Jesus from particular perspectives with subtle differences of interest and emphasis in the same events that one would expect of eyewitnesses. Eyewitness testimony from the apostles about Jesus (Matthew, Mark, John) sits alongside the results of careful investigation and research by one closely associated with the apostles (Luke).[18] Peter had particular concerns as he

18. The Gospel of Mark follows the pattern of Peter's preaching and, since at least the time of Papias, has been considered a summary of Peter's eyewitness recollections of Jesus's life and ministry. Luke, on the other hand, was a traveling companion of the apostle Paul. P. W. Barnett, *Jesus and the Logic of History* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press,

wrote his letters, but as he expressed those concerns he also testified to the importance of Paul's writings (2 Pet. 3:16). It is still perfectly appropriate to speak about "the New Testament" as a unit, just as it is to speak about "the Bible" or "Scripture," but it is also important to realize that any appeal to Scripture is both an appeal to one voice and to many complementary voices. We see this phenomenon in the New Testament itself. Jesus could speak of how "Scripture" would be fulfilled (Luke 4:21; 22:37), but, as we have seen, he could also speak about the words of Moses (Matt. 4:1–11) and the words of the prophet Isaiah (Matt. 13:14). In time the apostle Paul too would cite individual biblical authors (Rom. 9:25, 27, 29) but also ask, "What does the Scripture say?" (Rom. 4:3; Gal. 4:30).

Third, an appeal to the authority of Scripture, even in the exposition of a doctrine of Scripture, is, as N. T. Wright has observed, an appeal ultimately to the authority of God.[19] If God addresses us in the words of Scripture, it is his testimony to the nature, place, and use of the Bible that we hear there. John Calvin considered Scripture to be "self-authenticated" (*autopiston*) and affirmed that "the certainty it deserves with us, it attains by the testimony of the Holy Spirit."[20] A page earlier he had written (echoing the words of the fourth-century bishop Hilary of Poitiers):

> The testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason. For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his

1997), 148–49; Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 202–38.

19. "The phrase 'authority of scripture' can only make Christian sense if it is a shorthand for 'the authority of the triune God, exercised somehow *through* scripture." N. T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God* (London: SPCK, 2005), 17. I leave aside the problems with Wright's way of putting this and how he develops this idea. See D. A. Carson, "Three More Books on the Bible: A Critical Review," *Trinity Journal* 27, no. 1 (2006): 1–62; reprinted as "Three Books on the Bible: A Critical Review," in Carson, *Collected Writings on Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 299–300.

20. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.7.5.

> Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men's hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what has been divinely commanded.[21]

A Christian doctrine of Scripture is inevitably a biblical doctrine of Scripture. As John Webster once wrote about Christian doctrine more generally:

> Theology is exegesis because its matter is Jesus Christ as he communicates himself through Holy Scripture. And so attention to Holy Scripture is not only necessary but also—in a real sense—a sufficient condition for theology, because Scripture itself is not only necessary but sufficient.[22]

As we embark on our investigation of the Christian doctrine of Scripture, it is right and proper that the words of Scripture are not simply in the background stimulating our reflections, but surely and confidently in the foreground. The trajectory of Scripture, to and then from Christ, needs to be followed if our theological investigation is going to be properly disciplined by Scripture. Understanding our place in God's timetable, from Genesis to Revelation, from the Old Testament to the New Testament, from promise to fulfillment, guards us against misreading and misapplying the biblical text. In this important sense, the discipline of biblical theology is the necessary companion of a faithful, coherent, and convincing systematic theology.

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21. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.7.4. The allusion is to words from Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 1.18: "Let us concede to God the knowledge about Himself, and let us humbly submit to His words with reverent awe. For He is a competent witness for Himself who is not known except by Himself." Hilary of Poitiers, *The Trinity*, trans. Stephen McKenna (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1968), 18.

22. John Webster, "Reading the Bible: The Example of Barth and Bonhoeffer," in *Word and Church: Essays in Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 110.

A Theological Doctrine of Scripture

As an exercise in systematic theology, the Christian doctrine of Scripture must find its ultimate anchor in the person and work of the triune God. The ancient definition of theology as "the study of God and of all things in relation to God" is as relevant here as elsewhere.[23] It is right to begin with Jesus Christ, who is, after all, the centerpiece and fulfillment of God's purpose in creation, redemption, and the regeneration of all things. Just as all things come into existence through him and reach their fulfillment in him, they cannot exist in the interim independently of him. That extends to the Scriptures as much as anything else. It is appropriate, then, that our doctrine of Scripture has this Christocentric character.

However, Jesus Christ is revealed to us in Scripture as the beloved Son of the Father and the one who uniquely comes among us in the power of the Holy Spirit. All that Jesus does and says arises in this context, and so our doctrine of Scripture must find its ultimate ground in the being and activity of the triune God. "As Father, Son and Spirit, God freely discloses his being and ways to his creatures as part of the saving economy of divine mercy."[24]

Scripture does not comment upon the economy of creation, redemption, and regeneration from outside of it. The written word is itself part of that economy: the nature, character, and function of Scripture are determined, ultimately, by "God's gracious turn towards creation in the missions of the

23. This simple definition goes back at least to Aquinas (*Summa theologica* Ia.1,3) and has been revitalized in recent years by John Webster, "On the Theology of the Intellectual Life," in *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology*, vol. 2, *Virtue and Intellect* (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 141.

24. John Webster, "The Dogmatic Location of the Canon," in *Word and Church*, 26. As Stephen Fowl insists, "Scripture needs to be understood in the light of a doctrine of revelation that itself flows from Christian convictions about God's triune life." Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 13.

Son and Spirit."[25] God's self-revelation is an expression of the same other-centeredness that explains his action in creation and redemption. He created human beings to know him and revealed himself to them throughout biblical history, but fully and finally in his Son, with the purpose of redeeming a people to enjoy his rest. More than that, as we shall see, Scripture as the written word of God has a role to play in the life of God's people that is neither peripheral nor dispensable. Attentiveness to the teaching of Scripture is attentiveness to the direction of the God who has created and redeemed us. Turning aside from, refusing to listen to, or simply disobeying God's word has serious consequences. This is because, as Peter Jensen puts it, "the Scriptures constitute not only a sufficient revelation of God's mind and purposes, but a unique instrument of our relationship with him."[26] This is simply to say that the Bible is not just *a* written word; it is "the word *of God*," and, once again, it is Jesus Christ himself who points us in this direction.

A doctrine of Scripture in this mode—Christ-focused, biblically shaped, and grounded in the person and work of the triune God—need not be defensive, constantly looking over its shoulder and preoccupied with apologetic concerns. It can be more confident than has often been the case, adopting an important Reformation and post-Reformation axiom that might be paraphrased as "theology is more concerned with proclamation than with proof."[27] Its preliminary question is not so much *whether* God has made himself known in human words or even *if it is possible* for God to make himself known

25. Brent A. Rempel, "'A Field of Divine Activity': Divine Aseity and Holy Scripture in Dialogue with John Webster and Karl Barth," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 73, no. 3 (2020): 204.

26. Peter F. Jensen, "God and the Bible," in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 478.

27. More literally, "Theology is not a demonstrative, but an exhibitive habit." Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), 303.

in human words, but *what in fact is involved* in God making himself known in human words. That is not to say that the various challenges to the Christian doctrine should be ignored or quickly glossed over, as if they were not serious or important. Yet they do not shape the doctrine. Systematic theology and apologetics are related but distinct disciplines.

For these reasons, then, as we turn to such an "exhibition" of the Christian doctrine of Scripture, we begin neither at the beginning nor at the end but in the middle, with the person, words, and work of Jesus Christ, God's Son incarnate and the Savior of the world.

1

Jesus and Scripture

The Christian Starting Point for Understanding Revelation and the Bible

The centerpiece of God's revelation of himself is Jesus Christ. The God who created all things and sustains all things has always intended that his own person, character, will, and purposes would be made known most clearly and most fully in and through his Son.

Of course, God was under no compulsion to make himself known. The eternal fellowship of Father, Son, and Spirit is perfectly self-sufficient and needs no one. His is the only truly independent life. He has "life in himself," as Jesus put it (John 5:26). Yet it is thoroughly consistent with his character as self-giving and self-communicating in that eternal fellowship of being that he should choose to make himself known to his creatures. In Kevin Vanhoozer's words, "God is never more himself than when he is going out of himself

in love—communicating for the sake of communion."[1] What is more, it is entirely fitting that the Father should relate to us primarily by his Son. As the apostle Paul confessed to the Colossians: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him" (Col. 1:15–16). The uniqueness of the Son's relation to creation in the eternal purposes of God explains why he is the person who became incarnate (and not the Father or the Spirit), but it also explains why he is the appropriate avenue for God's full and final revelation of himself. The apostle John would make the same point in different words:

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. . . .
>
> And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. . . . No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. (John 1:1–3, 14, 18)

From the beginning, God intended the Son to be at the very heart of his dealings with creation. As God the Son incarnate, Jesus Christ is the one mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5). That is not to say that God did not or could not relate to the creation prior to the coming of Jesus. Yet, with a note of finality and alluding to a long period of preparation and antici-

1. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 271.

pation, the author of Hebrews wrote, "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (1:1–2). From the time that final word was "spoken," there is no going back, as if the Son had not come and he did not embody the fullness of God's revelation and purpose. He is the way we know God and how God relates to all things. Theology is possible because of him. Through him we are enabled to see all that has come before him in the light of its proper destination, and all things that have come after him in the light of his life, work, and future.

The Son's unique relation *to the creation* is the reason why it is fitting for him to be the one who makes God known. Yet the Son's unique relation *to the Father* is the reason why he can effectively make the Father known to creatures.[2] John made this point with his reference to "the only God, who is at the Father's side," who "has made him known" (John 1:18). Jesus himself would insist that "no one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6) and then would validate that claim by pointing again to the absolutely unique relation he has to the Father—"I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (John 14:9–11). In Paul's idiom, this becomes "in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col. 2:9); in that of the writer to the Hebrews, "he is . . . the exact imprint of his nature" (1:3). Perhaps the critical piece of testimony, though—once again from Jesus's lips, but this time recorded by Matthew—is this: "All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (11:27).

2. Kevin Vanhoozer rightly ties these two together when he writes, "The Son is the focal point of the intra-Trinitarian as well as the divine-human dialogue." Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 270.

It is highly significant, and deeply moving, that these words should be followed immediately by Jesus's invitation "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). Coming to Jesus is coming to the Father. Those who refused to come to Jesus, he made plain, did so because they did not know his Father (John 7:28). Among the many monumental consequences of that truth is that Jesus's attitude toward men and women, the world, and even the Scriptures is the attitude commended to us by God. Once again we can see why Jesus—who he is, what he did, and what he said—rightly stands at the center of our doctrine of Scripture.

So what was Jesus's attitude toward the Scriptures? The Gospels provide us with ample testimony to how Jesus viewed and used the Old Testament, as well as how he treated the words of his commissioned spokesmen, the apostles.

The Final Appeal in Matters of Faith and Faithful Living

Jesus began his public ministry after his baptism by John the Baptist and his testing in the wilderness. It is noteworthy that at both points, at the baptism and as he headed into the wilderness, the Holy Spirit was active, and the principal question raised by the narrative was the identity of Jesus as the Son of God (Matt. 3:16–17; 4:1, 3, 6). In this way our attention is drawn to the significance of these events. The identification of Jesus as the beloved Son and the one who came to do the will of his Father is something in which Father, Son, and Spirit are inseparably united. Jesus is declared to be the Son of God by the Father himself and is attested as such by the anointing and leading work of the Spirit.

The testing in the wilderness is one of the first great demonstrations of Jesus's attitude toward the Old Testament Scriptures. It mirrors the testing of Israel in the wilderness following

the exodus and, even more importantly, the testing of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. Will Jesus trust that God's word is a good word? Will he be attentive enough to that word to resist a manipulation and distortion of it in the interests of another agenda? This testing takes place in the wake of the voice from heaven declaring, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). So it is unsurprising that the challenge from the tempter begins, "*If* you are the Son of God . . ." (Matt. 4:3). It is the same tactic the tempter used in the garden: casting doubt upon the words God has spoken, which involves casting doubt upon the motive of God in speaking those words, and finally proposing an alternative word and an alternative course of action. Will Jesus trust the word he heard when he rose out of the Jordan? Where will he turn when that word is under assault?

Adam, Eve, and the Israelites in the wilderness all failed the test of trusting the word God had given them. They succumbed to doubt about the goodness of God's word and placed their trust in another word. Yet at each point, Jesus responded to the tempter's suggestions and his misuse of Scripture with an appeal to the written word: "It is written . . . ," he countered all three times. It is obvious that as far as Jesus was concerned, the written words he quoted settled the question at hand. He turned to the Old Testament Scriptures to establish that God's words nourish the life of faith, that testing God is inimical to that faith, and that God himself is the only true object of faith and worship. Put simply, the words of Scripture reveal what is really true. They determine the faithful response of one who knows the Father.

Such an appeal to the words written in Scripture was a regular pattern in Jesus's ministry. Scripture settled the matter of John the Baptist's identity (Matt. 11:10). Scripture unmasked

what was happening at the temple, where the merchants and money changers had created "a den of robbers" (Matt. 21:13). Scripture foretold the behavior of the disciples on the night Jesus was betrayed (Matt. 26:24, 31). When Jesus was challenged about the behavior of his own disciples, he appealed to what was written about David and his men in Scripture (Matt. 12:3). In the midst of debate with the Pharisees about the grounds for divorce, Jesus pointed them to God's intention from the beginning, quoting the words of Genesis 2: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (v. 24).

On one occasion, when an expert in the Jewish law came to test Jesus by asking, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 10:25), Jesus's first recourse was again to what stands written in Scripture. "What is written in the Law?" Jesus asked him. "How do you read it?" (Luke 10:26). The lawyer responded by reciting a summary of the two dimensions of the law, a combination of words taken from Deuteronomy and Leviticus: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). Jesus both affirmed his answer and reinforced the point by his parable of the good Samaritan. That parable exposed the distance between the lawyer's confession and his practice. For Jesus, questions of faith and faithful discipleship are settled by God's word.

Appeal to Scripture as the Context for Jesus's Self-Understanding and Ministry

Of particular importance is the way in which Jesus appealed to the Old Testament in support of his own identity and to explain his ministry. Very early in his ministry, in Luke's account im-

mediately following the testing in the wilderness, Jesus attended the synagogue at Nazareth and read from the scroll of Isaiah the prophet. When he had sat down, he announced, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). Jesus was locating his ministry against the backdrop of the messianic promises of Isaiah 61. God had at last sent the one who would proclaim good news, freedom, recovery, and the year of the Lord's favor.

From the start Jesus understood all that he was doing as the fulfillment of what had been promised in the Scriptures. This fulfillment motif was not just something added in editorial comments in the Gospels (as in Matt. 1:22; 2:15; 8:17; John 19:24, 28; etc.) or in later commentary by the apostles (as in Acts 1:6; 3:18; 13:27, 33; etc.). It was found again and again on the lips of Jesus. He began his earthly ministry by preaching, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). He summarized his teaching ministry as not overturning the Law and the Prophets but rather fulfilling them (Matt. 5:17). Even the varied responses to the word he had "sown" were a fulfillment of prophecy (Matt. 13:14, citing Isa. 6:9–10).

Jesus did not treat the fulfillment of Scripture as incidental or simply secondary confirmations of the significance of what he came to do. Especially in connection with his death and resurrection, there was a certain divine necessity to the events that were unfolding, tied to the words of the Old Testament. In his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus told him, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so *must* the Son of Man be lifted up" (John 3:14). Jesus saw himself as the one to whom that strange episode in Israel's history had been pointing all along. Just as the Israelites could not save themselves but needed to look at the bronze snake and live—God providing

a means of rescue and life in the face of his own judgment (Num. 21:4–9)—so now, when God's full and final provision for rescue had come, those who would be saved must look not to themselves but to "the Son of Man." Yet, in order for that to happen, this Son of Man "must be lifted up."

Just before his arrest in the garden, Jesus sought to prepare his disciples for what was about to happen by speaking of it in these terms. At his Last Supper with the disciples, he explained what was about to happen in the categories provided by the Passover and the deliverance from Egypt recorded in Exodus, as well as Jeremiah's prophecy concerning the new covenant. As Jesus shared the bread and the wine in the customary way in which Jews remembered the Passover each year, he said, "This is my body," and "this is my blood of the [new] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26:26, 28). His death was to be a substitution, like that of the Passover lamb (Ex. 12).[3] His death was to effect a deliverance, just as occurred in the exodus from Egypt (Ex. 15).[4] His death was a sealing of God's new covenant, with its central blessing of the forgiveness of sins (Jer. 31).

It was Jesus (and not just his followers reflecting on these events) who pointed to the particulars of his death and resurrection as fulfillments of the words of Scripture. It was Scripture (Ps. 41:9) that foretold the betrayal by one of his own disciples (John 13:18). Scripture (Pss. 35:19; 69:4) spoke of the unjustified hatred that would be the motive of those who moved against him (John 15:24). The prophet Isaiah (53:12) had prophesied that the suffering servant would be "numbered with the transgressors" (Luke 22:37). No wonder that after the resurrection, in conversation with the two disciples who were

3. The apostle Paul would later say this explicitly in 1 Cor. 5:7.

4. In fact, at the transfiguration, Moses and Elijah were heard discussing with Jesus the "exodus" he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem (Luke 9:31).

traveling on the road to Emmaus, Jesus would remark: "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken. Was it not *necessary* that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" (Luke 24:25–26; see also 46). When he told the Pharisees that the Scriptures bore witness about him (John 5:39), it was not simply in some general sense but in the particulars of what he had come to be and do. Yet he also understood that there is a central unifying purpose to the whole of the Old Testament: to testify to what God was doing in and through him. So, famously, on the road to Emmaus, Jesus taught the disciples from all the Scriptures "the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). Understanding and following Jesus necessarily involves careful attention to the words of the Old Testament.

Jesus's Identification of Scripture as the Word of God

Jesus treated the Old Testament as the word of God that should direct the life of his people. Yet, did he ever directly identify it as such? He certainly spoke of his own words as words given to him by his Father (John 8:28; 12:49; 17:8, 14). He cited words from the Old Testament—words that in context are not directly the speech of God but the human writer's summary of its import—as words that God has spoken and that thus bear God's authority (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:4–5). Yet on several occasions he was more explicit. In debate with the Pharisees over the tradition of *Corban*, which allowed duties to one's parents to be overridden by religious vows, Jesus cited the fifth commandment from Exodus 20:12, and accused the Pharisees of "making void *the word of God* by your tradition that you have handed down" (Mark 7:12–13). In the midst of his opponents' attempt to stone him because they understood him to be "making himself God" (John 10:33), Jesus challenged them with the

words of Psalm 82:6 and then asked, "If he called them gods to whom *the word of God* came—and *Scripture* cannot be broken—do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'?" (John 10:35–36). In this context Jesus used the expressions "word of God" and "Scripture" interchangeably. In the same vein, in debate with the Sadducees about the resurrection, Jesus asked, "Have you not read what was *said to you by God*," and then went on to quote words from Exodus 3:6 (Matt. 22:31). The very strength of Jesus's argument relies upon a conviction he expected the Sadducees shared with him: that what they *read* was *said* to them by God. God's words are conveyed audibly and in written form, and both have an authority that ought to have shaped their thinking as well as their practice.

This observation does not simply demonstrate the organic link Jesus saw between the spoken and written word of God. It also makes clear to us again that Jesus did not see himself as an alternative to the teaching of the Old Testament. Even in the so-called "antitheses" of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 ("you have heard it said . . . but I say to you"), he did not lay aside the teaching of the Old Testament. Instead, he exposed a misuse of the words of the Law to mask a refusal to take seriously their meaning and intent. The words that God has given, which Jesus came to fulfill and which will not pass away "until all is accomplished" (Matt. 5:18), leave no room for hypocrisy and self-justification.

Of course, Jesus understood that his coming ushered in a new age, and some of the words of the Old Testament had served their purpose now that he had arrived. He understood God's timetable: "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15). So Jesus declared all foods clean (Mark 7:19). The strict dietary regulations of the old cove-

nant had served their purpose and would not be appropriate once the distinction between Jew and Gentile was torn down. That distinction itself had also served its purpose. Now that the Jewish Messiah had come as the Savior of the world (John 4:42), and the mission to the nations was about to begin (John 12:20–21), the last stage in the fulfillment of the ancient promise to Abraham was unfolding before their eyes. As Jesus cried from the cross, "It is finished" (John 19:30), the curtain of the temple was torn from top to bottom (Matt. 27:51). The Old Testament sacrificial system was no longer necessary. It had served its purpose and its fulfillment had arrived.

Yet in each of these examples the plan and purpose of God remained, now on display in a full and more direct way. The shadow had given way to the reality (Col. 2:17; Heb. 10:1). Nevertheless, the expression of God's priorities, what he values and what he considers abhorrent, the revelation of God's character and what he has intended from the beginning—all given to his people in his written word—this is not changed or eclipsed by his coming. The link between Jesus the Word of God and Scripture as the word of God is unbreakable and mutually illuminating.

By both implication and direct identification, Jesus treated the Old Testament as the word of God. Its words are the words God has given to his people, and as such they bear his authority. Yet Jesus did not treat Scripture as something that had fallen from heaven untouched by human hands.

Jesus on the "Double Agency" of Scripture

Jesus recognized God as the primary author of Scripture. He identified the sacred texts as the word of God. Yet he also recognized that human authors were consciously and creatively involved in the production of these texts. This word of God was

at the same time the word of Moses, David, Isaiah, or Daniel. Jesus could speak in general terms of how Moses "wrote of me" (John 5:46). More specifically he spoke of "the gift that Moses commanded" (Matt. 8:4, with reference to Lev. 14), what "Moses allowed" (Matt. 19:7, with reference to Deut. 24), the command that Moses had given (Mark 7:10, with reference to Ex. 20:12 and 21:17), and what Moses had demonstrated (Luke 20:37, with reference to an allusion to the resurrection in Ex. 3:6). At no point was Jesus denying the authority of these texts as the word of God, yet he could, without embarrassment or necessary qualification, refer to them as the work of Moses.

Similarly, Jesus spoke of what "David himself says in the Book of Psalms" (Luke 20:42, with reference to Ps. 110:1). He could rebuke the Pharisees and scribes who opposed him with the words "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you" (Mark 7:6), and then proceed to quote Isaiah 29:13. On another occasion (Matt. 13:14) he explained why he taught in parables by making reference to Isaiah 6:9–10. He warned his disciples of what was to come, using the enigmatic expression "spoken of by the prophet Daniel" (Matt. 24:15, with reference to "the abomination of desolation"; cf. Dan. 9:27).

Jesus did not explain in detail how this "double agency" of Scripture could be so.[5] The closest he came was a suggestive comment in Matthew 22, when he said that David "in the Spirit" calls the "son of David," the Messiah, "Lord" (vv. 42–43). The Spirit of God was involved as David penned the words of Psalm 110, and this is why these words can be spoken of as both David's words and God's.

5. The term "double agency" is used (and defended) in connection with Scripture by Nicholas Wolterstorff and Henri Blocher, among others. Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 38–42; Blocher, "God and the Scripture Writers: The Question of Double Authorship," in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 497–541.

Jesus and the Intelligibility of Scripture

Jesus's appeal to Scripture carried with it an implicit affirmation of the intelligibility or clarity of Scripture. If the meaning of Scripture were not clear, how could those who opposed him be expected to believe it or obey it? Yet time and again Jesus argued as if they should have read it, should have understood it, and should have both believed and obeyed it.

This was highlighted by his refrain "Have you not read . . . ?" with its implied rebuke that if they had read, then they would not have opposed Jesus. "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry?" Jesus asked when challenged about his disciples gleaning from a field on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:1–3). Similarly, "Have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless?" he asked (Matt. 12:5). When challenged on divorce, again he asked, "Have you not read . . . ?" and cited words from the account of creation in Genesis 2 (Matt. 19:3–9). As we have already noted, Jesus asked, "Have you not read . . . ?" when asked about the resurrection of the dead, and pointed his hearers to the account of the bush that did not burn in Exodus 3. At the end of the parable of the tenants (Mark 12:10), Jesus asked his hearers, "Have you not read . . . ?" and proceeded to quote Psalm 118:22–23. In every case, he expected the Scripture he was citing or quoting to settle the dispute, but this could be the case only if it was both accessible and intelligible.

Jesus understood that there was more than the clarity of the written text involved in the reception of the word. His parable of the sower indicated that the activity of the evil one, the trials and tribulations of life, the cares of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches could all interrupt hearing with understanding (Matt. 13:18–22). The reaction of the rich young man (Mark 10:17–22) is a tragic demonstration of the last of these

impediments to faithful hearing put into practice. Jesus's chief opponents, the Pharisees, prided themselves on their knowledge of Scripture and a consequent purity of life. Yet the frame of reference they brought to the text ensured they would not understand it. They treated the law as if it were concerned simply with easily circumscribed actions rather than with the intricacies of the sinful human heart (Matt. 5:20–48). They were distracted with religiosity and external minutiae, which meant they ignored "the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness" (Matt. 23:23).

As Jesus made clear with reference to his own words, the real reason they refused to hear was that their allegiance was elsewhere. "Why do you not understand what I say?" he asked. "It is because you cannot bear to hear my word" (John 8:43). And then a moment later, "Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God" (John 8:47). That contrary allegiance not only kept them from Jesus's words; it also kept them even from the words of Moses (John 5:46). It was what they brought to the text, rather than a lack of clarity in the text itself, that prevented them from hearing with understanding.

Yet Jesus indicated that two other factors had an impact on the way his words (including his appeal to the Old Testament) were received. On the one hand, some did not hear as a result of God's judgment. This is the point Jesus made when he explained why he spoke to the crowds in parables. The parables were indeed aids to understanding for his disciples and all who came to Jesus. Yet they were obstacles to understanding for those who refused to come. As Isaiah had prophesied long before, Jesus explained,

> This people's heart has grown dull,
> and with their ears they can barely hear,

> and their eyes have closed,
> lest they should see with their eyes
> and hear with their ears
> and understand with their heart
> and turn, and I would heal them. (Matt. 13:15)

Jesus quoted words that, in their original context, spoke of God's judgment upon hard-hearted Israel, which began with the challenge "keep on hearing, but do not understand; / keep on seeing, but do not perceive" (Isa. 6:9), and applied them to the unbelieving crowds of his own time. The things that Jesus was teaching were not obscure, but the crowds were kept from understanding them. The apostle Paul would talk about darkened minds, hardened hearts, and a yet-unlifted veil to explain the same reality (Rom. 1; 2 Cor. 4).

Yet, throughout the Gospels, Jesus's disciples themselves failed to understand his words, even though those words were given against the background of Old Testament promises familiar to them. In part, this was a timetable issue. As Jesus told them when washing their feet, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand" (John 13:7). He promised them the Spirit to "teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (John 14:26) and to "guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13). It was only after the resurrection, and more particularly when Jesus was glorified and the Spirit was given (John 7:39), that they really understood what Jesus had been teaching them. Prior to that they were often puzzled by what he was saying. Even after hearing Jesus predict for the third time his coming death and resurrection, the meaning "was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said" (Luke 18:34).

It was not, however, just a matter of timing. Understanding with faith requires not only a certain and clear text but also the

work of God in the life of the one who hears or reads the text. Once again it was Christ's apostle who would take this further when he explained the continuing Jewish opposition to the gospel: a veil lies over the hearts of those who are outside of Christ and "only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed" (2 Cor. 3:14–16).

