Chapter 4

The Four Characteristics of Scripture: (1) Authority

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

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

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

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

EXPLANATION AND SCRIPTURAL BASIS

The authority of Scripture means that all the words in Scripture are God’s words in such a way that to disbelieve or disobey any word of Scripture is to disbelieve or disobey God.

This definition may now be examined in its various parts.

A. All the Words in Scripture Are God’s Words

1. This Is What the Bible Claims for Itself. There are frequent claims in the Bible that all the words of Scripture are God’s words (as well as words that were written down by men). In the Old Testament, this is frequently seen in the introductory phrase, “Thus says the LORD,” which appears hundreds of times. In the world of the Old Testament, this phrase would have been recognized as identical in form to the phrase, “Thus says king …,” which was used to preface the edict of a king to his subjects, an edict that could not be challenged or questioned but that simply had to be obeyed. Thus, when the prophets say, “Thus says the Lord,” they are claiming to be messengers from the sovereign King of Israel, namely, God himself, and they are claiming that their words are the absolutely authoritative words of God. When a prophet spoke in God’s name in this way, every word he spoke had to come from God, or he would be a false prophet (cf. Num. 22:38; Deut. 18:18–20; Jer. 1:9; 14:14; 23:16–22; 29:31–32; Ezek. 2:7; 13:1–16).

Furthermore, God is often said to speak “through” the prophet (1 Kings 14:18; 16:12, 34; 2 Kings 9:36; 14:25; Jer. 37:2; Zech. 7:7, 12). Thus, what the prophet says in God’s name, God says (1 Kings 13:26 with v. 21; 1 Kings 21:19 with 2 Kings 9:25–26; Hag. 1:12; cf. 1 Sam. 15:3, 18). In these and other instances in the Old Testament, words that the prophets spoke can equally...
be referred to as words that God himself spoke. Thus, to disbelieve or disobey anything a prophet says is to disbelieve or disobey God himself (Deut. 18:19; 1 Sam. 10:8; 13:13–14; 15:3, 19, 23; 1 Kings 20:35, 36).

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

In the New Testament, a number of passages indicate that all of the Old Testament writings are thought of as God’s words. 2 Timothy 3:16 says, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (NIV). Here “Scripture” (γραφή, G1210) must refer to the Old Testament written Scripture, for that is what the word γραφή refers to in every one of its fifty-one occurrences in the New Testament. Furthermore, the “sacred writings” of the Old Testament are what Paul has just referred to in verse 15.

Paul here affirms that all of the Old Testament writings are θεόπνευστος (G2535) “breathed out by God.” Since it is writings that are said to be “breathed out,” this breathing must be understood as a metaphor for speaking the words of Scripture. For every word of the Old Testament, God is the one who spoke (and still speaks) it, although God used human agents to write these words down.

A similar indication of the character of all Old Testament writings as God’s words is found in 2 Peter 1:21. Speaking of the prophecies of Scripture (v. 20), which means at least the Old Testament Scriptures to which Peter encourages his readers to give careful attention (v. 19), Peter says that none of these prophecies ever came “by the impulse of man,” but that “men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” It is not Peter’s intention to deny completely human volition or personality in the writing of Scripture (he says that the men “spoke”), but rather to say that the ultimate source of every prophecy was never a man’s decision about what he wanted to write, but rather the Holy Spirit’s action in the prophet’s life, carried out in ways unspecified here (or, in fact, elsewhere in Scripture). This indicates a belief that all of the Old Testament prophecies (and, in light of vv. 19–20, this probably includes all of the written Scripture of the Old Testament) are spoken “from God”: that is, they are God’s own words.

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

In Matthew 19:5, the words of the author in Genesis 2:24, not attributed to God in the Genesis narrative, are quoted by Jesus as words that God “said.” In Mark 7:9–13, the same Old Testament passage can be called interchangeably “the commandment of God,” or what “Moses said,” or “the word of God.” In Acts 1:16, the words of Psalms 69 and 109 are said to be words which “the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David.” Words of Scripture are thus said to be spoken by the Holy Spirit. In Acts 2:16–17, in quoting “what was spoken by the prophet Joel” in Joel 2:28–32, Peter inserts “God declares,” thus attributing to God words written by Joel, and claiming that God is presently saying them.
Many other passages could be cited (see Luke 1:70; 24:25; John 5:45–47; Acts 3:18, 21; 4:25; 13:47; 28:25; Rom. 1:2; 3:2; 9:17; 1 Cor. 9:8–10; Heb. 1:1–2, 6–7), but the pattern of attributing to God the words of Old Testament Scripture should be very clear. Moreover, in several places it is all of the words of the prophets or the words of the Old Testament Scriptures that are said to compel belief or to be from God (see Luke 24:25, 27, 44; Acts 3:18; 24:14; Rom. 15:4).

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

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

These two passages taken together indicate that during the time of the writing of the New Testament documents there was an awareness that additions were being made to this special category of writings called “scripture,” writings that had the character of being God’s very words. Thus, once we establish that a New Testament writing belongs to the special category “scripture,” then we are correct in applying 2 Timothy 3:16 to that writing as well, and saying that that writing also has the characteristic Paul attributes to “all scripture”: it is “God-breathed,” and all its words are the very words of God.

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

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

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

Indications of a similar view of the New Testament writings are found in John 14:26 and 16:13, where Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would bring all that he had said to the disciples’ remembrance and would guide them into all the truth. This indicates a special superintending work of the Holy Spirit whereby the disciples would be able to remember and record without error all that Jesus had said. Similar indications are also found in 2 Peter 3:2; 1 Corinthians 2:13; 1 Thessalonians 4:15; and Revelation 22:18–19.

2. We Are Convinced of the Bible’s Claims to Be God’s Words as We Read the Bible. It is one thing to affirm that the Bible claims to be the words of God. It is another thing to be convinced that those claims are true. Our ultimate conviction that the words of the Bible are God’s words comes only when the Holy Spirit speaks in and through the words of the Bible to our hearts and gives us an inner assurance that these are the words of our Creator speaking to us. Just after Paul has explained that his apostolic speech consists of words taught by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:13), he says, “The natural man does not receive the 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). Apart from the work of the Spirit of God, a person will not receive spiritual truths and in particular will not receive or accept the truth that the words of Scripture are in fact the words of God.

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

It is important to remember that this conviction that the words of Scripture are the words of God does not come apart from the words of Scripture or in addition to the words of Scripture. It is not as if the Holy Spirit one day whispers in our ear, “Do you see that Bible sitting on your desk? I want you to know that the words of that Bible are God’s words.” It is rather as people read Scripture that they hear their Creator’s voice speaking to them in the words of Scripture and realize that the book they are reading is unlike any other book, that it is indeed a book of God’s own words speaking to their hearts.

3. Other Evidence Is Useful but Not Finally Convincing. The previous section is not meant to deny the validity of other kinds of arguments that may be used to support the claim that the Bible is God’s words. It is helpful for us to learn that the Bible is historically accurate, that it is
internally consistent, that it contains prophecies that have been fulfilled hundreds of years later, that it has influenced the course of human history more than any other book, that it has continued changing the lives of millions of individuals throughout its history, that through it people come to find salvation, that it has a majestic beauty and a profound depth of teaching unmatched by any other book, and that it claims hundreds of times over to be God’s very words. All of these arguments and others are useful to us and remove obstacles that might otherwise come in the way of our believing Scripture. But all of these arguments taken individually or together cannot finally be convincing. As the Westminster Confession of Faith said in 1643–46,

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

4. The Words of Scripture Are Self-Attesting. Thus, the words of Scripture are “self-attesting.” They cannot be “proved” to be God’s words by appeal to any higher authority. For if an appeal to some higher authority (say, historical accuracy or logical consistency) were used to prove that the Bible is God’s Word, then the Bible itself would not be our highest or absolute authority: it would be subordinate in authority to the thing to which we appealed to prove it to be God’s Word. If we ultimately appeal to human reason, or to logic, or to historical accuracy, or to scientific truth, as the authority by which Scripture is shown to be God’s words, then we have assumed the thing to which we appealed to be a higher authority than God’s words and one that is more true or more reliable.

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

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

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

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

“Logical consistency is my ultimate authority because it is logical to make it so.”
“The findings of human sensory experiences are the ultimate authority for discovering what is real and what is not, because our human senses have never discovered anything else: thus, human sense experience tells me that my principle is true.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

When we say that all the words of the Bible are God’s words, we are talking about the result of the process of bringing Scripture into existence. To raise the question of dictation is to ask about the process that led to that result or the manner by which God acted in order to ensure the result that he intended. It must be emphasized that the Bible does not speak of only one type of process or one manner by which God communicated to the biblical authors what he wanted to be said. In fact, there is indication of a wide variety of processes God used to bring about the desired result.
A few scattered instances of dictation are explicitly mentioned in Scripture. When the apostle John saw the risen Lord in a vision on the island of Patmos, Jesus spoke to him as follows: “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write …” (Rev. 2:1); “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write …” (Rev. 2:8); “And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write …” (Rev. 2:12). These are examples of dictation pure and simple. The risen Lord tells John what to write, and John writes the words he hears from Jesus.

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

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

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus …” (Luke 1:1–3)

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

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

In cases where the ordinary human personality and writing style of the author were prominently involved, as seems the case with the major part of Scripture, all that we are able to say is that God’s providential oversight and direction of the life of each author was such that their personalities, their backgrounds and training, their abilities to evaluate events in the world around them, their access to historical data, their judgment with regard to the accuracy of information, and their individual circumstances when they wrote, were all exactly what God
wanted them to be, so that when they actually came to the point of putting pen to paper, the words were fully their own words but also fully the words that God wanted them to write, words that God would also claim as his own.

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

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

Throughout the history of the church the greatest preachers have been those who have recognized that they have no authority in themselves and have seen their task as being to explain the words of Scripture and apply them clearly to the lives of their hearers. Their preaching has drawn its power not from the proclamation of their own Christian experiences or the experiences of others, nor from their own opinions, creative ideas, or rhetorical skills, but from God’s powerful words. Essentially they stood in the pulpit, pointed to the biblical text, and said in effect to the congregation, “This is what this verse means. Do you see that meaning here as well? Then you must believe it and obey it with all your heart, for God himself, your Creator and your Lord, is saying this to you today!” Only the written words of Scripture can give this kind of authority to preaching.

**C. The Truthfulness of Scripture**

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

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

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

2. Therefore All the Words in Scripture Are Completely True and Without Error in Any Part. Since the words of the Bible are God’s words, and since God cannot lie or speak falsely, it is correct to conclude that there is no untruthfulness or error in any part of the words of Scripture. We find this affirmed several places in the Bible. “The words of the LORD are words that are pure silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times” (Ps. 12:6, author’s translation). Here the psalmist uses vivid imagery to speak of the undiluted purity of God’s words: there is no imperfection in them. Also in Proverbs 30:5, we read, “Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.” It is not just some of the words of Scripture that are true, but every word. In fact, God’s Word is fixed in heaven for all eternity: “For ever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens” (Ps. 119:89). Jesus can speak of the eternal nature of his own words: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Matt. 24:35). God’s speech is placed in marked contrast to all human speech, for “God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should repent” (Num. 23:19). These verses affirm explicitly what was implicit in the requirement that we believe all of the words of Scripture, namely, that there is no untruthfulness or falsehood affirmed in any of the statements of the Bible.

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

The difference is significant, for this statement encourages us to think of the Bible not simply as being “true” in the sense that it conforms to some higher standard of truth, but rather to think of the Bible as being itself the final standard of truth. The Bible is God’s Word, and God’s Word is the ultimate definition of what is true and what is not true: God’s Word is itself truth. Thus we are to think of the Bible as the ultimate standard of truth, the reference point by which every other claim to truthfulness is to be measured. Those assertions that conform with Scripture are “true” while those that do not conform with Scripture are not true.

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

4. Might Some New Fact Ever Contradict the Bible? Will any new scientific or historical fact ever be discovered that will contradict the Bible? Here we can say with confidence that this will never happen—it is in fact impossible. If any supposed “fact” is ever discovered that is said to contradict Scripture, then (if we have understood Scripture rightly) that “fact” must be false, because God, the author of Scripture, knows all true facts (past, present, and future). No fact will ever turn up that God did not know about ages ago and take into account when he caused Scripture to be written. Every true fact is something that God has known already from all eternity and is something that therefore cannot contradict God’s speech in Scripture.
Nevertheless, it must be remembered that scientific or historical study (as well as other kinds of study of creation) can cause us to reexamine Scripture to see if it really teaches what we thought it taught. The Bible certainly does not teach that the earth was created in the year 4004 B.C., as some once thought (for the genealogical lists in Scripture have gaps in them). Yet it was in part historical, archaeological, astronomical, and geological study that caused Christians to reexamine Scripture to see if it really taught such a recent origin for the earth. Careful analysis of the biblical text showed that it did not teach this.

