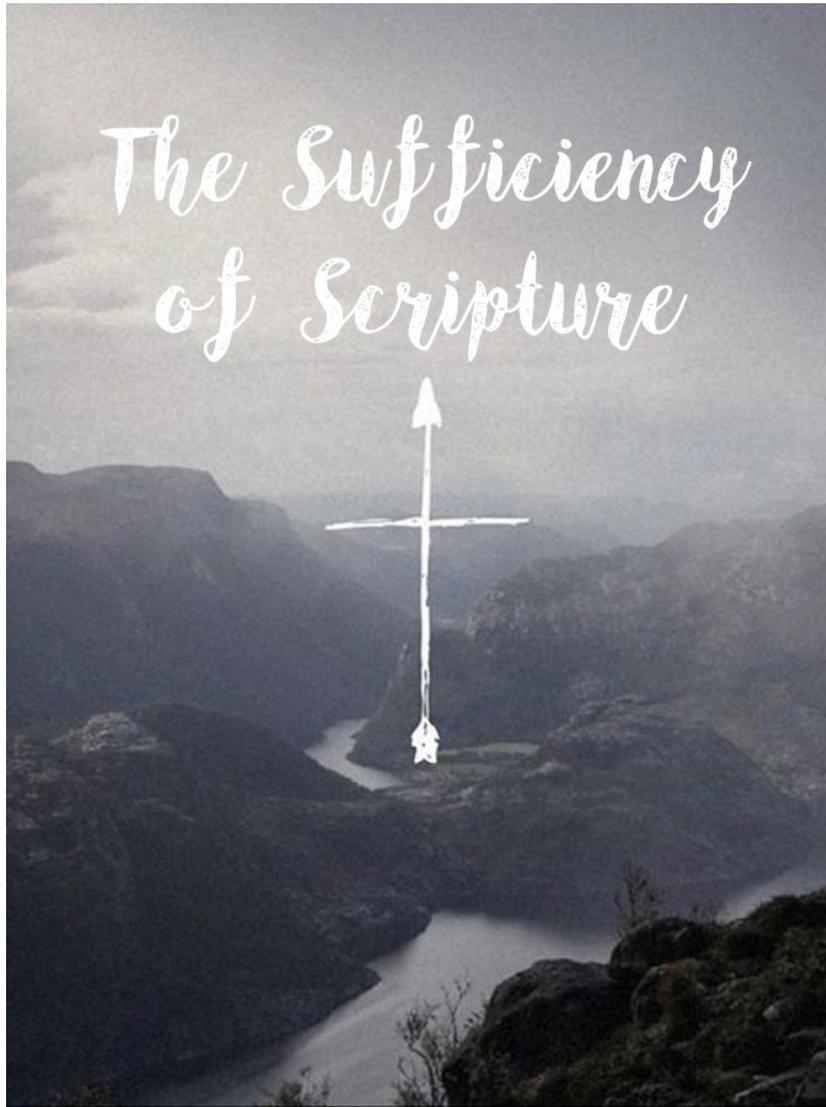


Theology for Life

Volume 6 | Issue 2 | Summer 2019

The Sufficiency of Scripture



Inside this Issue...

- ***What You Should Know about Biblical Counseling***—An Interview with Jim Newheiser
- **Developing a Personal Plan for Discernment**

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Editor's Corner

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In this issue of *Theology for Life Magazine*, we are going to take a look at the doctrine of Scripture, as affirmed by the Protestant Reformers, which is encapsulated in the Latin phrase *Sola Scriptura*. According to the Reformation—and the principle of *Sola Scriptura*—Scripture is the only infallible rule of faith for the Church. Because the Word of God is the only *theopneustos*—God-breathed—special revelation that we possess today (2nd Timothy 3:16), then no rule of faith can supersede Scripture. There is no higher court to which we can appeal for faith and practice, for there is nowhere else besides Scripture where we can surely find God's voice today. The fact that God's Word is inspired does not mean that He dictated it or that He overrode the personalities, gifts, and stylistic choices of the human authors, through whom the written Word of God has come to us. It does mean that He worked in and through these authors such that their words are His words.

Sola Scriptura also leads us to the doctrine of biblical sufficiency. To say that Scripture is sufficient is to say that the Bible contains all that we need for determining what we must believe and how we are to live before God. Scripture must be interpreted if we are to understand what we are to believe and how we are to act. The sufficiency of Scripture also indicates that we need no other source of special revelation for faith and life in addition to the Bible.

Passages such as 2nd Timothy 3:17 affirm the sufficiency of Scripture. Having affirmed that God's Word is profitable for "teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2nd Timothy 3:16), Paul explains that Scripture is enough to make us "complete, equipped for every good work."

Scripture in its totality is all that is needed so that we will be completely prepared to serve the Lord. A good work is anything pleasing to God, so this Magazine issue covers everything from determining sound doctrine, to knowing the deeds the Lord requires of us as proof of our faith in Him. Being equipped for every good work requires understanding the doctrinal *foundations* of God-pleasing actions, and the actions themselves. This is seen in how the New Testament Epistles typically move from presenting doctrine that must be believed, to practical application and moral instruction. John Calvin explains that to be complete means to be "one in whom there is nothing defective". To avoid being defective concerning faith and life, we must study Scripture and put its teachings into practice.

Some sectors of Christianity today believe that the Bible is inspired, inerrant, clear, and authoritative, but they also want you to think that there is a *need* for further revelation with "words from God, dreams, etc." Well, what it is? Are the Scriptures alone inspired, inerrant, and authoritative? If so, then the Scripture alone is sufficient for life and godliness. That means we don't need further revelation outside of the

Scriptures. The sufficiency of Scripture buttresses and fortifies the doctrine of Scripture from triviality and takes it into the everyday experience of the Christian.

Many Christians rightly believe that the inspiration, inerrancy, clarity, and authority of the Word matters, and they are right. But let me ask you, “Do you believe that biblical teaching on gender roles, sexuality, church practice, governance, and more matter?” Now here we venture into the arena of the sufficiency of Scripture. It’s not enough to say we have the right convictions about Scripture itself and then don’t put into practice what Scripture teaches. James tells us to no longer be hearers of the Word, but doers of the Word (James 1:22-25). Paul tells us that we are not to be tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine (Ephesians 4:14). To do that, we need to see the connection between the inspiration, inerrancy, clarity, and authority of the Word of God to see the sufficiency of Scripture.

The sufficiency of Scripture helps us to see that Christian freedom isn’t free; it’s costly. The death of Jesus wasn’t merely for freedom’s sake; it was for sinners to come and know the freedom Christ alone provides, in His finished and sufficient work through His death, burial, and resurrection. Jesus didn’t die to secure a “freedom”, so we could exercise that freedom in any way that we want. Instead, the freedom we have is a stewardship from God that we will give an account for on the last day as Christians. There is no absolute freedom in the Christian life. Everything comes at a cost. The death of Jesus forever secures and seals the children of God, but the Holy Spirit also convicts, teaches, guides, and corrects them through His Word.

You and I, as Christians, may be tempted to look for God’s will in places other than the Word of God. As we ponder the will of God for our lives, Christians must be careful to follow the guidance of Scripture. The Scriptures alone are sufficient to give the people of God the principles they need to know how to please God wherever we are, and however we are called to serve the Lord Jesus.

In this issue of *Theology for Life* we are going to talk about the sufficiency of Scripture, why it matters, what the Church has taught, and help readers understand the importance of this concept for the Christian life and ministry. There is a lot of confusion today about what the sufficiency of Scripture is. There is even less written today (sadly) about why it matters. This is why we are taking up this issue, at this time, to help you understand that the Bible is not only inspired, inerrant, clear, and authoritative; it is also sufficient to address all you need for your life and ministry. You can trust the Word of God, for it contains the words of eternal life uttered by none other than our precious dear Lord Jesus. By grace, you can become not only a hearer of the Word, but a doer of the Word—one who seeks to apply the sufficient teaching of Scripture to your own life and ministry.

In Christ Alone,

**Dave Jenkins
Executive Editor, *Theology for Life Magazine***

The Divine Breath: The Sufficiency of Scripture

By Dustin Bengé



During every era of Church history, men and women have proclaimed, apart from Scripture, “God told me”, “God revealed to me”, and “God said to me”, as if these “revelations” are equal to the authority of God’s revealed Word in Holy Scripture.

Why do we do this? Why do we seek additional revelation from God? Why do we desire more than we have already been given in the Bible? There is an insatiable impulse, albeit sinful, within fallen man to create and divulge our own truth—a truth of our own invention—in order to affirm our own desires. In other words, we have all acted, at one point or another, as if the Bible—God’s final and complete revelation to man—is not sufficient to guide us into all truth. As a young Christian, I remember thinking to myself that there was something more than the Bible to offer instruction and help. I read great Christian books that assisted me with doctrine, theology, and Christian living, but the more I read the greater I realized, while these books were

good, they could not stand above that which proceeded directly from the mouth of God.

If we believe God's word is infallible, inerrant, and authoritative, then it follows that we must also regard the Bible as the preeminent authority and guide for our lives. The Apostle Paul describes the Scripture as the very breath of God (2nd Timothy 3:16). Sinclair Ferguson has aptly stated, "There can be no more authoritative word than one that comes to us on divine breath."

"To affirm that Scripture does not have all the answers to everything about everything does not reveal a deficiency within what is revealed..."

What Sufficiency is Not

While it is accurate to affirm the Bible as God's full and complete revelation to man, the purpose of which is to guide men and women into all truth, there are several things we are *not affirming*. Within the Bible we do not find answers to everything there is to know about everything. The Bible is not a comprehensive encyclopedia on all universal knowledge. For example, Scripture does not provide information on how to change the oil in your car, or how to complete complex mathematical formulas, or what insurance policy is best for your family. If you find yourself on the side of the road with a flat tire, the Bible is not the first manual you should reach for in learning how to change your tire. Further, the Bible does not offer answers to some of our most probing questions: What is the density of a black hole? What is DNA? Who should I marry?

To affirm that Scripture does not have all the answers to everything about everything does not reveal a deficiency within what is revealed, but demonstrates that the Bible has a very particular goal. In other words, Scripture was given by God for a purpose. Everything we need to know, everything we need to learn, everything we need to obtain, and how all of that fits into the marvelous design and plan of God in order to be saved and live for His glory, is revealed in Scripture. Joel Beeke adequately summarized this thought: "The sufficiency of Scripture is limited to the Bible's purpose in revealed truth for our salvation, faith, and obedience (Psalm 19:7-11; John 20:31)." Nowhere does the Bible claim to be an exhaustive manual on every subject, but instead, gives us "the words of the wise" so "that your trust may be in the Lord" (Proverbs 22:17, 19).

What Sufficiency Is

When believers speak of the sufficiency of Scripture we are affirming exactly what the Bible affirms about itself. That is, the Bible reveals everything God has decreed us to know about Himself, how to know Him and His will, and how to enter into relationship with Him through Jesus Christ.

Perhaps the most complete statement about the sufficiency of Scripture is found from the pen of David, in Psalm 19:7–14. In verses 7–9, David makes six affirmations about Scripture as being “the law of the Lord”, “the testimony of the Lord”, “the precepts of the Lord”, “the commandments of the Lord”, “the fear of the Lord”, and “the judgments of the Lord”. John MacArthur has pointed out that by adding “of the Lord” at the end of each description of Scripture, David is affirming with overwhelming confidence that Scripture is not a scheme of human invention, but proceeds directly from God Himself. Further, the psalmist in Psalm 119:105, describes Scripture as a “light” to one’s path. The New Testament also repeatedly upholds the sufficiency of Scripture. For example, the Apostle Paul affirms in 2nd Timothy 3:15 that Scripture is able to lead a person to saving faith.

Throughout Church history, the Church has sought to solidify our belief that Scripture is absolutely sufficient. The extent of its sufficiency is precisely summarized in Question 3 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism:

Q. 3. What do the Scriptures principally teach?

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

The Shorter Catechism is clear that the Scriptures are sufficient for a specific task: they reveal who God is; who man is in relation to Him; what man is to believe about God; and how that relationship works in a life of obedience and holiness.

The Bible is the sufficient authority for the whole of the Christian life. Paul writes in 2nd Timothy 3:16, “[The Word of God is] *profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.*” A closer investigation of each of these declarations clearly validates that Scripture is wholly sufficient to equip a believer to faithfully live out the Christian life.

The first declaration Paul makes concerning Scripture is its sufficiency in “teaching”. The word Paul uses for “*teaching*” literally means instruction, and is closely related to the concept of doctrine and content. He uses the same word in Titus 2:1, “*But as for you, speak the things which are fitting for sound doctrine.*” Paul has in mind here the sufficiency of Scripture in directing the believer in how to live every facet of the Christian life, in what doctrine to believe, and in what God expects of him or her.

The second declaration made by Paul regarding the sufficiency of Scripture is “reproof”, which establishes the quality of admonishment inherent within Scripture. Paul had in mind here confronting those who have fallen into error and departed from what God requires. Scripture is profitable in judging the heart to the extent of pointing out areas of deviation from the faith once delivered to all the saints. When a believer strays in practice or doctrine from the faith, Scripture reproves that individual and points the way home. In 2nd Timothy 3:16, acting as a companion to “reproof” is the term, “correction”. Those who stray into doctrinal error or sinful lifestyle patterns are not only reprovved and confronted by Scripture in the error of their ways, but are corrected through the renewing of their mind, holiness, and truth (Ephesians 4:20–24).

Finally, Paul reminds Timothy that Scripture is profitable for “training in righteousness”. Not only is Scripture able to teach you the right doctrine and holy living, point out error by reprovving and correction, but it also demonstrates how to put its teaching into practice on a daily basis. Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus (Ephesians 4:25–32):

Lay aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you...be angry and do not sin...do not give the devil an opportunity...steal no longer...share with one who has need...let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth...do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God...let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

Scripture does not shroud in mystery the manner in which believers are to love, live, and conduct themselves. On the contrary, Scripture is profitable for “training in righteousness” to the extent that apart from the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures, no additional revelation is required in order for a believer to know how to live the Christian life.

Scripture attests to its own sufficiency in providing everything that is profita-

ble and essential for all believers to live faithful, holy, and righteous lives to the glory of God.

Why is Sufficiency Important?

We wholeheartedly affirm the inerrancy of Scripture. We overwhelmingly affirm the authority of Scripture. Sadly, we often live as if we reluctantly affirm the sufficiency of Scripture. Believers seem to be looking for something else—another experience, a mysterious feeling, a warm heart, a burning bush. Your doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture will shape how you approach all of your Christian life. Namely, how you pray, how you study God’s Word, how you evangelize, how you make choices in life, and how you seek to glorify God. Your spiritual health and formation depend on the level of emphasis you place upon the sufficiency of Scripture.

I often survey evangelicalism and shake my head in dismay that so many are relying on other means above—and at the expense of—Scripture. It is so easy to place our faith in politics, reform, revitalization, methodology, and the like. If our life is directed and shaped by these and other things we are surrendering the most reliable source we have—the very breath of God.

David ended Psalm 19 by praying, *“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.”* How can we be sure that our mouth will speak the right words and the meditation of our hearts will be centered upon that which is good and right? How can we appear acceptable in the sight of the living God and be pleasing vessels for the advance of His kingdom? How can we cry forth with confidence that Christ is our Rock and Redeemer? Joshua 1:8 provides the answer: *“This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.”*

We don’t need any more inspired and inerrant words. God’s breath is sufficient for all believers, in every age, to glorify Him throughout eternity.

The Sufficiency of Scripture: What it is and Why it Matters

By Dave Jenkins

The sufficiency of Scripture is a fundamental tenet of the Christian

faith. When we talk about the sufficiency of Scripture, we are speaking about how the Scriptures are all the Christian needs to equip them for a life of faith and service to God. The sufficiency of Scripture also helps readers understand

how it has always been the Lord's intention to reconcile humanity to Himself through the Lord Jesus. No other writings are necessary for the Good News of the gospel to be understood other than the Scriptures, nor are any other writings required to equip God's people for the life of faith.

The Importance of the Sufficiency of Scripture

As we begin to discuss the sufficiency of Scripture, it's essential to explain that



we are talking about the 66 canonized books that constitute the whole Word of God—both the Old and New Testaments. The Apostle Paul said (in 2nd Timothy 3:15-17), “... *And how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God 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.*”

Paul here uses a word that means “God-breathed”, which means Scriptures are not man-breathed (spoken by man). With that said, the Scriptures are *penned* by men, “*For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit*” (2nd Peter 1:21). No man-made writing is sufficient to equip man for every good work; only the Scriptures can do this particular—and special—work, because only the Holy Spirit equips man to do it. Since the Scriptures are sufficient to equip God’s people thoroughly, nothing else is needed beyond the Word of God.