Jesus and the Truthfulness of Scripture

Jesus was never indifferent to questions of truth. He told the Jews who had believed in him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31–32). His appeal to the Scriptures in his teaching and his debates with the religious leaders of his day would hardly have made sense unless he believed the Scriptures to be true, to teach the truth about God and the world, as well as the proper response to that truth. He told Pilate that he came into the world "to bear witness to the truth" (John 18:37); hours before, he had promised his disciples that he would send them (from the Father) the "Spirit of truth" (John 15:26).

For Jesus, the truthfulness of Scripture is sourced in the person and character of his Father, on the one hand, and the phenomenon of Scripture itself, on the other. God is impeccably true, and the word that proceeds from him bears that same character. So Jesus could say, "He who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him" (John 8:26; cf. 7:28). Jesus described himself as "a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God" (John 8:40). When he prayed for his disciples just prior to his arrest, Jesus asked, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17). Since that is so, Jesus consistently treated the Scriptures as utterly true,

whether in their presentation of God, his character and purposes, or in their account of the history of God's dealings with his people.

Jesus accepted the Old Testament's historical references as reliable and true. The people described there really did live, and they really did do the things the Scriptures said they did. He clearly distinguished between the characters and events of the Old Testament and the imaginary characters he created for his parables and similes of the kingdom. He regularly introduced his parables as parables, eliminating the need to ask which Samaritan was the Good Samaritan (Luke 10), who was that tax collector in the temple (Luke 18), or who was the man who had two sons (Luke 15). The similes had their own obvious markers—"the kingdom of heaven is like" (Matt. 13:44, 45, 47)—and sometimes the similes were parables (Matt. 13:31, 33). Yet Jesus's appeal to the Old Testament was more direct and did not need such signaling. He referred to events in Genesis with the clear assumption that in each case these things actually happened: the murder of Abel by his brother Cain (Matt. 23:35); Noah and the flood (Matt. 24:37); the judgment that fell on Sodom and the folly of Lot's wife (Luke 17:26–32). Jesus spoke similarly about events recorded in the historical and prophetic writings: David making use of the bread of the presence when he and his outcast followers were starving (Matt. 12:3–4); the wisdom of Solomon on display during the visit of the Queen of the South (Matt. 12:42); Elijah, the drought, and the widow of Zarephath (Luke 4:25–26); and Jonah's preaching mission to Nineveh and his time in the belly of the great fish (Matt. 12:39–41).

It is this twofold evidence—Jesus's sourcing scriptural truth in the character of God but also in what he found in the Old Testament texts themselves—that provides us with Jesus's attitude

toward the truthfulness of Scripture. However, no extended exposition of the concept of Scripture's truthfulness comes from the lips of Jesus in the Gospels. This ought not to surprise us. After all, the truth of Scripture was not something that needed to be argued or defended in his context, since it was a conviction Jesus shared with his opponents. Nevertheless, even without such an exposition it is still possible to demonstrate that Jesus did in fact affirm the truthfulness of Scripture. Such an affirmation both enabled and is reflected in his confession "Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35).

Jesus and the Sufficiency of Scripture

A certain finality was entailed in Jesus's appeal to Scripture during the testing in the wilderness. "It is written" carries all the connotations of "this is sufficient; the matter is settled." No new word is needed, despite the antiquity of the Old Testament text; for while on the surface it might seem that much has changed, the basic fabric of reality and the fundamental relationship that constitutes it (that of Creator and creature) has not. If it was ever true that man does not live by bread alone "but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4), it remains so. Jesus did not think that this truth needed to be revised in the light of later developments. If it was ever true that testing God is an inappropriate response to his declared will (Matt. 4:7), then it is always inappropriate. If it was ever true that the worship of anything or anyone other than God is both culpable and self-destructive (Matt. 4:10), then this is always so. God is not blindsided by advances in human knowledge or changes in the cultural consensus or the craftiness of the deceiver. His word remains enough.

This principle extends beyond the test in the wilderness to Jesus's appeal to the Old Testament throughout his ministry. If

it was ever the case that God's creational intention for marriage is lifelong fidelity and other-centered love between a man and a woman (Matt. 19:4–6, 18), then it is always so. Likewise, the value of human life and so the prohibition of murder, the importance of truth telling and so the prohibition of false witness, and the significance of acknowledging what has been given to your neighbor and so the prohibition of theft (Matt. 19:18). The same principle can be applied to Jesus's own words, whether his declaration from the cross "It is finished" (John 19:30) or his promise "Whoever comes to me I will never cast out" (John 6:37). In the midst of change, some things are unchangeable. Jesus's appeal to the Old Testament demonstrates that when God has spoken—whenever God has spoken—his words do not need to be augmented or revised. The God who knows the end from the beginning has said what needs to be said.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is Jesus's great affirmation in his own setting of the sufficiency of Scripture. At the end of the parable, the rich man calls on Abraham to send Lazarus to his five brothers so that they might be warned and not follow him into torment. Abraham's reply is simple and direct: "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them" (Luke 16:29). Yet that is clearly not enough for the rich man. They need something startling, something miraculous, like a man come back from the dead, to arrest their attention. Jesus gives Abraham the final word: "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead" (Luke 16:31). The words of Scripture to which they already had access are sufficient to challenge their brother's indifference to the suffering of his neighbor (and they should have been enough for him too). Jesus's point is that if people will not allow their behavior to be shaped by the written word of God, they will defy even a miracle happening before

their eyes. After all, that is what the Pharisees did time and again in connection with Jesus's ministry (e.g., John 11:45–53).

The available Scripture has always been sufficient for the moment. The Old Testament was sufficient to point forward to the Messiah and to direct his people how to live while they waited for him. Like the brothers of the rich man in the parable, the Jews of Jesus's time had what they needed. Yet the coming of Jesus certainly did bring change. His life, death, and resurrection were collectively the climactic moment in God's dealings with the human race. When John the Baptist fulfilled his commission by identifying Jesus as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29), a new era was breaking in. "The Law and the Prophets were until John," Jesus told his disciples; "since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached" (Luke 16:16). Something decisive happened that provided a new vantage point from which to view the entire Old Testament. In the words of the later book of Hebrews, God, having spoken in a variety of ways, has now spoken by his Son (1:1–2). There is something climactic, even final, about this.[6] Jesus's own teaching (and in time that of his commissioned spokesmen, the apostles) unfolded the nature and consequences of this new moment in God's eternal plan. Those on the other side of the cross and resurrection from the first hearers of Jesus's parable would have a sufficient Scripture for their moment in God's timetable too, because they would have the New Testament alongside the Old.

However, Jesus's appeal to the sufficiency of Scripture was tied to the purpose for which it had been given. The Scriptures truly reveal God, his character and purpose, his provision of a Savior, and the appropriate response of those who have been redeemed. But they were not given as the fulfillment of their

6. Compare Jesus's parable in Matt. 21:33–44.

own promises. They were not given in and of themselves to save us. That was never God's intention. Jesus's atoning work on the cross, in all its gritty physicality and rich spiritual power, and his triumph over death in the resurrection undo the Adamic curse and secure our redemption. It is the Spirit who brings a person to new birth and faith (John 3:5), and he is the one sent to dwell in us (John 14:17). Without Scripture we would not know of these things. We would not understand the promises associated with them or hear the call to repent and believe in the light of them. Nevertheless, it is Jesus who saves us, not the Bible. It is the Spirit who unites us to Christ and all his benefits, not the written word of God, though, as we shall see, the Spirit does not operate in creation apart from the word. Jesus did not claim all-sufficiency for Scripture but affirmed its sufficiency for the purpose for which it has been given.

Jesus and the Efficacy of Scripture

Jesus expected his words to have impact. His words had tremendous power, precisely because they were *his* words. He stilled the storm (Mark 4:39), banished evil and sickness (Matt. 8:13; Mark 1:25; 5:8, 34), and raised the dead (Mark 5:41; Luke 7:14; John 11:43)—each with just a word. His mastery of the creation reflected the effortless power with which God had brought it into being in the first place.

As Jesus taught, he knew the response to his words would be varied, not because of any defect in the words themselves, but because of the purpose of God and the dispositions of those to whom they were spoken. His parable of the soils taught that the faithful proclamation of the word of God could expect a variety of responses (Matt. 13:1–9). The parables reveal, but they also conceal. God makes himself known to some and he confirms others in their determination not to know him by the

same powerful word. In another context Jesus told the Jews who had believed in him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31). Yet he explained why, even in that group, some did not understand: "You cannot bear to hear my word" (John 8:43).

As his ministry reached its conclusion, Jesus prayed his great high priestly prayer, making clear that the words his Father had given him had indeed accomplished all they were intended to do:

> I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. (John 17:6–8)

As we have seen, Jesus's words included a regular appeal to the written words of the Old Testament. He considered these words to be powerfully effective as well. In the first instance, they effectively presented the truth about God and his purposes. More particularly, the Old Testament Scriptures effectively bore witness to the person and mission of Jesus, and those who rejected that witness were simply demonstrating that they stood under the judgment of God (John 5:39–40; 8:47). Jesus understood the whole of his ministry to be a fulfillment of Old Testament promises, bringing together the various threads and directions into a spectacular realization of all that God had long before said he would do.

That this was not just the perspective of the Gospel writers but also Jesus's own understanding can be shown quite easily. He applied the words of Isaiah 61 to himself during the visit

to the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:17–21). He explained his coming betrayal with reference to Psalm 41 (John 13:18). He quoted Isaiah 53 as he and his disciples headed out to the garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:37). Finally, he used the words of Psalm 2 from the cross to expose the depth of what was happening at that moment (Matt. 27:46). Jesus understood that the Scriptures were powerfully determining the entire course of events throughout his ministry, but especially the circumstances surrounding his death and resurrection. He repeatedly spoke of how the promises of Scripture "*must* be fulfilled" (Matt. 26:54; Luke 22:37; 24:7, 44). The "must" was highly significant. Nothing can get in the way or overcome the word that God has caused to be written. It cannot be otherwise than fulfilled. Elsewhere Jesus said very directly, "Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35).

Jesus and the Apostles' Words

So far the words of Jesus have had as their first and proper reference the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament. What of the New Testament, formed years after Jesus returned to his Father? We have already seen that the apostles were appointed by Jesus as his witnesses and entrusted with a mission that would extend to the ends of the earth and the end of the age (Matt. 28:19–20; Acts 1:8). Similarly, we noted that he had promised them the Spirit to guide them into all truth (John 16:13). Part of that witness to Jesus and guidance by the Spirit would soon involve the apostles (and those closely associated with them) penning what would become the New Testament. As John Webster put it, with reference to both the Old Testament prophets and the apostles of the New:

> Not by embodiment or continuation but by authorized representation and testimony, the prophets and apostles are

> instrumental in the communication of the one who commissions them for their task. So commissioned, they bear authority. . . .
>
> Holy Scripture is the textual settlement of this embassy. . . . Scripture is the availability of the prophetic and apostolic ministry beyond its originating occasion.[7]

During his ministry Jesus had much to say about the words of those he had chosen to be his witnesses. As he taught them in the context of his final meal, Jesus told his disciples: "Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours" (John 15:20). The words these disciples speak would be so closely associated with Jesus that they would share the lot of Jesus's words. As Moses had testified to Jesus, so the apostles were to be his witnesses (Acts 1:8). As Jesus's words met both reception by some and rejection by others, so too the apostles could expect the same.

The apostles' earlier brief mission to Jewish towns and villages had highlighted this relationship between Jesus's words and theirs. In Matthew 10, Jesus made clear the seriousness of refusing to listen to those he had sent: "If anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town" (vv. 14–15). He encouraged the apostles not to be anxious about what they should say when they were taken and delivered to the Gentiles (a reference, it appears, not to that specific mission but the larger ongoing mission of the apostles). "What you are to say," he promised, "will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you

7. John B. Webster, "Biblical Reasoning," in *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 120–21.

who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you" (vv. 19–20). In the face of malign misrepresentation and even violent opposition, they were not to be afraid. "For nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops" (vv. 26–27). He finished his instructions by reminding them, "Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me" (v. 40). As Timothy Ward remarked in connection with this passage, "God has identified himself both with Jesus Christ in person *and* with the passing on by his disciples of the words Jesus brought from the Father, with the result that to reject those human words spoken by the disciples is to reject God."[8]

It is little wonder, then, that on the night of his arrest Jesus should pray not only for his original disciples "but also for those who will believe in me through their word" (John 17:20). Jesus envisaged a mission that would continue long after his ascension to the Father. As the barrier between Jews and Gentiles was brought down, that mission would extend beyond the confines of Israel and that particular moment in time. During his last great teaching session in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus called on those who followed him to persevere in the face of opposition and persecution, and insisted "this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matt. 24:14). These disciples were to make other disciples from all nations by "teaching them to observe all that I commanded you" (Matt. 28:20).

Yet both the scope and duration of the mission would obviously require a written apostolic testimony. How else would the

8. Timothy Ward, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009), 44 (emphasis original).

words Jesus entrusted to them reach "all nations"? How else would the ministry of the apostles continue beyond their own deaths to "the end of the age"? Just as the prophetic ministry of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the rest had involved writing, which ensured their words were accessible on a wider canvas than simply their original occasion, so the mission activity of the apostles would involve writing as "apostles of Jesus Christ."

Jesus on the Appropriate Response to the Word of God

Jesus was not content with a formal acknowledgment of the nature or status of Scripture. He rebuked those who trivialized the word of God through their casuistry (Matt. 5) or their appeal to their traditions (Mark 7). He warned of those who preach but do not practice (Matt. 23:3). In contrast, on one of the occasions when Jesus told the parable of the sower, Jesus described the good soil as "those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart and bear fruit with patience" (Luke 8:15). The appropriate response to the word of God, whether in Scripture or from the mouth of Jesus himself (John 12:49–50; 14:10), is to hear it, believe it, and put it into practice. It was as simple as those words spoken in the wilderness: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4)—simple but extraordinarily difficult because of the weakness of the sinful human heart, the allure of the world, the pressures of life, and the deceitfulness of the evil one.

Jesus understood that those who would not listen to him were in fact rejecting the one who sent him (John 14:23). That explains the frightening warning with which he ended the Sermon on the Mount. He spoke of two men and two houses facing the same calamitous weather. The wise man, who "hears these words of mine and does them" (Matt. 7:24), builds his

house on the rock and survives the storm. The foolish man, who "hears these words of mine and does not do them" (Matt. 7:26), builds his house on the sand and loses it all. It was a stark way to end a sermon: "The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it" (Matt. 7:27).

How a person responds to the word of God, spoken by Jesus or written in the Scriptures, has serious consequences. The most articulate confession of the nature of Scripture and the strongest affirmations of its authority mean nothing if a person is not willing to live under that authority with repentance and faith. In contrast Jesus once exclaimed, "Blessed . . . are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" (Luke 11:28).

The Christian doctrine of Scripture must return again and again to the person, words, and work of Jesus Christ. He does not simply provide a launching pad for independent investigation. He remains its principal point of reference throughout. Jesus stands in the middle of the Bible as the one to whom its entire testimony points, but also as the one who points us both back to the Old Testament and forward to the words of his commissioned witnesses. The trustworthiness of the Bible is inextricably tied to the trustworthiness of Jesus. Because he is trusted, we trust the word he both endorsed and commissioned. Our task now is to attend to each aspect of Jesus's attitude toward the Scriptures, seeking to understand them more fully in the light of all God's dealings with his creatures as presented to us in Scripture itself. Along the way, we shall discover why Calvin could say, "By his word, God rendered faith unambiguous forever."[9]

9. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.6.2.

2

The Speaking God

When Jesus referred to God speaking (Luke 12:20; John 14:31; 16:13) and to words found in Scripture as words spoken by God (Matt. 15:4; 22:31; Mark 12:26), he was drawing on a rich vein of teaching in the Old Testament. The creation is presented in Genesis 1 as the result of divine speaking, summed up in the expression "And God said . . . and it was so" (Gen. 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 24, 26). God spoke with such power and authority that his words determined, and continue to determine, all reality. When he said, "Let there be light," there was light. From that point on, it is almost axiomatic in the Old Testament that the living God is one who speaks. He spoke the word of blessing and warning in the garden, the word of curse with the seed of its own undoing after the fall, the promise to Abraham, the law to Moses, the covenant with David, and the call to return through the prophets.[1] In each case the result of this speaking was that God's human creatures understood what he said to

1. Also see Mark D. Thompson, "The Declarative God: Toward a Theological Description of Preaching," in *Theology Is for Preaching: Biblical Foundations, Method, and Practice*, ed. Chase R. Kuhn and Paul Grimmond (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2021), 24–25.

them. Evidently when God speaks to his human creatures, he speaks human words.

Chief among those words are God's promises. The promise amid the curse in Genesis 3:15 creates a momentum that drives us through the rest of the Bible. "I will put enmity between you and the woman," God told the serpent, "and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." God promised that the great disaster in the garden would be undone by a descendant of the woman who would fully and finally defeat the tempter and all who are his. Who is this deliverer? The search is on.

Yet similarly important are a host of other promises given as the story of the Bible unfolds. Preeminent among them is the fourfold promise to Abram in Genesis 12. Abram was promised a land, promised that he would become a great nation, and promised that God would make his name great (vv. 1–2). Together these three elements of promise set the trajectory for the history of Abram's (Abraham's) descendants. They were partially fulfilled in the Old Testament itself, first when Joshua rested after the conquest of Canaan (Josh. 21:43–45), and then when Solomon sat on the throne of Israel, with the nation at its greatest extent and his wealth and wisdom noted throughout the known world (1 Kings 4:20–34). Yet the fourth element of that promise remained largely unrealized: "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). This promise pushes through the Old Testament and into the New (e.g., Acts 3:25), with its final fulfillment in a multicultural gathering around the throne in Revelation 7:9–12.

It is of particular significance in the Old Testament that God is heard rather than seen. Moses reminded the second generation of the Exodus, "The LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form;

there was only a voice" (Deut. 4:12). Unlike the nations around them, Israel was not to make images representing their God (Deut. 4:15–18). Worship of the living God was to be a matter of hearing, believing, and obeying the words that he had spoken rather than bowing before an image of him. When Moses himself asked to *see* God's glory (Ex. 33:18), the revelation he was given was not so much in a highly circumscribed vision (Ex. 33:23) but in the proclamation of "the name of the LORD" (Ex. 34:5). God's eternal character, which had been demonstrated in the deliverance from Egypt—compassionate and merciful but also just—was *proclaimed* to Moses.

There are of course visions at various points throughout the Old Testament, most notably associated with prophets like Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. Yet the most important thing about the ministry of those same prophets was the way they brought "the word of the LORD" to God's people. "The word of the LORD came . . ." (Isa. 38:4; Jer. 1:2; Ezek. 1:3; etc.), "Hear the word of the LORD" (Isa. 1:10; 28:14; 66:5; Jer. 2:4; 19:3; Ezek. 34:7; etc.), and "Thus says the LORD [Lord GOD]" (Isa. 7:7; 28:16; 49:7; 56:1; Jer. 5:14; 6:16; 31:35; Ezek. 3:27; 7:2; 20:5; Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4) are refrains throughout the prophetic books. Judgment fell on the kingdoms of Israel and Judah because of behavior that revealed they had rejected "the word of the LORD" brought to them by Moses and the prophets.

God's verbal address of his people—directly, in whatever way he chooses, or through the agency of his prophets—distinguishes the true and living God from the false gods represented by idols. Moses reminded the Israelites of the enormous privilege of having God speak to them (Deut. 4:32–33; 5:26) precisely because this was not the common experience of humanity. The contrast with the idols that proliferated the ancient world was acute: the living God is not seen but speaks; the

illusory gods have images but are never heard. The reason is quite simple according to the prophet:

> Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field,
> and they *cannot* speak;
> they have to be carried,
> for they *cannot* walk.
> Do not be afraid of them,
> for they *cannot* do evil,
> neither is it in them to do good. (Jer. 10:5)

These are indeed illusory gods. Only the God who created all things, including the gift of speech and human language, is able to speak with his creatures. It is an enormous privilege to be addressed by the living God.

It is against this background that the writer to the Hebrews wrote of Jesus's ministry as a climactic speaking by God. Behind all the variety of Old Testament history and prophecy lay the basic reality that God had spoken. Now in these last days he has spoken by his Son. This Son is himself the "Word," the self-manifestation of God. He does not simply bring revelation; he *is* the revelation. To "see me," Jesus said, is to "see the Father" (John 14:9). Yet he is also the one who came speaking the words given to him by his Father (John 17:8). The phenomenon of speaking suffuses Jesus's ministry. He is not simply the Creator God present in the midst of his creation, though he most certainly is that (John 1:10); he speaks as the Son from the Father in the midst of the creation. Jesus regularly described his ministry in terms of speaking the words he had been given to speak.

In our own time the conviction that God has addressed his people with words is regularly dismissed, not simply by those who deny there is a God to do the speaking in the first place, but also by others who suggest that the conviction itself is mud-

dled. Yet, if we let go of it, we end up with a very different idea of what the Bible is and how it functions, one that stands at odds with the teaching of Jesus we examined in the last chapter. So how, then, are we to understand this astonishing reality that the living God speaks?

Communicative Being: God Speaks

Speaking is primarily an act of communication. It is not only that, of course. Some words and patterns of speech reflect emotion or frustration without any concern to share these with another person. No one needs to be within earshot when such "verbal explosions" occur, and perhaps it is better if they are not. But most of the time words and speech are vehicles for communicating our thoughts and feelings with others. It is a particular feature of human life, which correlates with our physical makeup: we have lips, a larynx, and lungs so that we can speak, and ears so that we can hear.

The affirmation of God as one who speaks words raises significant questions. The human recipients in both the Old and New Testaments certainly heard a voice and understood the words spoken to them. They were able to share those words with others. Yet God is not physical, apart from the incarnation of the Son, and so does not have lips, a larynx, or lungs in order to generate those words. Are we right to think of God's speech as identical to our speech? Emil Brunner wrote, "When God speaks, if it is really *he* who speaks, something is said which is evidently quite different from that which men usually call 'speaking'."[2] Yet, from one end, the end of the receiver, that is not true. God's words were heard, they were understood, and they could be passed on, just like words from any other source.

2. Emil Brunner, *Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, trans. Olive Wyon (London: Lutterworth, 1949), 15 (emphasis original).

Not even the disaster at the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11) was able to prevent that. God obviously does not need our physical apparatus to bring about this result. So, what exactly was happening when God spoke?

Intra-Trinitarian Communication

Christians through the centuries have pondered this aspect of Scripture's teaching and how we should understand it. To do so, we need first to take a step further back and observe that God is deeply committed to communication. He is a communicative being. I have already mentioned Kevin Vanhoozer's remark "God is never more himself than when he is going out of himself in love—communicating for the sake of communion."[3] That is an insight with a very long pedigree.

One fascinating advocate of this perspective was Jonathan Edwards. In 1723 he wrote: "The great and universal end of God's creating the world was to communicate himself. God is a communicative being."[4] A "disposition" toward communication in God's eternal Trinitarian life is anchored, Edwards believed, in his triune goodness.

> It appears that there must be more than a unity in infinite and eternal essence, otherwise the goodness of God can have no perfect exercise. To be perfectly good is to incline to and delight in making another happy in the same proportion as it is happy itself, that is, to delight as much in communicating happiness to another as in enjoying of it himself, and an inclination to communicate all his happiness.[5]

3. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 271.

4. Jonathan Edwards, "Miscellany 332, End of the Creation," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 13, *The "Miscellanies," Entry Nos. a–z, aa–zz, 1–500*, ed. Thomas A. Schafer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 410.

5. Edwards, "Miscellany 96, Trinity," in *Works*, 13:263.

Edwards may have been developing ideas he found in Petrus van Mastricht about the goodness of God including "his faculty of communicating himself," or even Francis Turretin's insistence that "it is of the reason of good to be communicative of itself."[6] These can, however, be traced even further back through Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, and Pseudo-Dionysius to Plato: "Good is of its nature self-giving."[7] God did not suddenly become communicative as a consequence of creating the world. This is what God is like in himself from all eternity. It is part of what it means for him to be good and characterized by other-centered love even before there was a creation. He eternally communicates his intra-Trinitarian knowledge, love, and joy in himself.[8] As one modern study summarized, "God simply cannot be God without his *ad intra* communication."[9]

There are two dangers to avoid here. First, we must give equal weight to both dimensions of the reality of God's triune life, the oneness and the threeness. God's eternal "communication" is not one member of the Godhead disclosing to another things previously unknown, since God is one. Yet it is not illusory either. It is real because the one God is triune. The second danger is to read modern views of "communication"

6. Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, trans. Todd M. Rester, ed. Joel R. Beeke, vol. 2, *Faith in the Triune God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2019), 331. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, trans. George Musgrave Giger, vol. 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992), 241 (3.20.2). Edwards was familiar with the work of both these theologians from the previous century.

7. "Moreover, the communication of being and goodness arises from goodness. . . . This is why it is said that the good is diffusive of itself and of being." Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, trans. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Hanover House, 1955), I.37.5; T. V. Kelly, *The Axiom "Bonum est diffusivum sui": A Historical Study* (Rome: International Pontifical Institute Angelicum, 1937).

8. Jonathan Edwards, "Concerning the End for Which God Created the World," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8, *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 432–33. See also William M. Schweitzer, *God Is a Communicative Being: Divine Communicativeness and Harmony in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (London: T&T Clark, 2014), 13. Particularly helpful is Scott R. Swain's recent work in this series. Swain, *The Trinity: An Introduction* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021).

9. Schweitzer, *God Is a Communicative Being*, 66.

into Edwards's language. When referring to the triune God, "communication" cannot be simply a transferring of information. It is always more than that. The triune persons share life and delight, love and joy, as well as knowledge. God's eternal communication is the eternal self-giving of the persons in the profound oneness of being that is the triune Godhead.[10]

In the twentieth century the conviction that "the living God speaks" came under intense scrutiny. One context was a growing unease with appeals to a verbal revelation and, for some, even with the idea of revelation itself. As Colin Gunton once explained, "The heart of the modern offense with revelation . . . is rooted in the problem of authority and the way it appears to violate human autonomy."[11] We do not want to be told what to do or what to believe, even by God, and so we balk at the idea that there are actual words from God to which we might be held accountable. Another, overlapping context was a struggle over the nature of language referring to God. We have already noted Emil Brunner's comment (see p. 65). A similar sentiment is found in Wolfhart Pannenberg: "It is only figuratively possible to say that the invisible God speaks."[12] The pressing question is whether that was what Jesus understood to be the case.

For more than twenty-five years the philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff conducted sustained study of God as one who speaks. Wolterstorff's major work on the subject was *Divine*

10. The New Testament reflects this self-giving "communication" when it says that the Father is from himself, the Son is from the Father, and the Spirit is from the Father and the Son (John 5:26; 15:26). These divine processions, as we shall see, are revealed in the divine missions (Gal. 4:4–6).

11. Colin E. Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 31. A similar and similarly striking comment was made by John B. Webster: "The heart of the difficulty we face in attending to Scripture is not the conceivability of revelation's taking creaturely form but our antipathy to it." Webster, "The Domain of the Word," in *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 12.

12. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 167.

Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks.[13] It was a philosophical reflection rather than a strictly biblical or theological one, and its concentration was on the claim that "God speaks" rather than "God has spoken." That having been said, Wolterstorff made the case that even for human beings, "there are many ways of saying things other than by making sounds with one's vocal apparatus or inscribing marks with one's limbs," which leaves open the possibility that "God might cause soundings-out or inscribings of words even though God has no body."[14] Through the application of the speech-act theory developed by philosophers John Austin and John Searle, Wolterstorff outlined some of those "many ways."