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

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

D. Written Scripture Is Our Final Authority

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

This is important because people sometimes (intentionally or unintentionally) attempt to substitute some other final standard than the written words of Scripture. For example, people will sometimes refer to “what Jesus really said” and claim that when we translate the Greek words of the Gospels back into the Aramaic language Jesus spoke, we can gain a better understanding of Jesus’ words than was given by the writers of the Gospels. In fact, it is sometimes said that this work of reconstructing Jesus’ words in Aramaic enables us to correct the erroneous translations made by the gospel authors.

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

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

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. If you want to persuade someone that the Bible is God’s Word, what do you want that person to read more than any other piece of literature?

2. Who would try to make people want to disbelieve something in Scripture? To disobey something in Scripture? Is there anything in the Bible that you do not want to believe? To obey? If your answers to either of the preceding two questions were positive, what is the best way to approach and to deal with the desires you have in this area?

3. Do you know of any proven fact in all of history that has shown something in the Bible to be false? Can the same be said about other religious writings such as the Book of Mormon or the Qur’an? If you have read in other books such as these, can you describe the spiritual effect they had on you? Compare that with the spiritual effect that reading the Bible has on you. Can you say that when you read the Bible you hear the voice of your Creator speaking to you in a way that is true of no other book?

4. Do you ever find yourself believing something not because you have external evidence for it but simply because it is written in Scripture? Is that proper faith, according to Hebrews 11:1? If you do believe things simply because Scripture says them, what do you think Christ will say to you about this habit when you stand before his judgment seat? Do you think that trusting and obeying everything that Scripture affirms will ever lead you into sin or away from God’s blessing in your life?

SPECIAL TERMS

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

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**SCRIPTURE MEMORY PASSAGE**

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

**HYMN**

“STANDING ON THE PROMISES”

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

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

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

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

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

Standing on the promises I cannot fall,
Chapter 5

The Inerrancy of Scripture

*Are there any errors in the Bible?*

Most books on systematic theology have not included a separate chapter on the inerrancy of the Bible. The subject has usually been dealt with under the heading of the authority of Scripture, and no further treatment has been considered necessary. However, this issue of inerrancy is of such concern in the evangelical world today that it warrants a separate chapter following our treatment of the authority of the Word of God.

EXPLANATION AND SCRIPTURAL BASIS

A. The Meaning of Inerrancy

We will not at this point repeat the arguments concerning the authority of Scripture that were given in chapter 4. There it was argued that all the words in the Bible are God’s words, and that therefore to disbelieve or disobey any word in Scripture is to disbelieve or disobey God. It was argued further that the Bible clearly teaches that God cannot lie or speak falsely (2 Sam. 7:28; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18). Therefore, all the words in Scripture are claimed to be completely true and without error in any part (Num. 23:19; Pss. 12:6; 119:89, 96; Prov. 30:5; Matt. 24:35). God’s words are, in fact, the ultimate standard of truth (John 17:17).

Especially relevant at this point are those Scripture texts that indicate the total truthfulness and reliability of God’s words. “The *words of the LORD are words that are pure* silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times” (Ps. 12:6, author’s transl.), indicates the absolute reliability and purity of Scripture. Similarly, “*Every word of God proves true*; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him” (Prov. 30:5), indicates the truthfulness of every word that God has spoken. Though error and at least partial falsehood may characterize the speech of every human being, it is the characteristic of God’s speech even when spoken through sinful human beings that it is never false and that it never affirms error: “God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should repent” (Num. 23:19) was spoken by sinful Balaam specifically about the prophetic words that God had spoken through his own lips.

With evidence such as this we are now in a position to define biblical inerrancy: *The inerrancy of Scripture means that Scripture in the original manuscripts does not affirm anything that is contrary to fact.*

This definition focuses on the question of truthfulness and falsehood in the language of Scripture. The definition in simple terms just means that the *Bible always tells the truth* and that
it always tells the truth concerning everything it talks about. This definition does not mean that the Bible tells us every fact there is to know about any one subject, but it affirms that what it does say about any subject is true.

It is important to realize at the outset of this discussion that the focus of this controversy is on the question of truthfulness in speech. It must be recognized that absolute truthfulness in speech is consistent with some other types of statements, such as the following:

1. The Bible Can Be Inerrant and Still Speak in the Ordinary Language of Everyday Speech. This is especially true in “scientific” or “historical” descriptions of facts or events. The Bible can speak of the sun rising and the rain falling because from the perspective of the speaker this is exactly what happens. From the standpoint of an observer standing on the sun (were that possible) or on some hypothetical “fixed” point in space, the earth rotates and brings the sun into view, and rain does not fall downward but upward or sideways or whatever direction necessary for it to be drawn by gravity toward the surface of the earth. But such explanations are hopelessly pedantic and would make ordinary communication impossible. From the standpoint of the speaker, the sun does rise and the rain does fall, and these are perfectly true descriptions of the natural phenomena the speaker observes.

A similar consideration applies to numbers when used in measuring or in counting. A reporter can say that 8,000 men were killed in a certain battle without thereby implying that he has counted everyone and that there are not 7,999 or 8,001 dead soldiers. If roughly 8,000 died, it would of course be false to say that 16,000 died, but it would not be false in most contexts for a reporter to say that 8,000 men died when in fact 7,823 or 8,242 had died: the limits of truthfulness would depend on the degree of precision implied by the speaker and expected by his original hearers.

This is also true for measurements. Whether I say, “I don’t live far from my office,” or “I live a little over a mile from my office,” or “I live one mile from my office,” or “I live 1.287 miles from my office,” all four statements are still approximations to some degree of accuracy. Further degrees of accuracy might be obtained with more precise scientific instruments, but these would still be approximations to a certain degree of accuracy. Thus, measurements also, in order to be true, should conform to the degree of precision implied by the speaker and expected by the hearers in the original context. It should not trouble us, then, to affirm both that the Bible is absolutely truthful in everything it says and that it uses ordinary language to describe natural phenomena or to give approximations or round numbers when those are appropriate in the context.

We should also note that language can make vague or imprecise statements without being untrue. “I live a little over a mile from my office” is a vague and imprecise statement, but it is also inerrant: there is nothing untrue about it. It does not affirm anything that is contrary to fact. In a similar way, biblical statements can be imprecise and still be totally true. Inerrancy has to do with truthfulness not with the degree of precision with which events are reported.

2. The Bible Can Be Inerrant and Still Include Loose or Free Quotations. The method by which one person quotes the words of another person is a procedure that in large part varies from culture to culture. In contemporary American and British culture we are used to quoting a person’s exact words when we enclose the statement in quotation marks (this is called direct quotation). But when we use indirect quotation (with no quotation marks) we only expect an accurate report of the substance of a statement. Consider this sentence: “Elliot said that he would
return home for supper right away.” The sentence does not quote Elliot directly, but it is an acceptable and truthful report of Elliot’s actual statement to his father, “I will come to the house to eat in two minutes,” even though the indirect quotation included none of the speaker’s original words.

Written Greek at the time of the New Testament had no quotation marks or equivalent kinds of punctuation, and an accurate citation of another person needed to include only a correct representation of the content of what the person said (rather like our indirect quotations): it was not expected to cite each word exactly. Thus, inerrancy is consistent with loose or free quotations of the Old Testament or of the words of Jesus, for example, so long as the content is not false to what was originally stated. The original writer did not ordinarily imply that he was using the exact words of the speaker and only those, nor did the original hearers expect verbatim quotation in such reporting.

3. It Is Consistent With Inerrancy to Have Unusual or Uncommon Grammatical Constructions in the Bible. Some of the language of Scripture is elegant and stylistically excellent. Other scriptural writings contain the rough-hewn language of ordinary people. At times this includes a failure to follow the commonly accepted “rules” of grammatical expression (such as the use of a plural verb where grammatical rules would require a singular verb, or the use of a feminine adjective where a masculine one would be expected, or different spelling for a word than the one commonly used, etc.). These stylistically or grammatically irregular statements (which are especially found in the book of Revelation) should not trouble us, for they do not affect the truthfulness of the statements under consideration: a statement can be ungrammatical but still be entirely true. For example, an uneducated backwoodsman in some rural area may be the most trusted man in the county even though his grammar is poor, because he has earned a reputation for never telling a lie. Similarly, there are a few statements in Scripture (in the original languages) that are ungrammatical (according to current standards of proper grammar at that time) but still inerrant because they are completely true. The issue is truthfulness in speech.

B. Some Current Challenges to Inerrancy

In this section we examine the major objections that are commonly made against the concept of inerrancy.

1. The Bible Is Only Authoritative for “Faith and Practice.” One of the most frequent objections is raised by those who say that the purpose of Scripture is to teach us in areas that concern “faith and practice” only; that is, in areas that directly relate to our religious faith or to our ethical conduct. This position would allow for the possibility of false statements in Scripture, for example, in other areas such as in minor historical details or scientific facts—these areas, it is said, do not concern the purpose of the Bible, which is to instruct us in what we should believe and how we are to live. Its advocates often prefer to say that the Bible is “infallible” but they hesitate to use the word inerrant.

The response to this objection can be stated as follows: the Bible repeatedly affirms that all of Scripture is profitable for us (2 Tim. 3:16) and that all of it is “God-breathed.” Thus it is completely pure (Ps. 12:6), perfect (Ps. 119:96), and true (Prov. 30:5). The Bible itself does not make any restriction on the kinds of subjects to which it speaks truthfully.
The New Testament contains further affirmations of the reliability of all parts of Scripture: in Acts 24:14, Paul says that he worships God, “believing everything laid down by the law or written in the prophets.” In Luke 24:25, Jesus says that the disciples are “foolish men” because they are “slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken.” In Romans 15:4, Paul says that “whatever was written” in the Old Testament was “written for our instruction.” These texts give no indication that there is any part of Scripture that is not to be trusted or relied on completely. Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 10:11, Paul can refer even to minor historical details in the Old Testament (sitting down to eat and drink, rising up to dance) and can say both that they “happened” (thus implying historical reliability) and “were written down for our instruction.”

If we begin to examine the way in which the New Testament authors trust the smallest historical details of the Old Testament narrative, we see no intention to separate out matters of “faith and practice,” or to say that this is somehow a recognizable category of affirmations, or to imply that statements not in that category need not be trusted or thought to be inerrant. Rather, it seems that the New Testament authors are willing to cite and affirm as true every detail of the Old Testament.

In the following list are some examples of these historical details cited by New Testament authors. If all of these are matters of “faith and practice,” then every historical detail of the Old Testament is a matter of “faith and practice,” and this objection ceases to be an objection to inerrancy. On the other hand, if so many details can be affirmed, then it seems that all of the historical details in the Old Testament can be affirmed as true, and we should not speak of restricting the necessary truthfulness of Scripture to some category of “faith and practice” that would exclude certain minor details. There are no types of details left that could not be affirmed as true.

The New Testament gives us the following data: David ate the bread of the Presence (Matt. 12:3–4); Jonah was in the whale (Matt. 12:40); the men of Nineveh repented (Matt. 12:41); the queen of the South came to hear Solomon (Matt. 12:42); Elijah was sent to the widow of Zarephath (Luke 4:25–26); Naaman the Syrian was cleansed of leprosy (Luke 4:27); on the day Lot left Sodom fire and brimstone rained from heaven (Luke 17:29; cf. v. 32 with its reference to Lot’s wife who turned to salt); Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness (John 3:14); Jacob gave a field to Joseph (John 4:5); many details of the history of Israel occurred (Acts 13:17–23); Abraham believed and received the promise before he was circumcised (Rom. 4:10); Abraham was about one hundred years old (Rom. 4:19); God told Rebekah before her children were born that the elder child would serve the younger (Rom. 9:10–12); Elijah spoke with God (Rom. 11:2–4); the people of Israel passed through the sea, ate and drank spiritual food and drink, desired evil, sat down to drink, rose up to dance, indulged in immorality, grumbled, and were destroyed (1 Cor. 10:11); Abraham gave a tenth of everything to Melchizedek (Heb. 7:1–2); the Old Testament tabernacle had a specific and detailed design (Heb. 9:1–5); Moses sprinkled the people and the tabernacle vessels with blood and water, using scarlet wool and hyssop (Heb. 9:19–21); the world was created by the Word of God (Heb. 11:3); many details of the lives of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Rahab, and others actually happened (Heb. 11, passim); Esau sold his birthright for a single meal and later sought it back with tears (Heb. 12:16–17); Rahab received the spies and sent them out another way (James 2:25); eight persons were saved in the ark (1 Peter 3:20; 2 Peter 2:5); God turned Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes but saved Lot (2 Peter 2:6–7); Balaam’s donkey spoke (2 Peter 2:16).