Paul, in Colossians 2, deals with the dangers local churches face when the sufficiency of the Bible is challenged and merged with non-biblical writings, which are full of false doctrine. In chapter 2, verse 8, Paul warned the church in Colosse, “*See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.*”

Jude is much stronger when he states, “*Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints*” (Jude 1:3).

“Yet, statistics teach us that people are biblically illiterate.”

No other writing, no matter how godly the pastor, theologian, Bible teacher, or denomination they may come from, are to be seen as equal to—or competing with—the Word of God. The Bible is all that is necessary for the Christian to understand the character of God, the nature of man, and the doctrines of sin, heaven, hell, and salvation through the Lord Jesus alone.

Paul, when writing to the Galatians, indicates the seriousness of delivering a message outside of Scripture when he says (in Galatians 1:8), “*But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.*” One of the most potent verses on the topic of the sufficiency of Scripture comes from Psalm 19:7-14, where David rejoices in the Word of God—declaring

it to be perfect, trustworthy, right, sure, and altogether precious.

A Hunger for More of the Word of God

Sadly, such attacks come from inside our local churches, through management techniques, worldly methods of attracting a crowd, entertainment, extra-biblical revelation, mysticism, and some forms of psychological counseling that declare that the Bible and its precepts are not adequate for the Christian life. Jesus said in John 10:27, *“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”*

What we need a recovery of today is a hunger and thirst for what the Scriptures say. When you open your Bible to read it, you are opening the very Word of God. God speaks today through His Word. He uses faithful pastors and Bible teachers, who expose the meaning of the text, to help people grow in the Word of God. Jesus says in John 10:27 that His sheep hear His voice and He knows them and they follow Him. The people of God are to be captivated with the voice of God contained in the 66 books of the Bible. The Scriptures are the voice of God, and they alone are completely and utterly sufficient.

All around us are people who are clamoring for attention. They want their voice to be heard and their teaching to be known. The sufficiency of Scripture instructs us that the Bible alone is sufficient for the Christian. As the Word of God is preached from the pulpit, and people gather around the Word, they are hearing the *voice of God* through the biblical text. God uses the preaching of His Word to confound the wise and to expose the foolishness of man by pointing them to Christ alone.

Our great need today is not for more self-help thought, but instead for more of a hunger and thirst for the righteousness of God. God has provided the means of His Word via the Old and New Testament. The Bible is not a “church growth” manual, nor is it a self-help book. God uses the Word to open the eyes of the blind and to bring eternal life into the hearts of the lost. Even so, God also uses His Word to equip the Church.

Our great need in the Church today is not more programs, etc. Our great need in a biblically illiterate age is to become well versed in the Bible. In America, we have treasure after treasure of great biblical resources, and yet we are spiritually poor and lethargic. We are tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine, and yet we have more sound biblical resources than anywhere else in the world. The people of God in America have access to Bibles nearly everywhere—at our local churches, in bookstores, on the internet, and more. Yet, statistics teach us that people are biblically illiterate. They don’t know who preached the Sermon on the Mount, nor do they know the Ten Commandments.

How the Sufficiency of Scripture Challenges Christians Today

It is into the present age of the Church that the sufficiency of Scripture confronts and challenges us. If we say we believe the right things about the Bible itself, then we will do what Scripture teaches. The sufficiency of Scripture challenges the need for continued revelation because it teaches that the Bible alone is sufficient for faith and practice.

If you were to but pick up the Scriptures and daily read, God would use the Scriptures in your life to address problem areas that you may not even be aware of, and yet the Lord does. The Lord knows the exact condition of your heart today. There is nothing hidden from Him. Even so, the Lord also longs to provide mercy and grace for you that He has accomplished for you through Christ today.

Whether you open your Bible daily or not is not the issue. At the root of daily Bible reading is to see the Bible as the very Word of God. Only then will you see that, in the pages of the Bible, is the very food your soul longs for. When you don't open the Word of God, and don't have any hunger for it, what you are showing is that you have no hunger for God, nor to grow in the grace of God. That reveals a heart that is decaying and apathetic about God Himself and is one that doesn't desire to honor God.

The sufficiency of Scripture challenges us at precisely this point. The Bible alone is sufficient for the faith and practice of the people of God. The Scriptures are sufficient for our lives and ministries. The sufficiency of Scripture matters because it helps us to see our great need of Christ and His greatness to meet our need.

Wherever you are at today, the sufficiency of Scripture matters. For in the Scriptures, God has chosen to reveal Himself fully; it is through these 66 books that God Himself chooses to speak, and does for the glory of His great name, to a world that believes its own truth matters more. Only the voice of God thundering from the Scriptures can pierce through the fog of a post-truth world. This is precisely what the sufficiency of Scripture does—it pierces through the fog of our need today—despite the fact that many in the church are saying today that we need to have visions, dreams, or more revelation from God to make this decision or that. But God has said His Word alone is enough for all of faith and all practice for the Christian life and ministry.

As Christians, we are to trust the Word, because behind it is the character of

“As Christians, we are to trust the Word, because behind it is the character of a holy, just, and omnipresent God.”

a holy, just, omnipotent, and omnipresent God. The Word of God will never change, but the hearts of men change as they respond rightly to it. The only proper response to the Word of God is repentance, faith, and obedience because of the grace of God. What is your response to the sufficiency of the Scriptures? Will you repent of your apathy, dear Christian, towards the Word of God? Do you long for more of the righteousness of God? Do you long for God to grow you in His grace? God knows, and He sees the condition of your heart today.

My plea is that you, dear reader, will trust Him who is utterly sufficient in and of Himself. He has revealed Himself in the Word for you, and He alone is enough for you. That is why the sufficiency of the Scriptures not only matters to understand, but it's critical to understand in the present times in which we find ourselves.

The Sufficiency of Christ and the Sufficiency of Scripture

By Kevin DeYoung

The big idea in Hebrews chapter 1 is the point of all of He-

brews: the Son is superior to all others because in Him we have the fullness and finality of God's redemption and revelation. We do pretty well understanding the fullness piece. Everything in the days

"long ago" was pointing to Christ, and everything was completed in Christ. He is the fulfillment of centuries of predications, prophecies, and types. That's the *fullness* part of the equation.

But, just as important is the *finality* of Christ's work. God has definitively made Himself known. Christ has once for all paid for our sins. He came to earth, lived among us, died on the cross, and cried out in the dying moments, "*It is finished!*" We are awaiting no other king to rule over us. We need no other 'prophet' like Mohammed. There can be no further priest to atone for our sins. The work of redemption has



been completed.

And we must not separate redemption from revelation. Both were finished and fulfilled in the Son. The word of God versus the Word of God—the Bible versus Jesus, the Scriptures versus the Son—Hebrews gives no room for these diabolical antitheses. True, the Bible is not Jesus; the Scripture is not the Son. The words of the Bible and the Word made flesh are distinct, but they are also inseparable. Every act of redemption—from the Exodus, to the return from exile, to the cross itself—is also a revelation. They tell us something about the nature of sin, the way of salvation, and the character of God. Likewise, the point of revelation is always to redeem. The words of the prophets and the apostles are not meant to make us smart, but to get us saved. Redemption reveals. Revelation redeems. And Christ is both. He is God’s full and final act of redemption, and God’s full and final revelation of Himself.

Even the later teachings of the apostles were simply the remembrances of what Christ said (John 14:26) and the further Spirit-wrought explanation of all that He was and all that He accomplished (John 16:13-15).

“Nothing can be added to his redemptive work,” John Frame argues, “and nothing can be added to the revelation of that redemptive work.”^[1] If we say revelation is not complete, we must admit that somehow the work of redemption also remains unfinished.

A Silent God?

Does this mean God no longer speaks? Not at all. But we must think carefully about how He speaks in these last days. God now speaks through His Son. Think about the three offices of Christ—Prophet, Priest, and King. In the tension of the already and not yet, Christ has finished His work in each office. And yet, He continues to work through that finished work.

As a King, Christ is already seated on the throne and already reigns from Heaven, but the inauguration of His kingdom is not the same as the consummation of it. There are still enemies to subdue under His feet (Hebrews 2:8).

As a Priest, Christ has fully paid for all our sins with precious blood, once for all, never to be repeated again. And yet, this great salvation must still be freely offered and Christ must keep us in it (Hebrews 2:3).

Finally, as a Prophet, God has decisively spoken in/through His Son. He has shown us all we need to know, believe, and do. There is nothing more to say. And yet, God keeps speaking through what He has already said. The Word of God is living and active (Hebrews 4:12), and when the Scriptures are read the Holy Spirit still speaks (Hebrews 3:7).

So, yes, God still speaks. He is not silent. He communicates with us personally and directly. But this ongoing speech is not ongoing revelation. “The Holy Spirit no longer reveals any new doctrines, but takes everything from Christ (John 16:14).

Herman Bavinck writes, “In Christ God’s revelation has been completed.”^[2] In these last days, God speaks to us not by many and various ways, but in one way, through His Son. And He speaks through His Son by the revelation of the Son’s redeeming work that we find first predicted and prefigured in the Old Testament, then recorded in the gospels, and finally unpacked by the Spirit through the apostles in the rest of the New Testament.

Scripture is enough because the work of Christ is enough. They stand or fall together. The Son’s redemption and the Son’s revelation must both be sufficient. And as such, there is nothing more to be done and nothing more to be known for our salvation, and for our Christian walk, than what we see and know about Christ and through Christ in His Spirit’s book. Frame is right:

“Scripture is God’s testimony to the redemption he has accomplished for us. Once that redemption is finished, and the apostolic testimony to it is finished, the Scriptures are complete, and we should expect no more additions to them.”^[3]

While God certainly illumines His Word and may impress upon us direct applications from His Word, He does not speak apart from the Word. Or, as Packer puts it, more tersely but no less truly, “There are no words of God spoken to us at all today except the words of Scripture.”^[4]

References:

^[1] John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 227.

^[2] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics. Volume 1: Prolegomena*, gen ed. John Bolt, tr. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 491.

^[3] Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 227.

^[4] J.I. Packer, *“Fundamentalism” and the Word of God*, 1.

What You Should Know about Biblical Counseling

An Interview with Jim Newheiser

By Dave Jenkins



Dr. James (Jim) Newheiser, Jr., is the Director of the Institute for Biblical Counseling and Discipleship (IBCD) and the Director of the Christian Coun-

seling Program at RTS Charlotte. He is also the Associate Professor of Christian Counseling and Practical Theology at RTS Charlotte and an Adjunct Professor of Biblical Counseling at The Master's College. Jim has been married to his wife, Caroline, for 36 years and they have 3 adult children.

T4L: Thank you very much for agreeing to do this interview with *Theology for Life*

Magazine, Dr. Newheiser. Can you tell us a bit about your life, the Institute for Biblical Counseling and Discipleship, and the counseling program at Reformed Theological Seminary Charlotte Campus?

Jim Newheiser: My wife and I spent six years (1982-1987) in Saudi Arabia where I pastored an underground church for expatriates. This is where I first started practicing biblical counseling as I relied upon books by Jay Adams and Wayne Mack.

I then went to Westminster Seminary in California where I had the privilege of studying under George Scipione (the founder of Institute of Biblical Counseling and Discipleship, formerly CCEF) and Jay Adams. After completing my Doctor of Ministry Degree (1993) I started counseling for IBCD. In 2006, I was made the Executive Director. IBCD has evolved into a ministry whose primary focus has become making useful biblical counseling training resources available online and via DVD. We also continue to hold an annual conference in June in the San Diego area.

I was preaching pastor at Grace Bible Church in Escondido, CA from 1990-2016, at which time we moved to Charlotte, NC, where I now serve as the Director of the Christian (biblical) Counseling Program at Reformed Theological Seminary (RTS) in Charlotte.

RTS offers a Master of Arts in Christian Counseling, which equips men and women to serve in church and parachurch ministries. Our rigorous curriculum includes every Bible and Theology course future pastors take in their MDiv programs, which provides a foundation for training in biblical counseling. This includes classroom instruction and counseling experience under the supervision of experienced mentors. RTS also offers an MDiv degree with a counseling emphasis.

We are very thankful to God for blessing our first three years at RTS. We have some wonderful students and we are excited to see our graduates being placed in ministries where they are doing wonderful things for God's kingdom.

T4L: What is biblical counseling and what separates it from other approaches to counseling?

Jim Newheiser: Here are ten characteristics of biblical counseling.

- Biblical counseling is God-centered (2nd Corinthians 5:9; 1st Timothy 1:5; Colossians 1:28-29). The goal of Biblical counseling is to give instruction from

the Bible so that the counselee can achieve God's goals in his/her life.

- Biblical counseling is founded on sound theology.
- Biblical counseling is rooted in sound anthropology.
 - Mankind is created in God's image (Genesis 1:27).
 - Mankind is a duplex being—body and soul (2nd Corinthians 5:8).
 - Mankind is sinful and fallen, which is the source of soul problems (Romans 3:10).
- Biblical counseling is Christ-centered and redemptive (2nd Corinthians 5:21; 1st John 1:8-2:2; Romans 6:1; Ephesians 4:32 5:1-2, 25). Imperatives (what Christ commands) are grounded in the indicative (what Christ has done in His finished and sufficient work).
- Biblical counseling aims at the heart (Mark 7:20; Matthew 12:33; Proverbs 4:23). *We are not behaviorists.*
- Biblical counseling is based upon the all-sufficient and infallible Scripture (2nd Timothy 3:16-17; 2nd Peter 1:3; Psalm 119:24). Heath Lambert summed it up this way, "The sufficiency of Scripture means there will always be a passage of God's Word you can use to meet someone in their hour of need."
- Biblical counseling relies upon the Holy Spirit (1st Corinthians 2:14; Romans 8:5-11, 15:13; Philippians 4:13; John 14:16-17; Galatians 5:16).
- Biblical counseling is gentle and compassionate (Galatians 6:1; 1st Thessalonians 5:14; Matthew 9:35-36).
- Biblical counseling is not merely for an elite group of professionals (Romans 15:14; Ephesians 4:15; Galatians 6:1-2).
- Biblical counseling ideally takes place within the context of the local church (1st Peter 5:1; Titus 2:3-5; Hebrews 13:17).

Biblical counseling differs from other approaches in these ways.

- **Authority** – God's Word versus human wisdom.
- **View of man** – in God's image, body/soul, fallen versus evolutionary or neutral view.
- **View of man's problem** – sin versus ignorance, nature or nurture.
- **Goal** – God's glory versus the client's happiness.
- **Solution** – redemption found in the gospel versus humanistic Band-Aids which only deal with symptoms/felt needs.

Humanistic psychology can be good a description of some problems, but they fall

short in their prescription of solutions.

T4L: Thank you for that excellent clarifying summary. How does the sufficiency of Scripture relate to the work of the biblical counselor?

Jim Newheiser: God's Word contains wisdom, which surpasses all earthly wisdom (Psalm 19:7-10). No other wisdom is perfect; restoring the soul, rejoicing the heart. God's Word is also powerful, as John Frame states, "God's Word does what only God can do."

Here is a link to a talk I have given on the sufficiency of Scripture in counseling: <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=10291718224210>.

T4L: Perfect! Thanks for sharing that link. So, what (in your opinion) are the most common challenges facing biblical counselors?

Jim Newheiser: People have heard untrue things about us: that we deny that some problems are physical and require medical intervention (including medication). Or that we bash people with Bible verses without caring and listening first (Proverbs 20:5).

Because our knowledge is limited, and because body and soul are interrelated, it is hard to know what is (primarily) physical and/or medical, and what is merely spiritual.

T4L: Very true. Do you see any helpful developments in the biblical counseling field today?

Jim Newheiser: I started in the early 1980s when all of the books on biblical counseling could fit on one shelf. The resources available today are wonderful. Godly wise men and women are doing great work applying God's Word to many different issues. If I run into a "new" problem, I can be confident that someone in our field has addressed it with God's Word.

I think that the emphasis upon the gospel indicatives as the foundation for the biblical imperatives has been a blessing. Every counseling session should point the counselee to Christ. But we should not ignore the imperatives. Anyone involved in biblical counseling should see my mini-book, *Help! I Want to Change*. The Biblical

Counseling Coalition has given many of us an opportunity to network, to build relationships, and to learn from each other.

T4L: Networking is so important in this field, and in ministry in general. How can churches best train counselors and implement the biblical counseling ministry in their church?