Kevin Vanhoozer also picked up on speech-act theory and made use of it in his monumental exposition of "communicative theism," *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship*. He described his project as "extrapolating from God's speaking to God's being," pursuing the question "Who must God *be* (i.e., *what kind* of person) in order to do what Scripture says he does?"[15] The point is sharpened by his observation that "no activity is as characteristic, or as frequently mentioned in the Bible, as God's speaking."[16] Vanhoozer invited his readers to consider the alternative:

> If God does not literally perform speech acts, we cannot say that God commands, blesses, promises, warns, etc. Apart from these divine communicative acts, both the patriarchal narratives and the whole history of Israel would be unintelligible. Even more devastating: *if God does not speak, then he does not covenant*.[17]

13. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
14. Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 37, 11.
15. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 186–87(emphasis original).
16. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 212.
17. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 213–14 (emphasis original).

The conviction that God has spoken is critical to the unfolding "theodrama" of the Bible. Yet what God does in the economy of creation and redemption flows out of who God is in eternity. He never acts out of character. He is never changed in his essential being by circumstances that might appear unexpected or out of his control.

It is good not to push this too far. Time and eternity are not the same and we should avoid collapsing one into the other. We do not need to impose every aspect of God's speech in the world on the eternal divine communication. Yet the two are linked. God is as he presents himself to us. With Vanhoozer we can say, "God in himself (*in se*; *ad intra*) enjoys never-ending, fully realized interpersonal communication" and this is what overflows in God's dealings with the creation.[18] That overflow establishes relationship and effects redemption, but it also reveals God as he truly is. As John Webster put it, "Divine revelatory activity is God's triune being in its external orientation."[19] An important consequence of this observation is that God's decision to speak in and into the world he has made is not arbitrary. This is what we ought to expect because God is the God he is. There is, as Edwards would put it, "harmony" between how God relates to the world and who God is in himself.

Communication as an Expression of Relationship with His Creatures

God's free and fitting decision to create was personal, not merely mechanical. There is a particular intimacy in his creation of the man and the woman that establishes a unique relationship between the Creator and his human creatures. He addressed them

18. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 244.
19. John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 9.

with words meant to be heard and understood and, in time, to elicit a response. As God gave beyond himself, he did so in a personal way that was properly attuned to the creatures he had made. As William Schweitzer wrote: "God is a relational and intelligent being characterized by the attribute of communicativeness, who exists in eternal communication between Father, Son, and Spirit. Human beings, created in God's image, were designed to be in communication with their maker."[20] Human beings were created to be, among other things, God's conversation partners.

The Bible presents God as the first to use human words. He addressed the man and the woman with a word of blessing, a mandate, and then a warning that in each case was intelligible (Gen. 1:28–30; 2:15–17). By doing so he showed that human language is not an achievement but a gift. It is a vehicle God has designed to facilitate relationship, most obviously between his human creatures, but antecedently and preeminently with God their Creator. In an important sense the nature of the language used was an "accommodation." All good communication takes into account the one who will be receiving it. From the very beginning God did that with his engagement with his human creatures. This did not mean that the language God utilized for this communication was flawed, inadequate, or in error in any way.[21] It fully and properly accomplished the purposes for

20. Schweitzer, *God Is a Communicative Being*, 65.

21. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the concept of "accommodation" was used in two different ways. The first, by John Calvin and his followers, described the way God secures our understanding by speaking "in the manner of the common folk." Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.11.1. The second, by Faustus Socinus and other rationalists, suggests that God secures human understanding by adopting the perspective of his hearers even when it is erroneous (*Rakow Colloquium*). The cavern that opens between these two uses is immense: in one, "the text is true because it was accommodated to people's needs"; in the other, "the text is false because it was accommodated to the people's erroneous beliefs." Glenn S. Sunshine, "Accommodation Historically Considered," in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 258.

which it was designed (Isa. 55:10–11). However, it was never intended to provide a *comprehensive* knowledge of God or even of his purposes. As Moses would say to the wandering Israelites, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29).

God's accommodation involves the use of concrete images from human experience, anthropomorphism, approximation, and a variety of devices that enable language to convey meaning with clarity and persuasive power. God's use of language is focused on the welfare of the recipient: a word of comfort when one is faced with overwhelming odds, words of challenge at moments of indifference, a word of warning in the face of unrecognized danger. Above all, God's speech is a word of testimony, testifying to his own character and purpose, and ultimately to the one who perfectly embodies that character and fulfills that purpose.

God is an effective communicator who attends to the needs and capacities of his hearers. He does not stumble, deceive, or manipulate with his words. He seeks the welfare of those to whom he speaks. Even when providing the starkest warning of impending judgment, God is shown to be providing an opportunity for repentance and rescue. The account of Jonah's preaching to the city of Nineveh is a case in point. Unrelenting in its announcement of imminent and horrific judgment, the book of Jonah draws readers' attention to the fact that God has required this because of his pity on the "great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle" (4:11). Tellingly, Jonah knew this was what God was doing right from the beginning, which was why the reluctant prophet ran in the opposite direction (4:2).

The Bible's descriptions of God's speaking are not mythological, and they are not metaphorical—though, as with all language about God, we must recognize a principle of analogy. God's speaking is like our speaking in some ways—involving words, able to be committed to writing, open to translation across language barriers, and so on—yet unlike ours in others. So God does not require physical vocal apparatus, nor is his speaking ever subject to incompetence, ignorance, or malevolence. Yet the consistent testimony of Old and New Testaments is that God's words were heard, understood, sometimes inscribed, and passed on to others.

Communicative Agency: God Speaks through Human Ambassadors

God spoke directly and audibly to his human creatures from the beginning. In a way that is not explained in detail, God spoke words to Adam and Eve in the garden (Gen. 2–3), to Abram in Haran (Gen. 12), to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai (Ex. 3), and to Samuel as he lay on his bed at Shiloh (1 Sam. 3). A voice from heaven was heard at Jesus's baptism and transfiguration (Matt. 3; 17). It is evidently in keeping with God's character and purpose to address his human creatures in this way. Yet this was not the most common way in which God communicated his person and his will. He also designated and authorized those who would announce his word to others.

The Prophetic Pattern

Moses is the pattern. God spoke directly to Moses, "face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Ex. 33:11), and Moses was to pass God's words on, first to the Israelites and then to Pharaoh. "Go and gather the elders of Israel together," God commanded Moses, "and say to them, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers,

the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying . . .'" (Ex. 3:16). When Moses complained that he was not eloquent, God explained how he would overcome that difficulty: "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak" (Ex. 4:11–12). Moses was not left to his own resources to address the people on God's behalf. He was given the promise of God's special provision. God would enable him to speak and instruct him in what to say. When Moses persisted in his reluctance, God provided a mouthpiece for him, his brother Aaron. God summarized the arrangement in this way: "You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth, and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth and will teach you both what to do. He shall speak for you to the people, and he shall be your mouth, and you shall be as God to him" (Ex. 4:15–16).

Later the Lord would tell Moses, "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet" (Ex. 7:1). In an extraordinary way, the relation between God and his prophet is echoed in the relation of Moses and Aaron. Aaron would speak *Moses's* words to the people, an example of what modern linguistic theory might describe as "deputized speech": one person speaking the words of another. Yet this entire arrangement was anchored in the commission of God. When Moses was nearing the end of his ministry, God made him a promise that set this up as a paradigm for the future:

> I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. But the prophet who presumes

> to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die. (Deut. 18:18–20)

This is the commission of God, which means that God is able to address his people through these human agents without any loss of authority in the words spoken. Wolterstorff explored analogies to this in ordinary human experience, for instance in the case of an ambassador authorized to convey the will of his or her government. He concluded,

> It should be noted that to deputize to someone else some authority that one has in one's own person is not to surrender that authority and hand it over to that other person; it is to bring it about that one exercises that authority by way of actions performed by that other person acting as one's deputy.[22]

That authority gives both weight and certain defined limits to what the prophet might say as "the word of the LORD." This is clear in the ministry of Jeremiah.

> Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. They say continually to those who despise the word of the LORD, 'It shall be well with you'; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, 'No disaster shall come upon you.'"
>
> For who among them has stood in the council of
> the LORD
> to see and to hear his word,
> or who has paid attention to his word and
> listened? . . .

22. Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 42.

> I did not send the prophets,
> yet they ran;
> I did not speak to them,
> yet they prophesied.
> But if they had stood in my council,
> then they would have proclaimed my words to my people. (Jer. 23:16–18, 21–22)

This explains why accounts of the prophets' commissionings have such prominence in the prophetic books of Isaiah (chap. 6), Jeremiah (chap. 1), and Ezekiel (chaps. 2–3), and why phrases such as "the word of the LORD that came to . . ." are so important to all the prophets. In the New Testament, Paul's regular appeal to his apostolic credentials makes a similar point (Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:1; etc.). The apostle does not speak on his own authority. He speaks as he was commissioned to do. The eyewitness testimony of the apostles and their commission from Christ (Acts 1:8; 9:15–16) undergird their claim to speak the word of God (2 Cor. 2:17; 1 Thess. 2:13).

Dictation?

Are we then to think of the prophets (and later the apostles) as mere mouthpieces with no active or creative involvement in the words they spoke? Through the centuries, some Christian theologians have written as if this were so. But as Henri Blocher has observed, the major prophets "show no sign of having their intelligence or consciousness suspended as they carry on the duties of their office and shape their messages."[23] Put positively, they were indeed consciously and intelligently engaged as they spoke and later wrote.

23. Henri Blocher, "God and the Scripture Writers: The Question of Double Authorship," in Carson, *Enduring Authority*, 504.

This is why their words could be attributed to them as well as to the Holy Spirit. Isaiah's words were genuinely Isaiah's words, as Jesus referred to them (Matt. 15:7; Mark 7:6). Paul remarked that Isaiah, not the Lord, is "so bold as to say" (Rom. 10:20), and then he quoted words that in Isaiah's prophecy are spoken by the Lord (Isa. 65:1). There is a discernible style in Jeremiah's preaching that is different from that of Hosea or Malachi, a difference that does not lead to conflict or contradiction. Paul's way of expressing himself has its own recognizable qualities when put alongside that of John or Peter, yet they all testify to the same Christ, and their doctrine is both internally coherent and consistent with each other's. So, as John Webster put it, "In prophetic and apostolic speech the divine communicative mission is brought to bear upon creatures through creatures, in such a way that we may say of these human words that by derivation and appointment they are ["the word of God"]."[24]

There were indeed occasional incidents of "dictation" in the strict sense in both the Old Testament and the New. The second recording of the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone would seem to be one such instance: "And the LORD said to Moses, 'Write these words'. . . . And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments" (Ex. 34:27–28). In the great vision at the end of the New Testament, the apostle John is commanded to write "to the angel of the church in Ephesus" (Rev. 2:1, and similarly to the "angels" of the other six churches, 2:8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14). Yet one-for-one correspondence between the word heard and the word spoken or written does not seem to have been the usual pattern. While the prophets spoke the word of the Lord, and the apostles preached the word of God (Acts 13:5, 46; 17:13; 18:11), this came in

24. Webster, "Domain of the Word," 8.

their own words, words they consciously crafted. How are we to understand this?

Once again the answer involves taking a step back to examine how God chooses to operate in his world. God is most certainly able to, and does in fact, intervene in extraordinary ways, whether through miracle, vision, or direct address. Yet the Creator is not limited to intervention as a way of operating in his creation. God's continuing involvement in the world, preserving, sustaining, and directing it, means that he does not have to interrupt or suspend the course of human events in order to bring about his will. God often works concursively in and through his creatures to accomplish his purpose. They act in accordance with their natures, influenced by their backgrounds, responsive to their circumstances, and yet the result is entirely what God intended from the beginning.

The rampaging army of Nebuchadnezzar pursued the king's political and military agenda, yet that agenda accomplished God's purpose of judgment upon the kingdom of Judah (Jer. 25:8–9). The Roman emperor's desire for a census of his empire, as an instrument of control that would serve his own financial interests, ensured that Joseph and Mary would be in Bethlehem when Jesus was born (Luke 2:4). The prime example of this concursus, where even the evil intentions of creatures serve the ultimate purpose of the Creator, was explained by the apostle Peter on the day of Pentecost: "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men" (Acts 2:23).[25]

In none of these cases was the exercise of divine sovereignty coercive, overriding the genuine exercise of creaturely wills. The human agents did what they wanted to do and for their own

25. Compare the words of Joseph to his brothers in Gen. 50:20: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."

reasons. Yet, as Peter put it, in each case "the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" was fulfilled.

This dynamic extends to those who were commissioned to speak the word of God to others. We do not have to imagine the Lord God whispering into David's ear as he composed each of his psalms, or Peter's as he rose to speak on the day of Pentecost, or Paul's as he stood in the midst of the Areopagus. Their personalities, backgrounds, and circumstances shaped the words they used and how these words were brought together: a cry of lament from the leader of God's people on the run from his enemies; the testimony of an eyewitness commissioned to call for repentance and faith in the light of all he had seen and heard; and the disciplined biblical logic of the rabbi trained at the feet of Gamaliel. Dictation wasn't necessary, because the work of God suffused the entire lives of each of these his servants.[26] The active and indeed creative engagement of the human agents in the words they speak does not in any way diminish the result: the word of God spoken to his creatures with all the authority this implies.

Wolterstorff's category of deputized discourse helps us here as well. "Deputized speech" is not limited to one person authorized to speak the words of another. The ambassador is authorized to speak *on behalf of* or *in the name of* the government that he or she represents. The degree of specificity in terms of the words used will vary from situation to situation. Similarly, Wolterstorff argues, "the biblical notion of the prophet blends the concept of one who is commissioned to communicate a message from someone, with the concept of one who is deputized to speak in the name of someone."[27] Sometimes an exact form of

26. Blocher, "God and the Scripture Writers," 505.

27. Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 48. It seems to me that this is the distinction we should have in mind in 1 Cor. 7 as the apostle Paul moves between "not I, but the Lord" (v. 10) and "I, not the Lord" (v. 12).

words needs to be conveyed. Sometimes the author conveys the message he has been called to proclaim in his own words. Not every declaration of the gospel in the New Testament is given in precisely the same words. Yet it is the one authoritative gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Work of the Holy Spirit

An important biblical explanation of God's address of his people through human agents is found in 2 Peter 1:20–21: "knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. 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." This passage highlights the divine origin—"from God"—and the genuine human agency—"men spoke"—of prophecy. However, it goes further to draw attention to the particular involvement of the Spirit of God: "they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." The word "carried" (*pherō*) is a neutral word that needs to be filled out in meaning by the context.[28] The concern in this passage is to dismiss any suggestion that the apostles' testimony to Jesus Christ (including their appeal to the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy) was a human invention. Peter was an eyewitness, and he heard the voice from heaven at the transfiguration, and that revelation of the glory of Christ confirmed the word given long ago by those the Spirit had enabled to speak from God.

This work of the Spirit in enabling God's word to be spoken by his human creatures is a perfect expression of who the Spirit is. He is the Spirit of the Father and the Son. It is only by the Spirit that a person can know God as Father or confess Jesus

28. John S. Feinberg, *Light in a Dark Place: The Doctrine of Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 134–35.

as Lord (Rom. 8:15; 1 Cor. 12:3). Yet the apostle Paul enables us to say more than this.

> But, as it is written,
>
> > "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
> > nor the heart of man imagined,
> > what God has prepared for those who love him"—
>
> these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. (1 Cor. 2:9–13)

The Holy Spirit enables human creatures to understand and pass on to others what is made known about God and his purpose precisely because from eternity he completes or perfects the fellowship of the Father and the Son. This eternal relation is the ground and source of his work in the world.[29] Jesus told his disciples, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come" (John 16:13). He was the one who would bear testimony to Jesus and bring to the disciples' remembrance all that Jesus had said to them (John 15:26; 14:26). The Spirit attends the word in this way because

29. John Owen, *Pneumatologia, or A Discourse concerning the Holy Spirit*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, 16 vols. (1850–1853; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), 3:117.

he is the one who knows the Father and the Son perfectly from eternity. "Only God can know God in this way," and so what he does expresses who he is.[30] He is actively involved in both the communication of God's word and its reception. He moved the prophets so that they spoke from God, and he moves in the hearts of men and women so that they might "understand the things freely given us by God."

So these two things work together: God's concursive activity, superintending all things to bring about the purposes he has intended from the beginning; and the direct involvement of the Spirit, moving the prophets and apostles to speak the word of God at that moment in those circumstances. God had long been involved in Zechariah's life and circumstances, but at a particular moment, Zechariah was "filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied" (Luke 1:67; cf. Acts 4:8).

The Unique Word of God: Jesus Christ

It is in Jesus that God's direct address and its mediation through human agency come together in a remarkable way. He is the Word made flesh (John 1:14) and the man in whom all the fullness of God dwells bodily (Col. 1:19). He is both the promised prophet and the burden of the prophets' testimony. He is the beloved Son upon whom the Spirit rests (Matt. 3:16–17) and, as we have seen, he speaks of being anointed by the Spirit for the purpose of proclaiming the mercy and justice of God (Luke 4:17–21). After his resurrection, he took the disciples on the Emmaus road on a journey through the Old Testament, "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets," to explain "in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). His

30. Graham A. Cole, *He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 71. "Missions follow processions; the character of the work is determined by the nature of the one who works." Webster, "Illumination," in *Domain of the Word*, 53.

divine Sonship is the reason he could make the Father known (Matt. 11:27; John 1:18), and his genuine humanity enabled him to do that in the midst of the creation and its brokenness (1 Tim. 2:5). He is not simply another word but a unique Word and a final Word.

As we have already noted, the writer to the Hebrews most clearly points us to the unique and climactic word given to us in the person and ministry of Jesus. God had indeed spoken prior to the coming of Jesus, yet everything in his dealings with humanity had been heading toward this point, when this final word would be spoken. He had spoken in many ways by his servants the prophets, but now has spoken by his Son. The use of the term "Son" immediately evokes its correlate "Father." Our attention is drawn to the eternal relation of Father and Son in the Spirit, which is the antecedent foundation of the Son's work in the world. Jesus would stand in the midst of the human race not as a human agent commissioned to speak God's word but as God himself addressing his people.

John Webster put it this way:

> This communicative action of God's is singular. As God's eschatological disclosure of himself it does not share in the diversity of form which characterizes the word spoken to the fathers in the past; and it is not, like the word delivered to Israel through the prophets, an interim word, a word on the way to something else. It can neither be supplemented nor superseded.[31]

Everything from this point would be an exposition and elaboration of this final Word God has spoken, not a new word. Once again, this is because he was not simply another word,

31. John Webster, "One Who Is Son," in *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology*, vol. 1, *God and the Works of God* (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 66.

one more in a long line of words from God, but the Word that caught up all prior words. "For all the promises of God find their Yes in him" (2 Cor. 1:20). Yet he was not simply the fulfillment of the words that had gone before either. The argument of Hebrews is that in a critically important sense, "his excellence is surpassing, incommensurable with what has gone before."[32] John Calvin got the sense of it:

> For [the writer to the Hebrews] means, in fact, openly declares, that God will not speak hereafter as he did before, intermittently through some and through others; nor will he add prophecies to prophecies, or revelations to revelations. Rather, he has so fulfilled all functions of teaching in his Son that we must regard this as the final and eternal testimony from him. In this way this whole New Testament time, from the point that Christ appeared to us with the preaching of his gospel even to the Day of Judgment, is designated by "the last hour," "the last times," "the last days." This is done that, content with the perfection of Christ's teaching, we may learn not to fashion anything new for ourselves beyond this or to admit anything contrived by others.[33]

Jesus sums up in his person what it means for the living God to be the speaking God. He is a tangible and audible reminder that God is a communicative being. Jesus has come to entrust to others the words he heard from the Father. He expects and indeed commissions his disciples to take those words and share them with others. He does this because "all authority in heaven and on earth" has been given to him (Matt. 28:18), and yet

32. Webster, "One Who Is Son," 67.

33. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.8.7. The Battles translation has been adapted at two points: (1) Calvin believed Hebrews was written by Paul, and this has been removed to avoid unnecessary distraction; and (2) the originally marginal biblical citations, which the editor placed within brackets in the text, have been removed for ease of reading.

equally because he is the one anointed by the Spirit "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18–19).

God Is His Word

The living God is, then, the God who speaks. His words appropriately and perfectly reveal his character and his purposes. Unlike the normal human communication between fallen creatures, there is no gap in God's communication between who he is and what he expresses about himself, between what he intends to communicate and what he does in fact communicate. He unfailingly keeps his promises. We are bound to say, then, that God's word carries the authority of God himself. It is the chief means by which he expresses his authority in the world he has created. God's *word* is what *God* says. Timothy Ward puts this well: "God has so *identified* himself with his words that whatever someone does to God's words (whether it is to obey or to disobey) they do directly to God himself."[34]

This intimate connection between God and his word was given new emphasis at the time of the Reformation. Martin Luther insisted that believers have no interest in God viewed "absolutely" but rather in "God as He is dressed and clothed in His Word and promises."[35] William Tyndale used even bolder language: "God is but his word, as Christ saith, John viii. 'I am that I say unto you'; that is to say, That which I preach am I; my words are spirit and life. God is that only which he testifieth of himself; and to imagine any other thing of God than that is damnable idolatry."[36] Neither man can be accused

34. Timothy Ward, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009), 29 (emphasis original).

35. Martin Luther, "Exposition of Psalm 51," in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 66 vols. to date (St. Louis: Concordia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1955–), 12:312. He continued, "We must take hold of this God, not naked but clothed and revealed in His Word; otherwise certain despair will crush us."

36. William Tyndale, *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, in *Doctrinal Treatises*, ed. Henry Walter (Cambridge: Parker Society, 1848), 160. Peter F. Jensen points out that

of transforming God into a bunch of words, or of bibliolatry, worshiping the Bible as if the book were God. The point each was making is that the word of God, precisely because it is the word of the living God, is not simply a vehicle of information; it is an instrument of relationship. Peter Jensen puts this simply: "When you trust the word of God, you are trusting God himself; when you keep the word of God, you are obeying God himself. You do not need to search behind or beyond the word for the real God. He is as good as his word."[37]

The doctrine of Scripture which Jesus would commend to us has this deep anchor in the person, character, and work of the living God. Jesus understood God's continuing involvement with his creation to be crystallized at this critical point. He spoke, giving himself in his words and revealing his glorious intention for his creation. His word has tremendous power. It is the instrument by which he created all things. His word is a perfect expression of his character: compassionate, merciful, and just (Ex. 34:6–7), both love and light (1 John 1:5; 4:8).

Yet how do we move from the wonderful reality that God speaks, directly and through the deputized agency of prophets and apostles, to the reality of the Bible? How was the move from spoken to written word made, and is anything lost in that transition?

Tyndale was reflecting upon "a very close reading of John 8:25, which he translated, 'Then sayde they unto him who are thou? And Jesus sayde unto them: Even ye very same thinge yt I saye unto you.'" Jensen, "God and the Bible," in Carson, *Enduring Authority*, 478n2.

37. Jensen, "God and the Bible," 478.

3

From the Speech of God to "the Word of God Written"

Jesus answered the tempter in the wilderness with the words "it is *written*" (Matt. 4:4, 7, 10). He took the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and read it in the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:16–21). He rebuked the religious leaders with the question "Have you not *read*?" (Matt. 12:3, 5; 19:4; 22:31). He taught the disciples on the Emmaus road from "all the *Scriptures*" (Luke 24:27). Jesus's familiarity with the Scriptures of his day is undeniable. His appeal to the written word as authoritative is equally beyond doubt. It was an appeal echoed by his apostles. Paul wrote that Christ died for our sins "in accordance with *the Scriptures*" (1 Cor. 15:3). He would remind Timothy that it is "*the sacred writings*, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15) and urge him to devote himself to "the public reading of *Scripture*" (1 Tim. 4:13).[1] "All *Scripture* is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching,

1. Texts like 2 Tim. 3:15 (see also Rom. 1:2) inform the words "Holy Bible," which are found on the covers of many of our contemporary copies.

for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

Yet, despite this attitude of Jesus and his apostles, it has not been self-evident to all that the written word should bear the same authority as the word God has spoken, nor even that it should be described in the same way as "the word of God." Friedrich Schleiermacher, the father of liberal theology, wrote, "Every holy writing is merely a mausoleum of religion, a monument that a great spirit was there that no longer exists; for if it still lived and were active, why would it attach such great importance to the dead letter that can only be a weak reproduction of it?"[2] Karl Barth reacted against Schleiermacher by insisting, as we have seen (p. 18), that Christianity has only ever been a living religion when it is unashamedly a book religion.[3] Nevertheless, he still preferred to speak of Scripture as a witness to the word of God rather than the word of God in and of itself, though he acknowledged that God can and does choose to use this creaturely instrument to address his people today (and when this event happens, we may speak of Scripture *becoming* the word of God). His concern was to guard God's sovereign freedom in the matter of making himself known (we might be bound to this text, but God is not) as well as the centrality of Jesus Christ, the full and personal revelation of the living God. Therefore, according to Barth, the Bible has an indirect rather than a direct relation to the word of God.[4] Colin

2. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. Richard Coulter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 134–35.

3. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. T. Thomson and H. Knight (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 1/2:495.

4. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2:457–59, 492, 499. Barth also wanted to resist any suggestion that inspiration is a static attribute of the biblical text (1/1:112–13). See Mark D. Thompson, "Witness to the Word: On Barth's Doctrine of Scripture," in *Engaging with Barth: Contemporary Evangelical Critiques*, ed. David Gibson and Daniel Strange (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 168–97.

Gunton, also keen to avoid any claim to what he calls "revelatory immediacy" ("a direct apprehension of the content of the faith" that ignores, among other things, the human mediators of that content) wrote similarly: "We are confident that we have passed the stage when we any longer equate revelation and the actual words of Scripture."[5]

If, however, we accept the immediate and final authority of the words God has spoken, especially the person, words, and work of the Word made flesh, how should we view the Bibles that we hold in our hands? How was the transition from spoken to written word made? How does Scripture itself explain this, and how are we to understand the result of this process? What about those texts which were never spoken but were from the beginning written, such as the New Testament Epistles?

God's Instruction to Write

The first mention of writing in the Bible is found in Exodus 17:14, where God told Moses, "Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven." At God's direction, Moses recorded a promise of God in writing, intended, it would appear, as a demonstration of the fixed and certain character of the promise. This promise endured and proved to be a problem for King Saul, who, when directed to visit God's promised judgment on the Amalekites, determined for himself the extent of the destruction that was appropriate rather than

5. Colin E. Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 6. In each of these cases the concern is that God reveals *himself*, not simply external facts about himself. As John Webster put it, "The matter of revelation (*revelata*) is not simply identical with the form or medium of revelation (*modus revelationis*)." Webster, "*Omnia . . . Pertractantur in Sacra Doctrina sub Ratione Dei*. On the Matter of Christian Theology," in *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology*, vol. 1, *God and the Works of God* (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 6. That concern, as we shall see, can be addressed in other ways.

heeding the directions he had received from God's prophet, Samuel (1 Sam. 15). The critical point, though, is that this "memorial book" is written at the Lord's instruction, and that it bears God's own authority.