This list indicates that the New Testament writers were willing to rely on the truthfulness of any part of the historical narratives of the Old Testament. No detail was too insignificant to be
used for the instruction of New Testament Christians. There is no indication that they thought of a certain category of scriptural statements that were unreliable and untrustworthy (such as “historical and scientific” statements as opposed to doctrinal and moral passages). It seems clear that the Bible itself does not support any restriction on the kinds of subjects to which it speaks with absolute authority and truth; indeed, many passages in Scripture actually exclude the validity of this kind of restriction.

A second response to those who limit the necessary truthfulness of Scripture to matters of “faith and practice” is to note that this position mistakes the major purpose of Scripture for the total purpose of Scripture. To say that the major purpose of Scripture is to teach us in matters of “faith and practice” is to make a useful and correct summary of God’s purpose in giving us the Bible. But as a summary it includes only the most prominent purpose of God in giving us Scripture. It is not, however, legitimate to use this summary to deny that it is part of the purpose of Scripture to tell us about minor historical details or about some aspects of astronomy or geography, and so forth. A summary cannot properly be used to deny one of the things it is summarizing! To use it this way would simply show that the summary is not detailed enough to specify the items in question.

It is better to say that the whole purpose of Scripture is to say everything it does say, on whatever subject. Every one of God’s words in Scripture was deemed by him to be important for us. Thus, God issues severe warnings to anyone who would take away even one word from what he has said to us (Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Rev. 22:18–19): we cannot add to God’s words or take from them, for all are part of his larger purpose in speaking to us. Everything stated in Scripture is there because God intended it to be there: God does not say anything unintentionally! Thus, this first objection to inerrancy makes a wrong use of a summary and thereby incorrectly attempts to impose artificial limits on the kinds of things about which God can speak to us.

2. The Term Inerrancy Is a Poor Term. People who make this second objection say that the term inerrancy is too precise and that in ordinary usage it denotes a kind of absolute scientific precision that we do not want to claim for Scripture. Furthermore, those who make this objection note that the term inerrancy is not used in the Bible itself. Therefore, it is probably an inappropriate term for us to insist upon.

The response to this objection may be stated as follows: first, the scholars who have used the term inerrancy have defined it clearly for over a hundred years, and they have always allowed for the “limitations” that attach to speech in ordinary language. In no case has the term been used to denote a kind of absolute scientific precision by any responsible representative of the inerrancy position. Therefore those who raise this objection to the term are not giving careful enough attention to the way in which it has been used in theological discussions for more than a century.

Second, it must be noted that we often use nonbiblical terms to summarize a biblical teaching. The word Trinity does not occur in Scripture, nor does the word incarnation. Yet both of these terms are very helpful because they allow us to summarize in one word a true biblical concept, and they are therefore helpful in enabling us to discuss a biblical teaching more easily.

It should also be noted that no other single word has been proposed which says as clearly what we want to affirm when we wish to talk about total truthfulness in language. The word inerrancy does this quite well, and there seems no reason not to continue to use it for that purpose.
Finally, in the church today we seem to be unable to carry on the discussion around this topic without the use of this term. People may object to this term if they wish, but, like it or not, this is the term about which the discussion has focused and almost certainly will continue to focus in the next several decades. When the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI) in 1977 began a ten-year campaign to promote and defend the idea of biblical inerrancy, it became inevitable that this word would be the one about which discussion would proceed. The “Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy,” which was drafted and published in 1978 under ICBI sponsorship (see appendix 1), defined what most evangelicals mean by inerrancy, perhaps not perfectly, but quite well, and further objections to such a widely used and well-defined term seem to be unnecessary and unhelpful for the church.

3. We Have No Inerrant Manuscripts; Therefore, Talk About an Inerrant Bible Is Misleading. Those who make this objection point to the fact that inerrancy has always been claimed for the first or original copies of the biblical documents. Yet none of these survive: we have only copies of copies of what Moses or Paul or Peter wrote. What is the use, then, of placing so great importance on a doctrine that applies only to manuscripts that no one has?

In reply to this objection, it may first be stated that for over 99 percent of the words of the Bible, we know what the original manuscript said. Even for many of the verses where there are textual variants (that is, different words in different ancient copies of the same verse), the correct decision is often quite clear, and there are really very few places where the textual variant is both difficult to evaluate and significant in determining the meaning. In the small percentage of cases where there is significant uncertainty about what the original text said, the general sense of the sentence is usually quite clear from the context. (One does not have to be a Hebrew or Greek scholar to know where these variants are, because all modern English translations indicate them in marginal notes with words such as “some ancient manuscripts read …” or “other ancient authorities add …”)

This is not to say that the study of textual variants is unimportant, but it is to say that the study of textual variants has not left us in confusion about what the original manuscripts said. It has rather brought us extremely close to the content of those original manuscripts. For most practical purposes, then, the current published scholarly texts of the Hebrew Old Testament and Greek New Testament are the same as the original manuscripts. Thus, when we say that the original manuscripts were inerrant, we are also implying that over 99 percent of the words in our present manuscripts are also inerrant, for they are exact copies of the originals. Furthermore, we know where the uncertain readings are (for where there are no textual variants we have no reason to expect faulty copying of the original). Thus, our present manuscripts are for most purposes the same as the original manuscripts, and the doctrine of inerrancy therefore directly concerns our present manuscripts as well.

Furthermore, it is extremely important to affirm the inerrancy of the original documents, for the subsequent copies were made by men with no claim or guarantee by God that these copies would be perfect. But the original manuscripts are those to which the claims to be God’s very words apply. Thus, if we have mistakes in the copies (as we do), then these are only the mistakes of men. But if we have mistakes in the original manuscripts then we are forced to say not only that men made mistakes, but that God himself made a mistake and spoke falsely. This we cannot do.
4. The Biblical Writers “Accommodated” Their Messages in Minor Details to the False Ideas Current in Their Day, and Affirmed or Taught Those Ideas in an Incidental Way.

This objection to inerrancy is slightly different from the one that would restrict the inerrancy of Scripture to matters of faith and practice, but it is related to it. Those who hold this position argue that it would have been very difficult for the biblical writers to communicate with the people of their time if they had tried to correct all the false historical and scientific information believed by their contemporaries. Those who hold this position would not argue that the points where the Bible affirms false information are numerous, or even that these places are the main points of any particular section of Scripture. Rather, they would say that when the biblical writers were attempting to make a larger point, they sometimes incidentally affirmed some falsehood believed by the people of their time.

To this objection to inerrancy it can be replied, first, that God is Lord of human language who can use human language to communicate perfectly without having to affirm any false ideas that may have been held by people during the time of the writing of Scripture. This objection to inerrancy essentially denies God’s effective lordship over human language.

Second, we must respond that such “accommodation” by God to our misunderstandings would imply that God had acted contrary to his character as an “unlying God” (Num. 23:19; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18). It is not helpful to divert attention from this difficulty by repeated emphasis on the gracious condescension of God to speak on our level. Yes, God does condescend to speak our language, the language of human beings. But no passage of Scripture teaches that he “condescends” so as to act contrary to his moral character. He is never said to be able to condescend so as to affirm—even incidentally—something that is false. If God were to “accommodate” himself in this way, he would cease to be the “unlying God.” He would cease to be the God the Bible represents him to be. Such activity would not in any way show God’s greatness, for God does not manifest his greatness by acting in a way that contradicts his character. This objection thus at root misunderstands the purity and unity of God as they affect all of his words and deeds.

Furthermore, such a process of accommodation, if it actually had occurred, would create a serious moral problem for us. We are to be imitators of God’s moral character (Lev. 11:44; Luke 6:36; Eph. 5:1; 1 Peter 5:1, et al.). Paul says, since in our new natures we are becoming more like God (Eph. 4:24), we should “put away falsehood” and “speak the truth” with one another (v. 25). We are to imitate God’s truthfulness in our speech. However, if the accommodation theory is correct, then God intentionally made incidental affirmations of falsehood in order to enhance communication. Therefore, would it not also be right for us intentionally to make incidental affirmations of falsehood whenever it would enhance communication? Yet this would be tantamount to saying that a minor falsehood told for a good purpose (a “white lie”) is not wrong. Such a position, contradicted by the Scripture passages cited above concerning God’s total truthfulness in speech, cannot be held to be valid.

5. Inerrancy Overemphasizes the Divine Aspect of Scripture and Neglects the Human Aspect. This more general objection is made by those who claim that people who advocate inerrancy so emphasize the divine aspect of Scripture that they downplay its human aspect.

It is agreed that Scripture has both a human and a divine aspect, and that we must give adequate attention to both. However, those who make this objection almost invariably go on to insist that the truly “human” aspects of Scripture must include the presence of some errors in Scripture. We can respond that though the Bible is fully human in that it was written by human
beings using their own language, the activity of God in overseeing the writing of Scripture and causing it to be also his words means that it is different from much other human writing in precisely this aspect: it does not include error. That is exactly the point made even by sinful, greedy, disobedient Balaam in Numbers 23:19: God’s speech through sinful human beings is different from the ordinary speech of men because “God is not man that he should lie.” Moreover, it is simply not true that all human speech and writing contains error, for we make dozens of statements each day that are completely true. For example: “My name is Wayne Grudem.” “I have three children.” “I ate breakfast this morning.”

6. There Are Some Clear Errors in the Bible. This final objection, that there are clear errors in the Bible, is either stated or implied by most of those who deny inerrancy, and for many of them the conviction that there are some actual errors in Scripture is a major factor in persuading them to challenge the doctrine of inerrancy.

In every case, the first answer that should be made to this objection is to ask where such errors are. In which specific verse or verses do these errors occur? It is surprising how frequently one finds that this objection is made by people who have little or no idea where the specific errors are, but who believe there are errors because others have told them so.

In other cases, however, people will mention one or more specific passages where, they claim, there is a false statement in Scripture. In these cases, it is important that we look at the biblical text itself, and look at it very closely. If we believe that the Bible is indeed inerrant, we should be eager and certainly not afraid to inspect these texts in minute detail. In fact, our expectation will be that close inspection will show there to be no error at all. Once again it is surprising how often it turns out that a careful reading just of the English text of the passage in question will bring to light one or more possible solutions to the difficulty.

In a few passages, no solution to the difficulty may be immediately apparent from reading the English text. At that point it is helpful to consult some commentaries on the text. Both Augustine (A.D. 354–430) and John Calvin (1509–64), along with many more recent commentators, have taken time to deal with most of the alleged “problem texts” and to suggest plausible solutions to them. Furthermore some writers have made collections of all the most difficult texts and have provided suggested answers for them.

There are a few texts where a knowledge of Hebrew or Greek may be necessary to find a solution, and those who do not have firsthand access to these languages may have to find answers either from a more technical commentary or by asking someone who does have this training. Of course, our understanding of Scripture is never perfect, and this means that there may be cases where we will be unable to find a solution to a difficult passage at the present time. This may be because the linguistic, historical, or contextual evidence we need to understand the passage correctly is presently unknown to us. This should not trouble us in a small number of passages so long as the overall pattern of our investigation of these passages has shown that there is, in fact, no error where one has been alleged.

But while we must allow the possibility of being unable to solve a particular problem, it should also be stated that there are many evangelical Bible scholars today who will say that they do not presently know of any problem texts for which there is no satisfactory solution. It is possible, of course, that some such texts could be called to their attention in the future, but during the past fifteen years or so of controversy over biblical inerrancy, no such “unsolved” text has been brought to their attention.
Finally, a historical perspective on this question is helpful. There are no really “new” problems in Scripture. The Bible in its entirety is over 1,900 years old, and the alleged “problem texts” have been there all along. Yet throughout the history of the church there has been a firm belief in the inerrancy of Scripture in the sense in which it is defined in this chapter. Moreover, for these hundreds of years highly competent biblical scholars have read and studied those problem texts and still have found no difficulty in holding to inerrancy. This should give us confidence that the solutions to these problems are available and that belief in inerrancy is entirely consistent with a lifetime of detailed attention to the text of Scripture.

C. Problems With Denying Inerrancy

The problems that come with a denial of biblical inerrancy are not insignificant, and when we understand the magnitude of these problems it gives us further encouragement not only to affirm inerrancy but also to affirm its importance for the church. Some of the more serious problems are listed here.