Jim Newheiser: I am convinced that this is a priority for our church leaders (Ephesians 4:11; Romans 15:14). I often run into pastors who want to outsource their counseling. Counseling is *not* a distraction from pastoral work. Shepherds are called upon to care for sheep (1st Peter 5:1ff). The following is a link where I talk more about this: <https://ibcd.org/the-necessity-of-the-church-in-counseling/>.

There are many good programs which can help churches to move forward. One such program is from IBCD which has built a curriculum, *Care and Discipleship*, which many churches are using to equip leaders to participate in one-another care. It includes instruction along with videos demonstrating what live counseling looks like. This curriculum can prepare students for ACBC certification. It also offers IBCD certificates in Care and Discipleship, which are less demanding than ACBC training, but more attainable for many students.

T4L: What great information! Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to do this interview, Dr. Newheiser.

The Authority, Sufficiency, and Finality of Scripture

By Sinclair Ferguson

If God has given us the Scriptures to be the canon or rule for our lives, it follows that we must regard them as the supreme authority for our lives. Paul tells us that they are 'breathed out' by God. There can be no more authoritative word than one that comes to us on divine breath.

The Scriptures are also a sufficient authority for the whole of the Christian life. They are *“profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work”* (2nd Timothy 3:16).

The Scriptures do not tell us everything about everything. They provide no instruction about computer programming, or how best to organize a library,



the correct way to swing a golf club, or how to play chess. They do not tell us how far away the sun is from the earth, what DNA is, how best to remove an appendix surgically, the best coffee to drink, or the name of the person we should marry.

That is not an expression of any deficiency on their part. For there is a focus and a goal to the sufficiency of the Scriptures. Everything I need to learn in order to live to the glory of God and enjoy him forever I will find in the application of Scripture.

Yet this narrow focus broadens out into everything. For one thing, Scripture teaches us something about everything. Since the Bible gives us grounds for believing we live in a universe, Christians understand that everything has the characteristic of being created, of derivativeness, and also that everything fits into the grand design of God.

So Scripture is sufficient to give me a rational ground for thinking about anything and everything on the assumption that this world, and everything in it, makes sense. Further, no matter what my calling or abilities, the Scriptures are sufficient to teach me principles that will enable me to think and act in a God-honoring way when I am engaged in any activity or vocation.

Inerrancy in this context it is appropriate for us to ask an important and much debated question: *If Scripture is our final authority, exactly how reliable is it as the authority on which we should base the whole of our lives?*

If, convinced that the Bible is the word of God, we ask that question from a theological point of view, there seems to be only one reasonable answer: *Scripture is completely reliable.* For the God who has 'breathed out' Scripture is trustworthy in everything He does and says. He is the God who cannot lie (Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18; Numbers 23:19); He speaks the truth in everything He says (Proverbs 30:5). The notion that He would be untruthful and err is contradictory to everything Scripture tells us about Him.

However, Scripture also tells us that the word of God comes through the minds and mouths of men. Does this not mean that it will inevitably contain some mistakes? After all, "To err is human." If so, to use an old illustration, is it not more appropriate to think of the Bible as though it were a slightly scratched gramophone record? Or, in more contemporary terms, is the Bible not like a digitized version of an old recording— despite deficiencies, the music can still be heard, and if we listen with care we can make out the words quite well.

“...is the Bible not like a digitized version of an old recording— despite deficiencies, the music can still be heard...”

But two obvious considerations need to be remembered. First, strictly speaking, 'to err' is not so much human as it is *fallen*. Second, not everything said by humans involves error. Life revolves round the fact that people speak the truth, that what they say is not riddled with mistakes. A person can go through the whole day without making a single erroneous statement. And societies function well only where a premium is placed on truth telling. Much of what we say and write is, in a fairly obvious sense, error free.

“Frequently, however, we are told that the term ‘inerrant’ has an Achilles’ heel, since it needs to be qualified in order to explain exactly what it means.”

It is surely then within the power of God to preserve the authors of Scripture from error. So the assumption that the Scriptures inevitably contain errors because written by men is false. But there is a further consideration, in addition to that of the logic of our theology. The books of Scripture specifically affirm the truthfulness of what is written; those who appear

in their narratives share that perspective. Jesus himself spoke of God's word as 'truth'. Almost in passing he stated that “Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35)—and it is often in such passing comments that our real convictions come to the surface.

Other passages in Scripture point us in the same direction. The New Testament authors refer to passages and authors in the Old Testament in a way that assumes their trustworthiness and absolute reliability. There is no New Testament example of an author taking the view that there were probably, or even possibly, errors of any kind in Scripture. For them, if Scripture said it, then God said it; when He put His words into men's mouths, those words could be trusted fully and regarded as accurate. This applies both to statements of facts and to interpretations of events. The Scriptures are *inerrant*.

But when we speak about the 'inerrancy' of the Bible, what do we mean? 'Inerrancy' is, after all, a privative term. It tells us what Scripture is not—it is in-, or non-, errant; that is, 'error free'. What kind of 'inerrancy' do we mean?

A False Alternative?

Before we think further about this, however, there is a much discussed issue we ought to address. By no means do all Christians (indeed by no means all Christians who describe the Bible as the word of God) share the view that it is 'inerrant'. Many prefer the term 'infallible' believing that although Scripture may contain errors of fact, its message of salvation will not fail us. But this is a sleight of hand, so long as our dictionaries explain 'infallible' and 'inerrant' in mutual terms.

Frequently, however, we are told that the term 'inerrant' has an Achilles' heel, since it needs to be qualified in order to explain exactly what it means. If so, then

the term itself, it is argued, is surely an unhelpful one. From this point of view the term 'infallible' is both better, and—as it is claimed—uses the historic term to present the historic view of the church. 'Inerrant', the argument often continues, is (1) a relatively recent concept and (2) has come into popular use largely because of the influence of the influential American theologians Charles Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield, both of whom taught at Princeton Theological Seminary.

Granted that, for example, the Westminster Confession of Faith uses the term 'infallible' to describe the Bible, the power of this argument lies more in its rhetoric than in its substance.

For one thing, to argue that the term 'inerrant' is unhelpful because it needs to be qualified is naive. 'Qualify' is a grammatical term. Every schoolboy of my generation learned from *The Approach to Standard English* that “an adjective qualifies a noun”—it tells us something about its quality.

Say, for example, I play golf and want to purchase a new set of golf clubs. All golf clubs have shafts. The manufacturer asks me: “What shafts do you need in your clubs—“senior”, “regular”, “stiff”, or perhaps “extra stiff”?”

If I say, “Look, these qualifying terms are unhelpful. If you have to qualify the term “shaft” in these different ways, you shouldn't use it!”

But the club-maker will reply: “Sir, you don't understand. These qualifications clarify. If you are going to hit a golf ball with a club you will soon see the importance of these qualifications!”

The same is true when we describe the *inerrancy* of Scripture. To say that, because the term 'inerrant' needs to be qualified, the term 'infallible' is preferable, is also naive thinking. For the term 'infallibility' equally needs to be qualified, and often for exactly the same reasons and in exactly the same way as 'inerrancy'.

This criticism involves a self-defeating principle. For we are bound to ask: What do you mean by "infallibility"? When you say "Scripture is infallible", do you mean "error-free" (with the Oxford English Dictionary), or what? Is Scripture "infallible" on all matters, or only some? Is it "infallible" in historical detail, and in scientific issues, or is the infallibility linked only to what it says about God?

Some authors who reject *inerrancy* in favor of *infallibility* believe there are errors of fact and “obvious inconsistencies” in Scripture. For that very reason, when someone says Scripture is 'infallible', there is all the more reason to ask for clarification (i.e. qualification).

The point being established here is a simple, but important one: the criticism that the term 'inerrant' needs to be qualified, and therefore is inadequate, has no real substance. Qualifying a term clarifies it. Indeed rather than weaken, qualifying it may actually *strengthen* a term.

It is true that the term 'inerrancy' has been much more prominent in North America than, say, in the United Kingdom. But given the massive number of Christians, the much greater number and faculty size of major evangelical seminaries in the United States, and the number of publications that flow from them, this is hardly surprising. What is surprising is the implication that inerrancy is (1) essentially an American peculiarity, (2) one of relatively recent vintage, and (3) largely thrust into the atmosphere by two, albeit hugely influential, American theologians and their colleagues.

Even if this were true, it could hardly be grounds for rejecting the term. Christians in the fourth century did not reject the term *homoousios* simply because it was not traditional terminology.

But in fact these claims can be dismissed. Perhaps the most interesting way of doing so is found in the following quotation which affirms the inerrancy of Scripture: *It is absolutely wrong...either to narrow inspiration to certain parts of Scripture or to admit that the sacred writer has erred...So far is it from being possible that any error can co-exist with inspiration, that inspiration not only is essentially incompatible with error, but excludes and rejects it as absolutely and necessarily as it is impossible that God himself, the Supreme Truth, can utter that which is not true.*

The author? It certainly sounds like an early twentieth-century statement that might be found in one or other of the essays on Scripture, written by the American theologian, B. B. Warfield. But its source is a diameter removed, for:

- The statement comes from the work of a European theologian, not an American one.
- The statement was not made by an evangelical theologian.
- The statement was originally written in Latin, not in English.
- The statement was published in 1893.
- The statement appears in *Providentissimus Deus*, the Papal Encyclical of Leo XIII issued in that year.

This is simply one example from the history of theology giving the lie to the notion that inerrancy is a *recent* evangelical invention. Rather inerrancy is the classical doctrine of the Church, and not the idiosyncratic view of a narrow band of modern theologians.

While the interpretation of Scripture may have been debated in the historic controversies of the Church, and the sufficiency of Scripture may have been an issue at the time of the Reformation, the historic view of the Christian Church is that the Scriptures themselves are without error. Indeed this is actually what the term

'infallibility' denoted through the history of the Church.

In fact, while the words have different nuances they function as synonyms for each other. At the very least the two terms are interchangeable. Thus, for example, the Oxford English Dictionary defines 'infallible' as 'incapable of erring'. Indeed, it could be argued that, if anything, the term 'infallible' is the stronger, not the weaker of the two.

Qualifying Descriptions

It is important to qualify terms. What do we mean—and not mean—by 'inerrant'? In what sense is Scripture without error in what it affirms? When we refer to the Bible as 'inerrant' we are, of course, ultimately referring to the text of the Old Testament as it was received by Jesus, and the text of the New Testament as it was written by the apostles.

Why is this important, since we do not possess what are often referred to as 'the original autographs'? We know that during the process of copying, whether from one manuscript to another by an individual, or many manuscripts dictated to scribes writing simultaneously, errors can creep in to the copies. If you think about it, very few readers of a book have seen its 'original autograph'. As far as I am aware, the 'original autograph' of the first edition of this book is no longer in existence. That notwithstanding, it remains the text I originally wrote. The fact that I no longer have it does not make it irrelevant. It is what I wrote.

Even with modern technology we find errors in the published versions of books which were absent from the original autograph. Until the fourteenth century, book production was much more error prone. They were copied by hand. Sometimes they were dictated to a group of scribes. Errors caused by mishearing easily crept in. Nor is it surprising if a copyist wrote down a wrong word from a manuscript as his eyes moved from the original to the copy he was writing.

Similar slips take place today. I recall writing the words: "Rend your heart and not your garments" (Joel 2:13) in a manuscript. When the manuscript came back to me for review the wrong substitution of one letter (a 't' instead of a 'd'), changed my meaning dramatically, and humorously: "Rent your heart, and not your garments." That may be good advice; but it was not what my autographic text said! I didn't say: "I no longer have the "autographic text"—it doesn't matter."

The reason for speaking of the inerrancy of the text of the Old Testament Jesus used, and the autographic texts of the apostles, should be well understood by every author. When we speak of the 'inerrancy' of the Bible, we realize that Scripture needs to be interpreted properly, in a manner that is sensitive to its various genres and styles. It should be read in its own terms and not according to inappropriate stand-

ards. A young male student of astronomy is not likely to criticize an attractive, young female doctoral student in English poetry who asks: “Would you like to go for a walk around campus before sunset?” Even astronomers speak in those terms.

It should be obvious that the Bible was not written to be a twenty-first century scientific textbook. A moment's reflection indicates that, if it were, its precision and detail would (a) be incomprehensible to the vast majority of readers, and (b) very soon be out of date! So we ought to assess the Bible by appropriate standards, not inappropriate ones. The history recorded in Scripture is written from a different perspective from that of technical historians today.

Biblical authors believed that history is the unfolding of God's purposes and reveals the outworking of His promises. It has a meaning written into it, and a goal to which it is moving. By contrast, contemporary historians tend to completely exclude God from history. For all practical purposes, they adopt the view that, while they may be able to trace causes and effects in the events that transpire, it is no part of their discipline to discern an underlying plot line, or a divine plan and purpose, or for that matter an ultimate goal in history. It should not therefore surprise us that the authors of Scripture both describe and assess historical events very differently.

We recognize that the inerrancy of Scripture is, in the nature of the case, not something we can 'prove'. We do not know enough about the past to enable us to prove that all the Bible's statements are true; we do not know what will happen in the future to be able to verify any of its prophecies in advance. Our conviction is rooted in the more basic belief that the Bible is the Word of God, and that every indication we have confirms its reliability as such. There may remain elements in Scripture that we are not able to 'piece together'; but in the light of all we know about the Bible and its authors, we see no reason to doubt its reliability.

Critics of inerrancy point to what they regard as inconsistencies, or contradictions, in the text to demonstrate their perspective.

For example, as we have already seen, in one Gospel a Roman centurion asks Jesus to heal his servant, while in another it is the elders of the local synagogue who come to speak to Him. But far from being a contradiction, in this instance some knowledge of the cultural context enables us to see that these accounts are in fact completely harmonious.

“There is also a finality about the New Testament Scriptures.”

Again, Jesus healed the blind as he made his way through Jericho to Jerusalem. But there are differences in the Gospel accounts. Did Jesus heal two blind men as he left Jericho (Matthew 20:29-30)? Or only one blind man as he left Jericho

(Mark 10:46)? Or one blind man as he entered Jericho (Luke 18:35)? It may be easy enough to say: 'If he healed two, then he healed one. Surely all we have here is the different focus of the Gospel writers?' But aren't entering and leaving antithetical ideas? One cannot both enter and leave at the same time! Unless of course there was a larger area called 'Jericho' that one entered as one left the city called 'Jericho'. Or perhaps there were two healings? If so, the similarity between them, even in the words spoken, is hardly surprising. Either explanation is, surely more likely than that the Gospel writers consciously contradicted the other.

Entire volumes have been written on these and similar passages suggesting resolutions to the difficulties some feel with them. But as we have seen, our conviction of the inspiration and reliability of the Bible is not based on our ability to prove the doctrine of inerrancy by showing that every statement in Scripture is error-free, but by a Spirit-born recognition of the divine character of Scripture. Like the biblical teaching on the virgin conception, the resurrection, and the return of Christ, inerrancy is an article of faith.

Finality

There is also a finality about the New Testament Scriptures. Since they record God's last word for the last days, we should not now expect that God will 'speak' to us directly. Now that He has spoken in Christ and through the apostles, we discover His will by applying Scripture to all the varied circumstances in which we live. We do not expect, for example, that God will whisper to us the name of the person we are to marry, the calling we are to pursue, the church to which we are to belong, or the place we should live. We discover God's will in these areas by the careful and ongoing application of the principles, commands, and illustrations we find in Scripture to the life-situations in which we find ourselves.

This is an obvious implication of having the completed canon of Scripture. It might seem hardly worth mentioning, were it not for the fact that it has become commonplace among contemporary Christians to believe God speaks to us apart from and in addition to His Word.

The more balanced representatives of this view emphasizes that this does not mean in contradiction of God's Word. But nevertheless, in effect this establishes the possibility in practice of a second 'canon', separate from, and additional to, Scripture. And frequently—indeed almost inevitably—this second stream of revelation becomes the practical rule that directs the Christian life. It is seen as a more immediate and individualized revelation. These characteristics mean it is liable to be given precedence over the reading of, meditation on, reflection about, and application of the written Scriptures.

Whenever someone prefaces a statement by 'the Lord told me' or 'the Spirit revealed to me' and is referring to anything other than Scripture they have in effect established a second canon for themselves, an additional stream of revelation. But, as William Bridge wisely noted, "Who doth not know that the Devil will speak an hundred Truths, that he may crowd in one lye amongst them."

At one time I was a regular customer of a very talkative hairdresser. She became a Christian, but remained very talkative! Customers now began to prefer a different hairdresser to avoid being confronted by the gospel!