The connection between the speaking God and the written word is emphasized more strongly just a few chapters later when the Ten Commandments are given at Mount Sinai. We are told that Moses wrote down "all the words of the LORD and all the rules" (Ex. 24:3–4). The people had asked Moses to act as mediator between them and God: they promised to listen to all Moses would say to them, but they pleaded, "Do not let God speak to us, lest we die" (Ex. 20:19). It was after Moses had provided this written record of his encounter with God on the mountain that the Lord said to him, "Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, that I may give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction" (Ex. 24:12). The connection is even more pointed several chapters later when we are told, "And he [the LORD] gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God" (Ex. 31:18).

The expression "written with the finger of God" is an obvious anthropomorphism; we are not meant to imagine that the holy and eternal God has fingers. Yet the point being made is just as obvious: this was God's work. Later we are told, "The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets" (Ex. 32:16). The connection between God and these written words is as close as the words carried through the air by the Spirit of God and heard audibly by Moses himself. They carry the authority of God. So when, in one frightening moment, Moses broke those stone tablets (Ex. 32:19), it was an unmistakable indication of the serious-

ness of what had been done. The Israelites by their behavior had repudiated God and his rule. The true miracle is that, following Moses's intercession on the behalf of the people, the Lord once again took the initiative and said to him, "Cut for yourself two tablets of stone like the first, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke" (Ex. 34:1).

The central significance of all this is that it was God himself who gave the written word a place in the life of his people, and he did that very early on in his dealings with them. The written word was not a later development, replacing the charismatic leadership of the prophets, priests, and kings, or the tangible presence of God in the cloud and the pillar of fire, or the glory that filled the temple. The nation emerged and grew with the concept of an authoritative written word, a canon, imbedded in its experience of the living God. It was not the result of distance between God and his human creatures. When Joshua was commissioned to lead Israel in the place of Moses, God not only promised to be with him wherever he would go but also pressed upon him the importance of the words written by Moses at God's command: "This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it" (Josh. 1:8–9). God's personal presence with Joshua did not do away with the need to give due attention to the written word. Indeed, in the midst of the conquest of the land, Joshua took time to read aloud to the people "all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the Book of the Law" (Josh. 8:34).

At various points throughout the Old Testament, God instructed his servants to write, but of particular significance is the work of the major prophets of Israel's later history. Isaiah's

great prophecy against the Israelites who fled to Egypt in the face of God's judgment included the instruction given to him,

> And now, go, write it before them on a tablet
> and inscribe it in a book,
> that it may be for the time to come
> as a witness forever. (Isa. 30:8)

Like Moses's "memorial book," this written record would remind the people of their failure, and of God's certain judgment, in the years to come. Jeremiah was instructed by the Lord, the God of Israel, "Write in a book all the words that I have spoken to you" (Jer. 30:2). A little later he was told again, "Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you against Israel and Judah and all the nations, from the day I spoke to you, from the days of Josiah until today" (Jer. 36:2; cf. 25:13). The rationale followed: "It may be that the house of Judah will hear all the disaster that I intend to do to them, so that everyone may turn from his evil way, and that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin" (Jer. 36:3). Ezekiel was told to write down in the sight of the people the "whole design and all [the] laws" associated with the new temple, "so that they may observe all its laws and all its statutes and carry them out" (Ezek. 43:11).

Yet the prophets also drew attention to the words that had been written long before them. Daniel appealed to the words written in the Law of Moses and on that basis attributed the calamity of the exile to the people's refusal to turn from their iniquities and gain insight by God's truth (Dan. 9:11, 13). Through Malachi, God issued this charge: "Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel" (4:4). At this late date, the only access to those statutes and rules was through the words Moses had written at God's instruction.

Two underlying realities can be discerned from this. The first is the enduring character of the word of God. God's word is not simply transitory or momentary. It is a point of reference throughout life and throughout the history of the people. God himself continues to attend his word and ensure that it can be heard afresh in succeeding generations by causing it to be written. That is why the psalmist could pray,

> Open my eyes, that I may behold
> wondrous things out of your law (Ps. 119:18)

and testify,

> The unfolding of your words gives light;
> it imparts understanding to the simple. (Ps. 119:130)

The second reality is the sinful forgetfulness of God's chosen people. They needed to be reminded regularly of what God had said to them, and the means of doing this was the written record of the words God had spoken. The words recorded might be words of blessing and promise, or they might be words of warning and judgment. They might be a record of God's faithfulness in dealing with his people or the wisdom he had given to men like King Solomon. Widespread illiteracy in an agrarian nation was no obstacle, for the words written were to be read publicly, as Ezra did facing the square before the Water Gate after the returned exiles had finished rebuilding the city wall in Jerusalem (Neh. 8:1–3).

The existence of a body of writing understood as the authoritative word of God is evident at the time of Jesus. This Hebrew Bible, which Christians would come to know as the Old Testament, was the critical point of reference when it came to understanding or expounding the mind of God. This is why Jesus's appeal "it is written" was entirely intelligible to both

the tempter and the earliest readers of the Gospels. This is why locating the ministry of John the Baptist against the written words of Malachi, as well as Jesus's own zeal for the proper ministry of the temple against the words of Isaiah and Jeremiah, was so significant.[6] Jesus repeatedly told his disciples that what was *written* about him in the Scriptures must be fulfilled (Luke 21:22; 22:37; 24:44). Similarly, the apostles spoke of events in the early church as a fulfillment of what had been *written* (Acts 1:20; Rom. 8:36; 11:8; 1 Cor. 1:19; 14:21; 15:54). They understood what they wrote as written under the impress of the risen Christ's authority (1 Cor. 14:37; 2 Cor. 10:8; 13:10; Gal. 1:1) and in the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 7:40). The apostle Paul saw no difference in terms of authority between his spoken words to the Thessalonians and his letters (2 Thess. 2:15).

Quite naturally, the New Testament makes use of the language of speaking with reference to the written word. The words recorded in Isaiah 6 are what the prophecy of Isaiah "says" (Matt. 13:14). The words of Psalm 110:1 are what "David himself *says* in the Book of Psalms" (Luke 20:42). Peter, on the day of Pentecost, said something similar—"For David did not ascend to the heavens, but he himself *says*"—and then went on to quote the same words from Psalm 110 (Acts 2:34). Paul intriguingly wrote, "For the Scripture *says* to Pharaoh," and then quoted Exodus 9:16 (Rom. 9:17). A little later he introduced a quotation from Hosea 2:23 with "As indeed he [God] *says* in Hosea" (Rom. 9:25). The written form does not obscure the fact that in these words we are addressed by both the human writer and God himself. The transition from spoken word to written word and the human agency that, as we shall see, so often brought it about did not

6. Matt. 11:10, referencing Mal. 3:1; Matt. 21:13, referencing Isa. 56:7 and Jer. 7:11.

change the essential truth that underlies both: this is God's communication. This is his written word.

The Necessity of Scripture

Historically, especially at the time of the Reformation, these ideas were explored under the heading "the necessity of Scripture," in strong contrast to both the Roman Catholic appeal to unwritten traditions and those who claimed special, direct, present-day revelations. Two questions emerge: Why was it necessary for the spoken word to become the written word in the first place? And is the written word still necessary today? Francis Turretin's detailed treatment is very largely representative on the question. He acknowledged that Scripture "is not absolutely necessary with respect to God." God very obviously could have continued to communicate with his people as he had done in the time before Moses. This was not beyond him in any way. Yet, Turretin insisted, "God has seen fit for weighty reasons to commit his word to writing."[7]

Turretin's explanation moved in two directions. The first focused on the character of God and the historical unfolding of his purpose. God's decision to commit his word to writing is part of his loving accommodation to the condition of his creatures—in particular, the church. He knows what is needed at each stage in the history of his people.

> As in the natural economy parents vary the mode of instruction according to the age of their children . . . so the heavenly Father who chastens his people as a man chastens his son (Dt. 8:5), instructs the church yet in infancy and lisping by the spoken word, the simplest mode of revelation. The church presently growing up and in the beginning of

7. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, trans. George Musgrave Giger, vol. 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992), 57 (2.2.2).

> its youth constituted under the law, he teaches it both by spoken word (on account of the remains of its infancy) and by writing (on account of the beginnings of a more robust age in the time of the apostles). At length, as of full age under the gospel, he wishes it to be content with the most perfect mode of revelation (viz., with the light of the written word).[8]

The decision to give his word a written form was, then, a matter not just of "the power and liberty of God" but rather of "his wisdom and economy as dealing with man."[9] When, in these last days, Jesus's disciples are taking the gospel to the ends of the earth until the end of the age, the written mode of God's revelation is necessary.

Turretin's second line of argument focused more tightly on the word itself:

> It was necessary for a written word to be given to the church that the canon of true religious faith might be constant and unmoved; that it might easily be preserved pure and entire against the weakness of memory, the depravity of men and the shortness of life; that it might be more certainly defended from the frauds and corruptions of Satan; that it might more conveniently not only be sent to the absent and widely separated, but also transmitted to posterity.[10]

The need for a faithful transmission of the word, given at a particular point in history to succeeding generations and over an extended period of time, as well as the continuing reality of human finitude and an expectation of continued assault upon

8. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:57–58 (2.2.3) (spelling modernized at points).
9. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:57 (2.2.3).
10. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:58 (2.2.6).

the word by Satan and all opposed to the gospel of Christ, also explains the necessity of Scripture.[11] Of course this does not guarantee that the word will be faithfully received or faithfully taught in every instance or even in every generation. There are other factors at play at that point (the understanding and skill of the teacher, human weakness and sinfulness, institutional or cultural pressure, etc.). Yet Jesus himself insisted that "this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matt. 24:14). Critical to that mission is the Lord's provision of his word in a stable written form. How are we to ensure that the gospel we proclaim now is the same gospel entrusted to us then? In Scripture we find the criterion and guidance "to distinguish the divine truth from false influences and erroneous forces."[12] God did not have to provide us with a written form of his word, but because of his awareness of our need, and because of the critical role of his word in the mission Christ entrusted to his people, God gave us Scripture.

The Inspiration of Scripture

The Scripture God has given us is self-evidently a creaturely artifact. It exists on this side of the great Creator-creature distinction between God and everything else. These are real words, mostly taken from ordinary creaturely discourse (whether in the original texts or in the myriad copies and translations made over the centuries), written with ink on vellum, papyrus, parchment, or paper.

11. A few decades earlier, the Westminster Confession of Faith (1.1) gave classic expression to this line of argument: "It pleased the Lord . . . 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 the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing: which makes the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing His will unto his people being now ceased."

12. A. Waleus, in J. Polyander et al., *Synopsis of a Purer Theology*, vol. 1, ed. William J. van Asselt et al., trans. Riemer A. Faber (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 55 (disp. 2, para. 9).

Scripture is even more importantly a human artifact. The words were written, in almost every case (and we have noted the highly significant exceptions earlier in this chapter, p. 90), by human agents. Some of the authors are known from the texts themselves: Moses wrote the book of the Law; David authored many of the psalms; and the writing prophets made clear they were recording the word of the Lord that came to each one of them. The apostle John produced his eyewitness account of Jesus's life and ministry, and also the book of Revelation; the "we" passages of Acts (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27–28) help us to identify Luke the physician as the author of Luke-Acts; and Paul wrote his letters to the churches, often signing off in his own hand (1 Cor. 16:21; Gal. 6:11; Col. 4:18; 2 Thess. 3:17; Philem. 19). However, even when we are not given the identity of the writer, it is clear that these texts didn't drop from the sky but were in each case the work of a human hand.

Finally, these two factors come together in the recognition that Scripture is a historical artifact. The words are given to us from within a particular historical context, whether the emergence of the nation following the exodus, the period of the united kingdom, the declension of later centuries in Israel's history into which the prophets spoke, the life and ministry of Jesus, or the early years of the apostolic gospel mission. The letters of Paul, for example, were written, in the first instance, to the churches or individuals to whom they were addressed, even if from the very start there was a sense that what Paul had to say to each church had a wider application (Col. 3:16). Whether in the Old Testament or the New, the words were written *to* an original audience but were also written *for* us, as Paul indicated: "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom. 15:4).

The processes by which the biblical texts were created varied enormously. I have already mentioned some of the occasions in which a process quite close to dictation was involved (on Mount Sinai and in the letters to the seven churches in Revelation). Yet this method was very much the exception rather than the rule. Just as Peter's expression "men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" does not restrict us to prophets rehearsing verbatim words they had heard spoken in the heavens, so too the writers of the various biblical texts produced them in a number of different ways. If we confine ourselves just to the New Testament, we find eyewitness testimony, an "orderly account" (Luke 1:3) of history compiled from the reports of many eyewitnesses, personal and pastoral letters written by Christ's commissioned apostles, a "word of exhortation" (Heb. 13:22), and the record of a vision given to an apostle in exile. None of these required word-for-word dictation. The personalities and literary styles of the different authors are apparent in the word choices they made, the details they chose to focus upon, and their relationship to the particular situations in which, and to which, they were writing.

Nevertheless, neither the creaturely, human, and historical nature of the Bible nor the variety of times, authors, and methods involved in its composition preclude it from being the word of God to us. Whatever the precise process by which this particular biblical text came into being, the result is that "all Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16, my trans.). This is what Christian theologians mean when they speak about the "inspiration" of Scripture, a term that comes from the Latin translation of *theopneustos* in 2 Timothy 3:16, *divinitus inspirata est*. Strictly speaking, what is described as "inspired" is the product (all Scripture), not those involved in the process (the writers). Against the background I have sketched, it is not

difficult to explain what this means. This is God's word, at the most basic level brought to us by God's Spirit, sharing that same intimate relation to him that we have with the words which come from our mouths, carried by our breath. These are the words God meant us to have from Moses or David or Isaiah, from John or Peter or Paul. They are the product of a double agency, which, as we have already seen, is a special feature of God's self-revelation to his creatures. That double agency is itself the result of God's gracious decision to involve his creatures in accomplishing his purposes.

It is the inspiration of Scripture that marks these texts as different from any other texts we might name, whether from church councils or from assemblies or other theological writers. It underscores their unique authority. Augustine, the greatest Christian mind of the early church, for all the helpful things he wrote, nevertheless did not produce texts we should describe as "God-breathed." Neither did the great Reformers Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, or Cranmer. No contemporary writers, no matter how orthodox or pastorally helpful, can make this claim for their writings. We cannot speak this way about the great creeds or confessions of the churches either. The Scriptures stand alone as "inspired," and so they stand alone as the final authority by which all other authorities must be judged.

Though Scripture itself is properly called "inspired" rather than the writers of Scripture, it has been difficult in practice to separate the product from the process that gave it to us. This is clear in the much-used definition of biblical inspiration from professors A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield:

> [The inspiration of Scripture is] God's continued work of superintendence, by which, his providential, gracious and supernatural contributions having been presupposed, he presided over the sacred writers in their entire work of writ-

> ing, with the design and effect of rendering that writing an errorless record of the matters he designed them to communicate, and hence constituting the entire volume in all its parts the word of God to us.[13]

An important context for properly understanding how the inspiration of Scripture has come about is, as we have seen, the way God operates concursively in his world. God works in and with the creatures he has made, preparing them for the task he has for them, enabling them to do the task, and directing them in the task without compromising their creaturely integrity. God's widespread and prior involvement in the lives of those he commissioned for their particular role enabled the human authors of the Bible to act consciously and creatively and still to leave us with the words God intended. Moses's education in the courts of Pharaoh, David's experience as a shepherd before he became king, Paul's rabbinic training at the feet of Gamaliel—each one's lifelong formation by God shaped the thoughts and words he used. Warfield would later write, "If God wished to give His people a series of letters like Paul's He prepared a Paul to write them, and the Paul He brought to the task was a Paul who spontaneously would write just such letters."[14]

Yet, more was involved than God's general providential superintendence of all things, guiding and directing them toward the ends he had planned. Warfield also spoke of "the special superintendence of God" designed to secure "the errorless expression in language of the thoughts designed by God."[15] God did not simply wind up the universe and let it run on its own,

13. A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield, "Inspiration," *The Presbyterian Review* 2, no. 6 (1881): 232, reprinted as *Inspiration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), 17–18.

14. Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, "The Biblical Idea of Inspiration," in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), 155.

15. Warfield, "Biblical Idea of Inspiration," 154.

confident that it would turn out the way he intended. Nor did he just prepare individuals but leave it up to them whether they would write or not and, if they did, what they would write. Yes, they were consciously, intelligently, and creatively active, but the central testimony of Scripture about itself is that these texts are God-breathed. The free and active use of Paul's mind ended up in the words God himself wanted us to have.

Verbal Inspiration

It is clear that inspiration in this sense extends to the words used and not simply the thoughts behind the words. That is what is meant by *verbal inspiration*. Of course, words are an expression of thought (as well as emotion, personality, and a host of other things). However, we cannot bypass the actual words written. This is evident, as Roger Nicole observed, in the way Jesus and his apostles "did not hesitate on occasion to base their whole argumentation upon one single word of the Old Testament Scripture . . . or even on the grammatical form of one word."[16] Jesus's close attention to the wording of Old Testament texts is seen in his appeal to what is a single word ("my") in the English translation of Psalm 110:1 but in the original Hebrew text is just a single consonant (Matt. 22:41–45). He also appealed to the use of the word "gods" in Psalm 82:6, when defending himself against those Jews who wanted to stone him in the wake of his description of God as "my Father" and his statement "I and the Father are one" (John 10:27–36). One of the central tenets of Paul's teaching on justification in his letter to the Romans is his appeal to the word "credited to" (*hashab*, my trans.) in Genesis 15:6 to contrast the gift of righteousness to Abraham with a righteousness that would be due as a wage if he had

16. Roger Nicole, "New Testament Use of the Old Testament," in *Revelation and the Bible*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1958), 139.

been able to earn it. The writer to the Hebrews makes much of the words "brothers" in Psalm 22 (Heb. 2:11–12), "today" in Psalm 95 (Heb. 4:7), and "yet once more" in Haggai 2:6 (Heb. 12:26–27). The level of detail extends to the number of a noun in Galatians 3:16—"offspring," not "offsprings"—with reference to Genesis 22:18. None of these examples could be persuasive if the inspiration of Scripture did not extend to the words. Indeed, Martin Luther would say, "Not only the words but also the order of the words which the Holy Spirit and Scripture use is divine."[17]

If inspiration extends to the words, which words are we talking about? The Old Testament was originally given in Hebrew (with several chapters in Daniel and Ezra and isolated verses and words in Jeremiah, Genesis, and the Psalms written in Aramaic), and the New Testament in common (*koinē*) Greek. So, in the first instance, these are the words we can describe as "God-breathed." The continued careful study of these ancient languages arises from just such a conviction. The content of the word of God is critical, but that does not mean that the form in which that content is given to us is irrelevant or merely incidental. Luther agreed with Augustine that there is an ongoing need for "some people in the church who could use Greek and Hebrew before they deal with the Word, because it was in these two languages that the Holy Spirit wrote the Old and New Testaments."[18] All translations need to be tested against the original, since mistranslation is a genuine possibility.

17. Martin Luther, *In Quindecim Psalmos Graduum*, in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Schriften*, ed. J. K. F. Knaake et al., 73 vols. (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus, 1883–2009), 40/3:254.23–24. By "divine" in this context Luther meant "from God." He did not believe the text was God.

18. Martin Luther, "The Adoration of the Sacrament," in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 68 vols. to date (St. Louis: Concordia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1955–), 36:304. Luther appears to have been referencing Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* 2.11, accessible as *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 38.

Nevertheless, the process of translation does not *necessarily* involve distortion. Translation need not always be treason.[19] There is little embarrassment about the need and practice of translation when it occurs within the Bible itself. The Septuagint is a Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament from around 250 BC, which seems to be regularly cited in the New Testament. Furthermore, some Hebrew and Aramaic terms appear in the New Testament alongside a translation into Greek (e.g., Matt. 1:23; 27:33; Mark 5:41; 15:34; John 1:41; Acts 9:36). Translatability is a feature of human language on this side of the Tower of Babel, and a multiplicity of languages has never been an impediment to God making himself and his purposes known. Perhaps the most dramatic demonstration of this occurred on the day of Pentecost, when God so worked that each member of the gathered multiracial multitude heard the disciples praising God in his own native language (Acts 2:5–11). So, insofar as a given translation faithfully renders the original Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek text, what we have in translation is the word of God to us. It carries all the authority of the original.

Plenary Inspiration

Not only does the inspiration extend to the words that make up the text; it also extends across the breadth of Scripture. "All Scripture" is God-breathed, not simply "each scripture." This basic idea is often described as *plenary inspiration*. There are no degrees of inspiration in the Bible. The whole of it is the word of God to us because the whole of it is God-breathed. We do not have the right to pick and choose what we will accept in

19. Despite the saying, attributed to Okakura-Kakuzō, *The Book of Tea* (London: Putnam's Sons, 1906), 48, "Translation is always a treason, and as a Ming author observes, can at its best be only the reverse side of a brocade,—all the threads are there, but not the subtlety of colour or design."

the Bible. The words Jesus spoke may be especially treasured because they are the words Jesus spoke, but they are no more God-breathed than the narrative that surrounds them in the Gospels. They are equally "Scripture." In red letter Bibles, both the red and the black words are inspired.

This applies also to the varied literary genres of the biblical writings. It is not just the legal material that carries the authority of God, but the historical records too and even the poetry. It is certainly important to recognize the different types of writing and not to read the Bible as if all of it were just the same. How we apply the message of the historical books will necessarily be different from the way we apply the exhortations, warnings, and commands of the apostolic Epistles. We move from the biblical text to our own situation in slightly different ways in each case, noting, for instance, the distinction between description and prescription. Yet the differences in genre do not affect the inspiration of the text. Each is equally the word of God to us.

Nor should we distinguish in terms of specific subject matter, as if inspiration applied only when the text directly addresses the person and purposes of God or matters of salvation. The record of Israel's history is the record God wanted us to have. So, too, the collection of proverbs and other pieces of wisdom. Paul's treatment of appropriate behavior in the home based on what Christ has done for us is just as inspired as his exposition of justification by faith apart from works. Of course, careful attention needs to be given to the purpose and intention of the biblical text (as far as it can be discerned from the text itself). For example, even when the Bible addresses natural phenomena, it is not writing with the same expectations, conventions, and concern for precision of detail as a twenty-first-century science textbook. To impose these upon the Bible will inevitably create problems. The Bible's phenomenological

language (describing things as we experience them) and its chief interest in the relation of all things to God and his purposes, which find their ultimate fulfillment in Christ, lead us in a different direction from the twenty-first-century concern for precision of detail. Nevertheless, the passages where natural phenomena are discussed are just as inspired as the other parts of Scripture. We must not stand over the text deciding what is inspired and what is not. That would make our reason or the current scientific consensus the final authority, rather than Scripture.

Historically, something like this has happened when people have championed the idea of "limited inspiration." In the sixteenth century, Faustus Socinus wrote that some parts of Scripture are of "no importance," a view that allowed him to reject a number of Christian doctrines, including the Trinity, original sin, and God's provision of atonement by Christ's death.[20] Two and half centuries later, Samuel Taylor Coleridge influenced a number of English church leaders when he wrote, "In short, whatever finds me, bears witness for itself that it has proceeded from a Holy Spirit."[21] As he explained to a friend, "What you find therein coincident with your pre-established convictions, you will of course recognize as the revealed Word."[22] This idea that inspiration need be affirmed only of some Scripture and not all of it lay at the heart of the controversy surrounding Charles Briggs, Llewellyn J. Evans, and Henry Preserved Smith at the end of the nineteenth century.[23] As Evans put it:

20. F. Socinus, *De sacrae Scripturae auctoritate* (1570; Raków: Sebastiani Sternacii, 1611), 21; see Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, vol. 2, *Holy Scripture*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 306.

21. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* (New York: Chelsea House, 1983), 42 (first published in 1840, six years after his death).

22. Coleridge, *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, 64–65.

23. Henry Preserved Smith, *Inspiration and Inerrancy: A History and a Defense* (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke, 1893).

> The Bible is a pneumatic [spiritual] Book. The groundwork, the substance, all that makes the Book what it is, is pneumatic. The warp and woof of it is pneuma [spirit]. Its fringes run off, as was inevitable, into the secular, the material, the psychic. Can we not, as persons of common intelligence even, much more with the internal witness of the Spirit to aid us, discriminate between the fringe and the warp and woof? Do not the "spiritualities" and the "heavenlinesses" of Scripture distinguish themselves from all that is lower, as the steady shining of the everlasting stars from the fitful gleaming of earth's fire-flies?[24]

Evans wanted to affirm the inspiration of Scripture, but only in such a way that the Scriptures were accepted as "an infallible rule of faith and practice and not as infallible in their every statement."[25] Smith went further, insisting that "it is entirely legitimate . . . to distinguish between two elements in Scripture: what was the subject of revelation and what was not the subject of revelation."[26] It was left to the individual to discern the inward testimony of the Spirit and so to make this discrimination.

B. B. Warfield, once again, wrote to defend the Bible's own teaching about itself and against this alternative in particular. The chief problem of the proposal of Briggs, Evans, and Smith on inspiration and infallibility is that "it has the Bible itself against it," he wrote.[27] "*All* Scripture is God-breathed," and so we cannot distinguish between which texts are inspired and which are not, or between degrees of inspiration. That is why inspiration is described as both *verbal* and *plenary.*

24. Llewelyn J. Evans, "Biblical Scholarship and Inspiration," in Smith, *Inspiration and Inerrancy*, 81.
25. Smith, "The Debate," in *Inspiration and Inerrancy*, 148.
26. Smith, "Response to the Charges," in *Inspiration and Inerrancy*, 225.
27. Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *Limited Inspiration* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974), 54.

The Canon of Scripture

However, both the word "plenary" and the biblical expression "all Scripture" raise the question of the extent of the Bible. How do we distinguish between what is included in "all Scripture" and what is not? We have the Bible as sixty-six books, bound as one, and understood in its entirety, as well as in its parts, as the word of God written for us. But why these sixty-six books and no other?

We have already seen that Jesus himself made regular appeal to the Old Testament and endorsed the common threefold structure of the Hebrew Bible as the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings (Luke 24:44). He recognized these as "the Scriptures of the prophets" (Matt. 26:56; John 6:45), who, like David, spoke these words through the working of the Holy Spirit (Mark 12:36). This led Jesus to make a clear distinction between the teaching found in these texts and the teaching of those who had come after, especially the religious teachers and experts of his own time (Matt. 15:6). Jesus also commissioned the apostles for a worldwide gospel mission until the end of the age (Matt. 28:19–20), and promised them the same Holy Spirit, who would not only remind them of all he had taught them but give them the words to say when they were called upon to testify to him (Matt. 10:19; John 14:26).

The apostles followed Jesus's example, appealing to the Old Testament in their teaching and writing as the words of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 6:16; Heb. 3:7; 10:15; 2 Pet. 1:21). Yet they also understood that they, as Jesus's authorized witnesses, were speaking as those taught by the same Spirit (1 Cor. 2:13; 2 Cor. 4:13). The risen Christ kept his promise and poured out his Spirit on the church. This Spirit continued to be active in the church—among other things, enabling the apostolic word to be heard and received as the word of God (1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Pet.

3:16). The result was a church built upon "the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Eph. 2:20). It is in this light that Paul emphasized his apostolic authority whenever he wrote to the churches and pointed them to his habit of writing the final greeting with his own hand as proof that the letter was indeed from him (Gal. 6:11; 2 Thess. 3:17)—evidently there were letters in circulation that falsely claimed to be from him (2 Thess. 2:2). The apostle expected anyone claiming to be "a prophet, or spiritual" to acknowledge that the things Paul was writing to them were "a command of the Lord" (1 Cor. 14:37).