1. If We Deny Inerrancy, a Serious Moral Problem Confronts Us: May We Imitate God and Intentionally Lie in Small Matters Also?
   This is similar to the point made in response to objection #4, above, but here it applies not only to those who espouse objection #4 but also more broadly to all who deny inerrancy. Ephesians 5:1 tells us to be imitators of God. But a denial of inerrancy that still claims that the words of Scripture are God-breathed words necessarily implies that God intentionally spoke falsely to us in some of the less central affirmations of Scripture. But if this is right for God to do, how can it be wrong for us? Such a line of reasoning would, if we believed it, exert strong pressure on us to begin to speak untruthfully in situations where that might seem to help us communicate better, and so forth. This position would be a slippery slope with ever-increasing negative results in our own lives.

2. If Inerrancy Is Denied, We Begin to Wonder If We Can Really Trust God in Anything He Says.
   Once we become convinced that God has spoken falsely to us in some minor matters in Scripture, then we realize that God is capable of speaking falsely to us. This will have a detrimental effect on our ability to take God at his word and trust him completely or obey him fully in the rest of Scripture. We will begin to disobey initially those sections of Scripture that we least wish to obey, and to distrust initially those sections that we are least inclined to trust. But such a procedure will eventually increase, to the great detriment of our spiritual lives. Of course, such a decline in trust and obedience to Scripture may not necessarily follow in the life of every individual who denies inerrancy, but this will certainly be the general pattern, and it will be the pattern exhibited over the course of a generation that is taught to deny inerrancy.

3. If We Deny Inerrancy, We Essentially Make Our Own Human Minds a Higher Standard of Truth Than God’s Word Itself.
   We use our minds to pass judgment on some sections of God’s Word and pronounce them to be in error. But this is in effect to say that we know truth more certainly and more accurately than God’s Word does (or than God does), at least in these areas. Such a procedure, making our own minds to be a higher standard of truth than God’s Word, is the root of all intellectual sin.

4. If We Deny Inerrancy, Then We Must Also Say That the Bible Is Wrong Not Only in Minor Details but in Some of Its Doctrines as Well.
   A denial of inerrancy means that we say
that the Bible’s teaching about the nature of Scripture and about the truthfulness and reliability of God’s words is also false. These are not minor details but are major doctrinal concerns in Scripture.

**QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL APPLICATION**

1. Why do you think the debate about inerrancy has become such a large issue in this century? Why do people on both sides of the question think it to be important?

2. If you thought there were some small errors affirmed by Scripture, how do you think that would affect the way you read Scripture? Would it affect your concern for truthfulness in everyday conversation?

3. Do you know of any Scripture texts that seem to contain errors? What are they? Have you tried to resolve the difficulties in those texts? If you have not found a solution to some text, what further steps might you try?

4. As Christians go through life learning to know their Bibles better and growing in Christian maturity, do they tend to trust the Bible more or less? In heaven, do you think you will believe the Bible is inerrant? If so, will you believe it more firmly or less firmly than you do now?

5. If you are convinced that the Bible teaches the doctrine of inerrancy, how do you feel about it? Are you glad that such a teaching is there, or do you feel it to be something of a burden which you would rather not have to defend?

6. Does belief in inerrancy guarantee sound doctrine and a sound Christian life? How can Jehovah’s Witnesses say that the Bible is inerrant while they themselves have so many false teachings?

7. If you agree with inerrancy, do you think belief in inerrancy should be a requirement for church membership? For teaching a Sunday school class? For holding a church office such as elder or deacon? For being ordained as a pastor? For teaching at a theological seminary? Why or why not?

8. When there is a doctrinal controversy in the church, what are the personal dangers facing those whose position is more consistent with Scripture? In particular, how could pride in correct doctrine become a problem? What is the solution? Do you think inerrancy is an important issue for the future of the church? Why or why not? How do you think it will be resolved?

**SPECIAL TERMS**

- autograph
- faith and practice
- ICBI
- inerrant
- infallible
- textual variants

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**
Sections in Evangelical Systematic Theologies

(In this section, when referring to some significant older works that do not include a specific discussion of inerrancy, I have listed instead the pages where they discuss biblical authority generally. In those cases the pages here duplicate the listings for chapter 4 on the authority of Scripture.)

1. Anglican (Episcopalian)
   1882–92 Litton, 18–40
   1930 Thomas, 500–501

2. Arminian (Wesleyan or Methodist)
   1875–76 Pope, 1:36–192
   1892–94 Miley, 2:41–49
   1940 Wiley, 1:166–84
   1960 Purkiser, 66–80

3. Baptist
   1767 Gill, 11–18
   1907 Strong, 222–42
   1917 Mullins, 142–44, 150–53
   1983–85 Erickson, 221–40
   1987–94 Lewis/Demarest, 1:93–171

4. Dispensational
   1947 Chafer, 1:63–88
   1949 Thiessen, 105–15
   1986 Ryrie, 77–104

5. Lutheran
   1934 Mueller, 101–37

6. Reformed (or Presbyterian)
   1559 Calvin, 1:74–92
   1871–73 Hodge, 1:163–82
   1878 Dabney, DET 1:282–313, 466–81
   1887–1921 Warfield, IAB passim
   1889 Shedd, 1:93–110
   1938 Berkhof, Intro 144–65, 182–86

7. Renewal (or charismatic/Pentecostal)
   1988–92 Williams, 1:36–43

Sections in Representative Roman Catholic Systematic Theologies

1. Roman Catholic: Traditional
   1955 Ott (no explicit treatment)

2. Roman Catholic: Post-Vatican II
Other Works

(See also the bibliography for chapter 4, “Authority,” much of which is also relevant here, but only part of which has been listed again.)


______. *Does the Bible Contradict Itself?* St. Louis: Concordia, 1955.


Works From a Noninerrancy Perspective (See also the bibliography for chapter 4.)


Psalm 12:6: The promises [literally, “words”] of the Lord are promises [“words”] that are pure, silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times.

HYMN

“THE LAW OF THE LORD IS PERFECT”

This modern setting of Psalm 19:7–11 expresses the perfection of God’s Word in several different ways and shows various aspects of its application to our lives.

The law of the Lord is perfect,
converting the soul.
The testimony of the Lord is sure,
making wise the simple.

Refrain:
More to be desired are they than gold,
yea than much fine gold.
Sweeter also than honey
and the honeycomb.

The statutes of the Lord are right,
rejoicing the heart.
The commandments of the Lord are pure,
enlight’ning the eyes.

The fear of the Lord is clean,
enduring forever.
The judgments of the Lord are true,
and righteous altogether.

Author: Anonymous (from Ps. 19:7–11)

Chapter 6

The Four Characteristics of Scripture: (2) Clarity

Can only Bible scholars understand the Bible rightly?

EXPLANATION AND SCRIPTURAL BASIS

Anyone who has begun to read the Bible seriously will realize that some parts can be understood very easily while other parts seem puzzling. In fact, very early in the history of the church Peter reminded his readers that some parts of Paul’s epistles were difficult to understand:
“So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures” (2 Peter 3:15–16). We must admit therefore that not all parts of Scripture are able to be understood easily.

But it would be a mistake to think that most of Scripture or Scripture in general is difficult to understand. In fact, the Old Testament and New Testament frequently affirm that Scripture is written in such a way that its teachings are able to be understood by ordinary believers. Even in Peter’s statement just quoted, the context is an appeal to the teachings of Paul’s letter, which Peter’s readers had read and understood (2 Peter 3:15). In fact, Peter assigns some moral blame to those who twist these passages “to their own destruction.” And he does not say that there are things impossible to understand, but only difficult to understand.

A. The Bible Frequently Affirms Its Own Clarity

The Bible’s clarity and the responsibility of believers generally to read it and understand it are often emphasized. In a very familiar passage, Moses tells the people of Israel:

> And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. (Deut. 6:6–7)

All the people of Israel were expected to be able to understand the words of Scripture well enough to be able to “teach them diligently” to their children. This teaching would not have consisted merely of rote memorization devoid of understanding, for the people of Israel were to discuss the words of Scripture during their activities of sitting in the house or walking or going to bed or getting up in the morning. God expected that all of his people would know and be able to talk about his Word, with proper application to ordinary situations in life. Similarly, Psalm 1 tells us that the “blessed man,” whom all the righteous in Israel were to emulate, was one who meditated on God’s law “day and night” (Ps. 1:2). This daily meditation assumes an ability to understand Scripture rightly on the part of those who meditate.

The character of Scripture is said to be such that even the “simple” can understand it rightly and be made wise by it. “The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple” (Ps. 19:7). Again we read, “The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple” (Ps. 119:130). Here the “simple” person (Heb. פֶּתִי, H7343) is not merely one who lacks intellectual ability, but one who lacks sound judgment, who is prone to making mistakes, and who is easily led astray. God’s Word is so understandable, so clear, that even this kind of person is made wise by it. This should be a great encouragement to all believers: no believer should think himself or herself too foolish to read Scripture and understand it sufficiently to be made wise by it.

There is a similar emphasis in the New Testament. Jesus himself, in his teachings, his conversations, and his disputes, never responds to any questions with a hint of blaming the Old Testament Scriptures for being unclear. Even while speaking to first-century people who were removed from David by 1,000 years, from Moses by about 1,500 years, and from Abraham by about 2,000 years, Jesus still assumes that such people are able to read and rightly to understand the Old Testament Scriptures.

In a day when it is common for people to tell us how hard it is to interpret Scripture rightly, we would do well to remember that not once in the Gospels do we ever hear Jesus saying
anything like this: “I see how your problem arose—the Scriptures are not very clear on that subject.” Instead, whether he is speaking to scholars or untrained common people, his responses always assume that the blame for misunderstanding any teaching of Scripture is not to be placed on the Scriptures themselves, but on those who misunderstand or fail to accept what is written. Again and again he answers questions with statements like, “Have you not read …” (Matt. 12:3, 5; 19:4; 22:31), “Have you never read in the scriptures …” (Matt. 21:42), or even, “You are wrong because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God” (Matt. 22:29; cf. Matt. 9:13; 12:7; 15:3; 21:13; John 3:10; et al.).

Similarly, most of the New Testament epistles are written not to church leaders but to entire congregations. Paul writes, “To the church of God which is at Corinth” (1 Cor. 1:2), “To the churches of Galatia” (Gal. 1:2), “To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons” (Phil. 1:1), and so forth. Paul assumes that his hearers will understand what he writes, and he encourages the sharing of his letters with other churches: “And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea” (Col. 4:16; cf. John 20:30–31; 2 Cor. 1:13; Eph. 3:4; 1 Tim. 4:13; James 1:1, 22–25; 1 Peter 1:1; 2:2; 2 Peter 1:19; 1 John 5:13).

2 Peter 1:20 may be urged against the view of the clarity of Scripture explained in this chapter. The verse says, “no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation,” and someone may claim that this means that ordinary believers are unable to interpret Scripture rightly for themselves. It is unlikely, however, that this implication should be drawn from 2 Peter 1:20, for the verse is probably discussing the origin and not the interpretation of Scripture. Thus the NIV translates it, “no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation.” Furthermore, even if the verse were understood as speaking of interpreting Scripture, it would be saying that the interpretation of Scripture must be done within the fellowship of believers and not merely as a personal activity. It still would not be implying that authoritative interpreters are needed to ascertain the true meaning of Scripture, but simply that reading and understanding Scripture should not be carried out entirely in isolation from other Christians.

Lest we think that understanding the Bible was somehow easier for first-century Christians than for us, it is important to realize that in many instances the New Testament epistles were written to churches that had large proportions of Gentile Christians. They were relatively new Christians who had no previous background in any kind of Christian society, and who had little or no prior understanding of the history and culture of Israel. Nevertheless, the New Testament authors show no hesitancy in expecting even these Gentile Christians to be able to read a translation of the Old Testament in their own language and to understand it rightly (cf. Rom. 4:1–25; 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:1–11; 2 Tim. 3:16–17; et al.).

B. The Moral and Spiritual Qualities Needed for Right Understanding

The New Testament writers frequently state that the ability to understand Scripture rightly is more a moral and spiritual than intellectual ability: “The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts (literally “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; cf. 1:18–3:4; 2 Cor. 3:14–16; 4:3–4, 6; Heb. 5:14; James 1:5–6; 2 Peter 3:5; cf. Mark 4:11–12; John 7:17; 8:43). Thus, although the New Testament authors affirm that the Bible in itself is written clearly, they also affirm that it will not be understood rightly by those who are unwilling to receive its teachings. Scripture is able to be understood by all unbelievers who will read it sincerely seeking salvation, and by all believers who will read it while seeking God’s help in understanding it. This is
because in both cases the Holy Spirit is at work overcoming the effects of sin, which otherwise will make the truth appear to be foolish (1 Cor. 2:14; 1:18–25; James 1:5–6, 22–25).