After some time she told me how excited she was because her pastor was teaching her how to live so that every detail of her life could be directed by the Holy Spirit. This sounded wonderfully encouraging. But in fact, her pastor had been teaching 'how to listen to what the Spirit is saying to you immediately, personally, and individually each day'. I recall her telling me with enthusiasm how she had learned to listen to the Spirit so that she would know whether he wanted her to put on the right foot sock or the left foot sock first in the morning.

But this pathway of pursuing detailed obedience to extra-biblical revelation always has the same tendency. One day it will lead to complete paralysis—not putting on either sock because the Spirit has not 'spoken'. Or it will lead to guilt when things go awry and then the individual fears that she may have disobeyed the Lord by putting on the wrong sock at the beginning of the day.

This is not to say that our inner promptings and 'feelings' are unimportant. They are, after all, superintended by the providential rule of God. But unlike Scripture, providential experiences do not come with their own built-in interpretation, and we cannot claim for them 'thus says the Lord'. They are the result of processes within our own minds—even if they seem to come to us without prior conscious reflection.

The more our minds are saturated in Scripture the greater will be its impact on our mental processes at every level. Thus subjective feelings and judgments can be healthy expressions of the impact of biblical teaching on our responses to life situations. But our approach with everything that comes into our minds is to submit it to God's Word in Scripture. It is our only safe guide.

Understanding the authority and function of canonical Scripture—that God has adequately revealed His will for the church in the Bible—saves us from the instability of such 'bolt-from-the-blue' approaches to guidance. For all its apparent spirituality, immediacy is no guarantee of validity. And not every Christian is sufficiently mature enough to know how to distinguish the work of the Spirit from the influence of an enemy who appears as an angel of light (2nd Corinthians 11:14).

God has provided a safe and secure pathway for us in the directives, promises,

examples, and commands of His written Word. In their light we seek to interpret the significance of all His providences—including our mental processes and perceptions. Every thought we have about what may be the will of God, we will want to bring to the touchstone of the teaching of the Bible.

We live in an age characterized by a reaction to sterile rationalism. We have a preference for, and have become used to, the immediate. There is, therefore, a subtle attraction to the subjective authority of personal experience in distinction from the objective authority of a book that needs to be studied and applied. All the more reason for us to be people of the Book, who are growing in ability to apply its teaching to every life situation.

Instead of narrowing and confining life, biblical wisdom makes us strong and stable. Plus, unlike immediate guidance that bypasses Scripture completely, the patient study of God's written revelation gradually transforms our patterns of thinking and molds our character. As we will see, it is in order to transform us by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:1-2) that God has given us the Bible in the first place.

Thus, at the end of the day how we understand Scripture as our canon—our rule of faith and life—has very practical repercussions.

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William Bridge, *Scripture Light the Most Sure Light*, in *Twenty One Several Books of Mr. William Bridge collected into two volumes* (London, 1656), vol. 2, p. 15. 2 See Professor John Murray's valuable discussion on 'The Guidance of the 27.

The Sufficiency of the Bible Contra Rome

By Joel Beeke



As far back as the late medieval period, men such as John Wycliffe (c. 1329–1384) and Jan Hus (1373–1415) called the Church to return to Scripture. When challenged by hostile church officials, Hus answered his opponents, “Show me... better out of the Scriptures, and I will forthwith recant!” Hus’s devotion to *Sola Scriptura* cost him his life, for it compelled him to attack the principles on which the medieval Church based its authority. Beginning with Martin Luther (1483–1546) and Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531), and continuing in men such as John Calvin (1509–1564) and John Knox (c. 1514–1572), the Reformers developed Hus’s emphasis on Scripture to promote a recovery of the great teachings of the Bible. *Sola Scriptura*, at its heart, was an assertion of the sufficiency of the Bible for the faith and practice of the Church.

In the Smalcald Articles, Luther wrote, “The Word of God—and no one else, not

even an angel—should establish articles of faith” (Part 2, Art. 2, Sec. 15). The Geneva Confession (1536/37) declares in its first article, “For the rule of our faith and religion, we wish to follow the Scripture alone, without mixing with it any other thing which might be fabricated by the interpretation of men apart from the Word of God; and we do not pretend to receive any other doctrine for our spiritual government than that which is taught us by the same Word, without addition or reduction, according to the command of our Lord.”

The principle of *Sola Scriptura* explains why the Reformers accepted some parts of Roman Catholic teaching, but not others. They believed that Christ, as the only Head, rules His Church by His Word and Spirit. The authority of Scripture is thus absolute—the authority of Christ Himself—not an authority derived from or accorded to it by the Church. Calvin said that Scripture is as authoritative as if we heard God’s “living words” from Heaven with our own ears (*Institutes*, 1.7.1) and so Christians should be governed by its promises (*Institutes*, 3.2.6–7) and the Church should be wholly subject to its authority (*Institutes*, 4.8).

“As the revelation of the only wise God,
the Scripture is not obscure, but
perspicuous...”

The principle of “Scripture Alone” arises out of the unique properties or attributes of the Bible as the Word of God. Since Scripture is God’s written Word, we cannot pass judgment on Scripture; rather, Scripture passes judgment on *us*. As God’s Word, the Bible is the only book characterized by infallibility and inerrancy. Every word of every sentence is there by God’s determination (2nd Timothy 3:16-17). As the Word of God, the Scripture is pure truth without any assertions of error (Proverbs 30:5). Thus, Luther said (quoting Augustine), “I have learned to hold only the Holy Scripture inerrant”.

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the Bible has full authority to rule our consciences, for it comes to us resonating with the words, “Thus saith the Lord.” This authority is not dependent upon the testimony of mere men, or the judgment of the Church, but arises from the certainty produced by the Spirit, who bears witness to the Word (1st Thessalonians 1:5). Calvin emphasized the self-authenticating character of the Bible. This teaching holds that the Bible’s witness is confirmed by the internal testimony of the Spirit in the believer’s heart (*Institutes*, 1.7.2–5).

As the revelation of the only wise God, the Scripture is not obscure, but perspicuous, meaning that its sense is clear and can be understood (Psalm 119:105). With the Spirit’s illumination to overcome our native blindness, the Bible both au-

thenticates itself and interprets itself. It must be said that the Holy Spirit is the true expositor of the Bible, enabling “not only the learned, but the unlearned” to use Scripture to interpret Scripture and so “attain to a sufficient understanding [of it]” (Westminster Confession, 1.7, 9). The key of interpretation, therefore, belongs to the entire community of Christians, not just to Peter and his reputed successors in Rome. While tradition aids interpretation, the true, spiritual meaning of Scripture is its natural, literal sense, not an allegorical one, unless the particular Scripture passage being studied is clearly allegorical in nature.

The fact that the Bible is the written Word of God, supremely authoritative and self-authenticating, unfailingly true in all that it declares, clear in its doctrines, and made efficacious by the Spirit’s work, implies that the Bible is uniquely sufficient as God’s special revelation to us today. Recovering the Word of God means releasing the power of God (Romans 1:16). As this Word of Power, we can look to Scripture to transform and renew our minds as an instrument of the Spirit of God. That power must be manifested in our lives, our homes, our churches, and our communities.

Biblical Sufficiency Defined

The doctrine of the sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures teaches that “the whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary” for saving faith and the Christian life is revealed in the Bible. Therefore, the preaching, teaching, and counseling ministries of God’s Church are the ministry of the Word of God. There is no need or warrant to base our doctrine or directives on anything else, even if enshrined in Church tradition. When an early bishop of Rome based an argument on tradition, Cyprian (c. 200–258) responded with this rule: “If, therefore, it is either prescribed in the Gospel, or contained in the epistles or Acts of the Apostles... let this divine and holy tradition be observed.” Cyprian argued, “What obstinacy is that, or what presumption, to prefer human tradition to divine ordinance, and not to observe that God is indignant and angry as often as human tradition relaxes and passes by the divine precepts.” Cyprian warned, “Custom without truth is the antiquity of error” (*Epistle 73.2–3*, 9).

The Reformation brought a renewed emphasis upon the Bible’s sufficiency as special revelation in opposition to Roman Catholic claims to supplement the Bible with additional revelation passed down in tradition. Calvin said, “All our wisdom is contained in the Scriptures, and neither ought we to learn, nor teachers to draw their instructions, from any other source” (Commentary on 2nd Timothy 4:1). The Westminster Confession of Faith (1.6) offers a helpful summary of the doctrine: “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and neces-

sary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men.”

The sufficiency of Scripture is, however, limited to the Bible’s purpose in revealing truth for our salvation, faith, and obedience (Psalm 19:7-11; John 20:31). The doctrine does not assert that the Bible is sufficient to guide all human activities in every respect, except in the most general way. The Bible does not claim to be a comprehensive encyclopedia of everything. Instead, it gives us “the words of the wise” so “that [our] trust may be in the Lord” (Proverbs 22:17, 19). The Holy Scriptures “are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (2nd Timothy 3:15). It is “profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2nd Timothy 3:16). Other matters must be governed by “the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed,” such as “Whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God” (1st Corinthians 10:31).

Biblical Sufficiency Clarified

The Bible’s sufficiency should also not be understood to exclude the use of the Church’s helps, such as her many teachers past and present, and the writings produced by them. These are *not to be rejected*, but welcomed as a means that the Holy Spirit has provided in the body of Christ (1st Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11-13). *However*, they are subordinated to the Bible in such a way that they have authority to direct our faith and obedience only insofar as they faithfully reproduce and apply the teachings of Scripture. The principle of Scripture alone, rightly understood, does not mean the church of any given time or place operates by the Bible alone without reference to the traditions of the Church through the ages. Rather, the *Sola* of ‘*Sola Scriptura*’ means that the Bible alone is the fountain and touchstone for all authoritative teaching and tradition. This point especially needs to be emphasized in a historic contemporary culture that emphasizes radical individualism and personal liberty. As Peter warns, “No prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation” (2nd Peter 1:20).

Nor is it right to appeal to the decisions of the Church’s synods and councils as if they were as authoritative as Scripture. In Roman Catholicism, much is made of the decrees of the “Ecumenical Councils” of the ancient Church, as though the authority of such assemblies were infallible and absolute. The Westminster Assembly of Divines did not reject the decisions of these bodies outright, but sounded a warning: “All synods or councils since the apostles’ times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred; therefore, they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice, but to be used as an help in both” (21.4).

The Bible’s sufficiency as revelation should also be carefully distinguished from its efficacy. The efficacy of the Word of God comes from the present activity of the Ho-

ly Spirit working with the Word (1st Thessalonians 1:5). The Westminster Assembly of Divines wisely added the following qualification to the definition cited above:

“Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word” (John 6:45; 1st Corinthians 2:9-12). However, this does not reduce the Bible to a dead letter. The Word and the Spirit are inseparable (Isaiah 59:21; John 6:33), for the Spirit directed the writing of the Bible Word (2nd Peter 1:20-21), and the Word is the great instrument of the Spirit for accomplishing His work in us and in the world (John 16:7-11; Ephesians 6:17). We must always remember, however, that the Spirit is sovereignly free, working when and where and how He pleases (John 3:8), as He uses and applies the Word, whether to harden the wicked or draw sinners to Christ.

The sufficiency of the written Word of God does not mean that the Bible contains all special revelation granted throughout redemptive history. Our Lord Jesus Christ did many things that are not written in the Gospels (John 20:20; John 21:25). God revealed some things to the apostles that He forbade them to report to the Church (2nd Corinthians 12:4; Revelation 10:4). However, the Bible does contain all things that God willed to function as the rule of faith and obedience for His people.

Though the sufficiency of Scripture informs all of life with respect to how to please God, it has special relevance for the sacred activity of the Church and its officers. The Belgic Confession says, “Since the whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in them at large, it is unlawful for any one, though an apostle, to teach otherwise than we are now taught in the Holy Scriptures” (article 7). All our activities, though serving many legitimate earthly purposes, should be done for God’s pleasure, but the public worship of the Church

is performed in God’s special presence for His pleasure as the sacrifices of His royal priesthood offered in His living temple (1st Peter 2:4-5, 9).

Therefore, in the worship and witness of the Church as the people of God, the sufficiency of Scripture implies and confirms the regulative principle: we must worship as God has commanded, not according to human ideas of worship, neither adding nor subtracting from His Word (Deuteronomy 12:30-32).

This is not to say, however, that we must have biblical warrant for every incidental detail of our worship. The Westminster Assembly of Divines again clarified, “There are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the

“We recognize that the Word of God as revelation predates the Bible, for God spoke to mankind in the Garden of Eden.”

light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed” (1st Corinthians 11:13-14; 1st Corinthians 14:26; 1st Corinthians 14:40). The regulative principle must be nuanced: The Bible is sufficient to direct us in regard to the elements, content, and character of our worship, but provides only general guidance with regard to things merely circumstantial to it.

Biblical Teaching on Scripture’s Sufficiency

Negatively, we find the sufficiency of Scripture asserted in the prohibitions against *adding to* or *taking away from* God’s Word (Deuteronomy 4:2). The Word of God, as it exists in each stage of redemptive history, is sufficient to be the wisdom and righteous law of God’s people (Deuteronomy 4:6-8). The Bible closes with a warning not to add to or take away from the book (Revelation 22:18-19; Proverbs 30:5-6).

We recognize that the Word of God as revelation predates the Bible, for God spoke to mankind in the Garden of Eden. His spoken word was prior to His written word. God spoke to Adam, Eve, and the serpent after the Fall, and His spoken word was sufficient to bring our first parents to repentance and faith in the coming Savior. God added to His Word progressively over time through His servants the prophets, but forbade men to add or subtract anything according to their own ideas. Through Moses, God initiated the writing or “inscripturation” of His Word, He Himself writing the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone. At every point in redemptive history, the Word of God, spoken or written, was sufficient for His people’s needs at that time. With the apostles and New Testament prophets, God completed His special revelation. Today the Bible is the *only* Word of God that the Church possesses.

As the written Word of God, the Bible issues an oft-repeated warning against drawing spiritual wisdom from any other source. All claims to know God’s will for us today must be tested by Scripture, as the prophet Isaiah admonished (Isaiah 8:20). Tradition cannot be added to the Bible as a distinct source or repository of divine revelation. The Prophet Isaiah, the Lord Jesus, and the Apostle Paul all unite to warn against doctrine or practice based merely on “the precept of men”, “the tradition of men”, or “the commandments and doctrines of men” (Isaiah 29:13; Mark 7:6; Colossians 2:22).

Positively, the Bible bears witness to the completeness and finality of its revelation. The Bible is sufficient for moral instruction. Even before the coming of Christ, the prophet could say, “He hath [showed] thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee” (Micah 6:8). The Bible is sufficient for repentance and salvation. When He spoke of the rich man in hell and Lazarus with Abraham in heaven, the Lord Jesus presented the rich man as denying the sufficiency of Scripture. He

asked Abraham to send a man back from the dead to warn his brothers, but when Abraham said, "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them," the man in hell objected, "Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent." In other words, the rich man claimed that the Bible was not enough;

"Paul said that God's servant is fully equipped for "all good works", the whole ministry required of him by God, because the Bible is "profitable" (or useful) for all those works."

men need to see miracles. The answer of Abraham in Christ's parable is startling: "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead" (Luke 16:27-31). If God's Word is rejected, then no miracle will suffice to convince them. How much more is God's revelation full and complete now that God's Son has come in the flesh (Hebrews 1:1-2).

Christ performed this work of revelation during His earthly life, and brought it to fulfillment in the ministry of the Spirit through His apostles. The Lord Jesus said to them that the Comforter "shall teach you all things" (John 14:26). Christ promised the Spirit would "show you things to come" (John 16:13, KJV). The "all things" and "all truth" in view is certainly not all possible knowledge about everything, but consists of the full revelation of the Father's will for our redemption, accomplished in Christ (John 16:14-15). These promises, originally given to the apostles, pertain especially to the apostolic ministry of the Word that was distilled in the New Testament writings. They do not give warrant for new revelations that add to the Bible, for the Spirit "shall not speak of himself," or go beyond Christ, but, Christ said, "he shall glorify me, [and] shall take of mine, and shall show it unto you" (John 16:13-15). Therefore, in the apostolic documents of the New Testament, together with the Old Testament, we have the "all things" and "all truth" which God has willed to reveal in Christ, for our time and for all time to come.