The earliest church was born with a "canon consciousness," which reflected the attitude of her Lord and his apostles. From the start she recognized a body of prophetic writings distinct from all other writing, bearing the authority of God and functioning as the test and rule of all faithful teaching and practice.[28] Broughton Knox put it this way:

> When, at the beginning of the gospel, Jews were converted to put their faith in Jesus as their Messiah, they did not abandon their Old Testament, nor modify their views with regard to it, except to see Jesus Christ as fulfilling it. Similarly, when Gentiles were converted, they were converted into a church where the Old Testament was already prized as the oracles of God (Rom. 3:2). Thus "the Christian church was not required to form for itself the idea of a canon." . . . It had a canon from the beginning.[29]

28. The word "canon" has both of these senses: a measuring rod by which other things are tested and a recognized list of writings that make up this measure or rule.

29. D. Broughton Knox, "The Canon and Biblical Theology," in *D. Broughton Knox Selected Works*, vol. 1, *The Doctrine of God*, ed. Tony Payne (Kingsford, NSW: Matthias Media, 2000), 320. The expression "oracles of God" with the associated reference is taken from an earlier, manuscript edition of Knox's article. Knox is quoted in Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, "The Formation of the Canon of the New Testament," in *Inspiration and Authority*, 411.

An important implication of this is that the emergence of the Christian canon of Scripture is not in the first instance a decision of human creatures, even redeemed human creatures or their gathered reality as the church. God himself distinguishes these writings from other human writings. The words the Father gave to the Son are guarded and guided by the Spirit, who brings all things to the goal for which they were intended. Theologians through the centuries have recognized that "Scripture has its being in its reference to the activity of God," and this extends to his activity of setting these texts apart and preserving them as an instrument of his self-revelation and as a means of nurturing and directing his people.[30] God attends his word, not just at the moment it was spoken or written but as it is read and recognized for what it is, as the texts are circulated and then collated, and, in time, as authorized lists are prepared. The canon is a theological reality before it is a historical one.[31]

The historical process of reception was messy. Consider just the New Testament books: no list seemed necessary in the earliest years of the Christian mission. Knox again comments:

> The activity of the Holy Spirit and Christ's commission of his apostles are the two factors which provide the possibility of New Testament Scripture. Scripture inspired by the Spirit is authoritative from the moment it is written. It is recognised as authoritative when known to have apostolic authorisation. The first recipients of these writings would know of this authorisation from the beginning. Other Christian churches would learn of the existence and authorisation of these Scriptures through the lapse of time. In

30. John Webster, "The Dogmatic Location of the Canon," in *Word and Church: Essays in Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 28.

31. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 146. Floyd V. Filson, *Which Books Belong in the Bible? A Study of the Canon* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957), 42.

> this way the canon of each church would grow in volume though not in authority.[32]

It would seem, from evidence in the New Testament itself, that this process was well underway during the lifetime of the apostles (Col. 4:16; 2 Pet. 3:16). Their authorization was, of course, critical to the acceptance of each piece of writing.[33] It is possible that the four canonical Gospels, having first been distributed individually, were read as a collection by the end of the first century. The quotation of parts of the New Testament as Scripture by the writer of the homily known as 2 Clement (c. 95) and by Ignatius of Antioch (d. 108) also suggests a growing recognition of these texts in this same early period.[34] The Muratorian Fragment suggests that lists of canonical New Testament books were being prepared in the middle of the second century, perhaps in the wake of a spate of spurious writings and the activity of heretics like Marcion of Sinope (who removed parts of the Bible he did not like). So when Athanasius included a list in his Easter letter of 367, he did not believe he was conferring anything new on the books in the list, but merely recognizing what had long been the case.

The debates were renewed at the time of the Reformation. The Roman appeal to the Apocrypha in support of the doctrine of purgatory was particularly irksome to the Reformers. In addition, a fresh focus on salvation by Christ alone led Luther to raise questions about the place of some books generally accepted as canonical. Most famously he described James as "an epistle of straw," but he also had doubts about Hebrews, Jude,

32. Knox, "Canon and Biblical Theology," 328.

33. Apostolicity did not necessarily mean direct authorship of each writing by the apostles but denoted a close association with the apostles in a way that indicated their endorsement. Warfield spoke of the new books "given the church under the seal of apostolic authority. . . . They received new book after new book from the apostolic circle, as equally 'Scripture' with the old books." Warfield, "Formation of the Canon," 412–13.

34. 2 Clement 2:4; Ignatius, *To the Smyrnean Church* 7.

Revelation, and, in the Old Testament, Esther.[35] However, Luther was never able to remove these books from the canon, and he was unable to persuade fellow Reformers of his views. When, in 1546, the Catholic Council of Trent produced an authorized canonical list that included the Apocrypha—and declared that all who did not agree with it were anathema—the Protestant churches began to produce their own canonical lists without the Apocrypha, such as those found in the Second Helvetic Confession (1562) and the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion (1571).[36]

However, it is important to remember that this entire messy process took place within a context. That context included God's determination to make himself known, his involvement of genuine human agency in speaking and writing his word, the risen Christ's gift of the Spirit and the apostles to the church, and the Spirit's attendance of his word at every stage from its first utterance to its reception. God has not left the human words he has used to make himself known simply to fend for themselves in the world. His Spirit ensures that they will not return "empty" but "shall accomplish that which I [the LORD] purpose" (Isa. 55:11). For this reason we must conclude that "the canon is a matter of grace."[37]

Alongside this is the wonderful truth, as Jesus told his disciples, that the sheep hear the voice of their shepherd: "He goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice" (John 10:2–4). Beyond all arguments from history and

35. Luther distinguished between what he called "the true and certain chief books of the New Testament" and others that "from ancient times had a different reputation." These four books he placed in unnumbered pages as an addendum to the rest of the New Testament. Martin Luther, *Preface to the Epistle to the Hebrews (1522)*, in *Luther's Works*, 35:394.

36. Often the Apocrypha was mentioned but with a caveat, such as that in the Thirty-Nine Articles, "the other Books (as Jerome said) the Church does read for example of life and instruction of manners; but yet it does not apply them to establish any doctrine" (Art. 6).

37. Webster, "Dogmatic Location of the Canon," 42.

the confirmations or evidences that have been suggested from time to time, it is because, as Calvin put it, "God in person speaks in it" that Christians have confidence in the Bible we have been given. Scripture, he insisted is "self-authenticated" and "the certainty it deserves with us, it attains by the testimony of the Spirit."[38] Yet, as one modern author puts it, "The acceptance of Scripture through the Spirit is the result of the authority that Scripture already has in and of itself."[39]

The sixty-six books that make up the Christian canon are given to us by God. This does not mean that no human decisions were involved or that it was a simple and straightforward process. Disagreement remains between Catholics and Protestants, not on the sixty-six books but on a small number of others that a Catholic council placed alongside them and for which it is difficult to find any connection to the apostolic mission.[40] Yet the crucial point is that "the church's judgment is an act of confession of that which precedes and imposes itself on the church."[41] The church recognizes the canon; it does not create it. It is Jesus's endorsement of the Old Testament Scriptures and his gospel commission, enabled by his gift of the Spirit and

38. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.7.4–5. Turretin, who served in Geneva a century after Calvin, suggested both external and internal "marks" that, in his terms, "furnish indubitable proof of divinity": the external include antiquity, preservation, the candor and sincerity of the writers, the testimony of the martyrs; the internal include sublime mysteries (Trinity, incarnation, satisfaction, and resurrection), divine majesty of style (simplicity and weight of expression), agreement and harmony of doctrine, direction to God's glory and our salvation, efficacy (pierces the soul and triumphs over Satan). Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:63–64 (2.4.6, 8–9). The Westminster Confession of Faith had, a little earlier, produced a similar list of evidences.

39. Henk van den Belt, *The Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology: Truth and Trust* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 323.

40. These books are not found in the Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament but are only in the Septuagint, the Greek translation dating from the second century BC. Protestants describe these books collectively as "The Apocrypha." Again, they are considered outside the canon and so are not used "to establish any doctrine," but they are nevertheless useful "for example of life and instruction of manners" (Art. 6 of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion). In 1563 the Council of Trent included these books in the Roman Catholic canon.

41. Webster, "Dogmatic Location of the Canon," 38–39.

of the prophetic ministry of the apostles to the church, that must stand at the center of any consideration of the canon.

The Preservation of Scripture

Yet, before we turn to consider the character of the Bible we have been given, should we push just a little further? After all, we do not have the handwriting of Moses, David, and Isaiah, or John, Peter, and Paul; rather, we have copies of copies made over centuries, first by hand, then by printers, and now digitally. Is the inspired text of the Bible beyond our reach? Against what are we to test the various translations available today? These might seem like modern questions, but they have been addressed many times over the centuries. Augustine recognized the possibility of "an incorrect text" in a letter to Jerome. Erasmus produced a critical edition of the New Testament using the manuscripts available to him and making some very significant corrections to the Vulgate translation as a result. John Owen devoted considerable effort to addressing the question in two treatises published together in 1689. In the nineteenth century, B. B. Warfield was lampooned for his insistence that inspiration and infallible truthfulness attached to the original text, with critics mocking his appeal to an ideal text that "no living man has ever seen." He directly addressed the question in a carefully worded response.[42]

Warfield's response picked up elements of earlier arguments from people like Turretin and Owen. He made a crucial distinction between "the autographic codex" (e.g., the manuscript which contains Paul's own handwriting) and "the autographic

42. Augustine, "Epistle 82" (AD 405); Desiderius Erasmus, *Novum instrumentum omne* (Basel: Froben, 1516); John Owen, *Of the Divine Original, Authority, Self-Evidencing Light and Power of the Scriptures* (Oxford: Robinson, 1689); Owen, *Of the Integrity and Purity of the Hebrew and Greek Text of the Scripture* (Oxford: Robinson, 1689); Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Inerrancy of the Original Autographs," *The Independent*, March 23, 1893, 382–83.

text." We do not have the former (e.g., Paul's handwritten manuscript), but we can be confident that we have the latter (Paul's words).[43] Warfield believed that the detailed study of the myriad of manuscripts and fragments—mapping out their relation to each other, identifying at which points copyist or printer errors appear to have entered the chain of transmission, and seeking to explain how this might have happened—has given us a high degree of confidence that the text we have is indeed the autographic text.

It is important to keep perspective here. Despite outlandish claims to the contrary, when the relationship of variants to each other is taken into account, the number is entirely manageable, and the vast bulk of them are inconsequential (spelling variations, a missing word or letter, the duplication of a word from the line above, etc.).[44] However, there are a few more-substantial variants. They should not be lightly dismissed but demand careful study and explanation. In doing so, we do need to keep in mind that not all variants are equally viable (the fact that a variant exists does not automatically mean that it is a serious alternative), and the careful comparison of manuscripts and fragments usually enables us to determine which are more likely to be original than others. As Köstenberger and Kruger have put it, even "these few 'significant' textual variants do not materially affect the integrity of the New Testament because,

43. Various suggestions as to why the sovereign and good God did not preserve "the autographic codex" have been made over the centuries. The simple answer is that we do not know. The New Testament says nothing about the lost originals of the Old Testament. However, perhaps we should see this as God's kindness in keeping us from the temptation to idolatry, in which the gift of God becomes itself an object of worship. In 2 Kings 18 that is precisely what happened with the bronze serpent Moses had constructed at God's command (Num. 21), and Hezekiah was praised for destroying it.

44. The number of variants grows geometrically rather than linearly. That is, a variant occurring in one manuscript might itself be repeated in copies made from that copy. The science of textual criticism compares manuscripts and maps the relation between them in order not to be misled by the number of times a variant appears or by an inflated total of textual variants.

put simply, we can usually spot them when they occur."[45] Warfield drew attention to the "Wicked Bible" of 1631, in which the seventh commandment was mistakenly printed without the negative: "Thou shalt commit adultery." Despite the printing error, there was never any doubt what the proper wording should be.[46] In the end, even those who appeal to the variants to cast doubt upon the text have to admit that "essential Christian beliefs are not affected by textual variants in the manuscript tradition of the New Testament."[47]

In this regard, our situation is not really much different from those in biblical times, since even at the time of Jesus and for many centuries before, any appeal to the Old Testament was necessarily an appeal to the text as preserved in a copy. At the beginning of each new reign in Israel, a copy of the Law was to be made by the king, who was to read it regularly, keep it, and not turn aside from it (Deut. 17:18–20). It was to be a copy carefully made ("approved by the Levitical priests"), but it was still a copy. It was not the handwriting of Moses or the Lord, and it wasn't even written by the king himself; yet it carried the same authority. By the time of the New Testament, neither Jesus nor the apostles possessed the autographic codex of any of the Old Testament books. Yet they confidently appealed to the copies at hand as the authoritative word of God. When Jesus read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth, he was undoubtedly reading from a copy rather than the autographic codex. Nevertheless, he was still able to say, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing"

45. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Michael J. Kruger, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy: How Contemporary Culture's Fascination with Diversity Has Reshaped Our Understanding of Early Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 218.

46. Warfield, "Inerrancy of the Original Autographs," 382–83, reprinted in *Selected Shorter Writings of B. B. Warfield*, ed. John E. Meeter, 2 vols. (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 2:585.

47. Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 252–53 (appendix to paperback edition).

(Luke 4:21). "It is the wording, not the physical autographa, that matters."[48]

The preservation of Scripture needs to be seen as yet another example of the generosity of God in his communication with his human creatures. It is not a human achievement but an act of divine grace. The Westminster Confession spoke of God's "singular care and providence" with respect to his written word (1.8). Heinrich Bullinger located this in God's plan for the ages: "By the vigilant care and unspeakable goodness of God, our Father, it is brought to pass, that no age at any time either hath or shall want so great a treasure."[49] God's intention is to make himself and his purposes known to us. He has chosen to do this through human words, spoken and then written by his human agents in particular situations, but with us in mind. Precisely because it is God's word, God himself attends it at every point from utterance to reception.

The preservation of Scripture is not, however, a concept imposed upon the Bible from without. The prophet Isaiah observed,

> The grass withers, the flower fades,
> but the word of our God will stand forever. (Isa. 40:8)

Jesus himself spoke of how "not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished" (Matt. 5:18), but also spoke in similar terms to those of Isaiah about his own words: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (Matt. 24:35). God has ensured that even after two thousand years of copying, printing, and translating, we still

48. Peter J. Williams, "Ehrman's Equivocation and the Inerrancy of the Original Text," in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 400.

49. Heinrich Bullinger, *The Decades of Henry Bullinger, Minister of the Church of Zurich*, trans. H. I., ed. Thomas Harding (Cambridge: Parker Society, 1849), 55 (decade 1, sermon 1).

have access to the words of the prophets, apostles, and Jesus himself. As one most unlikely witness testified, "The faithful preservation of the apostolic writings is the work of the Spirit of God acknowledging his own products."[50]

The Bible is God's written word. These words were written long ago and yet *for us*, so that "through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom. 15:4). What then can we say about the character of this word God has given?

50. Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. Hugh Ross Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart, trans. D. M. Baillie et al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 602.

4

The Character of Scripture (Part 1)

Clarity and Truthfulness

When Jesus appealed to the Scriptures, either in teaching his disciples or in challenging his opponents, his appeal sometimes included an affirmation, and always carried certain assumptions, about the character of Scripture. As we have seen, he assumed Scripture was accessible, that it could be read and its message understood. The challenge "Have you not read?" (Matt. 12:3, 5; 19:4; 22:31) would not make sense if this were not so. Neither would his charge that the religious leaders of his day had made void the word of God (as far as they were able) by their insistence upon their traditions (Matt. 15:6).

Jesus spoke boldly about the truthfulness and hence reliability of Scripture—"Your word is truth" (John 17:17) and "Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35)—and also about the Spirit of truth (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13), whom he would send

to his disciples. His parable of the rich man and Lazarus reinforced the sufficiency of Scripture: "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead" (Luke 16:31). Jesus demonstrated the power of his words when he stilled the storm (Mark 4:39), expelled demons (Mark 1:25; 5:8; 9:25), and healed the sick (Matt. 8:8, 13; Mark 5:34). His words did things; they were effective. He expected the same from the words of Scripture, teaching his disciples that "everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms *must be fulfilled*" (Luke 24:44). Jesus not only understood Scripture to be the word of God written but also understood what kind of word it is that God has given us. As we have also seen, his commissioning of the apostles and his promise of the Spirit pushed these perspectives forward into the New Testament.

In Christian theology, the character of Scripture has often been discussed under headings such as "The Properties of Scripture" and "The Attributes of Scripture." Having settled "what Scripture is" (the written word of God), many treatments of the subject moved on to "how Scripture is" (its character).[1] At the time of the Reformation, it became important for Protestants to expound the attributes of Scripture in order to underline its uniqueness and its authority, in the face of both Roman Catholic claims for the authority of the church and tradition and Anabaptist claims for the authority of the inner word of the Spirit to the human soul.[2] One of the fullest lists is that of the

1. Richard Muller discerns in some theology after the Reformation the ancient pattern of moving from "is there such a thing?" (*an sit*) to "what is it?" (*quid sit*) and then to "how [or what kind] is it?" (*qualis sit*). The pattern is found in medieval scholasticism under the influence of Aristotle's rhetoric. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, vol. 2, *Holy Scripture*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 298.

2. For a discussion of this context, see Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. 1, *Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 449, 452–54.

Dutch theologian Petrus van Mastricht: authority, truth, integrity, sanctity, perspicuity, perfection (i.e., sufficiency), necessity, and efficacy.[3] More recent accounts have treated some of these elsewhere in the doctrine, allowing a more succinct list of attributes.[4] In this chapter and the next we will examine four aspects of the character of Scripture arising directly from Jesus's own use of the Bible as sketched above: clarity, truthfulness, sufficiency, and efficacy.

However, before we proceed, we must recognize that none of these "attributes" is a static, inert quality of the biblical text. Rather, all four exist as dynamic realities arising from the identity of Scripture as the word of the living God. God has spoken through the prophets and apostles, and as a result, Scripture is constituted as God's "mighty speech-act," as modern linguistic philosophers and theologians might say.[5] The Reformed theologians of the seventeenth century may have raised questions by suggesting, in Richard Muller's words, that "the attributes of Scripture have an analogical relationship to some of the communicable attributes of God"; yet, John Webster cautions us, this need not be read as "divinising the Bible."[6] Analogies work both ways, in this instance trading on both likenesses and differences between the living God and the text he brought into existence through genuine human agency. Scripture is not divine

3. Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, trans. Todd M. Rester, ed. Joel R. Beeke, vol. 1, *Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2018), 126–31.

4. They are "authority, necessity, sufficiency, perspicuity": Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:449; "necessity, sufficiency, clarity and authority": Timothy Ward, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009), 98–132; "enough, clear, final and necessary": Kevin DeYoung, *Taking God at His Word: Why the Bible Is Worth Knowing, Trusting and Loving* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2014).

5. Kevin Vanhoozer, "God's Mighty Speech-Acts: The Doctrine of Scripture Today," in *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture*, ed. P. E. Satterthwaite and D. F. Wright (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 171.

6. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:299; John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 23.

in the way that God himself is, and Webster is right to point out that the relation between divine and human agency in the production of Scripture is not the same as the union between divinity and humanity in the person of Christ.[7] Nevertheless, as one recent study put it, "God's relationship with his Word is one of far greater intimacy than is often appreciated in theology."[8]

Scripture does not exist outside of God's presence, and it does not operate in isolation from God's activity in making himself known, redeeming fallen human beings, and moving all things toward the conclusion he has planned for them. Scripture is the word of God, not only in the sense that it originates in him but also in the sense that he continues to present himself to us in it. Attended by the Spirit at every point, the Bible mediates the presence of the triune God. As J. I. Packer summarized it, "God the Father is the giver of Holy Scripture; God the Son is the theme of Holy Scripture; and God the Spirit, as the Father's appointed agent in witnessing to the Son, is the author, authenticator, and interpreter of Holy Scripture."[9]

These attributes are spoken of as attributes *of Scripture*. Nevertheless, they are attributes of Scripture precisely because it is the written word of God, and God himself is like this. God is an effective communicator; without ignorance or deception, he always speaks the truth; he is generous in his provision for his people; and his sovereign purpose is always accomplished in whatever he does. As a result, the Bible is clear, truthful, sufficient, and powerfully effective. Yet we do not speak of Scripture in this way solely on the basis of deductions made

7. Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 23. As Vanhoozer puts it, "While Christ is a fully human and fully divine agent, all we are claiming for Scripture is that it is a fully human and fully divine *act*." Vanhoozer, "God's Mighty Speech-Acts," 175 (emphasis original).

8. Telford Work, *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 26.

9. J. I. Packer, *God Has Spoken: Revelation and the Bible* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1979), 91.

from the doctrine of God. Each of these attributes arises also from the testimony of Scripture concerning itself.

In a variety of "speech acts" that resist being leveled into one, God directs all things toward his Son. Through his human agents, he asserts and explains, invites and commands, promises and warns, describes and prescribes, rejoices and laments. In addition, these speech acts occur within a variety of literary genres. Jesus might warn of the coming judgment directly or through a parable. God's loving care of his servant might be recounted in a narrative or celebrated in a psalm. Through the law he might command, and through the words of the wise the same injunction might be issued as an invitation to the blessed life. Yet the attributes we are considering apply to each of these speech acts and the different literary genres in which they occur, even if in slightly different ways.

Attentiveness to Scripture in its varied genres as God's multidimensional speech act enables us to speak in the strongest terms of the connection between God and Scripture, between God's character as he has made it known to us and the character of the word he has given us, without falling into the danger of "divinizing the Bible." So too does the rich biblical category of *covenant*. God's words have regularly taken the form of promises, and those promises have been conveyed and formalized by means of a covenant. The covenant expresses the relationship generated by the promise and specifies the appropriate response to the promise: confident trust, which issues into faithful obedience. God establishes his covenant in its various iterations (Gen. 9:16; 17:2; Ex. 19:5; 2 Sam. 23:5), and he assures his people that he will never violate it (Ps. 89:34). When Israel broke the covenant, God promised a new covenant (Jer. 31:31–34), which is realized in Jesus Christ (Luke 22:20). Ultimately, "who God reveals himself to be is the one who in Jesus keeps his word to

Israel."[10] In this way, the entire Scripture can be understood in terms of God's covenant with his people: "The Scriptures do not simply contain a covenant or covenants, but as a whole can be said to constitute the covenant document itself."[11] This grand scale "covenantal structure of the Bible," understood in terms of the dynamic of promise and fulfillment, provides both a context for individual texts and direction as to the appropriate response to them—"words from him create our true response of repentant faith."[12]

Scripture reflects, in a creaturely mode, the character of the triune God who gave it to us. It also aligns with his purpose to save lost men and women (Luke 19:10), and to bring all things under the feet of Christ (Eph. 1:22). We read each of the attributes of Scripture in the light of these great realities. God's free, dynamic, and sovereign activity in making himself known is not surrendered at the point of inscripturation but continues in and through this text.

The Clarity of Scripture

To affirm the clarity (or perspicuity) of Scripture might at first glance seem counterintuitive, given the sheer volume of commentary on the biblical text over the centuries and the diversity of opinion about elements of its teaching. Doesn't the phenomenon of false teaching and even heresy raise questions for us, espe-

10. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 215.

11. Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 207. See also John M. Frame, "The Gospel and the Scriptures," in *John Frame's Selected Writings*, vol. 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2014), 30. Both Horton and Frame, and many others, have been influenced by the conclusions of Meredith Kline: "The documents which combine to form the Bible are in their very nature—a legal sort of nature, it turns out—covenantal. . . . All Scripture is covenantal and the canonicity of all the Scripture is covenantal." Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 75.

12. Peter F. Jensen, "God and the Bible," in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 483, 486.

cially given the historical fact that many of the early heretics cited Scripture in support of their opinions? Even the devil appealed to Scripture when testing Jesus in the wilderness. Yet, as we have seen, Jesus regularly cited Scripture, operating with the assumption that its meaning is accessible and the appropriate response to what has been written should have been obvious. How then are we to understand this particular attribute of Scripture?

The clarity of Scripture is "that quality of the biblical text that, as God's communicative act, ensures meaning is accessible to all who come to it in faith."[13] The most basic anchor of this attribute is found in the communicative activity of God. God is an effective communicator. Heinrich Bullinger put it simply: "God's will is to have his word understood of mankind."[14] Since his word always accomplishes what he intends for it (Isa. 55:11), if it is his intention to communicate to us, then we ought to expect that his meaning will be accessible. He knows what he is doing with human words. He has been using them for a very long time.

Throughout Scripture we find affirmations of this God-given accessibility. Moses spoke in these terms to the Israelites about the word given to them on the stone tablets and in the book of the Law:

> For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?" Neither is it beyond the

13. Mark D. Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word: The Clarity of Scripture* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2006), 169–70. An expansion of this definition might take into account the need for responsible reading: "The clarity of Scripture is that quality of Scripture which, arising from the fact that it is ultimately God's effective communicative act, ensures the meaning of each biblical text, when viewed in the context of the canonical whole, is accessible to all who come to it in faith." Thompson, "The Generous Gift of a Gracious Father: Towards a Theological Account of the Clarity of Scripture," in Carson, *Enduring Authority*, 617–18.

14. Heinrich Bullinger, *The Decades of Henry Bullinger, Minister of the Church of Zurich*, trans. H. I., ed. Thomas Harding (Cambridge: Parker Society, 1849), 71 (decade 1, sermon 3).

> sea, that you should say, "Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?" But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it. (Deut. 30:11–14, cited in Rom. 10:6–13)

Moses's farewell speech spoke of the blessings of obedience and the curses attached to unfaithfulness to God's covenant. It was addressed not just to some priestly or scholarly elite but to the entire assembly. Moses warned that there could be no recourse to the suggestion that they had never been told what was required, or that they had been told but it was too hard to understand or inaccessible. The Israelites might not have known everything about God and his purposes—some things are kept for the future and some things simply are not given us to know (Deut. 29:29)—but what was given could be known and ought to have directed the way they lived as God's chosen people.

This conviction that the words given to God's people were addressed to all God's people and were not the private possession of a small, especially educated group continues throughout Scripture. David could write of how

> the testimony of the LORD is sure,
> making wise the simple. (Ps. 19:7)

And the author of Psalm 119 proclaimed not only

> Your word is a lamp to my feet
> and a light to my path (Ps. 119:105)

but also

> The unfolding of your words gives light;
> it imparts understanding to the simple. (Ps. 119:130)

Jesus spoke of how the Father had "hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children,"

and while he was not specifically speaking about Scripture at that point, it was these "little children" whom he taught with regular reference to the Old Testament (Matt. 11:25). The apostle Paul wrote to the Christians at Rome that "whatever was written in former days was written for *our* instruction" (Rom. 15:4; cf. 1 Cor. 10:11). He reminded Timothy that the sacred writings "are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15), and that all Scripture is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). None of this would be possible if the meaning of Scripture were inaccessible. What is more, how could the elders and overseers that Titus was to appoint be able to "hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that [they] may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it" (Titus 1:9), if there were a fundamental difficulty with understanding what Scripture actually teaches? It was, after all, a concern of the apostle that when he proclaimed Christ, he would do so clearly (Col. 4:4).