C. Definition of the Clarity of Scripture

In order to summarize this biblical material, we can affirm that the Bible is written in such a way that all things necessary for our salvation and for our Christian life and growth are very clearly set forth in Scripture. Although theologians have sometimes defined the clarity of Scripture more narrowly (by saying, for example, only that Scripture is clear in teaching the way of salvation), the many texts cited above apply to many different aspects of biblical teaching and do not seem to support any such limitation on the areas to which Scripture can be said to speak clearly. It seems more faithful to those biblical texts to define the clarity of Scripture as follows: The clarity of Scripture means that the Bible is written in such a way that its teachings are able to be understood by all who will read it seeking God’s help and being willing to follow it. Once we have stated this, however, we must also recognize that many people, even God’s people, do in fact misunderstand Scripture.

D. Why Do People Misunderstand Scripture?

During Jesus’ lifetime, his own disciples at times failed to understand the Old Testament and Jesus’ own teachings (see Matt. 15:16; Mark 4:10–13; 6:52; 8:14–21; 9:32; Luke 18:34; John 8:27; 10:6). Although sometimes this was due to the fact that they simply needed to wait for further events in the history of redemption, and especially in the life of Christ himself (see John 12:16; 13:7; cf. John 2:22), there were also times when this was due to their own lack of faith or hardness of heart (Luke 24:25). Furthermore, there were times in the early church when Christians did not understand or agree on the teachings of the Old Testament or about the letters written by the apostles: note the process of growth in understanding concerning the implications of Gentile inclusion in the church (culminating in “much debate” [Acts 15:7] in the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15), or Peter’s misunderstanding of this issue in Galatians 2:11–15, or the frequent doctrinal and ethical issues that had to be corrected by the New Testament epistles. In fact, throughout the history of the church, doctrinal disagreements have been many, and progress in resolving doctrinal differences has often been slow.

In order to help people to avoid making mistakes in interpreting Scripture, many Bible teachers have developed “principles of interpretation,” or guidelines to encourage growth in the skill of proper interpretation. The word hermeneutics (from the Greek word ἑρμηνεύω “to interpret”) is the more technical term for this field of study: hermeneutics is the study of correct methods of interpretation (especially interpretation of Scripture).

Another technical term often used in discussions of biblical interpretation is “exegesis,” a term that refers more to the actual practice of interpreting Scripture, not to theories and principles about how it should be done: exegesis is the process of interpreting a text of Scripture. Consequently, when one studies principles of interpretation, that is “hermeneutics,” but when one applies those principles and begins actually explaining a biblical text, he or she is doing “exegesis.”

The existence of many disagreements about the meaning of Scripture throughout history reminds us that the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture does not imply or suggest that all believers will agree on all the teachings of Scripture. Nevertheless, it does tell us something very important—that the problem always lies not with Scripture but with ourselves. The situation is in
fact similar to that of the authority of Scripture. Whereas we affirm that the words of Scripture have all the authority of God himself, we also realize that many people do not acknowledge that authority or submit themselves to it. Similarly, we affirm that all the teachings of Scripture are clear and able to be understood, but we also recognize that people often (through their own shortcomings) misunderstand what is clearly written in Scripture.

E. Practical Encouragement From This Doctrine

The doctrine of the clarity of Scripture therefore has a very important, and ultimately very encouraging, practical implication. It tells us that where there are areas of doctrinal or ethical disagreement (for example, over baptism or predestination or church government), there are only two possible causes for these disagreements: (1) On the one hand, it may be that we are seeking to make affirmations where Scripture itself is silent. In such cases we should be more ready to admit that God has not given us the answer to our quest, and to allow for differences of viewpoint within the church. (This will often be the case with very practical questions, such as methods of evangelism or styles of Bible teaching or appropriate church size.) (2) On the other hand, it is possible that we have made mistakes in our interpretation of Scripture. This could have happened because the data we used to decide a question of interpretation were inaccurate or incomplete. Or it could be because there is some personal inadequacy on our part, whether it be, for example, personal pride, or greed, or lack of faith, or selfishness, or even failure to devote enough time to prayerfully reading and studying Scripture.

But in no case are we free to say that the teaching of the Bible on any subject is confusing or incapable of being understood correctly. In no case should we think that persistent disagreements on some subject through the history of the church mean that we will be unable to come to a correct conclusion on that subject ourselves. Rather, if a genuine concern about some such subject arises in our lives, we should sincerely ask God’s help and then go to Scripture, searching it with all our ability, believing that God will enable us to understand rightly.

This truth should give great encouragement to all Christians to read their Bibles daily and with great eagerness. We should never assume, for example, that only those who know Greek and Hebrew, or only pastors or Bible scholars, are able to understand the Bible rightly—remember that the Old Testament was written in Hebrew and that many of the Christians to whom the New Testament letters were written had no knowledge of Hebrew at all: they had to read the Old Testament in a Greek translation. Yet the New Testament authors assume that these people can read it and understand it rightly even without scholarly ability in the original language. Christians must never give up to the scholarly “experts” the task of interpreting Scripture: they must keep doing it every day for themselves.

Furthermore, even though we admit that there have been many doctrinal disagreements in the history of the church, we must not forget that there has been an amazing amount of doctrinal agreement on the most central truths of Scripture throughout the history of the church. Indeed, those who have had opportunities for fellowship with Christians in other parts of the world have discovered the remarkable fact that wherever we find a group of vital Christians, almost immediately a vast amount of agreement on all the central doctrines of the Christian faith becomes apparent. Why is this true, no matter what the society, or culture, or denominational affiliation? It is because they all have been reading and believing the same Bible, and its primary teachings have been clear.
F. The Role of Scholars

Is there any role then for Bible scholars or for those with specialized knowledge of Hebrew (for the Old Testament) and Greek (for the New Testament)? Certainly there is a role for them in at least four areas:

1. They can teach Scripture clearly, communicating its content to others and thus fulfilling the office of “teacher” mentioned in the New Testament (1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11).

2. They can explore new areas of understanding the teachings of Scripture. This exploration will seldom (if ever) involve denial of the main teachings the church has held throughout its centuries, but it will often involve the application of Scripture to new areas of life, the answering of difficult questions that have been raised by both believers and unbelievers at each new period in history, and the continual activity of refining and making more precise the church’s understanding of detailed points of interpretation of individual verses or matters of doctrine or ethics. Though the Bible may not seem large in comparison with the vast amount of literature in the world, it is a rich treasure-house of wisdom from God that surpasses in value all the other books that have ever been written. The process of relating its various teachings to one another, synthesizing them, and applying them to each new generation, is a greatly rewarding task that will never be completed in this age. Every scholar who deeply loves God’s Word will soon realize that there is much more in Scripture than can be learned in any one lifetime!

3. They can defend the teachings of the Bible against attacks by other scholars or those with specialized technical training. The role of teaching God’s Word also at times involves correcting false teachings. One must be able not only “to give instruction in sound doctrine” but also “to confute those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9; cf. 2 Tim. 2:25, “correcting his opponents with gentleness”; and Titus 2:7–8). Sometimes those who attack biblical teachings have specialized training and technical knowledge in historical, linguistic, or philosophical study, and they use that training to mount rather sophisticated attacks against the teaching of Scripture. In such cases, believers with similar specialized skills can use their training to understand and respond to such attacks. Such training is also very useful in responding to the false teachings of cults and sects. This is not to say that believers without specialized training are incapable of responding to false teaching (for most false teaching can be clearly refuted by a believer who prays and has a good knowledge of the English Bible), but rather that technical points in arguments can only be answered by those with skills in the technical areas appealed to.

4. They can supplement the study of Scripture for the benefit of the church. Bible scholars often have training that will enable them to relate the teachings of Scripture to the rich history of the church, and to make the interpretation of Scripture more precise and its meaning more vivid with a greater knowledge of the languages and cultures in which the Bible was written.

These four functions benefit the church as a whole, and all believers should be thankful for those who perform them. However, these functions do not include the right to decide for the church as a whole what is true and false doctrine or what is proper conduct in a difficult situation. If such a right were the preserve of formally trained Bible scholars, then they would become a governing elite in the church, and the ordinary functioning of the government of the church as described in the New Testament would cease. The process of decision-making for the church must be left to the officers of the church, whether they are scholars or not (and, in a congregational form of church government, not only to the officers but also to the people of the church as a whole).
QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. If the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture is true, why does there seem to be so much disagreement among Christians about the teaching of the Bible? Observing the diversity of interpretations of Scripture, some conclude, “People can make the Bible say anything they want.” How do you think Jesus would respond to this statement?

2. What would happen to the church if most believers gave up reading the Bible for themselves and only listened to Bible teachers or read books about the Bible? If you thought that only expert scholars could understand the Bible rightly, what would happen to your personal reading of Scripture? Has this already happened to some extent in your life or in the lives of those you know?

3. Do you think that there are right and wrong interpretations of most or all passages of Scripture? If you thought the Bible was generally unclear, how would your answer change? Will a conviction about the clarity of Scripture affect the care you use when studying a text of Scripture? Will it affect the way you approach Scripture when trying to gain a biblical answer to some difficult doctrinal or moral problem?

4. If even seminary professors disagree about some Bible teaching, can other Christians ever hope to come to a correct decision on that teaching? (Give reasons for your answer.) Do you think ordinary people among the Jews at the time of Jesus had a hard time deciding whether to believe Jesus or the scholarly experts who disagreed with him? Did Jesus expect them to be able to decide?

5. How can a pastor preach biblically based sermons each Sunday without giving the impression that only people with seminary training (like himself) are able to interpret Scripture rightly? Do you think it should ever be necessary, in a doctrinal or ethical controversy, for a Bible scholar to speak in a church and base his main arguments on special meanings of Greek or Hebrew words that the church members themselves are unable to evaluate or take issue with personally? Is there an appropriate way for a scholar to use such technical knowledge in popular writing or speaking?

6. Church leaders at the time of Martin Luther said they wanted to keep the Bible in Latin to prevent the common people from reading it and then misinterpreting it. Evaluate this argument. Why do you think Martin Luther was so anxious to translate the Bible into German? Why do you think church leaders in previous centuries have persecuted and even killed men—like William Tyndale in England—who were translating the Bible into the language of the people? Why is the task of Bible translation into other languages so important a part of the work of missions?

7. Does the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture mean that the New Testament can be fully understood by people who do not have access to an Old Testament?

SPECIAL TERMS

clearity of Scripture
exegesis
hermeneutics
perspicuity
BIBLIOGRAPHY

(For an explanation of this bibliography see the note on the bibliography to chapter 1, p. 38. Complete bibliographical data may be found on pp. 1223–29.)

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(no explicit treatment)

Other Works

In this section I have listed several works on developing greater skill in biblical interpretation, including three helpful works by nonevangelical authors (one by Barr and two by Hirsch).


**SCRIPTURE MEMORY PASSAGE**

**Deuteronomy 6:6–7:** And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.

**HYMN**

**“JEHOVAH’S PERFECT LAW”**

This section of Psalm 19 set to music reminds us of many excellent qualities of Scripture, among them the fact that it is written clearly: “The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple” (v. 7).
(Use the tune of “We Come, O Christ, to You.”)

Jehovah’s perfect law restores the soul again;
His testimony sure gives wisdom unto men;
The precepts of the LORD are right,
And fill the heart with great delight.

The LORD’s commands are pure; they light and joy restore;
Jehovah’s fear is clean, enduring evermore;
His statutes, let the world confess,
Are wholly truth and righteousness.

They are to be desired above the finest gold;
Than honey from the comb more sweetness far they hold;
With warnings they your servant guard,
In keeping them is great reward.

His errors who can know? Cleanse me from hidden stain;
Keep me from willful sins, nor let them o’er me reign;
And then I upright shall appear
And be from great transgressions clear.

Whene’er you search my life, may all my thoughts within
And all the words I speak your full approval win.
O Lord, you are a rock to me,
And my Redeemer you shall be.

From: *The Psalter* 1912 (taken from Ps. 19:7–14)

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**Chapter 7**

**The Four Characteristics of Scripture:**

**(3) Necessity**

*For what purposes is the Bible necessary? How much can people know about God without the Bible?*

Do we need to have a Bible or to have someone tell us what the Bible says in order to know that God exists? Or that we are sinners needing to be saved? Or to know how to find salvation? Or to know God’s will for our lives? These are the kinds of questions which an investigation of the necessity of Scripture is intended to answer.

**EXPLANATION AND SCRIPTURAL BASIS**
The necessity of Scripture may be defined as follows: *The necessity of Scripture means that the Bible is necessary for knowing the gospel, for maintaining spiritual life, and for knowing God’s will, but is not necessary for knowing that God exists or for knowing something about God’s character and moral laws.*

That definition may now be explained in its various parts.