Paul deduced the sufficiency of Scripture from its nature as a "God-breathed" document. He said to Timothy, "From a child thou hast known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2nd Timothy 3:15-16). Even when taught to children, the Bible is "able" to lead them to wisdom and salvation. According to 2nd Timothy 3:16, the Bible is also sufficient for the Church and its ministries. A "man of God" in biblical parlance is God's prophet (Deuteronomy 33:1; 1st Kings 13:1-10; 1st Kings 17:24), but here, a preacher of the Word (2nd Timothy 4:2; 1st Timothy 6:11).

Paul said that God's servant is fully equipped for "all good works", the whole ministry required of him by God, because the Bible is "profitable" (or useful) for all those works. We find the same Greek phrase here translated "all good works" (*pan ergon agathon*) a little earlier in this epistle: "If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honor, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work" (2nd Timothy 2:21).

Just as a holy life qualifies a man morally for ministry, so the Bible qualifies him with the full revelation of truth needed to feed the flock of God. This is all the more striking when we remember that Timothy had listened to Paul's preaching for years (2nd Timothy 2:2; 3:10), but when Paul neared death, he did not tell Timothy to rely primarily upon his memories of Paul's words, but to rely on the Holy Scriptures. Having the written Word is even better than fallible memories of an apostle's teaching, even if you heard an apostle with your own ears. Peter bids his readers take heed to the written Word of God because, as "the word of prophecy", it is "more sure" than his own testimony as an eyewitness of Christ's transfiguration on the mount (2nd Peter 1:16-21). Thus Paul proceeded to tell Timothy, "preach the word" (2nd Timothy 4:2).

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The Sufficiency of Scripture and Counseling

By Joey Tomlinson

In my experience, I've found that many people in local churches would agree with a statement of faith that reads like this:

"We believe that Scripture is breathed out by

God and is authoritative, inerrant, infallible, and sufficient." Albeit, this is a very short, vague, and (I would argue) incomplete statement of belief regarding the Scripture, it is nonetheless confessed in some way by any orthodox church. However, these are just words on a page. You can read them, make them a part of your church's statement of faith, and nod your head in agreement until your neck is tired. But doing those things doesn't matter. If this statement on the doctrine of Scripture does not obviously animate your local church, then your church does not believe this confession. I know that may sound harsh, but it is true and you need to hear it.



In this short article, I want to address the importance of putting feet to our confession regarding Scripture. This I intend to do by discussing the issue of counseling and—specifically—the sufficiency of Scripture.

Defining Sufficiency

The doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture means that there is no need for any more special revelation. God has spoken and revealed everything needed to know Him and glorify Him forever, and His words have been documented in 66 books, kept pure (preserved) throughout the ages. All knowledge outside of the Scripture must be viewed as inferior to Scripture and, if found in conflict, be discarded. Theologian, John Frame, says it in this way:

Since God created and governs all things, he is the original interpreter of creation, the one who understands the world and all its depths- not only its material nature, but also its ultimate meaning and purpose. God, therefore, has the ultimate viewpoint on the world- the broadest, deepest understanding of it. His word about himself or about the world, therefore, is more credible than any other word or any other means of knowing. It obligates belief, trust, and obedience.

So, if God's Word is authoritative, inerrant, and infallible that means it is sufficient. Sufficiency is the legs to our doctrine, our confession. Sufficiency means that the Scripture is *useful*. In fact, that's what Paul is reminding young Pastor Timothy of in 2nd Timothy 3:16-17:

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

Now, by the time 2nd Timothy is written, the Apostle Paul is in prison in Rome (2nd Timothy 1:16-17; 2:9) and he knows that his fate is probably death (2nd Timothy 4:6-8). We are getting Paul's final words, which is why we should be paying attention. Furthermore, this letter is an *ecclesiastical* letter. It's a letter about the Church and *for* the Church. Therefore, we should seek to apply the things the Apostle Paul is commending to Timothy inside of our local church assembly.

Paul's concern here is for Timothy to faithfully minister to the church in Ephesus (1st Timothy 1:3; 7; 6:3), even in the midst of false teachers within the church. This subscription to false teaching had influenced the moral behavior of those within the church of Ephesus (1st Timothy 1:8-11; 2:9-15; 2nd Timothy 2:16-17, 19).

Now, the reason this is important for us to know is because wrong beliefs lead to wrong behavior, and wrong behavior demands the ministry of counseling. Like the church of Ephesus, our churches today are filled with people who have been influenced by false teachers and teachings.

Churches are filled with people who believe their lustful passions, and our broader culture helps to solidify that people can “live however they want”. The broader culture’s mantra is, *‘Be who you are. Follow your heart.’* Therefore, as you know, we are prone to be people (and know people) whose behavior is only an outworking of their false beliefs. Now, interestingly Paul’s remedy for combatting false doctrine and immorality is for Timothy to preach the Word (2nd Timothy 4:2) publicly and privately and to have confidence in it, because it is *sufficient*. Scripture is sufficient because it is the very Word of God.

What Paul is pressing into Timothy is the need to apply this doctrine of authority of Scripture in the local church context. He is saying, “Because Scripture is breathed out by God, it is profitable and sufficient. Therefore, apply it.”

The Sufficiency of Scripture and Counseling

Counseling should be taking place in the context of the local church primarily. Why is this? Because the Scriptures are sufficient. Now we need to ask the question, “What can the Scriptures *do* in the counseling context?” According to the Apostle Paul they can teach, reprove, correct, and train in righteousness so that the man or woman of God may be equipped for every good work (2nd Timothy 3:16-17). In other words, we utilize our sufficient Scripture to present mature men and women in Jesus.

This type of counseling even extends to things such as depression and anxiety (Psalm 42-43:77 and 1st Peter 5:6-7). Now, I am not saying there is no place for medication. We are created body and soul. There is a use for medication for biological issues. However, I am asserting that everyone needs counseling and the Scriptures are completely sufficient for that.

Now, the question is if the Scriptures are sufficient for counseling (or as some say, *the private ministry of the Word*), and the Apostle Paul commends counseling ministry to take place in the local church, we need to ask ourselves the question, “Why do we send people away from the local church when life gets “messy”?” As believers, if someone’s life gets *messy*, isn’t it a good thing for it to be messy in the context of the local church? Yes, it absolutely is. Here is my encouragement to you dear

reader. If you are a Christian and you have a Bible, grow in your capacity to administer the gospel to struggling believers. Connect with organizations such as CCEF or ACBC, and become competent to counsel.

If you are a pastor and you're reading this, you don't *not* have time to counsel your members. There is no such thing as a man called to the office of 'preacher'. Men are called to the office of 'pastor/elder', and that entails the ministry of counseling. So, repent of your neglect and start counseling.

I am excited about what the Lord is doing in this particular ministry. There is a growing resurgence of men and women committed to counseling, and organizations like Servants of Grace are doing a great job at publishing content to help equip us. So, keep plodding, dear believer; your labor is not in vain.

References:

- i. John Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2002), 81.
- ii. The word *kérussó* could be better translated "proclaim" or "herald" and thus extends beyond the pulpit and beyond the pastorate.

The Sufficiency of Scripture and Pastoral Ministry

By Charles Handren



The aim of pastoral ministry is to shepherd the people of God toward Christ that they may be formed into His im-

age. As the Apostle Paul wrote, “*Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me*” (Colossians 1:28-29). While the process of shepherding people includes such things as evangelism, discipleship, and equipping for ministry, the question is this: how are the shepherds of the Church to fulfill their calling? That is, how are they to win the lost? How are they to teach the newly saved? How are they to nourish seasoned saints? How are they to equip the Church for the work of the ministry?

As it is with those who shepherd literal sheep, so it is with those who lead the people of God. The shepherds of the Church are given a staff to guide and a rod to rebuke, both of which are the Word of God, and both of which are to be utilized under the guidance of the Spirit (Ephesians 6:17-18), with humility of spirit (1st Peter 5:3), and with a genuine desire to edify the Church (Ephesians 4:11-16). Since the Scripture itself encourages the people of God to seek counsel from others (Proverbs 24:6), it’s acceptable for shepherds to consult persons and resources outside of Scripture as they carry out their calling. However, all things must ultimately be tested by the Word to ensure that they’re in accord with and useful for wielding the Word in the life of the Church.

Shepherds are Commanded to Teach Sound Doctrine

One way we see the primacy of the Word in the calling of shepherds is the commands that are given to them in the pastoral Epistles. For example, Paul writes, “*He [the elder] must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it*” (Titus 1:9). This text requires several things of pastors. First, shepherds must have a tight grip on “*the trustworthy word as taught*”, which I take to mean they must both grasp it well and be fully convinced of it in their own minds. They must possess both a strong handle on the truth and a passionate love for the truth.

Second, shepherds must hold “*to the trustworthy word as taught*”, which implies that the teaching they know and love derives not from themselves but from some source of authority outside of themselves. For Titus, the source of authority was the teaching that Paul received by the command of God. “Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God’s elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness, in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began and at the proper time *manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted* by the command of God our Savior” (Titus 1:1-3, emphasis mine). Since the core of Paul’s teaching is now contained in the Scriptures as we know them, we can say that pastors must hold to

the Scriptures in all they teach and do.

Third, shepherds must have the ability to give instruction in sound doctrine, which obviously means that their job is to teach the Word of God. Leadership, pastoral care, administration, and many other things are important, but pastors are essentially teachers. They are men of God who are called to spend their lives seeking to understand the truth, love the truth, be shaped by the truth, and embody the truth in their way of life. Then out of the overflow of their hearts and habits, they are to learn the art of ministering the “trustworthy word” to the people of God in a way that inspires them to love God and one another—that is, to be formed into the image of Christ.

Finally, shepherds must have the ability to rebuke those who contradict sound doctrine, which is to say, they must be able to defend the “trustworthy word as taught”. They must be highly skilled warriors on the battlefield of truth and error. Of course, as they do so they must also learn to emulate the character of Christ. As Paul said to Timothy, “And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, *correcting his opponents with gentleness*. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will” (2nd Timothy 2:24-26, emphasis mine). Thus, shepherds must be brave and full of love, bold to stand against error and quick to be kind, able to pierce with the sword of the Spirit and able to heal with the hand of mercy. They must always seek repentance, restoration, and unity—even when they have to engage in fierce battles for truth.

It is an inescapable fact that the shepherds of the Church are commanded to teach sound doctrine with their words and their manner of life, which is tantamount to saying that they must lead by teaching and applying the Word of God. They may draw on other persons and resources, but all things must be tested by the Word.

The Pastoral Function of the Word in the Life of the Church

The Word of God has fallen on hard times in many evangelical churches, for their leaders seem to think that it must be altered, adjusted, packaged, and marketed for the modern palette. While this conviction often flows out of a desire to see the lost saved, the lost cannot be saved when they are presented with something other or less than the very words of God. The gospel is the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16), and the gospel is articulated in those words, beginning with Genesis and moving through Revelation.

I have heard several well-known pastors say that much of the preaching in Christian churches today is out of touch with modern people, and I tend to agree.

But I think the problem is one of presentation, not of content. In other words, I think the issue is not so much that out-of-touch-pastors are preaching the Word on its own terms, as it is that they haven't learned how to preach it well. Any passage of Scripture can be presented in such a way that people are led to see the relevance thereof for their everyday lives. This, in fact, is one of the primary tasks of the preacher.

I derive this conviction, mainly, from Paul's well-known words in 2nd Timothy

3:16-17. *"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work."* The central claim of this text is that the Bible is "breathed-out" by God, which means, at least, that it derives from God and presents the very words and wisdom of God. Because this is so, the entire Bible is profitable for a number of things that are essential to life and crucial for

"The God-breathed words of Scripture touch upon every vital matter of life, and therefore they are imminently useful for pastoral ministry."

pastoral ministry.

First, all Scripture is profitable for "teaching", which means that it's useful for imparting the knowledge of truth. The Scripture teaches us the truth about theological matters like God, creation, humanity, morality, sin, redemption, the Church, Heaven and Hell, and the final judgment. It teaches us the truth about practical matters like romance, marriage, sexuality, raising children, work, play, money, philanthropy, friendship, time management, and planning. It teaches us the truth about matters of the heart like happiness, humility, pride, depression, stress, hope, love, and a proper sense of self. And it teaches us the truth about spiritual disciplines like Bible study, worship, prayer, fasting, meditation, silence, rest, service, and evangelism.

The God-breathed words of Scripture touch upon every vital matter of life, and therefore they are imminently useful for pastoral ministry. No other book or resource in the world is as relevant as the Word, and thus, why would we turn from its wisdom towards anything else? Why would we commit the twin evils of Israel who both forsook "the fountain of living waters", and hewed out cisterns for themselves, "broken cisterns that can hold no water" (Jeremiah 2:13)?

Second, all Scripture is profitable for reproof, which means that it's useful for rebuking God's people when they sin. The Word of God pierces right through our defenses and peers into the depths of our souls. It does not trifle with trivial matters, but cuts to the core so that God might heal our diseases rather than treat our symp-

toms. The purpose of such soul-piercing rebuke is to lead us away from destruction and toward a fuller life in Christ. Just as a shepherd must sometimes use his rod to strike the sheep and keep them from falling off a cliff or wandering near a wolf's den, so pastors must sometimes use the Word of God to rebuke the people of God and keep them from stumbling or falling prey to their enemies.

A few years ago, I got into a discussion about the pastoral ministry of rebuke with a thirty-something pastor of a new church. He insisted that pastors are not called to rebuke God's people, but only to ask them leading questions. I drew his attention to 2nd Timothy 3:16-17, but he replied, "Does this text say pastors are supposed to rebuke God's people or does it say that the Scripture is supposed to rebuke God's people?"

I replied, "Have you never read the next four verses?" Then turning in my Bible I read, "*I charge you [Timothy] in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths*" (2nd Timothy 4:1-4).

Yes, part of the calling of pastors is to humbly rebuke the people of God by

Whereas correction says, "No, don't walk in that way," training in righteousness says, "Yes, walk in this way."

the Word of God when necessary (see Titus 1:9, 13; 2:15). If we do not perform this duty, the sheep will certainly wander into all kinds of danger and perhaps even fall prey to our enemies. Of course, it's essential that we first humble ourselves before Scripture and learn what it means to receive the rebuke of the Lord before we give it.

But woe to the shepherd who does not learn the art of rebuke, and woe to the people he serves. Both he and they are in great danger.

Third, all Scripture is profitable for correction which means that it's useful for guiding God's people in the way they should go. The word for "correction" here can mean "rebuke", but given the context of this verse, I don't think that's what Paul has in mind. Rather, I think he's saying that, whereas the Scripture is useful for rebuking God's people when they sin, it's also useful for reorienting the course of their lives so that they will head in the right direction. Our sin has radically corrupted our ability to discern the will of God and follow in the ways of God, and we simply must be corrected so that we'll learn to head in the right direction. Just as a

shepherd must sometimes use his staff to guide the sheep, pastors must sometimes use the Word of God to guide His people; in fact, they are constantly engaging in this practice. Since the Word of God has the power to lead the people of God in the way that they should go, it is therefore sufficient for pastoral ministry.

Finally, all Scripture is profitable for training in righteousness, which is the positive outcome of correction. Whereas correction says, “No, don’t walk in that way,” training in righteousness says, “Yes, walk in this way.” Whereas correction warns us away from disobedience, training in righteousness teaches us obedience, and—ultimately—what obedience has to do with love. Jesus said in John 14:21, “*Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.*” Therefore, all Scripture is able to train us to display our love for God by gladly and willingly obeying his commands. I cannot imagine a source of wisdom more useful than that.