It is no wonder, then, that Christian theologians have repeatedly affirmed the clarity of Scripture. It was particularly important to do so at the time of the Reformation, when the Roman church insisted that Scripture was prone to misinterpretation and that faithful Christians would be misled without the church's authoritative interpretation. Luther argued that the papal claim to be the sole authorized interpreter of Scripture was the second of three walls erected to keep the church from criticism or reform. His response was to label it "an outrageous fancied fable" and to insist that Holy Scripture is "in and of itself the most certain, the most accessible, the most clear of all, interpreting itself, approving, judging and illuminating all things."[15]

15. Martin Luther, "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate," in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 66 vols. to date (St. Louis: Concordia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1955–),

Of particular importance was the expression "interpreting itself." Luther was insisting that the critical resource for understanding any part of Scripture is the whole of Scripture itself. The ancient practice of comparing Scripture with Scripture allows the God-breathed word to stand as the final authority rather than the pronouncements of church authorities or the judgments of even the most faithful and orthodox of scholars. The Bible does not need an external authoritative interpretation. Half a century after Luther, an English Protestant divine, William Whitaker, summed up the Reformation controversy as follows:

> We understand that their mind and opinion is that the people are to be kept from reading the Scriptures because they are so obscure as that they cannot be understood by laics, women, and the vulgar. We hold the contrary, that the Scriptures are not so difficult but that they may be read with advantage, and ought to be read, by the people.[16]

In the context of the Reformation debates it was critical to stress that Scripture is supremely clear when outlining the means of our salvation and the proper response to the gospel. Whitaker conceded difficulty with some biblical texts and the continuing need of learned teachers of the word, but insisted that "all things necessary to salvation are propounded in plain words in the Scriptures."[17] In this he anticipated one of the strongest confessional statements of biblical clarity, from the Westminster Confession of Faith:

44:134; "Assertio omnium articulorum M. Lutheri per Bullam Leonis X. novissimam damnatorum," in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Schriften*, ed. J. K. F. Knaake et al., 73 vols. (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus, 1883–2009), 7:97. Luther's German translation of this treatise, which forms the basis of the English edition in *Luther's Works*, vol. 32, retains the sense but not the exact phrasing of the Latin edition.

16. William Whitaker, *Disputations on Holy Scripture*, trans. and ed. William Fitzgerald (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 2000), 360.

17. Whitaker, *Disputations on Holy Scripture*, 364.

> 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 due use of ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them. (1.7)

Put in these terms, the affirmation raises questions about degrees of clarity in Scripture and differences of reception, to which we will return in a moment. However, the focus on the knowledge of salvation in the broadest sense ("things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed") draws attention to the relation of the clarity of Scripture and its purpose. The Scriptures have not been given simply to stimulate or satisfy intellectual curiosity. Paul's words to Timothy come again to mind: they are "able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15). Revelation and redemption are bound together in God's purposes, and so they are inextricable also in the Scripture he has given us. Indeed, as Timothy Ward remarks: "Scripture . . . is not just a means by which God reveals what his actions signify. It is also [itself] one of the redemptive acts by which God draws people into union with Christ and into relationship with himself."[18] In this way, Scripture's clarity is not isolated from the rest of the Christian doctrine of Scripture. It is related to the purpose for which the Bible was given.

In later contexts, more attention has been paid to the dynamic reality of God's presence in and with this text, which gives it this clarity. Benedict Pictet, writing at the end of the seventeenth century, asked what a denial of biblical clarity would mean for the doctrine of God:

18. Ward, *Words of Life*, 54.

> Either God *could not* reveal himself more plainly to men, or he *would not*. No one will assert the former, and the latter is most absurd; for who could believe that God our heavenly Father has been unwilling to reveal his will to his children, when it was necessary to do so, in order that men might more easily obey it?[19]

Pictet tied Scripture's attribute of clarity to the benevolence of God. God is good and his word is a good gift from our heavenly Father to his children. It is his generous provision for life in the midst of a world full of confusion and darkness, "a lamp shining in a dark place" (2 Pet. 1:19). To suggest that Scripture, having been given, remains inaccessible to us would cast doubt on God's fatherly benevolence and so is, in Pictet's words, "most absurd." Our heavenly Father loves to give good gifts to his children and does not cruelly hold them just out of reach. As Luther asked Erasmus: "If Scripture is obscure or ambiguous, what point is there in God giving it to us?"[20]

A different yet complementary approach was taken early in this century by John Webster. He tied the clarity of Scripture to God's "radiant presence," defining it as "the work which God performs in and through this creaturely servant as, in the power of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God illumines the communion of saints and enables them to see, love and live out the gospel's truth."[21] Webster's is such a dynamic understanding of this attribute that it runs the risk of not being an attribute of Scripture at all. "Scripture is clear," he goes on to say, "as the instrument of the reconciling *clarity of God* whose light is radiantly present in Jesus Christ and

19. Benedict Pictet, *Christian Theology*, trans. Frederick Reyroux (Weston Green: L. S. Seeley, 1834), 48 (emphasis original).

20. Martin Luther, "The Bondage of the Will," in *Luther's Works*, 33:93–94.

21. John Webster, "On the Clarity of Holy Scripture," in *Confessing God*, Essays in Christian Dogmatics 2 (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 38, 33.

the Holy Spirit."[22] According to Webster, it is really God's clarity that we are talking about when we speak of the clarity of Scripture. "God is light," as the apostle John wrote, "and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). It is in his light that we see light (Ps. 36:9). Webster shares the concern of those theologians who warn of "attributing to the text perfections which are properly attributed to God alone." It would be a misstep (one he identifies as taken in the past by post-Reformation theology) to render clarity "as a natural property of the Bible *qua text*."[23]

Yet the concern about isolating the text from the work of God need not lead us to pull back from describing clarity as an attribute of the text as text. Precisely because God continually attends Scripture, so that it is not read in his absence or "behind his back," as it were, Scripture accomplishes its purpose and shines the light of the gospel. Clarity is not a *natural* property of the Bible as a text. But Scripture is God's communicative act, and so it bears the marks of his character. It is the written word of the God who is like this.

Difficulty with clarity as an attribute of Scripture most often occurs when certain false inferences are made. Acknowledging what the clarity of Scripture does *not* mean helps us to sharpen our account of what it does mean.

Clarity Is Not the Same as Simplicity

The apostle Peter could describe some things in Paul's letters as "hard to understand" (2 Pet. 3:16). However, as Turretin pointed out, "hard to understand" (*dysnoēta*) is not the same thing as "impossible to understand" (*anoēta*).[24] Peter does go

22. Webster, "Clarity of Holy Scripture," 42 (emphasis added).
23. Webster, "Clarity of Holy Scripture," 43, 35 (emphasis original).
24. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, trans. George Musgrave Giger, vol. 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992), 146 (2.17.15).

on to say that "the ignorant and unstable" twist Paul's words, something that would be impossible for him to conclude if the true meaning of Paul's words were inaccessible. This text reminds us that what might be called "degrees of difficulty" in Scripture have been recognized since the time of the New Testament itself.

In the sixth century, Gregory the Great likened Scripture to a river "both shallow and deep, in which the lamb may find a footing and the elephant swim." Scripture addresses and nourishes Christians at all stages of life and at all levels of understanding: "It holds in the open that by which little ones may be nourished [and] keeps hidden that by which those of lofty intellect might stand in wonder."[25] Augustine, writing two centuries earlier, was perhaps more direct, using the language of "easier" (*apertioribus*) and "more obscure" (*obscurioribus*): "The Holy Spirit, therefore, has generously and advantageously planned Holy Scripture in such a way that in the easier passages He relieves our hunger; in the more obscure He drives away our pride." Augustine went on to explain why this ought not to discourage the reader or erode confidence in the accessibility of Scripture's meaning: "Practically nothing is dug out from those obscure texts which is not discovered to be said very plainly in another place."[26] Here is the principle we noted earlier in Luther: that Scripture is its own interpreter, and the comparison of Scripture with Scripture is a key to better understanding, as well as a guard against idiosyncratic reading.

Luther also acknowledged that some parts of Scripture are harder than others to understand—in fact, in the very same context in which he made his strongest statements about the

25. Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job*, to Bishop Leander, para. 4.

26. Augustine, "On Christian Doctrine," trans. J. F. Shaw, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 14 vols. in series 1, ed. Philip Schaff (repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 2:537 (2.5.8). The translation has been revised.

clarity of Scripture. He responded to Erasmus's "skepticism" by writing,

> I admit, of course, that there are many texts in the Scriptures that are obscure and abstruse, not because of the majesty of their subject matter, but because of our ignorance of their vocabulary and grammar; but these texts in no way hinder a knowledge of all the subject matter of Scripture.[27]

To our lack of familiarity with the languages in which the Scriptures were written, Luther might have added a lack of familiarity with the Bible as a whole, since later texts often build upon the concepts and imagery of earlier texts. Nevertheless, in both cases the issue is with the reader rather than the text.

To say Scripture is clear is not to say that at every point it is easy or simple. Yet this is a very different thing from saying that Scripture has been given to us in a form that makes understanding impossible or even unlikely.

Clarity Is Not the Same as Illumination

Clarity does not in itself ensure that the word will be believed. This requires a work of God in the heart of the reader. The predisposition of every human heart is to determine its own worldview. Paul wrote of how the decision to suppress the truth and to worship the creature rather than the Creator (first made in the garden but echoed in decisions made ever since) led to futile thinking and darkened, foolish hearts (Rom. 1:21). He also spoke of how "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers" (2 Cor. 4:4). This leads to the conclusion that "the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14).

27. Luther, "Bondage of the Will," 25.

Understanding Scripture is not simply an intellectual exercise; it is a moral and spiritual one as well. Luther spoke of the obstacles of "blindness or indolence."[28]

It is the Spirit who at every point attends the word that he has enabled to be written, who impresses it upon the mind, conscience, and heart of the believer. The Spirit is "the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of [God]" (Eph. 1:17). He takes away blindness and shines in our hearts "to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). As the Spirit was involved in the ministry of the apostles in their speaking and writing, so he is involved in the reception of their words: "We impart this ["the things freely given us by God"] in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths *to those who are spiritual*" (1 Cor. 2:12–13).

John Calvin made a great deal of this insight. Expounding what it means to say that Scripture is self-authenticated, he wrote:

> And the certainty [Scripture] deserves with us, it attains by the testimony of the Spirit. For even if it wins reverence for itself by its own majesty, it seriously affects us only when it is sealed upon our hearts through the Spirit. . . .
>
> The only true faith is that which the Spirit of God seals in our hearts.[29]

Calvin was willing to identify certain confirmatory evidences of Scripture's truth, relevance, and authority (e.g., its majesty, antiquity, and power in the lives of those who read it; attendant miracles and the fulfillment of prophecy; its preservation through the centuries; the testimony of the church, and the

28. Luther, "Bondage of the Will," 25, 27.

29. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.7.5.

confession of the martyrs). However, even after outlining these, Calvin returned to this basic conviction: "Scripture will ultimately suffice for a saving knowledge of God only when its certainty is founded upon the inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit."[30] The self-authentication of Scripture, so important if Scripture is to remain the final authority even on its own character, is from beginning to end a work of the Spirit of God. This is how we are convinced that "God in person speaks in [Scripture]."[31]

The illumination of the Spirit also serves to explain the ongoing sovereignty of God in making himself known through and in Scripture. God's word always accomplishes the purpose for which God sent it, but the purpose may differ from situation to situation. It will be the word of life where God wills it to be so, but it will confirm God's judgment in others. The rejection of God's word by some—whether that word is spoken or written—is their own decision, for which they are fully accountable. Yet, in such cases, the word presented to them is itself a testimony against them.

The apostle Paul spoke of his ministry as "the aroma of Christ," which is received as "a fragrance from death to death" by "those who are perishing" and "a fragrance from life to life" by "those who are being saved" (2 Cor. 2:15–16). Jesus himself turned to the commission of Isaiah, which involved preaching to a people who would be ever hearing but not understanding and ever seeing but not perceiving, to explain how his parables are a way of speaking that assists understanding for some but stands in the way of understanding for others (Isa. 6:9–10; Mark 4:11–12; cf. Zech. 7:12).

30. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.8, esp., 1.8.13.

31. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.7.4. See, once again, the Westminster Confession of Faith, which spoke of "the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts" (1.5).

It is not that there is some deficiency in the word spoken or written. Rather, it is the Spirit who brings new birth (John 3:5–8; 6:63), softens hard hearts (Ps. 51:17; Ezek. 36:26; 2 Cor. 1:22), and enables us to confess "Jesus is Lord" (1 Cor. 12:3) and to call on God as "Abba, Father" (Rom. 8:15). The same Spirit is involved when the word of truth is heard and believed (Eph. 1:13). Calvin summed it up this way: "The same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded."[32]

Clarity Does Not Ensure Everything Is Understood at Once

The clarity of Scripture does not mean that everything being said in any biblical text is immediately and fully known upon a first reading. There is always room for growth in our understanding. Greater familiarity with the text, its language, and its context, as well as comparison with other texts in the Bible, often leads to greater understanding. This does not compromise the clarity of the text in any way.

The apostles prayed that those to whom they were writing might grow in knowledge and understanding (Col. 1:9; 2 Pet. 3:18). After all, they had themselves grown in understanding, especially in the light of the resurrection (John 12:16; 13:7; 20:9). They expected growth toward maturity that would involve growth in understanding (1 Cor. 14:20; Eph. 4:13; Heb. 5:11–6:3; 2 Pet. 3:18).

The disciples, however, had grown in understanding as God's revealing and redeeming action was brought to completion. There were some things they just were not able to understand until after the resurrection and the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost. Similarly, the Ethiopian eunuch apparently under-

32. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.7.4.

stood that the prophet Isaiah had spoken of one who would suffer for the sins of others, but it was only after Philip "told him the good news about Jesus" that he understood to whom the prophet was referring (Acts 8:35). Once the final piece was in place, the message as a whole came to life, and the Ethiopian immediately sought to be baptized as a follower of Jesus.

We in these last days stand in a different position in God's timetable than those disciples before Christ and even the Ethiopian eunuch, who only had the Old Testament. With both the Old Testament and the New in our hands, we do not need any further revelation, but we are able to grow in our understanding of the word that has been given. The prayer of the psalmist remains the prayer of the Christian:

> Open my eyes, that I may behold
> wondrous things out of your law. (Ps. 119:18)

Clarity Does Not Make Teaching, Teachers, or Study Superfluous

If Scripture is so clear, why do we need teachers? Why do people spend their lives studying it? Part of the answer to those questions lies in the answer to the previous one: there is always room to grow in our understanding, and the risen Christ has given us teachers to help us in that growth (Eph. 4:11–14). The ministry of the teacher is to be based on a deep familiarity with the word. "Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching," Paul wrote to Timothy (1 Tim. 4:13). "Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching" (1 Tim. 4:16). The realities of life, in both New Testament times and our own, mean that not everyone has the time or the ability to study the biblical languages, to be immersed in the Scripture so that they understand deeply the way various parts of Scripture inform other parts, or to develop a habit of testing

the current developments in the world and in the churches against the teaching of Scripture. Teachers ought to beware of becoming a new priestly caste, seeing themselves somehow as intermediaries between God's word and God's people. God addresses his people directly and effectively in Scripture. However, teachers are meant to be good gifts to God's church helping God's people to take God's word seriously and to respond to it appropriately.

Another part of the answer is that the Christian life has never been meant to be isolationist. It has never been simply a matter of me alone with the Bible. This is why definitions of biblical clarity that emphasize "the right of private judgment" are, in the end, unhelpful.[33] My propensity to read my own culture and preferences into the text or to champion my own idiosyncratic reading needs to be challenged by fellow members of the body of Christ. When Luther discovered that "the righteousness of God" in Romans 1 meant the gift of righteousness given by God, his first instinct was to search out whether anyone had seen this before, not as proof that he was right but as a confirmation that he had not simply invented something nobody had ever before seen in the text.[34]

We read the Bible in the company of others—some who have come before us, some who read alongside us. We read it in the church, not in the sense that the church has some authority over the Bible but, rather, that the fellowship of God's people is the proper context in which we benefit most in reading God's word. The epistles of Paul were very largely written to churches; he expected the letters to be read when the church

33. E.g., Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols (1871; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), 1:183.

34. Martin Luther, "Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings," in *Luther's Works*, 34:337; Luther insisted, "I am not the only one, or even the first, to say that faith alone justifies. Ambrose said it before me, and Augustine and many others." Luther, "On Translating: An Open Letter," in *Luther's Works*, 35:197.

gathered together, and then shared with other churches (Col. 4:16). More often than not he was applying the great truths of the gospel to *us* rather than just to *me*. Teachers can help us by pointing that out, challenging our tendency to avoid the challenges of Scripture and our reluctance to let its teaching shape a discipleship characterized by humble repentance and faith. They can draw attention to those most urgent points at which a particular text intersects with life now. A clear Scripture, attended by God's Spirit, proclaimed and served by faithful teachers—these are all signs of God's continued love and care for his people.

Clarity Does Not Guarantee Universal Agreement about Meaning

How, though, can Scripture be clear when there is such debate and disagreement between Christians about its meaning and its application to the Christian life? In the first instance, disagreement should not surprise us. Jesus and the apostles warned that the last days would be a time when the truth would be contested (Matt. 24:11–12; 1 Tim. 6:2–5; 2 Pet. 2:1–3). There would be false teachers and false prophets, and a particular responsibility of the elders among God's people would be to guard and even contend for "the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (1 Tim. 6:20; Jude 3). Peter, as we have seen, warned of how some people "twist" things in the letters of Paul (2 Pet. 3:16). It is a longstanding strategy of the evil one to make use of God's word in ways that foster doubt and encourage disobedience (Gen. 3:1–5; Matt. 4:6). Some disagreement is the product of this conflict between the word of God and other words during the last days.

However, there is always more than the text involved in our reading, and other background factors can fuel different

perspectives and disagreement. Sometimes, quite simply, the disagreement arises from misunderstanding or from a lack of familiarity with what the text actually says or with how its teaching coheres with the rest of Bible. A previous misreading (our own or that of others who have influenced us) might skew our subsequent readings. Our reading of the text might be atomistic, without due regard for the context or its relation to other texts in the canon. The translation we are using might be faulty, as was the case at the time of the Reformation when the authorized Latin translation in fact mistranslated the Greek word for repentance, and an entire practice of penance was built upon it. Careful attention to the text might reveal that one side or the other of a disagreement is mistaken.

Some disagreement arises from different frameworks brought to the reading of Scripture. An easy example is the person who approaches the text of the Bible convinced that God does not (or for some reason cannot) intervene in the created order. As a result, such a person might be predisposed to dismiss the biblical accounts of miraculous or supernatural events as primitive explanations of things we now know to be naturally occurring phenomena. Such a person would seek a natural explanation for the crossing through the sea in Exodus 14 (an unusual but not unknown meteorological phenomenon), the feeding of the five thousand in Matthew 14 (the sacrificial generosity of a young boy prompts others to share their lunch too), or even the resurrection of Jesus in John 20 (the disciples had a sense that Jesus was still with them even after the crucifixion and burial). The different frames of reference might be philosophical (as in these examples), but they might also be determined by the current cultural consensus, the conclusions of modern science, the assured results of scholarly biblical and theological study, the confessional tradition to which we are committed, or even our

own personal preference and agenda (if the text actually says X, it might prevent me from doing what I want to do, so it must mean something else).

Sometimes the disagreement arises from an attempt to make the text say more than it actually says, for one reason or another. Does the Bible commit us to one, and only one, form of church government (episcopal, presbyteral, congregational)? Does it mandate a particular mode of baptism (immersion or aspersion) or a single model of ministry (itinerant evangelist, family church pastor, megachurch team leader)? In some areas Scripture encourages Christian freedom exercised in love (circumcision, food offered to idols, even vegetarianism—Rom. 14:2; 1 Cor. 7:19; 8:8–9; Gal. 5:6; 6:15), and in other areas Scripture is simply silent. (What did happen when first-generation converts began to have children? How did they respond to the high incidence of infant mortality?) We too often want to tie things down more tightly than the Bible does, either in terms of theology or in terms of practice, and sometimes we ask questions it was never meant to answer.

The point is that disagreement can arise for a vast number of reasons. We do not have to conclude that because disagreement exists, Scripture is unclear. Instead, we should turn our attention to the purpose of affirming the clarity of Scripture, which is to encourage all Christians to read the Bible for themselves and with confidence. This is God's good gift to us, and we need not approach it in fear that it will be too difficult for us to understand. Our heavenly Father loves us, he has something to say to us, and he is able to do it effectively in these words.

The Truthfulness of Scripture

The truthfulness of Scripture, and associated terms such as *infallibility* and *inerrancy*, has been a focal point of

controversy since the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and especially since the rise of critical biblical scholarship in the late nineteenth century.[35] The literature on this one attribute of Scripture is enormous. Despite the ease of demonstrating that it has been affirmed in each of the Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox traditions from the beginning, the debate over what it means to say "your word is truth," with particular reference to the written word, has at times been heated in the last two and half centuries.[36] Many have realized that a great deal is at stake.

35. The two terms "infallibility" (does not fail) and "inerrancy" (does not err) have been used interchangeably through the history of doctrine. It was only in the mid-twentieth century that the terms began to be contrasted, with infallibilists insisting that Scripture will not fail in what God intends for it but drawing back from the conviction that Scripture is entirely free from error.

36. A list of the most important affirmations would include Augustine, "Epistle 82" (to Jerome) 3 (*NPNF* 1/1:350): "completely free from error"; Hugh of Saint Victor, *On Sacred Scripture and its Authors*, 1, trans. F. van Liere, in *Interpretation of Scripture: Theory*, ed. F. T. Harkins and F. van Liere (Turnhout, Brepols, 2012), 213: "Whatever is taught in it is truth; whatever is prescribed in it is goodness; whatever is promised in it is happiness"; John Wycliffe, *On the Truth of Holy Scripture* 2.18, trans. I. C. Levy (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, 2001), 251: "The authority of Holy Scripture is infallible, not only because it deceives nobody in actuality, but because it never could have deceived anyone. . . . Scripture remains true in its totality"; Huldrych Zwingli, *On the Clarity and Certainty of the Word of God*, in *Zwingli and Bullinger*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), 93: "The word of God is certain and can never fail. It is clear, and will never leave us in darkness. It teaches its own truth"; Martin Luther, *Confession concerning Christ's Supper*, in *Luther's Works*, 37:279: "The Holy Spirit neither lies nor errs nor doubts"; Edmund Grindal, "Homily 10, Second Book of Homilies," in *Certain Sermons or Homilies Appointed to Be Read in Churches in the Time of Queen Elizabeth of Famous Memory* (repr., London: SPCK, 1864), 399: "It cannot therefore be but truth, which proceedeth from the God of all truth"; John Owen, *The Divine Original of Scripture*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, 16 vols. (1850–1853; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), 16:328: "The Scripture, the written Word, hath its infallible truth in itself"; Johann A. Quenstedt, *Theologia Didactico-Polemica sive Systema Theologiae*, pt. 1, chap. 4, q. 5 (Wittenberg: J. L. Quenstedt, 1701), 77b (my trans.): "The canonical Holy Scriptures in the original text are the infallible truth and free from every error"; Vatican I: "They contain revelation without error"; A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield, *Inspiration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), 17–18: "an errorless record of the matters he designed them to communicate"; John Murray, "Inspiration and Inerrancy," in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 4, *Studies in Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), 25: "To predicate verbal inspiration and infallibility of the Scripture is the same as to speak of its inerrancy. Something cannot be infallible if it contains error of judgement or representation"; J. I. Packer, *Truth and Power: The Place of Scripture in the Christian Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 91: "Though *inerrancy*, like *Trinity*, is not a biblical word, it expresses a biblical thought. Inerrancy, meaning the full truth and trustworthiness of what the Bible

The truthfulness or otherwise of Scripture plays a key role in determining whether it is reliable, and its reliability is critical if we are to trust that it is able to make us "wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15). While some have attempted to quarantine truthfulness to particular subjects addressed in Scripture (e.g., statements about God and the message of salvation), this has not proven to be sustainable.[37] The Bible's statements about God and his purposes are inextricably interwoven with records of his involvement in human history and the concrete realities of the world he has created. If we were to conclude that some parts of Scripture are true and others are not, who would decide which is which, and on what grounds?

We need to acknowledge the debate, its sometimes-heated nature, and the danger of turning key terms into shibboleths used to exclude others from our fellowship. This has sadly happened from time to time, especially with the term *inerrancy*. Yet a willingness to use the term is a very imprecise measure of orthodoxy or even a high view of Scripture. We need to reckon with the tragic possibility that a person might affirm inerrancy in the strongest terms and yet not submit in his or her own life to the teaching of Scripture. How would this compare with the person who has difficulties with the term (perhaps because of how others have used it) but consistently hears and heeds all the words God has given? Here, as elsewhere, Graham Cole helpfully reminds us, theology is concerned not simply with what we affirm (*orthodoxy*), though that certainly matters, but also with how we live in the light of what we believe

tells us, is entailed, that is, necessarily and inescapably implied, by the God-givenness of what is written."

37. Famous examples of those holding such a view include Faustus Socinus, *An Argument for the Authority of Holy Scripture*, trans. E. Coombe (London: W. Meadows, 1731), 21, 140, and Henry Preserved Smith, "Biblical Scholarship and Inspiration," in *Inspiration and Inerrancy: A History and Defense* (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke, 1893), 88–141.

(*orthopraxis*), and both of these elements are tied to the state of our hearts (*orthokardia*).[38]

Even a cursory glance at the accounts of Jesus's life and ministry demonstrates his concern for truth. This is particularly evident in John's Gospel. In a single conversation with "the Jews who had believed him," he made the point several times. He told them, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (8:31–32). A little later he unmasked the plot to kill him as a struggle against truth: "But now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God" (8:40). Near the end of the conversation, he contrasted what he was doing with what the devil was doing: "He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell you the truth, you do not believe me" (8:44–45). On the night before Jesus died, he told his disciples, "I am the way, and the *truth*, and the life" (14:6), promised to send them "the Spirit of truth," who would guide them "into all the truth" (14:17; 15:26; 16:13), and prayed to the Father that he might "sanctify them in the truth" (17:17, 19). It is in this last context, as he prayed for his disciples, that he confessed, "Your word is truth." Finally, before Pontius Pilate, he made what the apostle Paul would later describe as "the good confession" (1 Tim. 6:13): "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice" (John 18:37).

Jesus was himself heavily invested in the notion of truth and was steadfastly opposed to lies, deceit, and falsehood.

38. Graham A. Cole, *Faithful Theology: An Introduction* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 15–16.

He also understood the Scriptures, to which he regularly appealed, to be true. As we have seen, he referred to people, places, and events in the biblical narratives as genuinely historical. He treated the promises of God as true, and fulfillment of what had been written about him as necessary. Jesus, himself the truth, personally guaranteed the truthfulness of what had been written. He promised to send the Spirit of truth in order to secure the truthfulness of the word yet to be given to the church. It is significant that he did all this as one who did not speak on his own authority but spoke with the word and the authority given to him by his Father (John 7:16; 8:28; 12:49; 14:10).

Faustus Socinus, an anti-Trinitarian radical of the early seventeenth century, suggested that Jesus's treatment of the Old Testament events and theology as true was part of his accommodation to his first audience. For Jesus to speak otherwise would have required knowledge they did not yet possess and would have distracted from the lesson he was trying to impart. "This was not the time to perturb the Jews," Socinus argued at the Rakow Colloquium in 1601. Jesus allowed these erroneous views to stand unchallenged (Socinus was talking at that point about the general resurrection of the dead) "until at length age matures and men are able to accustom themselves to these ways of talking," meaning the alternative explanation of the future Socinus himself was proposing.[39]

Socinus's suggestion is untenable, not least because Jesus certainly was willing to challenge false ideas and practices when he came across them, no matter how deeply engrained these ideas or practices may have been (Matt. 12:1–14; 23:16–22;

39. F. Socinus et al., "Epitome of a Colloquium Held in Rakow in the Year 1601," in George Huntston Williams, *The Polish Brethren: Documentation of the History and Thought of Unitarianism in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and in the Diaspora, 1601–1685* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1980), 121–22.