**A. The Bible Is Necessary for Knowledge of the Gospel**

In Romans 10:13–17 Paul says:

> For, “everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.” But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And *how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?* And how are they to hear without a preacher? … *So faith comes from what is heard* and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ.

This statement indicates the following line of reasoning: (1) It first assumes that one must call upon the name of the Lord to be saved. (In Pauline usage generally as well as in this specific context [see v. 9], “the Lord” refers to the Lord Jesus Christ.) (2) People can only call upon the name of Christ if they believe in him (that is, that he is a Savior worthy of calling upon and one who will answer those who call). (3) People cannot believe in Christ unless they have heard of him. (4) They cannot hear of Christ unless there is someone to tell them about Christ (a “preacher”). (5) The conclusion is that saving faith comes by hearing (that is, by hearing the gospel message), and this hearing of the gospel message comes about through the preaching of Christ. The implication seems to be that without hearing the preaching of the gospel of Christ, no one can be saved.

This passage is one of several that show that eternal salvation comes only through belief in Jesus Christ and no other way. Speaking of Christ, John 3:18 says, “He who believes in him is not condemned; *he who does not believe is condemned already* because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” Similarly, in John 14:6 Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; *no one comes to the Father, but by me.*”

Peter, on trial before the Sanhedrin, says, “*there is salvation in no one else* for there is *no other name* under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Of course, the exclusiveness of salvation through Christ is because Jesus is the only one who ever died for our sins or whoever could have done so. Paul says, “For there is one God, and *there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all …*” (1 Tim. 2:5–6). There is no other way to be reconciled to God than through Christ, for there is no other way of dealing with the guilt of our sin before a holy God.

But if people can be saved only through faith in Christ, someone might ask how believers under the old covenant could have been saved. The answer must be that those who were saved under the old covenant were also saved through trusting in Christ, even though their faith was a forward-looking faith based on God’s word of promise that a Messiah or a Redeemer would come. Speaking of Old Testament believers such as Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Sarah, the author of Hebrews says, “*These all died in faith* not having received what was promised, but *having seen it and greeted it from afar …*” (Heb. 11:13). The same chapter goes on to say that Moses “*considered abuse suffered for the Christ (or the Messiah) greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he looked to the reward*” (Heb. 11:26). And Jesus can say of Abraham, “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad” (John 8:56). This again apparently refers to Abraham’s joy in looking forward to the day of the promised
Messiah. Thus, even Old Testament believers had saving faith in Christ, to whom they looked forward, not with exact knowledge of the historical details of Christ’s life, but with great faith in the absolute reliability of God’s word of promise.

The Bible is necessary for salvation, then, in this sense: one must either read the gospel message in the Bible for oneself, or hear it from another person. Even those believers who came to salvation in the old covenant did so by trusting in the words of God that promised a Savior to come.

In fact, these repeated instances of people trusting in God’s words of promise, together with the verses above that affirm the necessity of hearing about and believing in Christ, seem to indicate that sinful people need more on which to rest their faith than just an intuitive guess that God might provide a means of salvation. It seems that the only foundation firm enough to rest one’s faith on is the word of God itself (whether spoken or written). This in the earliest times came in very brief form, but from the very beginning we have evidence of words of God promising a salvation yet to come, words that were trusted by those people whom God called to himself.

For example, even in the lifetime of Adam and Eve there are some words of God that point toward a future salvation: in Genesis 3:15 the curse on the serpent includes a promise that the seed of the woman (one of her descendants) would bruise the head of the serpent but would himself be hurt in the process—a promise ultimately fulfilled in Christ. The fact that the first two children of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, offered sacrifices to the LORD (Gen. 4:3–4) indicates their consciousness of a need to make some kind of payment for the guilt of their sin, and of God’s promise of acceptance of sacrifices offered in the right way. Genesis 4:7, “If you do well, will you not be accepted?” indicates again in the very briefest form a word from God that offered the provision of some kind of salvation through trusting in the promise of God offered in that word. As the history of the Old Testament progressed, God’s words of promise became more and more specific, and the forward-looking faith of God’s people accordingly became more and more definite. Yet it seems always to have been a faith resting specifically on the words of God himself.

Thus, although it will be argued below that people can know that God exists and can know something of his laws apart from Scripture, it seems that there is no possibility of coming to saving faith apart from specific knowledge of God’s words of promise.

B. The Bible Is Necessary for Maintaining Spiritual Life

Jesus says in Matthew 4:4 (quoting Deut. 8:3), “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God” (NASB). Here Jesus indicates that our spiritual life is maintained by daily nourishment with the Word of God, just as our physical lives are maintained by daily nourishment with physical food. To neglect regular reading of God’s Word is as detrimental to the health of our souls as the neglect of physical food is detrimental to the health of our bodies.

Similarly, Moses tells the people of Israel of the importance of God’s words for their lives: “For it is no trifle for you, but it is your life and thereby you shall live long in the land which you are going over the Jordan to possess” (Deut. 32:47). And Peter encourages the Christians to whom he writes, “Like newborn babes, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation” (1 Peter 2:2). The “pure spiritual milk” in this context must refer to the Word of God about which Peter has been speaking (see 1 Peter 1:23–25). The Bible, then, is necessary for maintaining spiritual life and for growth in the Christian life.
C. The Bible Is Necessary for Certain Knowledge of God’s Will

It will be argued below that all people ever born have some knowledge of God’s will through their consciences. But this knowledge is often indistinct and cannot give certainty. In fact, if there were no written Word of God, we could not gain certainty about God’s will through other means such as conscience, advice from others, an internal witness of the Holy Spirit, changed circumstances, and the use of sanctified reasoning and common sense. These all might give an approximation of God’s will in more or less reliable ways, but from these means alone no certainty about God’s will could ever be attained, at least in a fallen world where sin distorts our perception of right and wrong, brings faulty reasoning into our thinking processes, and causes us to suppress from time to time the testimony of our consciences (cf. Jer. 17:9; Rom. 2:14–15; 1 Cor. 8:10; Heb. 5:14; 10:22; also 1 Tim. 4:2; Titus 1:15).

In the Bible, however, we have clear and definite statements about God’s will. God has not revealed all things to us, but he has revealed enough for us to know his will: “The secret things belong to the LORD our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children for ever that we may do all the words of this law” (Deut. 29:29). As it was in the time of Moses, so it is now with us: God has revealed his words to us that we might obey his laws and thereby do his will. To be “blameless” in God’s sight is to “walk in the law of the LORD” (Ps. 119:1). The “blessed” man is one who does not follow the will of wicked people (Ps. 1:1), but delights “in the law of the LORD,” and meditates on God’s law “day and night” (Ps. 1:2). To love God (and thereby to act in a way that is pleasing to him) is to “keep his commandments” (1 John 5:3). If we are to have a certain knowledge of God’s will, then, we must attain it through the study of Scripture.

In fact, in one sense it can be argued that the Bible is necessary for certain knowledge about anything. A philosopher might argue as follows: The fact that we do not know everything requires us to be uncertain about everything we do claim to know. This is because some fact unknown to us may yet turn out to prove that what we thought to be true was actually false. For example, we think we know our date of birth, our name, our age, and so forth. But we must admit that it is possible that some day we could find that our parents had given us false information and our “certain” knowledge would then turn out to be incorrect. Regarding events that we personally have experienced, we all realize how it is possible for us to “remember” words or events incorrectly and find ourselves later corrected by more accurate information. We can usually be more certain about the events of our present experience, so long as it remains present (but even that, someone might argue, could be a dream, and we will only discover this fact when we wake up!). At any rate, it is difficult to answer the philosopher’s question: If we do not know all the facts in the universe, past, present, and future, how can we ever attain certainty that we have correct information about any one fact?

Ultimately, there are only two possible solutions to this problem: (1) We must learn all the facts of the universe in order to be sure that no subsequently discovered fact will prove our present ideas to be false; or (2) someone who does know all the facts in the universe, and who never lies, could tell us some true facts that we can then be sure will never be contradicted.

This second solution is in fact what we have when we have God’s words in Scripture. God knows all facts that ever have been or ever will be. And this God who is omniscient (all-knowing) has absolutely certain knowledge: there can never be any fact that he does not already know; thus, there can never be any fact that would prove that something God thinks is actually false. Now it is from this infinite storehouse of certain knowledge that God, who never lies, has
spoken to us in Scripture, in which he has told us many true things about himself, about ourselves, and about the universe that he has made. No fact can ever turn up to contradict the truth spoken by this one who is omniscient.

Thus, it is appropriate for us to be more certain about the truths we read in Scripture than about any other knowledge we have. If we are to talk about degrees of certainty of knowledge we have, then the knowledge we attain from Scripture would have the highest degree of certainty: if the word “certain” can be applied to any kind of human knowledge, it can be applied to this knowledge.

This concept of the certainty of knowledge that we attain from Scripture then gives us a reasonable basis for affirming the correctness of much of the other knowledge that we have. We read Scripture and find that its view of the world around us, of human nature, and of ourselves corresponds closely to the information we have gained from our own sense-experiences of the world around us. Thus we are encouraged to trust our sense-experiences of the world around us: our observations correspond with the absolute truth of Scripture; therefore, our observations are also true and, by and large, reliable. Such confidence in the general reliability of observations made with our eyes and ears is further confirmed by the fact that it is God who has made these faculties and who in Scripture frequently encourages us to use them (compare also Prov. 20:12: “The hearing ear and the seeing eye, the LORD has made them both”).

In this way the Christian who takes the Bible as God’s Word escapes from philosophical skepticism about the possibility of attaining certain knowledge with our finite minds. In this sense, then, it is correct to say that for people who are not omniscient, the Bible is necessary for certain knowledge about anything.

This fact is important for the following discussion, where we affirm that unbelievers can know something about God from the general revelation that is seen in the world around them. Although this is true, we must recognize that in a fallen world knowledge gained by observation of the world is always imperfect and always liable to error or misinterpretation. Therefore the knowledge of God and creation gained from Scripture must be used to interpret correctly the creation around us. Using the theological terms that we will define below, we can say that we need special revelation to interpret general revelation rightly.

**D. But the Bible Is Not Necessary for Knowing That God Exists**

What about people who do not read the Bible? Can they obtain any knowledge of God? Can they know anything about his laws? Yes, without the Bible some knowledge of God is possible, even if it is not absolutely certain knowledge.

People can obtain a knowledge that God exists and a knowledge of some of his attributes simply from observation of themselves and the world around them. David says, “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (Ps. 19:1). To look at the sky is to see evidence of the infinite power, wisdom, and even beauty of God; it is to observe a majestic witness to the glory of God. Similarly, Barnabas and Paul tell the Greek inhabitants of Lystra about the living God who made the heavens and the earth: “In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways; yet he did not leave himself without witness for he did good and gave you from heaven rains and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness” (Acts 14:16–17). Rains and fruitful seasons, food produced from the earth, and gladness in people’s hearts, all bear witness to the fact that their Creator is a God of mercy, of love, and even of joy. These evidences of God are all around us in creation to be seen by those who are willing to see them.
Even those who by their wickedness suppress the truth cannot avoid the evidences of God’s existence and nature in the created order:

For what can be known about God is plain to them because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. (Rom. 1:19–21)

Here Paul says not only that creation gives evidence of God’s existence and character, but also that even wicked men recognize that evidence. What can be known about God is “plain to them” and in fact “they knew God” (apparently, they knew who he was), but “they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him.” This passage allows us to say that all persons, even the most wicked, have some internal knowledge or perception that God exists and that he is a powerful Creator. This knowledge is seen “in the things that have been made,” a phrase that refers to all creation. Yet it is probably in seeing mankind created in the image of God—that is, in seeing both themselves and other people—that even wicked persons see the greatest evidence of God’s existence and nature.

Thus, even without the Bible, all persons who have ever lived have had evidence in creation that God exists, that he is the Creator and they are creatures, and have also had some evidence of his character. As a result, they themselves have known something about God from this evidence (even though this is never said to be a knowledge that is able to bring them to salvation).

E. Furthermore, the Bible Is Not Necessary for Knowing Something About God’s Character and Moral Laws

Paul goes on in Romans 1 to show that even unbelievers who have no written record of God’s laws still have in their consciences some understanding of God’s moral demands. Speaking of a long list of sins (“envy, murder, strife, deceit …”), Paul says of wicked people who practice them, “Though they know God’s decree that those who do such things deserve to die they not only do them but approve those who practice them” (Rom. 1:32). Wicked people know that their sin is wrong, at least in large measure.