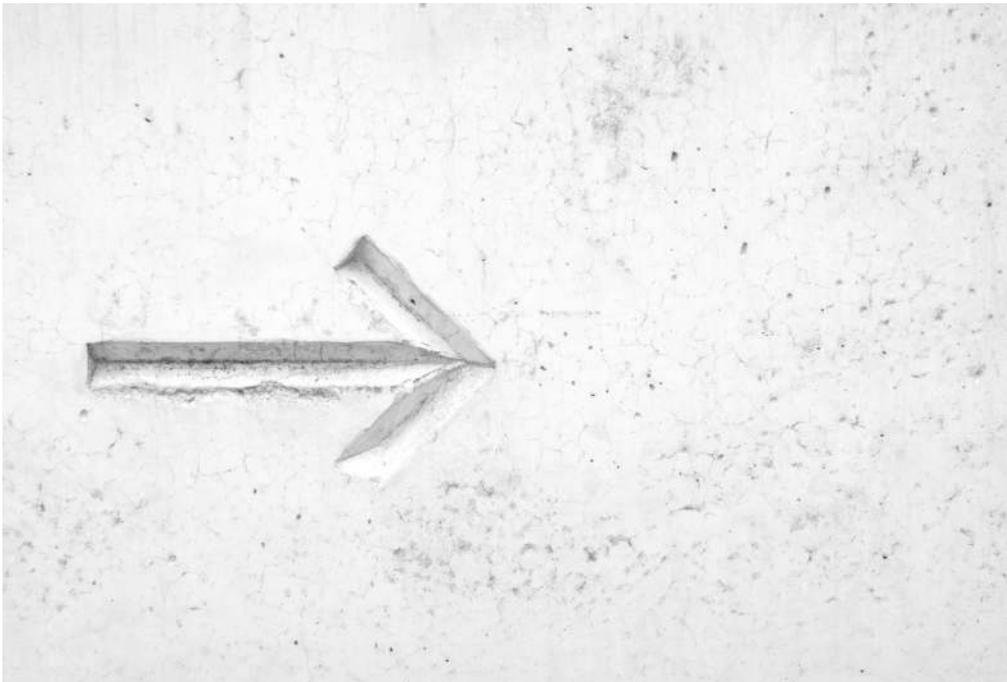
The end result of this four-fold purpose of Scripture is that the people of God become competent and equipped for every good work. In other words, God uses the Scriptures to raise His children and teach us how to be Christians. Since God has purposed to use His Word for such massively important things as these, I submit to you that it’s nothing less than malpractice to minimize or withhold it from His people as we carry out the pastoral ministry.

A Final Plea

For those who serve as shepherds of local churches, I want to close by pleading with you to amplify your personal love of the Word of God and your practical skill in utilizing it in the course of your ministry. Let the sufficiency of Scripture be more than a theological or theoretical conviction for you; rather, let it be a joy-producing truth that causes you to interact with people and carry out your ministry in the light of the wisdom of the Word. And for those who worship Jesus as members of local churches, I want to close by pleading with you to amplify your personal love of the Word of God and your practical skill in applying it to life and ministry. Further, I want to encourage you to pray for your shepherds along with those who serve Jesus throughout the world.

The Need for Discernment

By Dave Jenkins



Discernment is a word that many Christians today need to get a better hold of.

What exactly is discernment? How does discernment relate to spiritual growth? These are some of the questions that I will cover in this article.

First Thessalonians 5:21-22 says, “*Test everything hold fast*

what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.” Testing everything is a call to discernment. In the context of very basic Christian commands, Paul says that discernment is crucial to the effective Christian life.

Many people view discernment in the wrong way. Some Christians think discernment is just the pastor’s job as he watches the flock. This would be partially correct as most of the calls to discernment in the New Testament are issued to church leaders (1st Timothy 4:6-7, 13, 16; Titus 1:9). Every Pastor is required to be skilled in teaching the truth of God’s Word and able to refute unsound doctrine.

Discernment, however, is not only the duty of pastors and elders. The same careful discernment Paul demanded of pastors and elders is the duty of every Christian. First Thessalonians 5:21 is written to the entire church to “examine everything carefully”.

The Greek reads in 1st Thessalonians 5:21, “*examine everything*”. The idea conveyed by the word “*carefully*” is included in the Greek word translated “examine”, *dokimazo*. Elsewhere in the New Testament, this word is translated “analyze”, “test”, or “prove”. This word refers to the process of testing something to reveal its genuineness, such as in the testing of precious metals. Paul wanted believers to scrutinize everything they hear to perceive that it is genuine, to distinguish between the true and the false, to separate the good from the evil. In other words, Paul wants them to examine everything critically. The discernment that Paul is calling for in 1st Thessalonians 5:21 is doctrinal discernment.

Often Christians are told not to judge. After all, they reason, Jesus said in Matthew 7:1 to “not judge”. Was Jesus forbidding Christians from judging what is taught in His name? What Jesus condemned was the *hypocritical* judgment of those who held others to a higher standard than they were willing to live by. Elsewhere in Scripture, we are forbidden to judge others motives or attitudes. We are not able to discern “the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). Only God can judge the heart because only God can see it (1st Samuel 16:7). He alone knows the secrets of the heart (Psalm 44:21). He alone can weigh the motives therein (Psalm 16:2). He alone, according to Romans 2:16, will judge the secrets of men’s hearts through Christ Jesus.

The Scriptures make it clear that hypocritical judging and judging others thoughts and motives is not what Christians are to do. Throughout Scripture, the people of God are urged to judge between truth and error, right and wrong, good and the devil. Jesus, in John 7:24, said, “*Judge with right judgment.*” Paul wrote to the Corinthians believers in 1st Corinthians 10:15, saying, “*I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say.*” God requires Christians to be discriminating when it comes to matters of sound doctrine.

Christians are to judge one another with regard to acts of sin (1st Corinthians 5:12-13). This speaks of the same process of discipline outlined by Jesus Himself in Matthew 18:15-20. Most importantly, every Christian should examine themselves to see if they have judged rightly according to 1st Corinthians 11:31, which states, “*if we judged ourselves truly, we ourselves would not be judged.*” This calls for the believer to search their own hearts. Paul calls for this self-examination every time believers partake of the Lord’s Supper (1st Corinthians 11:28). The discernment Chris-

tians are called to engage in is doctrinal discernment.

The testing of truth that Paul calls for is not merely an academic exercise. It demands an active two-fold response. First, there is a positive response to whatever is biblical: *“Hold fast what is good”* (1st Thessalonians 5:21). This echoes Romans 12:9, *“Abhor what is evil; hold fast what is good.”* The expressions *hold fast*, or “cling to”, speak of jealously safeguarding the truth. Paul is calling for the same kind of watchfulness that he demanded of Timothy every time he wrote to him (1st Timothy 6:20; 2nd Timothy 1:13-14). The truth is given into our custody, and we are charged with guarding it against every possible threat.

This describes a militant, defensive, protective stance against anything that undermines the truth or does violence to it in any way. We must hold the truth securely, defend it zealously, and preserve it from all threats. To placate the enemies of truth, or lower our guard, is to violate this command.

“Hold fast” also carries the idea of embracing something. It goes beyond just that which is good and speaks of loving the truth with all of one’s strength. Those who are truly discerning are passionately committed to sound doctrine, to the truth, and to all that is inspired by God.

“A U.S. Treasury Agent does not need to study counterfeit money to spot it.”

Every Christian should have this attitude of discernment. Paul defined salvation as loving the truth (2nd Thessalonians 2:10), and he told the Corinthians they proved their salvation by holding fast to the gospel he delivered (1st Corinthians 15:2). Those who fail to hold fast to the saving message of Christ are those who have believed in vain; that is, their faith was empty to begin with. The Apostle John, in 1st John 2:19, said, *“They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they are not all of us.”* All true believers hold fast to the gospel.

Paul urged the Thessalonians to nurture and cultivate their love for truth and let it rule their thinking. He wanted them to cultivate a conscious commitment to all truth, faithfulness to sound doctrine, and a pattern of holding fast to all that is good.

The attitude this calls for is incompatible with the suggestion that we should lay doctrine aside for the sake of unity. It cannot be reconciled with the opinion that hard truths should be downplayed to make God’s Word more palatable for unbelievers. It is contrary to the notion that personal experience takes precedence over objective truth. God has given His People His Truth objectively in His Word. It is a treas-

ure that we should protect at all costs.

This is the opposite of undiscerning faith. Paul leaves no room for rote tradition. He makes no place for a blind, irrational faith that refuses to consider the authenticity of its object and just accepts at face value everything that claims to be true. He rules out the kind of faith that is driven by feelings, emotion, and the human imagination. Instead, we are to identify “what is good” by examining everything carefully, objectively, rationally using Scripture as our standard.

No human teacher, no personal experience, and no strong feeling is exempt from this objective test. Experience and feelings, no matter how powerful, do not determine what is true. Rather, those things themselves must be subjected to the test.

“That which is good” is the truth that accords with the Word of God. The word “good” is *kalos*, meaning “something good”. It isn’t just something that is nice to take in or behold. It speaks of something good in itself—genuine, true, noble, right. It does not refer to satisfying the flesh. It refers to that which is good, true, accurate, authentic, dependable—that which is in agreement with the infallible Word of God.

The other side of Paul’s command is a negative response to evil: “*Abstain from every form of evil*” (1st Thessalonians 5:21). The word *abstain* is a powerful word meaning to hold oneself back, keep away from, or shun. It is the same word used in 1st Thessalonians 4:3, “*abstain from sexual immorality*”, and 1st Peter 2:11, “*abstain from the passions of the flesh*”. It calls for radical separation from “*every form of evil*”. This includes evil behavior. In this context, it is speaking to evil teaching—false doctrine. When you find something that does not line up to the Word of God—something that is untrue, erroneous, or contrary to the Word of God—shun it.

Scripture does not permit believers to expose themselves to evil. Some people believe the only way to defend against false doctrine is to study it, become proficient in it, and master all its nuances, and then refute it. The problem is when one immerses themselves in false doctrine, they will become influenced by it. Some Christians immerse themselves in philosophy, entertainment, and the culture of society. They feel such a strategy will strengthen their witness to unbelievers. Our focus as Christians should be on knowing the truth. Error is to be shunned!

Believers cannot recede into a monastic existence to escape exposure to every evil influence. Neither are we supposed to be experts about evil. The Apostle Paul wrote, “*I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil*” (Romans 16:19).

A U.S. Treasury Agent does not need to study counterfeit money to spot it. They study genuine bills until they master the look of the real thing. Then when they find bogus money, they recognize it. Detecting spiritual counterfeits requires the

same discipline. Master the truth to refute the error. Study the truth. Hold fast to the faithful Word. Then you will be able to exhort in sound doctrine and refute those who contradict it (Titus 1:8). Paul wrote, “*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*”

Paul also rules out syncretism. Syncretism is the practice of blending ideas from different religions and philosophies. Many people I have witnessed to over the

“Doctrine that comes from God’s Word matters supremely, because God gave His Word to His people so that they would know His Son.”

years have said, “I believe in Christianity, plus I believe in this philosophy.” This is the wrong idea! It’s not whatever we believe that matters; it’s what the truth is in the Word of God.

The only proper response to false teaching is to *shun it*. Erroneous doctrine is not a place to look for the truth. Satan is subtle. He often sabotages the truth by mixing it with error. Truth mixed with

error is far more effective and more destructive than a straightforward contradiction to the truth.

Believers, we should use discernment with regard to what we listen to on Christian radio and television. If you do not use discernment, then you are a prime target for doctrinal deception. If you think everyone who appears to love the truth does, then you don’t understand the wiles of Satan. 2nd Corinthians 11:14-15 states, “*Satan disguises himself as an angel of light, so it is not surprise if his servants, also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness.*”

Satan also disguises his lies as truth. He doesn’t always wage war openly against the gospel. He is much more likely to attack the Church by infiltrating with subtle error. He uses the Trojan horse stratagem by placing false teachers in the Church where they can “*secretly bring in destructive heresies*” (2nd Peter 2:1). He puts his lies in the mouth of someone who claims to speak for Jesus Christ—someone likable and appealing; then he spreads his perverse lies in the Church where they can draw away Christ’s disciples (Acts 20:30). He attaches Bible verses to his lies (Matthew 4:6). He uses deception and hypocrisy. He disguises falsehood as truth. He loves syncretism. It makes evil look good.

That’s why Christians are to examine everything carefully and shun whatever is unsound, corrupt, or erroneous. It is deadly. Millions in the Church today are being overwhelmed by the Trojan-horse ploy calling for the integration of secular ideas with biblical truth. Others are being duped by anything labeled ‘Christian’. They don’t examine everything. They don’t hold fast to the truth. And they won’t shun evil. They are left vulnerable to false doctrine and have no defense against theological confusion.

The Apostle Paul's clear teaching in 1st Thessalonians 5:21-22 cannot be avoided or ignored. As in the days of the early Church, doctrinal error is all around us. Dr. Mohler said, "The tragedy that evangelicals have lost the art of biblical discernment must be traced to a disastrous loss of biblical knowledge. Discernment cannot survive without doctrine." God gave us His Word so we would have a measuring stick by which to examine every spiritual or theological message we encounter.

Hopefully in this issue of *Theology for Life Magazine*, you will learn how to be discerning. The goal in being discerning is not to be unloving, but rather to preserve that which is "first pure, then peaceable" (James 3:17). Scripture makes it clear that this type of examination is inherently loving, as God's people are called to think biblically and exercise discernment. To do anything less will only result in spiritual anemia (Hosea 4:7).

The role of discernment in spiritual growth is clear. If one is not discerning, then he/she will be lead astray by false doctrine. In today's Church, many people think that doctrine does not matter, but it's the opposite. Doctrine that comes from God's Word matters supremely, because God gave His Word to His people so that they would know His Son. This makes God's Word supremely important to study, meditate on, learn from, and grow in. Discernment is tied to spiritual growth because without discernment one cannot grow to be like Christ, which is the goal for spiritual growth.

My prayer for you in this issue is that, as you encounter doctrinal teaching, you will be like the Bereans who were nobler because they were "*examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so*" (Acts 17:11).

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Developing a Doctrinal Framework for Discernment

By Dave Jenkins



Every Christian should develop the ability to think rightly about spiritual matters. Every

Christian should be like the Bereans of Acts 17, who examined the Scriptures to see what is true and what is false.

In this article, I want to explain the essential issues that Christians should think about when choosing a church, buying a book, tuning into a sermon, or listening in to Christian radio. In other words, I will explore what Christians should focus on in terms of non-negotiables when evaluating a Christian ministry, philosophy, or a program.

Three basic doctrines should motivate believers to build a basic framework for discernment. The first of these is a high view of God's Word. Second, is to have a high view of God's Person. Obeying God is far more critical than obeying man (Acts 5:29). The allegiance of the Christian should be to the Sovereign Creator of the universe. The result of this is to please God, even if it displeases one's neighbors. The third is to have a high view of God's

salvation and the gospel.

It is these three elements—a high view of God’s Word, a high view of God Himself, and a high view of the gospel—that comprise the biblical framework for determining what hills Christians should “die on”. Because these three categories are of primary importance, believers should be careful to evaluate every ministry and every message they encounter through this theological grid. What books you buy, where you go to church, how you respond to the sermons you hear, and with whom you associate and minister to—each of these should be primarily evaluated on this basis. With this in mind, let’s consider each of these three theological categories.

A High View of God’s Word

Crucial to developing biblical discernment is having a high view of Scripture. After all, the Scriptures constitute as God’s written revelation to man. Without them, we would know nothing about God’s specific desires for us or about His plan of salvation. We would be unable to please Him, to know Him, or to follow Him; being destined instead to spiritual ignorance, decay, and death. Yet God, in His mercy, revealed Himself to us in this one book (a canonized collection of Scripture) we call the *Bible*.

For this reason, God’s Word to the Christian should be like bread to the hungry man (Matthew 4:4) or like water to the thirsty deer (Psalm 42:1). By keeping its commands, we keep ourselves pure (Psalm 119:9). By following its guidance, we have a light for our paths (Psalm 119:105). By meditating on it, we find blessing and joy (Psalm 1:1-2). By wrestling with the Scriptures, we find our own lives being changed and sanctified (Hebrews 4:12). It is our perfect guide and our ultimate authority (Psalm 19:7-11) because it is the very Word of God.

Churches, sermons, books, and articles may claim to have the label *Christian*. But if they undermine or contradict God’s Word in anyway, you can be certain they do not meet God’s approval. Sometimes these errors take away from what God has taught (like the “Jesus Seminar”, which denies the historical authenticity of large portions of the Gospels). Other times they try to add to what God has taught (for example, cult groups who place the teaching of their leaders on the same level as the Bible). In either case, Scripture itself responds with strong condemnation. Christ’s final warning in the Book of Revelation (verses 22:18-19) says, *“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.”*

Without question, maintaining a high view of Scripture is a hill that every

Christian should “die on”. If God’s Word is undermined, such that God Himself is no longer given the final say, then the door is opened to all kinds of error. A high view of Scripture is indispensable to the discerning Christian, and this high view must uphold at least three elements.

First, a proper view of Scripture necessitates a full understanding and acknowledgment of the Bible’s authenticity—namely that the Bible is indeed the inspired Word of God. Scripture, of course, makes this claim about itself in numerous places (1st Thessalonians 2:13; 2nd Peter 1:20-21; 1st John 5:10). In the Old Testament alone, the text claims to represent the very words of God over 3,800 times. It’s no wonder that, when we come to the New Testament, the Apostle Paul can say, “*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work*” (2nd Timothy 3:16-17).