Mark 7:5–8; John 4:19–24; 7:22). Socinus in fact misused the doctrine of accommodation we have already encountered, espoused by Calvin and others, which recognized that God communicates to his creatures in ways they can understand without in any way compromising his personal integrity and commitment to truth.[40]

As always, this attribute of Scripture is properly grounded in the person and character of God. Scripture is utterly truthful and trustworthy because it is God's word, and God himself is truthful and trustworthy. On the one hand, he knows all things. "The LORD is a God of knowledge" (1 Sam. 2:3). He is the beginning and the end (Rev. 21:6), which gives him a unique relationship to every creature and every happening (Isa. 46:9–11). He knows the secrets of the human heart (Pss. 44:21; 139:1–6; Acts 15:8). His knowledge is both extensive and intensive. There is nothing that has happened of which God is unaware, and no new development can catch him by surprise. There is never a need for him to revise what he has said in the light of new information. Nothing can be hidden from him (Heb. 4:13), and he is never deceived (Job 13:9). Consequently, he is never ignorant, for he is perfect in knowledge (Job 37:16).

On the other hand, God is never deceitful and never lies. As Balaam reminded his master Balak:

> God is not a 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?
> (Num. 23:19)

40. Glenn Sunshine, "Accommodation in Calvin and Socinus: A Study in Contrasts" (MA thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1985). For an account of how Socinus's ideas entered mainstream theological scholarship, see John D. Woodbridge, "Pietism and Scriptural Authority," in Carson, *Enduring Authority*, 166.

Samuel said much the same thing to Saul (1 Sam. 15:29). King David responded to God's promise to build him and his descendants into a royal house by tying the truthfulness of God's word to his character as God: "And now, O Lord GOD, you are God, and your words are true" (2 Sam. 7:28). He would draw the same connection in a psalm:

> This God—his way is perfect;
> the word of the LORD proves true;
> he is a shield for all those who take refuge in him.
> (Ps. 18:30; cf. Prov. 30:5)

The Lord watches over his word, Jeremiah was told, "to perform it" (Jer. 1:12). The writer to the Hebrews cited the "unchangeable character of [God's] purpose" and his "oath" as "two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie" (Heb. 6:17–18). Perhaps most succinctly of all, the apostle Paul wrote to Titus of the hope of eternal life, "which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began" (Tit. 1:2).

Truth is an aspect of God's character, which is never compromised in his dealings with his human creatures. As Paul put it,

> Let God be true though everyone were a liar, as it is written,
>
> "That you may be justified in your words,
> and prevail when you are judged." (Rom. 3:4)

Even on the one occasion where he allowed an evil king to be deceived by a lying prophet as an act of judgment, the truth was made known to the king concerned before the calamity God intended took place (1 Kings 22:19–23). King Ahab went to his death fully informed of the truth and yet determined on his

own course. That determination was exposed by his response to the "lying prophet."

In this way it is apparent that "the basis for the doctrine of biblical inerrancy is located both in the nature of God and in the Bible's teaching about itself."[41] The Bible must be both true and trustworthy if it is the word of the God we know as "the God of truth" (Isa. 65:16). And this is exactly what Scripture testifies about itself (Ps. 119:160; John 17:17). Nevertheless, difficulties remain.

Much of the difficulty with biblical inerrancy arises from two errors of method: first, in terms of what is expected of Scripture itself; and, second, in terms of what is concluded about other information external to Scripture and, at least apparently, contradictory to Scripture.

Anachronistic or False Expectations of Precision

The truthfulness of Scripture coheres with all its other attributes and indeed with Scripture's purpose. It is important to remember that the New Testament was written in the first century with its canons of evidence and its conventions of language, rather than our own. Our capacity for precision (especially with the advent of computers) generates an expectation that is unreasonable when applied to the biblical texts. The Bible was not given as a biological textbook, an accounting handbook, a medical report, or a computer manual. Nor does it deal with every aspect of the created order in equal detail, but focuses its attention instead on God and his dealings with his human creatures, especially those he chose to be his "treasured possession among all peoples" (Ex. 19:5). Our expectations in terms of precision and detail need to be tempered by the purpose for which Scripture was given. We

41. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Inerrancy of Scripture," in *Latimer Comment 65* (Oxford: Latimer House, 1997), 1.

are helpfully reminded that "the overarching function of Scripture is 'to communicate Christ and covenant.'"[42]

It is equally important to be sensitive to the type of literature we are dealing with at each point and to remember that our literary (even grammatical) conventions are not immutable laws that apply to all literature at all times. What is more, our own knowledge of the language and literature of the New Testament, and even more so of the Old Testament, is not of the same order as those for whom these were contemporary texts in the vernacular. So we need to beware of concluding that when events are not recorded in the same way we would record them, when grammar and literary genre are not what we would have expected, when such devices as approximation and phenomenological language are used, that must mean the author has erred and the text is flawed. Numbering the men who left Egypt as "about six hundred thousand" (Ex. 12:37) or those who fought at Ai as "about three thousand" (Josh. 7:4) is not in itself an error, even if the precise total were a few hundred either way. It is evident that statistical precision was not intended in that context. Locating an event or setting direction with reference to "sunrise" or "sunset" (Josh. 8:29; 12:1; 1 Kings 22:36; 2 Chron. 18:34) does not commit the reader to a geocentric view of the universe any more than references to "the four corners of the earth" (Isa. 11:12; Rev. 7:1; 20:8) commit us to a flat earth. These are descriptions from the perspective of those experiencing those things rather than scientifically precise explanations.

One potentially false expectation—and it would be false in our own context as well—is that eyewitness testimony must

42. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Holy Scripture," in *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic*, ed. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 53; Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading: A Theological Introduction to the Bible and Its Interpretation* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 78.

correlate exactly with that of other eyewitnesses to be true. Even today, too close a correlation would normally raise suspicion of collusion rather than provide corroboration. Different people witnessing the same event are very often impressed by different details, and those differences, so long as they do not directly contradict each other, lend authenticity to the testimony that is given. Each person brings a distinct background of experiences to the activity of processing what he or she has seen and heard, which might explain why different individuals' attention is drawn to particular details. "In the nature of the case," Richard Bauckham reminds us, "even accurate memories are selective and interpretative."[43] We are familiar with how camera angle and focal depth can influence the appearance of a scene in a news report or from a movie. It was all the more so with eyewitness accounts in the first century. So, in the Gospel accounts of the resurrection, it might be the words of the angel who spoke that arrested the attention of one eyewitness (Mark 16:5), while another was taken by the fact there were two angels (Luke 24:4–7).

Consequently, we can avoid frantic attempts at harmonization in order to smooth over the differences of detail in parallel accounts of events in Scripture. Such attempts can, and have, led to absurdities on occasion, as when Andreas Osiander suggested there were a total of eight denials of Jesus by Peter, rather than the three Jesus predicted.[44] Harold Lindsell came up with six.[45] Others have shown that differences of detail in the Gospels can be reconciled without increasing the number.[46] What

43. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 326.

44. A. Osiander, *Harmoniae Evangelicae Libri IIII* (Basel: Froben, 1537), 128.

45. Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), 174–76.

46. D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew and Mark*, rev. ed., ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 623–24.

is self-evidently a much more significant tension between Paul and James on justification by faith (compare Rom. 3:28 and James 2:24) is resolved by more careful attention to the subject matter of the argument at each point. Paul was affirming that faith apart from works is a crucial element in our justification (principally because this justification is grounded in the work of Christ), while James was insisting on the nature of true faith (not passive assent but a confident trust that fuels love and good works).[47] There may remain some differences that are more difficult to resolve. Yet, careful attention to texts in their context and, in the case of the Gospels, sensitivity to the nature of genuine eyewitness testimony has generally been fruitful in resolving apparent conflicts. The point is that we should be wary of concluding too quickly that one or another account is an error.

Premature Conclusions of Contradictory Truth

Other difficulties arise when what appear to be incontrovertible facts of history or science stand in contrast or even contradiction to the teaching of Scripture. An important starting point here is to ask whether we are dealing with what the biblical text actually says or what others have interpreted it to say. Does the Bible really teach a geocentric universe, as some within the Roman church believed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and thus firmly opposed Copernicus and Galileo? Or was

47. Even Martin Luther, the champion of justification by faith *alone*, insisted that "our faith in Christ does not free us from works but from false opinions concerning works, that is, from the foolish presumption that justification is acquired by works." Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in *Luther's Works*, 31:372–73; Calvin remarked, "It is therefore faith alone which justifies, and yet the faith which justifies is not alone." John Calvin, "Acts of the Council of Trent with Antidote," in *Tracts*, trans. Henry Beveridge, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1851), 3:152 (6th session, can. 11). However, Calvin's preferred way of reconciling Paul and James was somewhat different. He argued that the question for James was not "how men may attain righteousness for themselves in the presence of God, but how they may prove to others they are justified." Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. Ross Mackenzie (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), 79.

the biblical language to which the church appealed phenomenological and never intended as a literal representation of reality? Can the parable of the rich man and Lazarus really be pressed to provide a physical account of heaven and hell? A sensitivity to genre and language—not to mention the purpose of Scripture as a whole and, when it is given, the discernible purpose of the passage concerned—is helpful in resolving difficulties like these.

It is worth recognizing the very substantial degree of confidence that has been generated as a result of discovery, research, and scholarship in the areas of history and natural science. Technology in a range of fields has facilitated an exponential growth in knowledge over the last fifty years. The current consensus in these areas should not be lightly dismissed. However, it would be a mistake to ignore the continued limits to our knowledge and a certain provisionality that persists despite the outstanding growth. Our knowledge in any of these areas is not exhaustive; conceptual paradigms do have a tendency to shift over time; theories are revised and sometimes replaced altogether; assured results are sometimes overturned by new discoveries or reexamined evidence; and then there is always the possibility of subjective bias that would push us beyond the evidence. In all areas, not just in theology and its application, "now we know in part" (1 Cor. 13:12). This realization is reflected in some of the more thoughtful definitions of inerrancy in recent times, such as that of Paul Feinberg: "Inerrancy means that when all facts are known, the Scriptures in their original autographs and properly interpreted will be shown to be wholly true in everything that they affirm, whether that has to do with doctrine or morality or with the social, physical, or life sciences."[48]

48. Paul D. Feinberg, "The Meaning of Inerrancy," in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1980), 294.

"When all the facts are known"—that doesn't mean we cannot make any confident claim to knowledge now. Ordinary life depends on such confidence at almost every point. Yet what philosophers call "epistemic humility," a recognition that we do not know everything and, unlike God, may indeed be mistaken, is an intellectual virtue worth cultivating, especially when what we think we know appears to stand in conflict with the word of the God who knows all things. Some difficulties remain unresolved, yet there are good reasons to wait.

Two brief examples might suffice to demonstrate the wisdom of caution when a scientific or historical truth appears to contradict the teaching of Scripture. In the nineteenth century doubts arose about the historicity of the book of Daniel, in particular the Babylonian king Belshazzar.[49] Other ancient sources recorded Nabonidus as the last king of the neo-Babylonian empire. However, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, first the Nabonidus Cylinders were discovered and then the Nabonidus Chronicle, which mentioned not only Nabonidus's son Belshazzar but also that he was frequently left as ruler in Babylon while his father was away from the city, which he was on the day, or rather night, Babylon fell.[50] Could this be why the best Belshazzar could offer Daniel was to be "third in the kingdom" (Dan. 5:16, 29)? Darius the Mede, another character from the book of Daniel, has proven even more elusive. However, careful attention to the dynastic arrangements in Persia and Media at that time has given a great deal of credibility to the suggestion that Darius and Cyrus the Persian were the same

49. C. von Lengerke, *Das Buch Daniel: Verdeutscht u. ausgelegt* (Königsberg: Borntträger, 1834), 204; F. Hitzig, *Das Buch Daniel* (Leipzig: Weidmann, 1850), 75.

50. James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament with Supplement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 306, 313; Alan R. Millard, "Daniel in Babylon: An Accurate Record?," in *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith? A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture*, ed. James K. Hoffmeier and Dennis R. Magary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 269–72.

person, and that Darius might well have been his enthronement name used only in the first year of his reign.[51]

A great deal is often made of the absence of archaeological evidence corroborating the biblical accounts of a powerful united monarchy under King David and his successor, Solomon. This has regularly led to the suggestion that the David story is not historical but mythical, despite the reminder from many that "an absence of evidence is not evidence of absence."[52] However, new archaeological discoveries are being made all the time. In 1993 a team of archaeologists uncovered a piece of basalt rock from about a century or so after King David is supposed to have ruled in Jerusalem—the Tel Dan inscription—and on it is inscribed the Aramaic word for "the house [or dynasty] of David."[53] In 2005, ruins of a large public building were uncovered in East Jerusalem with pottery shards in layers immediately above and below, suggesting it was constructed in the tenth century BC, around the time that David made the city the

51. Donald J. Wiseman, "Some Historical Problems in the Book of Daniel," in *Notes on Some Problems in the Book of Daniel*, ed. Donald J. Wiseman et al. (London: Tyndale, 1956), 9–16; John C. Whitcomb, *Darius the Mede* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959); Joyce Baldwin, *Daniel* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1978), 127; Ernest C. Lucas, *Daniel* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2002), 134–37. Millard, "Daniel in Babylon," 275–77. A more recent restatement of a different conclusion, informed by a detailed examination of the writing of the Greek historian Xenophon (430–355 BC), is that Darius was in fact the throne name of Cyaxares II, the Median king who shared power with Cyrus until about two years after the fall of Babylon. Steven D. Anderson, *Darius the Mede: A Reappraisal* (Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace, 2014).

52. Gregory J. Wightman, "The Myth of Solomon," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 277/278 (1990): 5–22. Edwin Yamauchi extrapolated from Homeric studies to biblical studies and concluded, "I think it should be apparent that too often negative criticisms of the traditions are based on arguments from silence and therefore represent not so much the inaccuracy of the traditions as the inadequacy of our archaeological data." Yamauchi, "Homer and Archaeology: Minimalists and Maximalists in Classical Context," in *The Future of Biblical Archaeology: Reassessing Methodologies and Assumptions*, ed. James K. Hoffmeier and Alan Millard (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 88; David Merling, "The Relationship between Archaeology and the Bible: Expectations and Reality," in Hoffmeier and Millard, *The Future of Biblical Archaeology*, 33–34.

53. Avraham Biran and Joseph Naveh, "An Aramaic Stele Fragment from Tel Dan," *Israel Exploration Journal* 43, no. 2/3 (1993): 81–98; Biran and Naveh, "The Tel Dan Inscription: A New Fragment," *Israel Exploration Journal* 45, no. 1 (1995): 1–18.

capital of his kingdom.[54] These examples could be multiplied. We ought to be careful not to overstate what they establish. The Tel Dan inscription does little more than attest to a Davidic dynasty. The building in East Jerusalem in itself merely suggests that around this period a "highland village culture was rapidly being transformed into a 'proto-urban' society that was much more highly centralized."[55] They are small pieces of a much larger puzzle. Important questions remain unanswered, and problems remain unresolved. Yet, while we should be reserved about claims of "proof" and perhaps speak of the relationship between the Bible and archaeology more in terms of "convergences" and "plausibility," these and other discoveries give us ample reason for confidence that the questions are not unanswerable and the problems are not unresolvable. Premature yet confident claims that the Bible is in error because there is no extrabiblical evidence at all for certain people or events have had to be revised time and again.

The truthfulness of Scripture, its correspondence to reality, and its internal coherence have been under attack since the incident in the garden of Eden. "You will not surely die," the serpent told the woman in the face of God's warning to the contrary (Gen. 3:4). Doubt about the veracity of God's word was deliberately sown in order to cast doubt on God's character and intention. Yet not all questions are as mischievous or deceitful. Christians need not fear or avoid a careful examination of the evidence, whether inside or outside of Scripture. As B. B. Warfield put it, "By all means let the doctrine of the Bible be tested by the facts and let the test be all the more, not the less, stringent and penetrating

54. Eilat Mazar, "Did I Find King David's Palace?," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 32, no. 1 (2006): 16–27.

55. William G. Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It? What Archaeology Can Tell Us about the Reality of Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 267.

because of the great issues that hang on it."[56] The Bible is able to withstand any attacks made upon it, and the living God will not be shown to be misleading or confused. Warfield's conclusion can still be endorsed with confidence: "Every part of Holy Writ is thus held alike infallibly true in all its statements, of whatever kind."[57]

56. B. B. Warfield, "The Real Problem of Inspiration," *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 4, no. 14 (1893): 214.

57. Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, "Inspiration and Criticism," in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), 420.

5

The Character of Scripture (Part 2)

Sufficiency and Efficacy

The clarity and truthfulness of Scripture are two aspects of its character that have been the subject of a great deal of attention in recent years. As we have seen, they relate directly to the character of the God who is the primary author of the Bible. By the work of his Spirit and through the agency of those specially chosen and equipped for the task, God communicates both effectively and truthfully in and by these words. He testifies to his Son and unfolds his eternal plan, which is large enough to encompass the entire creation and has Jesus at its center. As the word of God to us, Scripture can be trusted, and it is more than able to withstand the challenge of those who would cast doubt on its clarity or its truthfulness. Yet there is more to be said about the character of Scripture.

The two aspects we examine in this chapter, sufficiency and efficacy, also relate directly to the character of God but with them our attention begins to be drawn to the use of Scripture (which I will briefly touch upon in the final chapter). Is Scripture enough for us? Does it make any difference? Once again we begin with Jesus, what he had to say about Scripture, and how that directed the approach of his apostles and is in fact reflected in the Old Testament itself. By the way, it ought not to surprise us that these "attributes" of Scripture have come under challenge as well, though perhaps not as vociferously as those we examined in the previous chapter.

The Sufficiency of Scripture

Sufficiency is an incomplete predicate. It immediately provokes the question Sufficient for what? Jesus's appeal to Scripture in the midst of testing or argument assumed it was sufficient at each point to answer the suggestion being made or the question being asked (e.g., Matt. 4:4, 7, 10). The point made by his parable of the rich man and Lazarus is that the Scripture available at that time was sufficient for readers to understand their need to repent and live faithfully in God's world (Luke 16:19–31). Jesus's question "Have you not read . . . ?" carried with it the assumption "That should have been enough. God has already given you all you need to respond appropriately to this situation" (see Matt. 12:3, 5; 19:4; 22:31). Jesus appeared to be committed to the sufficiency of Scripture, and he certainly challenged the overlay of tradition that had been insisted upon by the Jewish religious leaders (Matt. 15:1–20). Yet, at the same time, Jesus spoke words given to him by his Father, which he expected his hearers to take seriously (Matt. 7:24–27; John 12:47; 14:24), and he commissioned his apostles to teach "all that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20). Insofar as these

words spoke of the new thing God had done in Jesus, were they adding to the Scripture that was current in Jesus's time?

The apostles wrote of the sufficiency of Scripture as well. Paul reminded Timothy that the Scriptures were able to make him "wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15). They were sufficient for this task. In the very next lines of his letter, the apostle insisted that all Scripture was not only God-breathed but also "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness," so that God's servant might be "complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16–17). The Scriptures are enough for these things. Peter went a step further when he insisted that "through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence" and "by which he granted to us his precious and very great promises," God "has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness" (2 Pet. 1:3–4). The way Peter wrote that sentence put an emphasis on the "all" in "all things." This knowledge arising from his promises is enough—God has given us what we need for life and godliness. Yet the way Paul expected the churches to read and heed the things he wrote, and Peter's classification of Paul's letters with "the other Scriptures" (2 Pet. 3:16), raises the question of whether Scripture was actually sufficient prior to those letters being written.

A similar question arises from an examination of the Old Testament itself. Moses spoke to the Israelites near the end of his ministry, warning them of the dangers of life that lay ahead:

> When the LORD your God cuts off before you the nations whom you go in to dispossess, and you dispossess them and dwell in their land, take care that you be not ensnared to follow them, after they have been destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire about their gods, saying, "How did these nations serve their gods?—that I also may do the

> same." You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way, for every abominable thing that the LORD hates they have done for their gods, for they even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods.
>
> Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it. (Deut. 12:29–32)

The commands that God had given them, the law Moses had inscribed for them, was to guide their response to God and his salvation. They did not need to look elsewhere, and in fact it would have been dangerous to look elsewhere. What the LORD had given them was enough. Moses made a similar point later in Deuteronomy: "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29). The Scriptures do not tell us everything. They might not tell us everything we'd like to know. But they are enough to fulfill the purpose for which they were given to Israel: "that we might do all the words of this law." And yet the Old Testament did not close with the book of Deuteronomy. After Deuteronomy came the prophetic history, the Psalms, Proverbs, wisdom and other writings, and the great prophetic texts of the divided kingdom and beyond. If Israel had enough to live appropriately as God's people with Deuteronomy, why was the rest necessary? Why did God cause it to be written and preserved?

At this point Wayne Grudem's definition of the sufficiency of Scripture is most helpful:

> The sufficiency of Scripture means that Scripture contained all the words of God he intended his people to have at each stage of redemptive history, and that it now contains every-

> thing we need God to tell us for salvation, for trusting him perfectly, and for obeying him perfectly.[1]

The words "at each stage of redemptive history" enable us to see that the sufficiency of Scripture is not at all incompatible with the progressive revelation that took place throughout the Old Testament and right up until God's final word was spoken in Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1–4). God gave the wilderness generation what they needed to "do all the words of this law." He gave the kingdom in the time of David and Solomon all they needed to live in covenant with the Lord who had fulfilled all his promises (1 Kings 8:56). He gave the first-century Jews all they needed to live faithfully and to recognize Jesus as the Messiah (John 1:41, 45). He gave those in the last days—following Jesus's atoning death, triumphant resurrection, and ascension, until his glorious return—all that they and we need in order to know who God is, what he has done for us in Jesus and by his Spirit, and how we should live and serve in the light of these things. A key part of God's provision at each stage is the Scripture then available. The Scripture available at each moment is sufficient for that moment in the overall scriptural movement from promise to fulfillment.

Again it is important to trace this attribute of Scripture back to the person and character of the God whose word this is. Nevertheless, in this case in particular this needs to be done with care. The triune God's sovereign and personal self-sufficiency is of an entirely different order from that of Scripture. Scripture is not self-existent. It is a creature of God's will, an expression of his character rather than an extension of his being. God creates and communicates with his creatures in acts of grace. His involvement of the genuine agency of human creatures to proclaim his character and purpose to other human creatures is likewise an act

1. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 127.

of grace. The sufficiency of Scripture is tied to the same attributes of God that inform, and indeed require, the clarity of Scripture: God's capacity and his benevolence. God is able to provide a text that is sufficient to accomplish his purpose, and out of love and concern for the welfare of his creatures, he chooses to do so. Benedict Pictet, again, lays bare what is at stake when the sufficiency (or perfection) of Scripture is denied, whether in support of the necessity of the authorized teaching tradition of the Roman church or to bolster claims to direct revelations from the radical Anabaptists and their heirs. Why would our heavenly Father provide his children with a gift that was insufficient? Why would he wish only part of what was needful to be written and leave the rest to "the uncertain tradition of men"?[2] God is not indifferent to the needs of his creatures; rather, he provides lavishly in keeping with his character of abundant grace.

Scripture is sufficient for the task(s) for which God has designed it. The Spirit attends Scripture at every point, from its writing to its reception, but this is not because of a deficiency in Scripture. Scripture is sufficient to teach, to promise and warn, to command or invite, and to elicit faith and nourish it in those brought to new life in the Spirit. So, as John wrote near the end of his Gospel, "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" (John 20:30–31).

There are two aspects to the sufficiency of Scripture as it has been affirmed throughout the history of Christian doctrine: a material aspect and a formal aspect. Timothy Ward has provided a clear and simple explanation. The *material aspect* of

2. Benedict Pictet, *Christian Theology*, trans. Frederick Reyroux (Weston Green: L. S. Seeley, 1834), 42–43.

Scripture's sufficiency is what is most often meant when the term is used: "that Scripture contains everything a person needs to know to be saved and to live in a way which pleases God." Its *formal aspect* "relates to the authority by which Scripture is interpreted, and asserts that Scripture is its own interpreter."[3]

The material aspect speaks of Scripture's completeness or perfection. It does not need a supplement in order to accomplish its purpose, whether that supplement is offered by the teaching magisterium of the church, the discoveries and dictates of human reason, or fresh revelations of the Spirit. What has been given to us is enough to make known to us the saving purpose of God in Christ, to warrant faith, and to direct the Christian life. This is the word that God through his Spirit has given to the church. The formal aspect overlaps with what I have said about the clarity of Scripture. Though study and the exercise of a faithful teaching ministry are both enjoined in Scripture itself, and though the Spirit attends the word to bring about conviction in the human heart, Scripture is its own interpreter. Careful attention to what is written, its context—most particularly in the biblical canon—and the comparison of one biblical text with others guards against misunderstanding. The apostle Paul warned the Corinthians "not to go beyond what is written" (1 Cor. 4:6). We are not bound to authoritative interpretations of Scripture given by the church or even by the academy.

Sola Scriptura

At the time of the Reformation and beyond, this truth was summarized in the slogan *sola Scriptura* ("by Scripture alone"). It obviously did not mean that preaching and teaching were now

3. Timothy Ward, *Word and Supplement: Speech Acts, Biblical Texts, and the Sufficiency of Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 21. A similar distinction was made in the early seventeenth century in the series of disputations collected as *A Synopsis of Purer Theology.*

unnecessary, nor that we should dispose of all the writing of Christian thinkers through the ages. As we have repeatedly seen, even the strongest exponents of the Reformation understanding of Scripture were preachers who regularly quoted the words of others. We must not be so arrogant as to suggest that we have nothing to learn from those who have read the Bible before us or are reading the Bible alongside us. But all other theological writing is to be tested against Scripture, rather than the other way around. Once again, our first and recurring question remains What does the Scripture say? However, in deliberate contrast to the Reformers, the Catholic Council of Trent declared that saving truth and moral discipline are "contained in the written books and in the unwritten traditions," and as a result the church "receives and venerates with an equal affection of piety and reverence, all the books both of the Old and the New Testament . . . as also the said traditions."[4]

In reaction to such a veneration of tradition (echoed even in some branches of Protestant theology, it should be said) we need to be careful not to misstate the doctrine of sufficiency in a way that denies all external aids in the reading of Scripture. As we noted earlier, when we read Scripture, we use an externally acquired facility with human language, and in some cases not just our own language but also Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. We engage our minds to understand, using the reasoning capacity developed elsewhere to make sense of what is being said. We read from within a context: personal, cultural, and even denominational. We acknowledge other "authorities" when it comes to knowledge—Scripture is not the only authority, though it is the *final* authority.[5] It is never simply a case of the

4. Council of Trent, session 4, "Concerning the Canonical Scriptures," April 8, 1546.

5. Theologians often speak of the authorities, norms, or rules that are subject to other authorities, norms, or rules (*norma normata*), in contrast to the one norm that norms all else but is never itself normed by any other (*norma normans non normata*).