Paul then talks about the activity of conscience in Gentiles who do not have the written law:

When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them …” (Rom. 2:14–15)

The consciences of unbelievers bear witness to God’s moral standards, but at times this evidence of God’s law on the hearts of unbelievers is distorted or suppressed. Sometimes their thoughts “accuse” them and sometimes their thoughts “excuse” them, Paul says. The knowledge of God’s laws derived from such sources is never perfect, but it is enough to give an awareness of God’s moral demands to all mankind. (And it is on this basis that Paul argues that all humanity is held guilty before God for sin, even those who do not have the written laws of God in Scripture.)

The knowledge of God’s existence, character, and moral law, which comes through creation to all humanity, is often called “general revelation” (because it comes to all people generally).
General revelation comes through observing nature, through seeing God’s directing influence in history, and through an inner sense of God’s existence and his laws that he has placed inside every person. General revelation is distinct from “special revelation” which refers to God’s words addressed to specific people, such as the words of the Bible, the words of the Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles, and the words of God spoken in personal address, such as at Mount Sinai or at the baptism of Jesus.

Special revelation includes all the words of Scripture but is not limited to the words of Scripture, for it also includes, for example, many words of Jesus that were not recorded in Scripture, and probably there were many words spoken by Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles that were not recorded in Scripture either.

The fact that all people know something of God’s moral laws is a great blessing for society, for unless they did there would be no societal restraint on the evil that people would do and no restraint from their consciences. Because there is some common knowledge of right and wrong, Christians can often find much consensus with non-Christians in matters of civil law, community standards, basic ethics for business and professional activity, and acceptable patterns of conduct in ordinary life. Moreover, we can appeal to the sense of rightness within people’s hearts (Rom. 2:14) when attempting to enact better laws or overturn bad laws, or to right some other injustices in society around us. The knowledge of God’s existence and character also provides a basis of information that enables the gospel to make sense to a non-Christian’s heart and mind: unbelievers know that God exists and that they have broken his standards, so the news that Christ died to pay for their sins should truly come as good news to them.

However, it must be emphasized that Scripture nowhere indicates that people can know the gospel, or know the way of salvation, through such general revelation. They may know that God exists, that he is their Creator, that they owe him obedience, and that they have sinned against him. The existence of systems of sacrifice in primitive religions throughout history attests to the fact that these things can be clearly known by people apart from the Bible. The repeated occurrences of the “rain and fruitful seasons” mentioned in Acts 14:17 may even lead some people to reason that God is not only holy and righteous but also loving and forgiving. But how the holiness and justice of God can ever be reconciled with his willingness to forgive sins is a mystery that has never been solved by any religion apart from the Bible. Nor does the Bible give us any hope that it ever can be discovered apart from specific revelation from God. It is the great wonder of our redemption that God himself has provided the way of salvation by sending his own Son, who is both God and man, to be our representative and bear the penalty for our sins, thus combining the justice and love of God in one infinitely wise and amazingly gracious act. This fact, which seems commonplace to the Christian ear, should not lose its wonder for us: it could never have been conceived by man alone apart from God’s special, verbal revelation.

Furthermore, even if an adherent of a primitive religion could think that God somehow must have himself paid the penalty for our sins, such a thought would only be an extraordinary speculation. It could never be held with enough certainty to be the ground on which to rest saving faith unless God himself confirmed such speculation with his own words, namely, the words of the gospel proclaiming either that this indeed was going to happen (if the revelation came in the time before Christ) or that it indeed has happened (if the revelation came in the time after Christ). The Bible never views human speculation apart from the Word of God as a sufficient basis on which to rest saving faith: such saving faith, according to Scripture, is always confidence or trust in God that rests on the truthfulness of God’s own words.
QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. When you are witnessing to an unbeliever, what is the one thing above all others that you should want him or her to read? Do you know of anyone who ever became a Christian without either reading the Bible or hearing someone tell him or her what the Bible said? What then is the primary task of an evangelistic missionary? How should the necessity of Scripture affect our missionary orientation?

2. Do you nourish your soul on the spiritual food of the Word as carefully and diligently as you nourish your body on physical food? What makes us so spiritually insensitive that we feel physical hunger much more acutely than spiritual hunger? What is the remedy?

3. When we are actively seeking to know God’s will, where should we spend most of our time and effort? In practice, where do you spend most of your time and effort when seeking to find God’s will? Do God’s principles in Scripture and the apparent guidance we receive from feelings, conscience, advice, circumstances, human reasoning, or society ever seem to conflict? How should we seek to resolve the conflict?

4. Is it a hopeless task to work for civil legislation based on standards that accord with God’s moral principles in Scripture? Why is there good reason to hope that we will finally be able to persuade a great majority of our society to adopt laws consistent with scriptural norms? What would hinder this effort?

SPECIAL TERMS

general revelation
natural revelation
necessity of Scripture
special revelation

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SCRIPTURE MEMORY PASSAGE

Matthew 4:4: *But he answered, “It is written, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” ’*

HYMN

“TEACH ME, O LORD, YOUR WAY OF TRUTH”

(Use the familiar tune of “Jesus Shall Reign.”)
Teach me, O Lord, your way of truth,  
And from it I will not depart;  
That I may steadfastly obey,  
Give me an understanding heart.

In your commandments make me walk,  
For in your law my joy shall be;  
Give me a heart that loves your will,  
From discontent and envy free.

Turn now my eyes from vanity,  
And cause me in your ways to tread;  
O let your servant prove your Word  
and thus to godly fear be led.

Turn away my reproach and fear;  
Your righteous judgments I confess;  
To know your precepts I desire;  
Revive me in your righteousness.

From: The Psalter 1912 (taken from Ps. 119:33–40)

An alternative hymn for this chapter is a modern Scripture song, “Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God.” The second verse of this song ("Man shall not live on bread alone …") is a quotation of Matthew 4:4 and expresses the necessity of Scripture for maintaining our spiritual life: we live on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. The other verses of the song do not speak directly of the doctrine of the necessity of Scripture but do contain the words of gospel invitation (vv. 1, 4, 5). All verses in the song are direct quotations of Scripture, and, as such, will be spiritually nourishing for us to sing and meditate on.

Chapter 8

The Four Characteristics of Scripture:  
(4) Sufficiency

Is the Bible enough for knowing what God wants us to think or do?

EXPLANATION AND SCRIPTURAL BASIS

Are we to look for other words from God in addition to those we have in Scripture? The doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture addresses this question.

A. Definition of the Sufficiency of Scripture
We can define the sufficiency of Scripture as follows: 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 everything we need God to tell us for salvation, for trusting him perfectly, and for obeying him perfectly.

This definition emphasizes that it is in Scripture alone that we are to search for God’s words to us. It also reminds us that God considers what he has told us in the Bible to be enough for us, and that we should rejoice in the great revelation that he has given us and be content with it.

Significant scriptural support and explanation of this doctrine is found in Paul’s words to Timothy, “from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15). The context shows that “sacred writings” here means the written words of Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16). This is an indication that the words of God which we have in Scripture are all the words of God we need in order to be saved: these words are able to make us wise “for salvation.” This is confirmed by other passages that talk about the words of Scripture as the means God uses to bring us to salvation (James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23).

Other passages indicate that the Bible is sufficient to equip us for living the Christian life. Once again Paul writes to Timothy, “All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

Here Paul indicates that one purpose for which God caused Scripture to be written is to train us that we might be “equipped for every good work.” If there is any “good work” that God wants a Christian to do, this passage indicates that God has made provision in his Word for training the Christian in it. Thus, there is no “good work” that God wants us to do other than those that are taught somewhere in Scripture: it can equip us for every good work.

A similar teaching is found in Psalm 119: “Blessed are those whose way is blameless who walk in the law of the LORD!” (v. 1). This verse shows an equivalence between being “blameless” and “walking in the law of the LORD”: those who are blameless are those who walk in the law of the Lord. Here again is an indication that all that God requires of us is recorded in his written Word: simply to do all that the Bible commands us is to be blameless in God’s sight.

To be morally perfect in God’s sight, then, what must we do in addition to what God commands us in Scripture? Nothing! Nothing at all! If we simply keep the words of Scripture we will be “blameless” and we will be doing “every good work” that God expects of us.

B. We Can Find All That God Has Said on Particular Topics, and We Can Find Answers to Our Questions

Of course, we realize that we will never perfectly obey all of Scripture in this life (see James 3:2; 1 John 1:8–10; and chapter 24, below). Thus, it may not at first seem very significant to say that all we have to do is what God commands us in the Bible, since we will never be able to obey it all in this life anyway. But the truth of the sufficiency of Scripture is of great significance for our Christian lives, for it enables us to focus our search for God’s words to us on the Bible alone and saves us from the endless task of searching through all the writings of Christians throughout history, or through all the teachings of the church, or through all the subjective feelings and impressions that come to our minds from day to day, in order to find what God requires of us. In a very practical sense, it means that we are able to come to clear conclusions on many teachings of Scripture. For example, though it requires some work, it is possible to find all the biblical
passages that are directly relevant to the matters of marriage and divorce, or the responsibilities of parents to children, or the relationship between a Christian and civil government.

This doctrine means, moreover, that it is possible to collect all the passages that directly relate to doctrinal issues such as the atonement, or the person of Christ, or the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer’s life today. In these and hundreds of other moral and doctrinal questions, the biblical teaching about the sufficiency of Scripture gives us confidence that we will be able to find what God requires us to think or to do in these areas. In many of these areas we can attain confidence that we, together with the vast majority of the church throughout history, have found and correctly formulated what God wants us to think or to do. Simply stated, the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture tells us that it is possible to study systematic theology and ethics and find answers to our questions.

At this point we differ from Roman Catholic theologians, who would say that we have not found all that God says to us about any particular subject until we have also listened to the official teaching of the church throughout its history. We would respond that although the history of the church may help us to understand what God says to us in the Bible, never in church history has God added to the teachings or commands of Scripture: Nowhere in church history outside of Scripture has God added anything that he requires us to believe or to do. Scripture is sufficient to equip us for “every good work,” and to walk in its ways is to be “blameless” in God’s sight.

At this point we also differ from nonevangelical theologians who are not convinced that the Bible is God’s Word in any unique or absolutely authoritative sense, and who would therefore search not only the Bible but also many other early Christian writings in an attempt to find not so much what God said to mankind but rather what many early Christians experienced in their relationship with God. They would not expect to arrive at a single, unified conclusion about what God wants us to think or do with regard to any particular question, but to discover a variety of opinions and viewpoints collected around some major unifying ideas. All of the viewpoints held by early Christians in any of the early churches would then be potentially valid viewpoints for Christians to hold today as well. To this we would reply that our search for answers to theological and ethical questions is not a search to find what various believers have thought in the history of the church, but is a quest to find and understand what God himself says to us in his own words, which are found in Scripture and only in Scripture.

C. The Amount of Scripture Given Was Sufficient at Each Stage of Redemptive History

The doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture does not imply that God cannot add any more words to those he has already spoken to his people. It rather implies that man cannot add on his own initiative any words to those that God has already spoken. Furthermore, it implies that in fact God has not spoken to mankind any more words which he requires us to believe or obey other than those which we have now in the Bible.

This point is important, for it helps us to understand how God could tell his people that his words to them were sufficient at many different points in the history of redemption, and how he could nevertheless add to those words later. For example, in Deuteronomy 29:29 Moses says, “The secret things belong to the LORD our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law.”
This verse reminds us that God has always taken the initiative in revealing things to us. He has decided what to reveal and what not to reveal. At each stage in redemptive history, the things that God had revealed were for his people for that time, and they were to study, believe, and obey those things. With further progress in the history of redemption, more of God’s words were added, recording and interpreting that history (see chapter 3 above regarding the development of the canon).

Thus, at the time of the death of Moses, the first five books of our Old Testament were sufficient for God’s people at that time. But God directed later authors to add more so that Scripture would be sufficient for believers in subsequent times. For Christians today, the words from God that we have in the Old and New Testaments together are sufficient for us during the church age. After the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, and the founding of the early church as recorded in the New Testament, and the assembling of the books of the New Testament canon, no further central redemptive acts of God in history (acts that have direct relevance for all God’s people for all subsequent time) have occurred, and thus no further words of God have been given to record and interpret those acts for us.

This means that we can cite Scripture texts from throughout the canon to show that the principle of the sufficiency of God’s revelation to his people at each particular time has remained the same. In this sense, these verses that talk about the sufficiency of Scripture in earlier periods are directly applicable to us as well, even though the extent of the Bible to which they refer in our situation is greater than the extent of the Scripture to which they referred in their original setting. The following texts from Scripture thus apply to us also in that sense:

- You shall not add to the word which I command you nor take from it; that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you. (Deut. 4:2)

- Everything that I command you you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to it or take from it. (Deut. 12:32)

- Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words lest he rebuke you, and you be found a liar. (Prov. 30:5–6)

- I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. (Rev. 22:18–19)

D. Practical Applications of the Sufficiency of Scripture

The doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture has several practical applications to our Christian lives. The following list is intended to be helpful but not exhaustive.