Despite the clear self-claims of Scripture, contemporary Christianity is fraught with attacks on the inspiration and authenticity of the Bible. Some claim that only parts of the Bible are inspired. Others suggest that “inspiration” doesn’t actually refer to divine authorship, but instead to human intellectual achievement. These are only futile attempts to deny that God Himself stands behind every word of both the Old and New Testaments (Matthew 5:18; 24:35). It is at this foundational point that many so-called Christians condemn themselves to lives of perpetual confusion—doomed to wallow in the mire of man-made musings—simply because they have rejected the true source of divine wisdom. True wisdom begins with the Word of the Lord. “*For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding*” (Proverbs 2:6). Unless one acknowledges that the Bible is indeed His Word, we forfeit all possibility of learning discernment.

Second, a high view of Scripture must accept the accuracy and inerrancy of the Bible. After all, if the Bible is God’s inspired Word in every part (meaning that He is the author), then it must also be truthful in every part (including the passages regarding science and history), because He is a God of truth (Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:17-18). **Thus, the Scriptures can be wholly trusted because they come from a God who can be entirely trusted.**

This means Genesis should be believed when it states the world was created in seven days. It means that Adam should be accepted as a *real human being*, that the Flood was a global event, that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by fire from heaven, and that Jonah was in the belly of a fish for three days. Even Christ and the apostles reflect this same attitude toward the Old Testament when they refer to Adam (Romans 5:14), Noah (Matthew 24:37-38), the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomor-

rah (Matthew 10:15), and Jonah (Matthew 12:40) as historical figures. It is not enough to accept the Scriptures as true in matters of faith in practice, but then deny its truthfulness in matters of history and science. If the God of Truth has spoken (no matter the subject), then He has spoken truthfully.

Too often, Christians accept false teachings because they trust the latest scientific or literary theories over the very Word of God. In doing so, believers relinquish their ability to discern truth from error. Why? The reason is simple: it's because they

_____ have let go of the truth, without which they have no standard for deciphering what's wrong (or false) from what's right (or true).
 "It also means that the Bible is the first place you should go if you want to receive a heart of wisdom."

A high view of Scripture also demands submission to its absolute authority. Because the Bible comes from God Himself, and because it reflects His perfect truthfulness, it also bears His authority as the final say in our thoughts, our words, and our actions. Because we sub-

mit to Him, we likewise submit to His Word, through the power of His Spirit (John 14:15).

God should be our ultimate authority in discerning truth from error. This is why He gave us His Word—so we can know what He thinks about any given topic, and thereby know the truth (John 17:17). 2nd Peter 1:2-3 indicates that the knowledge He's given us in Scripture includes everything we need for life and godliness. This means that we don't have to supplement the Bible with human philosophy. Nor do we need business principles to learn about successful church growth. God has given us His authoritative Word on all of those matters, and it comes complete with everything we need to live the Christian life successfully. Those Christians who desire discernment should stop endorsing or entertaining any teaching that undermines, redefines, or rejects the clear teaching of Scripture. It also means that the Bible is the first place you should go if you want to receive a heart of wisdom (Proverbs 1:1-7).

A High View of God

Another essential component in developing a framework for biblical discernment is a high view of God Himself. For this view to be correct, it must flow from the revelation He has given about Himself. We must rely on the Word of God to inform our understanding of who He is.

Throughout church history, the doctrine of God has faced many attacks. Questions about the Trinity, divine attributes, Christ's deity, and the personhood of

the Holy Spirit have each been the topic of at least one church council. More recently, questions about God's sovereignty and the gifts of the Holy Spirit have sparked controversy. In each of these areas, as believers make their way through the maze of theological rhetoric, only a biblically-informed view of God will allow them to think rightly.

God's greatness quickly emerges from the pages of Scripture as one of His primary characteristics. It is seen in the first verse of the Bible—His creative power and His eternal preexistence. It continues in Genesis 3 with His judgment on the human race, a judgment that culminates in Genesis 6-8 with the Flood. At Sinai, the mountain trembles because God is there. Even Moses, after requesting to see the Lord, is only given a sheltered glance and he barely survives the experience.

In Psalm 115:3, we are told that "our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases." In Isaiah 40:18, the Lord asks rhetorically, "To whom will you liken God?" But the answer to this question leaves Job dumfounded (Job 40:4-5). And the thoughts of God's transcendence leave Nebuchadnezzar to decree (Daniel 3:28-28), "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God."

Yet despite God's majestic self-portrait, many Christians today minimize His greatness and God's glory. In some miracles, His sovereign power is denied (as with

"...Jesus Christ lived a perfect life before
sacrificing Himself on the cross."

"openness theology"). In other circles, it seems Satan and his demons are feared more than God Himself (in some charismatic contexts). But the Lord, whom we serve, is not like us. He made the sun, moon, and stars (Psalm 8:3). We are not at liberty to mold Him into our own image.

In discerning truth from error, we must ask ourselves, "Does a particular teaching, accurately depict the God of the Bible? Does it correctly represent His character essence and being?" Refuse to accept any teaching where the answer is anything other than *yes*.

God's greatness and majesty are not only seen in His sovereign power, but also in His mercy and grace. It was because of the Father's great love for us that He sent His Son to die for our sins (John 3:16).

As God in human flesh (John 1:1, 14; Titus 2:13), Jesus Christ lived a perfect life before sacrificing Himself on the cross. As the spotless lamb (1st Peter 1:19) and

once for all sacrifice (Hebrews 10:12), He not only paid the price for our sins, but also clothes us in His righteousness (2nd Corinthians 5:21). As the risen Lord (1st Corinthians 15:1-8), He sits enthroned at the right hand of God the Father (Acts 7:56) waiting for the day when He will return to earth to set up His kingdom (2nd Thessalonians 1:7-10; Revelation 20:1-6). In the meantime, all who trust Him as their Savior and choose to follow Him as Lord will be saved (Romans 10:9-10).

Despite the biblical evidence, false teachers stir up confusion about who Jesus is. Many deny His deity outright. Others are more subtle, agreeing that Christians must accept Jesus as Savior, but not as Lord. Some suggest the resurrection was spurious, or that the true Christ has been misrepresented by the Church. All such accusations fall flat when compared to the testimony of Scripture. This is why a biblical view of the Savior is vital to those who want to be discerning.

A proper view of God the Father and God the Son would not be complete if it did not include a right view of God the Holy Spirit. Before Jesus left, He promised that He would send a Helper, the Holy Spirit, to guide Christians throughout the church age (John 14:26); a promise that was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:2-8).

The Bible clearly distinguishes the Holy Spirit as a separate Person (John 14:26; Romans 8:11, 16, 26), who is equal with the Father and the Son (Matthew 28:19; 2nd Corinthians 3:16-18). His ministry is one of teaching (John 14:26; Luke 12:12), interceding (Romans 8:26), leading (Matthew 4:1), giving life (John 6:63), filling us with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18), and sanctification (Galatians 5:16-22). As believers study God's Word, the Spirit aids us in the process (John 14:26; 16:13; 1 Corinthians 2:14). Ephesians 6:17 tells us that "the sword of the Spirit" the weapon He uses to help us fend off deception, is the Word of God. It's no wonder, then, that to be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18) is parallel to "let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly" (Colossians 3:16).

Confusion about the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is almost as old as the Church itself. In Acts 8, a man named Simon incorrectly assumed that he could buy the Holy Spirit's power with money. Over the centuries, various cults—such as the Jehovah's Witnesses—have simply denied the Holy Spirit's personhood or deity, choosing instead to see Him as an impersonal force. The unbiblical practice (and at times demonic) of some charismatic groups (such as "slaying in the Spirit", "laughing in the Spirit", "barking in the Spirit", etc.) has only increased confusion on the work of the Holy Spirit.

The discerning Christian is spiritually unaffected by heretical trends. He is like a tree, firmly planted (Psalm 1:3), because his view of God (including the Father, the Son, and the Spirit) is firmly founded in the truths of Scripture. By letting God's self-

portrait inform his thinking, the discerning Christian compares what he hears with what he knows to be correct. In other words, he refuses to replace a high view of God (one that is biblical) with any type of cheap substitute.

A High View of the Gospel

Biblical discernment demands a third theological component, which is a correct understanding of the gospel. Building on the previous two categories, the gospel answers the question for us, “What must one do to be saved?” This is the most important question human beings can ask, for our answer to that question determines both our *present choices* and our *eternal destinies*.

Sadly, many Christians today downplay critical aspects of the gospel message. As a result, false professions of faith are commonplace in the contemporary church, where belief is redefined as mere assent, and repentance is missed altogether. Discerning Christians are not impressed with water-down gospel presentations, nor are they fooled by the false promises of prosperity preachers. Instead, they have a clear grasp of the gospel, always being ready to give an account for the hope that is in them (1st Peter 3:16).

The good news of Scripture begins with the bad news that all men are sinners before a holy God (Romans 3:23), unable to save themselves (Isaiah 64:6) and therefore worthy of His condemnation (Romans 6:23). Because Adam and Eve broke God’s law (Genesis 3:6-7), and because all of their descendants (with the exception of Jesus Christ) have also broken His law (James 2:10), human beings deserve to be punished. As a perfect Judge, God’s judgment for sin is death—both physical (Genesis 3:3) and spiritual (Romans 5:12-19). Scripture teaches that men and women are not only sinners through their actions (1 John 1:8,10), but also because they inherited a sin nature from Adam and Eve (Psalm 51:5; 5:12-19).

In light of Scripture’s emphasis on sin, it’s disheartening to watch contemporary Christians purposefully deemphasize the subject. Rather than addressing man’s true need (to be forgiven), too many modern evangelists focus on the *felt* needs of their audience. In the end, God is misrepresented as a loving grandfather rather than a holy Judge, and the listeners are given false expectations about the wonderful life Jesus has planned for them. New “converts” spend the rest of their “Christian” lives trying to meet their own felt needs and never deal with the sin in their lives; choosing instead to ignore it or redefine it as “honest mistakes” or “unhealed wounds”. In contrast, the discerning Christian is all-too-familiar with his sinfulness, having cried out to God for His mercy and daily battling the flesh (Romans 7:13-8:4).

If you have a biblical view of sin, you will have the right view of yourself. Isaiah cried out, “Woe is me!” (Isaiah 6:4). Similarly, the tax-collector of Luke 18:13 pleaded,

“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” Those who recognize their sinfulness before a holy God realize how wretched and unimportant they really are in comparison. With this in mind, the Apostle Paul commands his readers not to think more highly of themselves than they ought to think (Romans 12:3). Instead, following the example of Christ, they should regard others with “humility”, putting the wishes of their neighbor above their own (Philippians 2:3-4). Past success and achievements are deemed as worthless compared to knowing and serving the Savior (Philippians 3:7-8).

For the Christian, self-esteem is replaced with self-denial. After all, “we “have been crucified with Christ”, meaning that we no longer live, but rather Christ lives in us (Galatians 2:20). The Lord Himself instructs us along these lines, saying: *“If anyone would come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake, and the gospel’s will save it”* (Mark 8:34-35). Therefore, this attitude of self-denial is intimately tied to the gospel, since we can do nothing, in and of ourselves, to earn salvation (Ephesians 2:8-9). In embracing Christ’s work on our behalf, we abandon any form of self-sufficiency, choosing instead to thank God that He has chosen us—the weak, the foolish, and the unimportant (1st Corinthians 1:26-29).

In an age where self-esteem and self-promotion are prevalent, it’s not surprising to find many in the Church who have embraced their “self-worth”. This problem is only compounded by the fact that sin is *emphasized*, leading many pew-sitters to overestimate their inherent goodness. God’s holiness, of course, is also overlooked, resulting in Christians who have a high view of themselves and a low view of their Creator. The messages they hear and the books they read are evaluated by their man-made standards—in terms of *felt needs* and innovative programs. Because of their diminished reverence for God, they do not look to Him for His approval. As a result, they fail to cultivate true discernment in their lives.

Having underestimated Him and overestimated themselves, these same Christians fail to properly understand salvation. In some cases, they begin to view salvation as nothing more than heavenly fire insurance; as though God is obligated to save them without any repentance on their part. Others misunderstand grace, including cults who teach works-righteousness (such as Mormonism), is added to the free gift of salvation. Key concepts, such as justification and imputation (Christ takes

In an age where self-esteem and self-promotion are prevalent, it’s not surprising to find many in the Church who have embraced their “self-worth”.

our sin, and we take His righteousness) are sometimes misunderstood or redefined (as with the “New Perspective on Paul”). There are even some, such as Seventh-Day Adventists, who claim Christ’s atonement on the cross was not His final work of atonement, despite verses such as Hebrews 7:27 and 1st Peter 3:18.

What is the biblical plan of salvation from sin? The Apostle Paul answers this question in Romans 10:9-10 when he says, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart, one believes and is justified, and with the mouth, one confesses and is saved.” He reiterates this truth in 1st Corinthians 15:1-4.

“Thinking rightly about the gospel is something that God takes very seriously.”

Thus the call of salvation is a call to believe in the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ on the cross, and to publicly submit (“confess”) oneself to him as Lord (thereby repenting from sin). Of course, this is a gift of grace and not of human effort or merit (Ephesians 2:8-10). It also involves other theological truths—such as *regeneration* (John 3:3-7; Titus 3:5), *election* (Romans 8:28-30; Ephesians 1:4-11; 2nd

Thessalonians 2:13), *sanctification* (Acts 20:32; 1st Corinthians 1:2, 30; Ephesians 6:11; Hebrews 10:10, 14), and *eternal security* (John 5:24; Romans 5:9-10, 8:31-39). The heart of the gospel is this: by dying on the cross, Jesus took the penalty for all who believe in Him. By trusting in Him, the believer is seen as righteous (or justified) in the sight of God.

Thinking rightly about the gospel is something that God takes very seriously. Scripture severely condemns those who preach another gospel, as false teachers do (Galatians 1:8). Christians would do well, then, to arm themselves with the *true* gospel: one that maintains a biblical view of sin, self, and salvation. Only then will we be able to fulfill the Great Commission with which we have been tasked (Matthew 28:18-20), and only then will we be able to discern the message of life from any counterfeits. False gospels cannot be tolerated because eternity is at stake.

Mountains and Molehills

Are there other hills that Christians should die on? It depends on the circumstance and the individuals involved. Questions about end times, about the Church, and other areas of theology are essential. Why focus on the Bible, God, and the gospel? The New Testament portrays an accurate understanding of these three doctrines as crucial.

Peter discusses all three in the first two verses of his second epistle—a letter

that spends its time refuting false teaching. He begins with a right view of salvation (faith by the righteousness of Jesus Christ). He moves on to a correct view of Jesus Christ (as “Our God and Savior” and “our Lord”). He mentions a correct view of the Scriptures (“the knowledge of God”) a subject he unpacks in the rest of chapter 1. Other New Testament writers agree, responding to false gospels (Galatians 1:6-7; 2nd Corinthians 11:4), false Christ’s (1st John 2:22; 2nd John 7), and mishandled Scripture (2nd Peter 3:16) with the harshest of criticisms (Matthew 24:24; 2nd Peter 2:1-22; Jude 4-19). Because Christ and the apostles took a firm stand on these issues, we should be careful to do the same.

We should also take note of those issues that Scripture does not list as hills to die on. Preference issues such as the *length of a sermon*, the style of music used in corporate worship, the church’s building program, and other pet grievances, are not issues on which we should refuse to budge. Although we live in a day when everyone prioritizes his or her personal rights, opinions, and choices, our testimony as Christians should be different—seeking to give preferential treatment to our brothers and sisters in Christ (Philippians 2:1-4).

Final Thoughts

When it comes to developing a doctrinal framework for discernment, the theological grid through which every message is filtered cannot be emphasized enough. Without sound doctrine, you will not be able to protect your own heart from the doctrinal errors that exist today. By looking to the Scriptures as your ultimate authority for a right view of God and a right view of the gospel, you can safeguard your mind. “We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2nd Corinthians 10:5).

Good theology that comes from God’s Word allows one to discern between what is right and wrong. This clear biblical teaching lifts high the holiness of God, which stands for the Truth. It is most important that Christians be faithful to God. If you want to be faithful to God, then stand on God’s Word, which dictates the issues that Christians should fight for and the hills we should die on.

Developing a Personal Plan for Discernment

By Dave Jenkins



In this article we will consider how to develop a plan for discernment. The importance of personal discernment cannot be overstated, because those who are unable to distinguish right from wrong will likely fall into

serious error. Christians need to realize that this error comes in many forms, and it often looks good at first glance—that's why it's called *deception*. Yet, God has given His children all that they need to “test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil” (1st Thessalonians 5:21-22). Thus we can be confident that those who learn to think biblically will be adequately equipped to “turn away from the snares of death” (Proverbs 14:27). By asking the question, “How can we do this?”, and looking to God's Word for the answer, this article will help us spot and reject false teaching.