Bible alone in the strictest sense (what some have labeled *nuda Scriptura*), because *I* am the one reading it. Yet, in each case, these can be distorting factors rather than (or as well as) helpful ones. They need to be tested in line with the apostle Paul's encouragement about prophecy: "Test everything; hold fast what is good" (1 Thess. 5:21).

The Place of Systematic Theology

Does *sola Scriptura* mean that theology, or more precisely the discipline of systematic theology, is unnecessary or even inappropriate? Is that discipline itself an example of "going beyond what is written"? If we are honest, sometimes it does go too far. Some systematic theologies are shaped by concerns and ideas that take us a long way beyond what is written. The discipline can become far too self-referential, where the words of theologians overshadow the text of Scripture. And in principle this is no different when the theologians are faithful and orthodox or when the constant reference point of our thought and writing is an orthodox confession or creed rather than the word which God has given.

Yet systematic theology, properly conceived, arises from convictions about the sufficiency of Scripture, understood as the complete, clear, and coherent word of God. Such systematic theology digs deeper into Scripture to expose the connections between the various aspects of the truth it teaches, rather than building its own fancies upon submerged biblical foundations. As we have already heard from one of the most eminent systematicians of the early twenty-first century:

> Theology is exegesis because its matter is Jesus Christ as he communicates himself through Holy Scripture. And so attention to Holy Scripture is not only necessary but also—in a real sense—a sufficient condition for

> theology, because Scripture itself is not only necessary but sufficient.[6]

Yet we also need to recognize that such theology is a collaborative exercise, engaged in conversation with others who are seeking, or have sought, to honor Christ and serve the people of God by faithfully teaching what is taught in Scripture. Confusion is bound to arise, though, when the conversation partners themselves become the conversation.

In the seventeenth century, the Westminster Confession sought to explain the importance of tying theology and Scripture together in its statement of the sufficiency of Scripture:

> 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. (1.6)

In this, the confession stood full-square with the first Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther, when he declared at the Diet of Worms he would not recant, "unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures *or by evident reason*." Luther was clearly arguing not for an authority of reason coordinate with Scripture but for "good and necessary consequence" that may be deduced from Scripture and itself must be tested by Scripture. After all, he concluded, "I consider myself conquered by the Scriptures adduced by me and my conscience is captive to the word of God."[7] However, even more significantly, Jesus

6. John Webster, "Reading the Bible: The Example of Barth and Bonhoeffer," in *Word and Church: Essays in Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 110.

7. Martin Luther, "Luther at the Diet of Worms," in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 66 vols. to date (St. Louis: Concordia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1955–), 32:112 (emphasis added). See Mark D. Thompson, *A Sure Ground on*

demonstrated what was involved in deducing "by good and necessary consequence" when he asked the Sadducees whether they had read the way God spoke of himself "in the passage about the bush" (see Ex. 3:6)—"I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"—and then concluded, "He is not God of the dead, but of the living" (Mark 12:26–27).

Yet a little more is needed if we are to understand the shape a faithful systematic theology might have as it engages the text of Scripture. Someone who thought and wrote much on the practice of theology and its relation to Scripture was John Webster. One of his later explanations (characteristically using the term "dogmatics" for "systematic theology") is worth pausing over for a moment:

> Dogmatic reasoning produces a conceptual representation of what reason has learned from its exegetical following of the scriptural text. In dogmatics, the "matter" of prophetic and apostolic speech is set out in a different idiom, anatomized. Cursive representation leads to conceptual representation, which abstracts from the textual surface by creating generalized or summary concepts and ordering them topically. This makes easier swift, non-laborious and non-repetitive access to the text's matter. But in doing this, it does not dispense with Scripture, kicking it away as a temporary scaffold; it simply uses a conceptual and topical form to undertake certain tasks with respect to Scripture. These include: seeing Scripture in its full scope as an unfolding of the one divine economy; seeing its interrelations and canonical unity; seeing its proportions.[8]

Which to Stand: The Relation of Authority and Interpretive Method in Luther's Approach to Scripture (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004), 249–82.

8. John B. Webster, "Biblical Reasoning," in *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 130–31.

This explanation is not entirely without problems, especially in the notions of "abstracting from the textual surface" and "creating . . . concepts." Yet these were never meant in the sense of separating from the text, nor did they suggest that the exegesis of the text is superficial or in any way merely preliminary. Webster went on to insist:

> What dogmatic reason may not do is pretend to a firmer grasp of the object of theological reason than can be achieved by following the text. The prophets and apostles are appointed by God, dogmaticians are not; prophetic and apostolic speech is irreducible; the sufficiency of Scripture includes its *rhetorical* sufficiency.[9]

The most obvious example of this is the doctrine of the Trinity. Tony Lane is right to point out that, at least on the surface, the Bible "does not contain a developed doctrine of the Trinity," even if the elements of that doctrine are found in Scripture, and Scripture "cannot faithfully be interpreted other than in a Trinitarian manner."[10] The doctrine of the Trinity is a synthetic doctrine, in that it brings together various statements and elements of the biblical witness in order to show its coherent account of the living God. This has involved the coining or appropriation of certain terms to summarize what Scripture teaches. Tertullian coined the term "Trinity" (*Trinitas*), and the Council of Nicaea took up and refashioned the equally critical term "of one being" (*homoousios*). The terms themselves might not be biblical, but the concepts they expressed are profoundly so: the irreducible oneness and irreducible threeness of the Godhead; and the union of Father, Son, and Spirit, which is far more

9. Webster, "Biblical Reasoning," 131 (emphasis original).

10. Anthony N. S. Lane, "Sola Scriptura? Making Sense of a Post-Reformation Slogan," in *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture*, ed. P. E. Satterthwaite & D. F. Wright (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 319.

than simply one of will or of likeness but of "the same being." From the earliest days, the doctrine of the Trinity has been understood as emphatically a biblical doctrine.

Trinitarian language like this is required the moment we affirm "the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1); that the name (singular) into which we are baptized is "the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19); that Jesus could say, "I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (John 14:10–11), and Paul could write of both the "Spirit of God" and the "Spirit of Christ" (Rom. 8:9). Of course, we could just provide a catalog of biblical passages such as those above, but even the selection of which verses to include would involve a theological judgment.[11] Faithful systematic theology does not go beyond Scripture but employs regenerate reason in exploring Scripture's internal coherence, keeping an eye on the proportions of the whole, listening to fellow Bible-readers across the generations, and providing, in Webster's words, a "swift, non-laborious and non-repetitive access to the text's matter."

The sufficiency of Scripture, like clarity and truthfulness, must be affirmed in the light of Scripture's purpose. The Bible was never intended as a driving manual, a cookbook, or a calculus text. It is not sufficient for those things. Yet, for those living in the last days, the Bible is sufficient to understand the nature, character, and purpose of God, the salvation he has provided for us in Christ, and how he calls on us to live in the light of so great a salvation.

The Efficacy of Scripture

The efficacy of Scripture, its power to achieve its purpose, is evident in the life and ministry of Jesus. Most dramatically,

11. For more of these kinds of theological judgments in formulating a doctrine of the Trinity, see Scott R. Swain, *The Trinity: An Introduction* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021).

his word was powerful to still the storm (Mark 4:39) and to raise the dead (John 11:43). Yet Jesus expected his words to have an impact on the lives of those who followed him as well. As we have seen, that impact could be different in each case, dependent upon God's purpose and the disposition of those to whom it was spoken. Not everyone who heard him believed. Some hearts remained hard and refused to come to him in repentance and faith. Others confessed, "You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). Yet it was not that the word was powerful in one instance and without power in the other. The powerful word the Father had given Jesus to speak could be an instrument for salvation or for judgment. "No one can come to me," he explained, "unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44).

Jesus's appeal to the Old Testament included confidence in the power of that word of God to direct and change lives. "You know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God," he told the Sadducees, linking these two things in the most suggestive way. The fact that these were written words (though in their original context many of them were spoken) did not mean they were less powerful. After all, the spoken and written words are not two altogether different things but two modes of the same thing, the word of God.[12] The Ten Commandments were no more or less powerful and authoritative when spoken from the mountain than they were when read from the stone tablets, the book of the law, or the scrolls in the first-century synagogues. Jesus expected the written words of the Old Testament to be

12. This was a point made emphatically by Protestants in the wake of Catholic critique in the decades following the Reformation. J. Cameron, *A Tract of the Soueraigne Iudge of Controuersies in Matters of Religion*, trans. J. Verneuil (Oxford: Turner, 1628), 22–24; Bruce P. Baugus, "Living and Active: The Efficacy of Scripture as God's Word," *Reformed Faith and Practice* 1, no. 3 (2016): 25–26; Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, vol. 2, *Holy Scripture*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 200.

fulfilled in his own life and ministry (Luke 22:37; 24:44). They accomplished their purpose of bearing witness to him, even if the Pharisees, in their blindness, were not prepared to accept that testimony and so revealed themselves to be under the judgment of God (John 5:39–40).

The powerful effect of the word of God is a constant theme throughout the Scriptures. The creative fiat of God "Let there be . . . and it was so" (Gen. 1:3, 6–7, 9, 11, 14–15, 24) sets the pattern. The word of God accomplishes what God intends it to accomplish. "The word of the LORD" (*dabar yhwh*) came to Abram (Gen. 15:1), and the patriarchal narratives, indeed the rest of the Bible, unfold the powerful impact of that word: a reiteration of the promise to build a great nation, give them a great name, bring them into a blessed land, and in time provide through them for all the world to be blessed (Gen. 12:1–3). Israel was warned that if a prophet speaks a word that "does not come to pass or come true" then it is not a word that the Lord has spoken (Deut. 18:22; Jer. 28:9; Lam. 3:37). As the Lord reminded Ezekiel: "I am the LORD. I have spoken; it shall come to pass; I will do it" (Ezek. 24:14). When the prophet spoke the words given to him by God, dry bones came to life (Ezek. 37:1–10). Psalms 19 and 119 extol the word of the Lord, which revives the soul, makes wise the simple, rejoices the heart, and enlightens the eyes—a word of truth that delivers on its promise of life. Yet here too the word of the Lord could be instead a word of judgment, as in the commission given to Jeremiah. "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth," the prophet was told (1:9).

> See, I have set you this day over nations and over
> kingdoms,
> to pluck up and to break down,

to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant. (1:10)

Whether for salvation or judgment, God's intention in speaking, directly or through his prophets, would be accomplished, as he made clear to Isaiah:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.
(55:10–11)

The New Testament's testimony to the efficacy of the word is consistent with that of Jesus and the Old Testament. On three occasions the book of Acts records how, in those early years, "the word of God increased and multiplied" (Acts 12:24; cf. 6:7; 19:20). The words the apostles and others took to the world were "words of . . . Life" (Acts 5:20), and they broke through the ancient barrier between Jew and Gentile (Acts 11:14). Peter wrote of the "the living and abiding word of God" and identified that word as "the good news that was preached to you" (1 Pet. 1:23–25). James wrote of "the word of truth" and of "the implanted word, which is able to save your souls" (James 1:18, 21). Paul wrote of how the word of God is "at work in you believers" (1 Thess. 2:13).

The apostle Paul clearly understood the effective power of the word to apply to the written word as well as the spoken word. It did not matter whether he was present to address the Corinthians in person or his letter was read in the assembly. "If

anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual," he wrote, "he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord" (1 Cor. 14:37). The same apostle who longed to preach in Rome, understanding that the gospel is "the power of God *for salvation* to everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16), could also write to Timothy that the sacred writings "are able to make you wise *for salvation* through faith in Christ Jesus." Whether spoken or written, they are the word of God and that word is powerful. It will equip the servant of God for every good work (2 Tim. 3:15, 17).

The fullest single statement in the New Testament about the efficacy of Scripture comes from the writer to the Hebrews. Warning about the danger of refusing to listen and disobedience, he continued, "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4:12). The impact of the word of God is profound. We might talk of its power to "get under our skin," but more than that, to expose what is deeply hidden within us. It is able to cut through every obstacle erected against it and overturn every attempt to muffle it. The word of God is the "sword of the Spirit" (Eph. 6:17), one of those weapons Paul would insist has "divine power to destroy strongholds" (2 Cor. 10:4). This word is powerful enough to reorient the human heart.

The power of the word of God is anchored in the power of the God whose word it is. The triune God is almighty. Classically, this divine attribute is described as omnipotence. There is no one like our God (Ex. 8:10; Ps. 86:8; Jer. 10:6). He is unique in power, just as he is unique in wisdom and in unalloyed goodness. It is critical that we remember the coherence of God's attributes and his simplicity, which requires

that those attributes are not "parts" of God but his single, consistent character viewed from different points of reference. In this we can see why his absolute and unrestrained power does not degrade into tyranny: precisely because its exercise in the world is always at one and the same time an exercise of his goodness, as well as his righteousness and his mercy. In the terrifying power of his judgment he saves, as the book of Revelation testifies again and again. The cross is a demonstration of powerful love (Rom. 5:8) and also of righteousness (Rom. 3:25–26).

God exercises his power in both creation and redemption with resplendent ease. Nothing is too hard for him (Gen. 18:14; Job 42:2; Jer. 32:17; Luke 1:37). Nothing overturns his purpose (Isa. 46:10), nothing can resist his will (Rom. 9:9), and none is able to withstand him (2 Chron. 20:6). It is in this connection that his use of words is significant. He is the one "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom. 4:17). He only has to speak and it is so. Yet at each point this powerful word is attended by his Spirit.

The Word and Spirit Are Inseparable

The inseparability of the word of God and the Spirit of God is a particular expression of the inseparability of the persons of the Trinity. The mission of the Son as the incarnate Word was not something undertaken in isolation from either the Father or the Spirit. We encounter the Spirit at critical times during Jesus's earthly ministry: the Spirit enabled the virginal conception (Luke 1:35); the Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism (Matt. 3:16–17); Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested (Matt. 4:1); he applied to himself the prophecy concerning the Spirit-anointed herald of God's deliverance (Luke 4:17–21); he explained his work of casting out demons as "by

the Spirit of God" (Matt. 12:28); he promised that, with the Father, he would send the Spirit (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7); and, on the cross, Jesus offered himself without blemish to God "through the eternal Spirit" (Heb. 9:14).

This is not to suggest that the work of Jesus was ineffectual and needed to be made effectual by the Spirit. He is the Son who "upholds the universe by the word of his power" (Heb. 1:3). Yet the missions of the Son and the Spirit are not unrelated or independent. In other words, the work of the incarnate Word and the work of the Spirit are inseparable. It is no surprise, then, that we should find the written word always attended by the Spirit: "Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:21), and the Spirit is the one who enables spiritual truths to be received by those who hear or read (1 Cor. 2:9–13).

This inseparability of word and Spirit was a major theme during the Reformation. For Luther and the early Reformers, it was important to emphasize that the claim to have the Spirit independently of the word, a claim some of the more radical Reformers made, was dangerous. Luther wrote, "We must hold firmly to the conviction that God gives no one his Spirit or grace except through or with the external word which comes before." Luther warned of those, like Thomas Müntzer, who "boast that they possess the Spirit without and before the word and who therefore judge, interpret, and twist the Scriptures or spoken word according to their pleasure."[13] Calvin had a similar concern: "For seeing how dangerous it would be to boast of the Spirit without the Word, [the Lord himself] declared that the Church is indeed governed by the Holy Spirit, but in order that that government might not be vague and unstable, he annexed

13. Martin Luther, "The Schmalkaldic Articles (1536/7)," in William R. Russell, *Luther's Theological Testament: The Schmalkald Articles* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 145.

it to the Word."[14] Calvin, in particular, pushed in the opposite direction as well, insisting upon the *mutual* bond of Word and Spirit:

> For by a kind of mutual bond the Lord has joined together the certainty of his Word and of his Spirit so that the perfect religion of the Word may abide in our minds when the Spirit, who causes us to contemplate God's face, shines; and that we in turn may embrace the Spirit with no fear of being deceived when we recognize him in his own image, namely the Word. So indeed it is. God did not bring forth his Word among men for the sake of a momentary display, intending at the coming of his Spirit to abolish it. Rather, he sent down the same Spirit by whose power he had dispensed the Word, to complete his work by the efficacious confirmation of the Word.[15]

A few years earlier Calvin had written, "It would be no less unreasonable to boast of the Spirit without the Word than it would be absurd to bring forward the Word itself without the Spirit."[16]

This issue became a matter of fierce debate several decades later when a Lutheran pastor in Danzig began to teach that without the work of the Spirit the Scriptures would be merely an external word, and so ineffective. Hermann Rahtmann illustrated his point with reference to an ax: it is effective only when it is wielded by an arm. The written word has no power in itself, he argued. What is required is not just reading or proclamation but a distinct, if not independent, immediate act of the Spirit.[17]

14. John Calvin and Jacopo Sadoleto, *A Reformation Debate: Sadoleto's Letter to the Genevans and Calvin's Reply*, ed. John C. Olin (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1976), 60.

15. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.9.3.

16. Calvin and Sadoleto, *Reformation Debate*, 61.

17. The sad history of this debate, which to some degree was driven by misunderstanding and personality differences, can be found in R. D. Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture: A Study of the Theology of the Seventeenth Century Lutheran Dogmaticians* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1955), 175–79.

In reaction, other Lutherans began to emphasize the inherent power of Scripture, in some cases even arguing that this power exists prior to and apart from its use. This word is never merely a human word, nor is it ever uninspired. Critically, it does not *become* something it once was not. The illustration offered by those who opposed Rahtmann was that of a loaf of bread, which has the power to rise within it.

The most charitable reading of the two sides is that one was seeking to defend the essential union of word and Spirit, while the other was seeking to defend the power of the "living and active word of God." For all the sad acrimony—and there was some—the debate did help to clarify the critical inseparability of word and Spirit. In the end, the question of inherent efficacy does not arise because word and Spirit are never separated. As Johann Quenstedt put it:

> The Holy Spirit does not act and operate separately and independently without the Word, nor does the Word act separately and independently without God and the Holy Spirit in converting man. But the Holy Spirit acts simultaneously and in union with the Word, through the Word, and in the Word as His usual means; and the Word works with the Spirit from power that is divinely bestowed. And thus they accomplish by one and the same action one effect and activity, the conversion of man.[18]

God's Effective Speech Acts

The recent application of speech-act theory to the doctrine of Scripture has provided us with fresh ways to affirm both the efficacy of Scripture and the inseparable union of word and

18. Johann A. Quenstedt, *Theologia Didactico-Polemica sive Systema Theologiae*, pt. 4, chap. 7, sec. 1, thesis 16, as quoted in Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism: A Study of Theological Prolegomena* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1970), 375.

Spirit. We have already noted the application of recent speech-act theory to our understanding of what we are affirming when we say, "God speaks." Speaking and writing are communicative acts. God does things with words. But how?

Kevin Vanhoozer suggests that "Word and Spirit together make up God's active speech (speech act)."[19] So far we have not moved much beyond the conclusion of Quenstedt. However, Vanhoozer uses the analytic tools of speech-act theory to explain how the two dimensions of God's communication work together. In any communicative act there are three main parts: the locution (the words said or written together with their meaning and reference: "Surely I am coming soon"—Rev. 22:20); the illocution (what those words with that meaning actually do: promise); and the perlocution (the effect or impact of those words: comfort, reassurance).[20] Vanhoozer's suggestion is that perlocution is the point at which we speak most directly of the Spirit's engagement.

> First, the Spirit illumines the reader and so enables the reader to grasp the illocutionary point, to recognize what the Scriptures may be doing. Second, the Spirit convicts the reader that the illocutionary point of the biblical text deserves the appropriate response. . . . The Spirit does not alter the semantics of biblical literature. The locution and illocution as inscribed in Scripture remain unchanged. The Spirit's agency consists rather in bringing the illocutionary point home to the reader and so achieving the corresponding perlocutionary effect—whether belief, obedience, praise and so on.[21]

19. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 428.

20. One of John L. Austin's original examples went like this: "Shoot her!" (locution); "he urged me to shoot her" (illocution); "I was persuaded to shoot her" (perlocution). Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962), 101–2.

21. Kevin Vanhoozer, "God's Mighty Speech-Acts: The Doctrine of Scripture Today," in *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture*, ed. P. E. Satterthwaite and D. F. Wright (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 177; see also Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 374.

There is nothing deficient in the word. As Johann Baier put it, the word is not "a passive instrument" but "an active and cooperative instrument."[22] The word and Spirit always work together. Any attempt to separate them always ends up distorting the work of both. The Spirit does not add to the word as such. After all, he was intimately involved in its production as well. What is said is not changed or augmented. But neither does the word operate in some quasi-magical way, making an impact in some measure independent of the word being read and heard. "The semantics of biblical literature," Vanhoozer insists, "is not altered." Scripture has not suddenly become something it wasn't before. Indeed, what Vanhoozer is talking about has very significant overlap with the doctrine of the Spirit's illumination that I have discussed previously. The Spirit illumines the minds and hearts of human creatures, creating a seat for the word, bringing conviction, new life, repentance, and faith. Yet the means he uses is the word he brought into being and attends each moment.

The character of the written word of God, affirmed or assumed by Jesus, attested throughout the Old Testament and the New, is inextricably tied to the character of God. The gospel of Jesus Christ always turns our attention ultimately to the person and purposes of the triune God. The God who has given us this word, through the genuine human agency of the prophets and apostles, is an effective communicator. He is utterly and always truthful. He is never ignorant or misled, and he cannot lie. He provides abundantly for his human creatures, the objects of his love. And his word always accomplishes the purpose for which it was given. William Tyndale was right to say that "God is but his word."[23]

22. J. Baier, *Compendium Theologiae Positivae* (Jena: Tobias Oehrling, 1686), 142; Preus, *Inspiration of Scripture*, 171–72.

23. William Tyndale, *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, in *Doctrinal Treatises*, ed. Henry Walter (Cambridge: Parker Society, 1848), 160.

6

Reading the Bible as a Follower of Jesus

The Christian doctrine of Scripture is an integrated account of the word of the living God given to us in written form through the conscious, creative, yet faithful agency of human servants especially prepared for this work, and attended at every point by the Holy Spirit. As a doctrine, it does not arise from isolated and unusual "proof texts." Instead, it emerges from a broad and deep biblical theology and is ultimately anchored in the being and character of the triune God. At its center is Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word, who himself appealed to the written word, both endorsing and fulfilling the Old Testament and, through the commission he gave to his apostles and the promise of his Spirit, authorizing the New Testament.

The Christian attitude toward the Bible is part of Christian discipleship. To follow Jesus is to follow him in this too. Put simply, we want to have the same attitude toward the Bible as Jesus had. We must not pit the authority of Jesus—or the power of the Holy Spirit, for that matter—against the teaching

of Scripture. Jesus himself turned to the Scriptures as the final word: sufficiently clear, true, and powerful to make known the person and purposes of God, and to direct a faithful response to what God has done for us in his Son. "It is written," Jesus said. "What does the Scripture say?" asked his faithful servant, the apostle Paul.

This explains why Christians cultivate a specific posture in relation to the Scriptures, not standing over them as critics and judges, deciding for ourselves what is wholesome and true and discarding the remainder. Instead, we speak of "sitting under" the word of God, being shaped and formed by it as it recasts our perspectives and brings about a genuine repentance of both mind and life. We recognize that our own predisposition toward self-interest, along with the preferences and preoccupations of a world that refuses God's right to direct our personal and corporate lives, needs to be challenged. We take seriously the folly and futility of all attempts to exclude God from consideration—whether these stem from philosophical systems, political and social structures, or public consensus—and the profound and lasting harm that they can cause. Instead, we acknowledge the authority of God to direct our understanding of him, our proper response to him, and the course of our entire lives lived as his redeemed and deeply loved creatures. This need not lead us into a narrow and legalistic fundamentalism that seeks to enforce compliance. True obedience flows out of faith, and faith is the work of the Spirit in the human heart. As Luther once said, it's only when you've won the heart that you've really won the person.[1] So, with confidence we commend God's word to all around us as a good word. God has given us the Bible for our good, collectively as well as individu-

1. Martin Luther, "Sermon for Monday after Invocavit, March 10, 1522," *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 66 vols. to date (St. Louis: Concordia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1955–), 51:76.

ally. It sheds light into the darkness and proclaims life-giving truth to counter ignorance, falsehood, and fear. It brings real freedom.

The study of the Bible is properly undertaken with humility as well as intellectual rigor, with an acute sense that we are in the presence of God as we study his word and are accountable for how we respond. "This is the one to whom I will look," the Lord said through Isaiah,

> he who is humble and contrite in spirit
> and trembles at my word. (66:2)

The study of Scripture is a spiritual and moral matter, not simply a matter of intellectual curiosity or the acquisition of knowledge.[2] We need to remember who God is and that whatever we think or say about his word is thought or said in his presence. For this reason, the study of Scripture is best approached prayerfully, dependent upon the same Spirit who caused Scripture to be written in the first place.

Of course, this is in no way a defensive posture. It is not a cloak for refusing to face hard questions or to wrestle with texts that, for one reason or another, I find hard to understand or difficult to reconcile with what I read elsewhere in the Bible. The written word of the living God can withstand the most rigorous questioning, and as Warfield reminded us, it deserves nothing less. In an important sense the Bible is not "safe," just as the living God is not "safe." It is not something we can tame or master or mold to suit our own preferences. Nor should our study of Scripture be characterized by the kind of individualism that refuses to listen to those who have read the text before us or are reading it alongside us. We can learn even from those

2. John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 87–91.

with whom we might ultimately disagree. They might alert us to our own blind spots and prejudices.

Yet there is one other aspect of the Christian posture toward Scripture without which the picture would be not only incomplete but distorted. The Bible is not a burden, not a rule book that binds us, not a dark, unfriendly word that always and only leaves us broken. It is a source of deep, rich, full-throated joy. King David wrote of the blessed man whose "delight is in the law of the LORD" (Ps. 1:2). Later in the Psalms we read,

> Open my eyes, that I may behold
> wondrous things out of your law." (119:18)

I was struck by a question I heard from a platform many years ago now, long before I had children of my own. The conference speaker asked, "Do your children ever see you reading the Bible, not because you have to prepare a Bible study or a sermon, but simply because you love to read it and it brings you great joy?" Not obligation or burden, but real delight—an echo of what Jesus said about the gatekeeper: "The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out" (John 10:3).

It is fitting that this short introduction to the Christian doctrine of Scripture should end where it began, with words of the Protestant martyr Archbishop Thomas Cranmer. He encouraged Bible translation, constructed a lectionary (a calendar of Bible readings), produced a liturgy saturated with Scripture, and wrote the homily "A Fruitful Exhortation to the Reading and Knowledge of Holy Scripture." He was convinced that the word of God could transform an entire nation as well as a single human heart. Don't be afraid of falling into error as you read it, he wrote.

> I shall show you how you may read it without danger of error. Read it humbly with a meek and a lowly heart, to the intent you may glorify God, and not yourself, with the knowledge of it; and read it not without daily praying to God, that he would direct your reading to good effect; and take upon you to expound it no further than you can plainly understand it.[3]

And a little earlier in the homily: "There is nothing that so much strengthens our faith and trust in God, that so much keeps up innocency and pureness of the heart and also of outward godly life and conversation, as continual reading and recording of God's word."[4]

3. Thomas Cranmer, "Fruitful Exhortation to the Reading and Knowledge of Holy Scripture," in *Certain Sermons or Homilies Appointed to Be Read in Churches in the Time of Queen Elizabeth of Famous Memory* (repr., London: SPCK, 1864), 7.
4. Cranmer, "Fruitful Exhortation," 4.

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