1. The sufficiency of Scripture should encourage us as we try to discover what God would have us to think (about a particular doctrinal issue) or to do (in a particular situation). We should be encouraged that everything God wants to tell us about that question is to be found in Scripture. This does not mean that the Bible answers all the questions that we might think up, for “The secret things belong to the LORD our God” (Deut. 29:29). But it does mean that when we are facing a problem of genuine importance to our Christian life, we can approach Scripture with the confidence that from it God will provide us with guidance for that problem.
There will of course be some times when the answer we find is that Scripture does not speak directly to our question. (This would be the case, for example, if we tried to find from Scripture what “order of worship” to follow on Sunday mornings, or whether it is better to kneel or perhaps to stand when we pray, or at what time we should eat our meals during the day, etc.) In those cases, we may conclude that God has not required us to think or to act in any certain way with regard to that question (except, perhaps, in terms of more general principles regarding our attitudes and goals). But in many other cases we will find direct and clear guidance from the Lord to equip us for “every good work” (2 Tim. 3:17).

As we go through life, frequent practice in searching Scripture for guidance will result in an increasing ability to find accurate, carefully formulated answers to our problems and questions. Lifelong growth in understanding Scripture will thus include growth in the skill of rightly understanding the Bible’s teachings and applying them to specific questions.

2. The sufficiency of Scripture reminds us that we are to add nothing to Scripture and that we are to consider no other writings of equal value to Scripture. This principle is violated by almost all cults and sects. Mormons, for example, claim to believe the Bible, but they also claim divine authority for the Book of Mormon. Christian Scientists similarly claim to believe the Bible, but in practice they hold the book Science and Health With a Key to the Scriptures by Mary Baker Eddy, on a par with Scripture or above it in authority. Since these claims violate God’s commands not to add to his words, we should not think that any additional words from God to us would be found in these writings. Even in Christian churches a similar error is sometimes made when people go beyond what Scripture says and assert with great confidence new ideas about God or heaven, basing their teachings not on Scripture but on their own speculation or even on claimed experiences of dying and coming back to life.

3. The sufficiency of Scripture also tells us that God does not require us to believe anything about himself or his redemptive work that is not found in Scripture. Among writings from the time of the early church are some collections of alleged sayings of Jesus that were not preserved in the Gospels. It is likely that at least some of the “sayings of Jesus” found in these writings are rather accurate records of things Jesus actually said (though it is now impossible for us to determine with any high degree of probability which sayings those are). But it does not really matter at all for our Christian lives if we never read any of those sayings, for God has caused to be recorded in Scripture everything that we need to know about Jesus’ words and deeds in order to trust and obey him perfectly. Though these collections of sayings do have some limited value in linguistic research and perhaps in the study of the history of the church, they are of no direct value whatever for us in learning what we should believe about the life and teachings of Christ, or in formulating our doctrinal or ethical convictions.

4. The sufficiency of Scripture shows us that no modern revelations from God are to be placed on a level equal to Scripture in authority. At various times throughout the history of the church, and particularly in the modern charismatic movement, people have claimed that God has given revelations through them for the benefit of the church. However we may evaluate such claims, we must be careful never to allow (in theory or in practice) the placing of such revelations on a level equal to Scripture. We must insist that God does not require us to believe anything about himself or his work in the world that is contained in these revelations but not in Scripture. And we must insist that God does not require us to obey any moral directives that come to us through such means but that are not confirmed by Scripture. The Bible contains everything we need God to tell us for trusting and obeying him perfectly.
It should also be noted at this point that whenever challenges to the sufficiency of Scripture have come in the form of other documents to be placed alongside Scripture (whether from extrabiblical Christian literature of the first century or from the accumulated teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, or from the books of various cults such as the Book of Mormon), the result has always been (1) to deemphasize the teachings of the Bible itself and (2) to begin to teach some things that are contrary to Scripture. This is a danger of which the church must constantly be aware.

5. With regard to living the Christian life, the sufficiency of Scripture reminds us that nothing is sin that is not forbidden by Scripture either explicitly or by implication. To walk in the law of the Lord is to be “blameless” (Ps. 119:1). Therefore we are not to add prohibitions to those already stated in Scripture. From time to time there may be situations in which it would be wrong, for example, for an individual Christian to drink coffee or Coca-Cola, or to attend movie theaters, or to eat meat offered to idols (see 1 Cor. 8–10), but unless some specific teaching or some general principle of Scripture can be shown to prohibit these (or any other activities) for all believers for all time, we must insist that these activities are not in themselves sinful and they are not in all situations prohibited by God for his people.

This also is an important principle because there is always the tendency among believers to begin to neglect the regular daily searching of Scripture for guidance and to begin to live by a set of written or unwritten rules (or denominational traditions) concerning what one does or does not do in the Christian life.

Furthermore, whenever we add to the list of sins that are prohibited by Scripture itself, there will be harm to the church and to the lives of individual believers. The Holy Spirit will not empower obedience to rules that do not have God’s approval from Scripture, nor will believers generally find delight in obedience to commands that do not accord with the laws of God written on their hearts. In some cases, Christians may repeatedly and earnestly plead with God for “victory” over supposed sins that are in fact no sins at all, yet no “victory” will be given, for the attitude or action in question is in fact not a sin and is not displeasing to God. Great discouragement in prayer and frustration in the Christian life generally may be the outcome.

In other cases, continued or even increasing disobedience to these new “sins” will result, together with a false sense of guilt and a resulting alienation from God. Often there arises an increasingly uncompromising and legalistic insistence on these new rules on the part of those who do follow them, and genuine fellowship among believers in the church will fade away. Evangelism will often be stifled, for the silent proclamation of the gospel that comes from the lives of believers will at least seem (to outsiders) to include the additional requirement that one must fit this uniform pattern of life in order to become a member of the body of Christ.

One clear example of such an addition to the commands of Scripture is found in the opposition of the Roman Catholic Church to “artificial” methods of birth control, a policy that finds no valid support in Scripture. Widespread disobedience, alienation, and false guilt have been the result. Yet such is the propensity of human nature to make such rules that other examples can probably be found in the written or unwritten traditions of almost every denomination.

6. The sufficiency of Scripture also tells us that nothing is required of us by God that is not commanded in Scripture either explicitly or by implication. This reminds us that the focus of our search for God’s will ought to be on Scripture, rather than on seeking guidance through prayer for changed circumstances or altered feelings or direct guidance from the Holy Spirit apart from Scripture. It also means that if someone claims to have a message from God telling us what we
ought to do, we need never assume that it is sin to disobey such a message unless it can be confirmed by the application of Scripture itself to our situation.

The discovery of this great truth could bring tremendous joy and peace to the lives of thousands of Christians who, spending countless hours seeking God’s will outside of Scripture, are often uncertain about whether they have found it. In fact, many Christians today have very little confidence in their ability to discover God’s will with any degree of certainty. Thus, there is little striving to do God’s will (for who can know it?) and little growth in holiness before God.

The opposite ought to be true. Christians who are convinced of the sufficiency of Scripture should begin eagerly to seek and find God’s will in Scripture. They should be eagerly and regularly growing in obedience to God, knowing great freedom and peace in the Christian life. Then they would be able to say with the psalmist:

I will keep your law continually,  
for ever and ever;  
and I shall walk at liberty,  
for I have sought your precepts …

Great peace have those who love your law;  
nothing can make them stumble. (Ps. 119:44–45, 165)

7. The sufficiency of Scripture reminds us that in our doctrinal and ethical teaching we should emphasize what Scripture emphasizes and be content with what God has told us in Scripture. There are some subjects about which God has told us little or nothing in the Bible. We must remember that “The secret things belong to the LORD our God” (Deut. 29:29) and that God has revealed to us in Scripture exactly what he deemed right for us. We must accept this and not think that Scripture is something less than it should be, or begin to wish that God had given us much more information about subjects on which there are very few scriptural references. Of course, there will be some situations where we are confronted with a particular problem that requires a great deal of attention, far greater than the emphasis that it receives in the teaching of Scripture. But those situations should be relatively infrequent and should not be representative of the general course of our lives or ministries.

It is characteristic of many cults that they emphasize obscure portions or teachings of Scripture (one thinks of the Mormon emphasis on baptism for the dead, a subject that is mentioned in only one verse in the Bible [1 Cor. 15:29], in a phrase whose exact meaning is apparently impossible now to determine with certainty). But a similar error was made by an entire generation of liberal New Testament scholars in the earlier part of this century, who devoted most of their scholarly lives to a futile search for the sources “behind” our present gospel narratives or to a search for the “authentic” sayings of Jesus.

Unfortunately, a similar pattern has too often occurred among evangelicals within various denominations. The doctrinal matters that have divided evangelical Protestant denominations from one another have almost uniformly been matters on which the Bible places relatively little emphasis, and matters in which our conclusions must be drawn from skillful inference much more than from direct biblical statements. For example, abiding denominational differences have occurred or have been maintained over the “proper” form of church government, the exact nature of Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper, the exact sequence of the events surrounding Christ’s return, the categories of persons who should be admitted to the Lord’s Supper, the way in which God planned that the merits of Christ’s death would be applied to believers and not applied to
unbelievers, the proper subjects for baptism, the correct understanding of the “baptism in the Holy Spirit,” and so forth.

We should not say that these issues are all unimportant, nor should we say that Scripture gives no solution to any of them (indeed, with respect to many of them a specific solution will be defended in subsequent chapters of this book). However, since all of these topics receive relatively little direct emphasis in Scripture it is ironic and tragic that denominational leaders will so often give much of their lives to defending precisely the minor doctrinal points that make their denominations different from others. Is such effort really motivated by a desire to bring unity of understanding to the church, or might it stem in some measure from human pride, a desire to retain power over others, and an attempt at self-justification, which is displeasing to God and ultimately unedifying to the church?

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. In the process of growing in the Christian life and deepening your relationship with God, approximately how much emphasis have you placed on reading the Bible itself and how much on reading other Christian books? In seeking to know God’s will for your daily life, what is the relative emphasis you have put on reading Scripture itself and on reading other Christian books? Do you think the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture will cause you to place more emphasis on reading Scripture itself?

2. What are some of the doctrinal or moral questions you are wondering about? Has this chapter increased your confidence in the ability of Scripture to provide a clear answer for some of those questions?

3. Have you ever wished that the Bible would say more than it does about a certain subject? Or less? What do you think motivated that wish? After reading this chapter, how would you approach someone who expressed such a wish today? How is God’s wisdom shown in the fact that he chose not to make the Bible a great deal longer or a great deal shorter than it actually is?

4. If the Bible contains everything we need God to tell us for obeying him perfectly, what is the role of the following in helping us to find God’s will for ourselves: advice from others; sermons or Bible classes; our consciences; our feelings; the leading of the Holy Spirit as we sense him prompting our inward desires and subjective impressions; changes in circumstances; the gift of prophecy (if you think it can function today)?

5. In the light of this chapter, how would you find God’s “perfect” will for your life? Is it possible that there would be more than one “perfect” choice in many decisions we make? (Consider Ps. 1:3 and 1 Cor. 7:39 in seeking an answer.)

6. Have there been times when you have understood the principles of Scripture well enough with regard to a specific situation but have not known the facts of the situation well enough to know how to apply those scriptural principles correctly? In seeking to know God’s will, can there be any other things we need to know except (a) the teaching of Scripture and (b) the facts of the situation in question, together with (c) skill in applying (a) to (b) correctly? What then is the role of prayer in seeking guidance? What should we pray for?
SPECIAL TERMS

blameless
sufficiency of Scripture

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How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,  
Is laid for your faith in his excellent Word!  
What more can he say than to you he hath said,  
You who unto Jesus for refuge have fled?  
You who unto Jesus for refuge have fled?

“Fear not, I am with thee, O be not dismayed;  
I, I am thy God, and will still give thee aid;  
I’ll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,  
Upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand,  
Upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand.

“When through the deep waters I call thee to go,  
The rivers of woe shall not thee overflow;  
For I will be with thee thy troubles to bless,  
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress,  
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.

“When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,  
My grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply;  
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design  
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine,  
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.

“E’en down to old age all my people shall prove  
My sovereign, eternal, unchangeable love;
And when hoary hairs shall their temples adorn,
    Like lambs they shall still in my bosom be borne,
    Like lambs they shall still in my bosom be borne.

“The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose,
    I will not, I will not desert to his foes;
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
    I’ll never, no, never, no, never forsake,
    I’ll never, no, never, no, never forsake.”

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