By God's grace, Christians have a standard to test the authenticity of any incoming religious message. That's why, even when we are bombarded with doctrinal frauds and spiritual knockoffs, we need not lose hope. God has not left us defenseless. By arming us with His Word, He has given us everything we need for life and godliness” (2nd Peter 1:3).

Believers' reliance upon Scripture becomes more and more crucial every day, as new errors are introduced into the church and as old errors continue to resurface. Whether it's new ways to evangelize or new ways to fill the auditorium, these innovative trends always seem to provide the perfect solution for the Church's present needs. These new solutions are primarily based on secular wisdom and driven by whatever works, and this does not solve anything. By suggesting that the “old and original” methods of the New Testament are no longer good enough for today, these theological trends are just worldly philosophies dressed up in religious garb.

Theological traditions (sometimes centuries old) also vie for our attention. Many traditions are good, but some of them are not. And they have been established for almost every aspect of Christian thought—from methods of church government to philosophies of Bible interpretation. Unlike their “new and improved” counterparts, these historic systems appeal to their distinguished heritage for added credibility. Nonetheless, when these theological legacies begin to replace the clear teaching of Scripture, the results are disastrous.

How can believers discern between trends, traditions, and the truth? The answer to this question begins with the Scriptures. God has given us His Word so that we can evaluate every spiritual message we receive, discriminating between what is right and what is wrong. In 2nd Timothy 3:16-17, the Apostle Paul said, *“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.”*

Do you want to be equipped for every good work? Do you want to be able to teach truth and correct error? If so, you must become a student of

the Scriptures—trusting that His Word is a sufficient guide for any problem you encounter. The maze of modern religious thought is no match for the Sword of the Spirit, which is able even to “discern the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

How can Christians, begin to apply biblical discernment to their daily lives? How can you prepare yourself for the battle? How can you make sure you are guarding the truth of God’s Word, so that you will be able to faithfully pass it on to the next generation? Scripture outlines the plan for us to follow.

Step one is to desire discernment. Proverbs 2:3-6 states, *“If you call out for insight and raise your voice or understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.”*

“The desire for discernment is a desire born out of humility.”

If we have no desire to be discerning, we won’t be discerning. If we are driven by a yearning to be happy, healthy, affluent, prosperous, comfortable, and self-satisfied, we

will never be *discerning* people. If our feelings determine what we believe, we cannot be discerning. If we subjugate our minds to some earthly ecclesiastical authority and blindly believe what we are told, we undermine discernment. Unless we are willing to examine all things carefully, we cannot hope to have any defense against reckless faith.

The desire for discernment is a desire born out of humility. It is humility that acknowledges our own potential for self-deception (“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick: who can understand it?” -Jeremiah 17:9). It is a humility that distrusts personal feelings and casts scorn on self-sufficiency (“on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weakness” -2nd Corinthians 12:5). It is a humility that turns to the Word of God as the final arbiter of all things (“examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things are so” -Acts 17:11).

No one has a monopoly on truth. My heart is as susceptible to self-deception as anyone’s. My feelings are as undependable as everyone else’s. I am not immune to Satan’s deception. This is true for all believers. Our only defense against false teaching and doctrine is to be discerning, to distrust our own emotions, to hold our own senses suspect, to examine all things, to test every truth—every claim—with the yardstick of Scripture, and to handle the Word of God with great care.

The desire to be discerning, therefore, entails a high view of Scripture linked with a passion for understanding it correctly. God requires this very attitude of every believer (2nd Timothy 2:15). The heart that loves Jesus will burn with a passion for discernment.

Step two is prayer. Prayer, of course, naturally follows desire; prayer is the expression of the heart's desire to God. When Solomon became king after the death of David, the Lord appears to him in a dream and said, "Ask what I shall give you" (1st Kings 3:5).

Solomon could have requested anything. He could have asked for material riches, power, victory over his enemies, or whatever he liked. Solomon asked for discernment. "Give your servant, therefore, an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil" (v.9). Scripture says, "It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this" (v.10).

The Lord told Solomon, "*Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, behold, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you. I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor, so that no other king shall compare with you, all your days. And if you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your days.*" (1st Kings 3:11-14).

Notice that God commended Solomon because his request was unselfish: "because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself". Selfishness is incompatible with *true* discernment. People who desire to be discerning must be willing to step outside of themselves.

Modern evangelism, enamored with psychology and self-esteem, has produced a generation of believers so self-absorbed that they cannot be discerning. People aren't even interested in discernment. All their interest in spiritual things is focused on self. They are interested only in getting their own felt needs met.

Solomon did not do that. Although he had an opportunity to ask for long life, personal prosperity, health and wealth, he bypassed all of that and asked for discernment instead. Therefore, God also gave him riches, honor, and long life for as long as he walked in the ways of the Lord.

James 1:5 promises that God will grant the prayer for discernment: "*If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given to him.*"

Someone will point out that with all his abundance of wisdom Solomon was

nevertheless a dismal failure at the end of his life (1st Kings 11:4-11). “His heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father” (v.4).

Scripture records this sad sediment of the wisest man who ever lived:

“Now King Solomon loved many foreign women, along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the nations concerning which the LORD had said to the people of Israel, “You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods.” Solomon clung to these in love. He had 700 wives, princesses, and 300 concubines. And his wives turned away his heart. For when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the LORD his God, as was the heart of David his father. For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and did not wholly follow the LORD, as David his father had done. Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Molech the abomination of the Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem. And so he did for all his foreign wives, who made offerings and sacrificed to their gods.” (1st Kings 11:1-9).

Solomon did not suddenly fail at the end of his life. The seeds of his demise were sown at the beginning. 1st Kings 3, the same chapter that records Solomon’s request for discernment, reveals Solomon “made a marriage alliance with Pharaoh kings of Egypt” (v.1). Verse 3 tells us “Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of David his father, only he sacrificed and made offering at the high places.”

From the very beginning his obedience was deficient. Surely with all his wisdom he knew better, but he tolerated compromise and idolatry among the people of God (v.2), and even participated in some of the idolatry himself.

Discernment is not enough apart from obedience. What good is it to know the truth if we fail to act accordingly? This is why James wrote, “be *doers* of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (James 1:22). Failure to obey is self-delusion; it is not true discernment, no matter how much intellectual knowledge we may possess. Solomon is biblical proof that even true discernment can give way to a destructive self-delusion. Disobedience inevitably undermines discernment. The only way to guard against that is to be doers of the Word and not hearers only.

Fourth in our steps toward biblical discernment is this: Emulate those who demonstrate good discernment. Do not follow the leadership of people who are themselves “tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine” (Ephesians 4:14). Find and follow leaders who display an ability to discern, to

analyze and refute error, and teach the Scriptures clearly and accurately. Read from authors who prove themselves careful handlers of divine truth. Listen to preachers who rightly divide the Word of Truth. Expose yourself to the teaching of people who think critically, analytically, and carefully. Learn from people who understand where error has attacked the church historically. Place yourself under the tutelage of those who serve as watchmen of the Church.

I practice this myself. There are certain authors who have demonstrated skill in handling the Word and whose judgment I have come to trust. When I encounter a difficult issue—whether it’s a theological problem, an area of controversy, a new teaching I have never heard of before, or whatever—I turn to these authors first to see what they have to say. I wouldn’t seek help from an unreliable source or marginal theologian. I want to know what those who are skilled in exposing error and are gifted in presenting truth have to say.

There have been outstanding men of discernment in every area of Church history. Their writings remain invaluable resources for anyone who wishes to cultivate discernment. Martyn Lloyd-Jones and J. Gresham Machen are just two of many in the past century who distinguished themselves in the battle for truth. Charles Spurgeon, Charles Hodge, and scores of other writers from the 19th century left a rich legacy of written material to help us discern between truth and error. In the century before that, Thomas Boston, Jonathan Edwards, and George Whitefield battled for truth, as did many others like them. The preceding era was the Puritan age—the 16th and 17th centuries—gave us what is undoubtedly the richest catalog of resources for discernment. Before that, the Reformers fought valiantly for the Truth of God’s Word against the traditions of men. Virtually every era before the Reformation also has godly men of discernment, who stood against error and defended the truth of God’s Word. Augustine, for example, preceded John Calvin by more than a thousand years, but he fought exactly the same theological battles and proclaimed precisely the same doctrines. Calvin and the Reformers drew heavily on Augustine’s writings as they framed their own arguments against error. In 325 A.D., a contemporary of Augustine, Athanasius, took a decisive stand against Arianism; the same error that is perpetuated by modern-day Jehovah’s Witnesses. His writings stand today as the definitive response to that error.

“In 325 A.D., a contemporary of Augustine, Athanasius, took a decisive stand against Arianism; the same error that is perpetuated by modern-day Jehovah’s Witnesses.”

Much of the written legacy these spiritual giants left is still available today. We

can all learn from these men of discernment and we would do well to emulate the clarity with which they spoke the truth against error. Those who can expose and answer the errors of false teachers are set in the body of Christ to assist us all to think critically and clearly. Learn from them.

As important as human examples are, however, the Spirit of God is ultimately the true Discerner. It is His role to lead us into all truth (John 16:13). 1st Corinthians 2:11 says, “no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.”

Paul goes on to write, “*Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one.*” (1st Corinthians 2:12-15). So discernment ultimately depends on the Holy Spirit. As we are filled with and controlled by the Spirit of God, He makes us discerning.

Finally, we return to the point we have touched on repeatedly: True discernment requires diligent study of the Scriptures. None of the other steps are sufficient apart from this. No one can be truly discerning apart from the mastery of the Word of God. All the desire in the world cannot make you discerning if you don’t study the Scriptures. Prayer or discernment is not enough. Obedience alone will not suffice. Good role models won’t do it either. Even the Holy Spirit will not give you discernment apart from the Word of God. If you really want to be discerning, you must diligently study the Word of God.

God’s Word is where you will learn the principles for discernment. It is there that you will learn the truth. Only there can you follow the path of maturity. Discernment flourishes only in an environment of faithful Bible study and teaching. In Acts 20, when Paul was leaving the Ephesians elders, he warned them about the deadly influences that would threaten them in his absence (vv.28-31). He urged them to be on guard, on the alert (vv.28, 31). How? What safeguard could he leave to help protect them from Satan’s onslaughts? Only the Word of God: “*And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.*” (v.32).

Let’s look more closely at 2nd Timothy 2:15, “*Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.*”

Notice what this mandate to Timothy implies. First, it suggests that the dis-

cerning person must be able to distinguish between the Word of Truth and the “irreverent babble” mentioned in verse 16. That may seem rather obvious, but it cannot be taken for granted. The task of separating God’s Word from human foolishness

“And if we are to interpret the Word of God correctly, then we must be very diligent about studying it.”

actually poses a formidable challenge for many today. One look at some of the nonsense that proliferates in churches and Christian media will confirm that this is so. Or, note the burgeoning stacks of “Christian” books touting strange (unbiblical) views. We must shun such folly and devote ourselves to the Word of God. We have to be able to distinguish between truth and error.

How? “Do your best.” Being *diligent* paints a picture of a worker giving maximum effort in his or her work. It describes someone driven by a commitment to excellent. “*Be diligent to present yourself approved to God.*” The Greek phrase literally speaks of standing alongside God as a co-laborer worthy of identifying with Him.

Furthermore, Paul says this approved workman “has no need to be ashamed”. The word *ashamed* is very important to Paul’s whole point. Any sloppy workman should be ashamed of low-quality work. But a servant of the Lord handling the Word of Truth carelessly has infinitely more to be ashamed of.

What Paul suggests in this passage is that we will be ashamed before God Himself if we fail to handle the Word of Truth with discernment. If we can’t distinguish the truth from worldly empty chatter, we can’t identify and refute false teachers; or if we can’t handle God’s Truth with skill and understanding, we ought to be ashamed.

And if we are to interpret the Word of God correctly, then we must be very diligent about studying it. There is no shortcut. Only as we master the Word of God are we made “competent, equipped for every good work” (3:17). This is the essence of what it means to be discerning.

Put simply, spiritual maturity is the process of learning to discern. The path to real discernment is the path to spiritual growth. Growth in grace is a continuous process through this earthly life. No Christian ever reaches complete maturity this side of Heaven. “*Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known*” (1st Corinthians 13:12). We must continually “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2nd Peter 3:18). We should hunger “for the pure spiritual milk, that by it we may grow” (1st Peter 2:2).

As we mature, our senses are exercised to discern good and evil (Hebrews 5:14). As we cease to be children, we gain stability (Ephesians 4:14-15). Mature people are discerning people.

We know this from the natural world. Parents continually help their child to be discerning, even when they become teenagers. Parents help them think through issues, understand what is wise and unwise, and prompt them to make the right choices. The goal of parenting is to raise a discerning child. The same is true spiritually. You don't pray for discernment and suddenly wake up with abundant wisdom. It is a process of growth.

Stay on the path of maturity. Sometimes it involves suffering and trials (James 1:2-4; 1st Peter 5:10). Often it necessitates divine chastening (Hebrews 12:11). As always it requires personal discipline (1st Timothy 4:7-8). The rewards are rich:

Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding, for the gain from her is better than gain from silver and her profit better than gold. She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare to her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called blessed. My son, do not lose sight of these- keep sound wisdom and discretion, and they will be life for your soul and adornment for your neck. Then you will walk on your way securely, and your foot will not stumble. (Proverbs 3:13-18, 21-23).

And these riches, unlike diamonds, will retain their value and brilliance for all eternity. The alternative is a life of theological confusion where spiritual treasures are confused with spiritual fakes. Hosea 14:9 exhorts, *“Whoever is wise, let him understand these things; whoever is discerning, let him know them; for the ways of the Lord are right, and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them.”*

Recommended Reading on the Sufficiency of Scripture

In this issue of *Theology for Life Magazine*, we've been considering the subject of the sufficiency of Scripture and how it helps Christians to no longer be tossed to and fro (like a wave in the ocean), but to stand wholly on the Word of God no matter what ministry they have. We understand that we haven't covered everything on this topic, but it is our prayer that, hopefully, readers of this issue of *Theology for Life* will grow in their understanding of it so they can stand fast on the Word of God.

If you've found this issue helpful and would like to study this subject further, please check out the following reading list below. These books are at the top of their genre in both excellence and readability.

Doctrine of Scripture:

- *'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God* by Dr. J.I. Packer
- *God Has Spoken: Revelation and the Bible* by Dr. J.I. Packer
- *Truth and Power: The Place of Scripture in the Christian Life* by Dr. J.I. Packer
- *Taking God at His Word* by Dr. Kevin DeYoung
- *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books* by Dr. Michael Kruger
- *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority* by G.K. Beale
- *The Doctrine of the Word of God* by Dr. John Frame
- *Inerrancy and Worldview: Answering Modern Challenges to the Bible* by Dr. Vern Poythress
- *Inerrancy and the Gospels: A God-Centered Approach to the Challenges of Harmonization* by Dr. Vern Poythress
- *The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture* by Dr. B.B. Warfield
- *Understanding Scripture: An Overview of the Bible's Origin, Reliability, and Meaning* by Drs. Wayne Grudem, C. John Collins, and Thomas Schreiner
- *From the Mouth of God: Trusting, Reading, and Applying the Bible* by Dr. Sinclair Ferguson

- *The Divine Original: Authority, Self-Evidencing Light, and Power of the Scriptures*, vol. 16 of Owen's Collected Works (Banner of Truth, 1988).
- *Thy Word is Truth* by E.J. Young
- *Reformed Dogmatics: Prolegomena (vol. 1): Part IV: Revelation* by Herman Bavinck (Baker Academic, 2003).
- *Scripture Alone: Exploring the Bible's Accuracy, Authority and Authenticity* by James White
- *Scripture Alone* by R.C. Sproul
- *God, Revelation, and Authority* by Carl Henry

Discernment:

- *The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment* by Tim Challies
- *Defining Deception* by Costi Hinn and Anthony Wood

Guidance:

- *Just Do Something* **By Kevin DeYoung**
- *Can I Know God's Will?* By R.C. Sproul
- *God's Will: Finding Guidance for Everyday Decisions* by J.I. Packer and Carolyn Nystrom

I hope you find these as helpful in your Walk as I have.

In Christ Alone,

Dave Jenkins

Executive Editor, *Theology for Life Magazine*



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