

DOCTRINE
— *according to* —
GODLINESS

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GODLINESS

a primer of Reformed doctrine

Ronald Hanko



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DEDICATED

——— *to my parents* ———

Herman and Wilma Hanko, who taught me these doctrines from a very young age and who instilled in me a love for Bible doctrines by their teaching and by their living witness to them.

If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; he is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself.

—1 Timothy 6:3-5

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FOREWORD

One of the challenges encountered in mission work is to present the gospel and the truth of God's Word clearly and simply, to expound the doctrines of Scripture thoroughly yet briefly. We live in an age when many who confess Christ wander in confusion, are poor in scriptural knowledge, and are led astray by every wind of doctrine that blows through the church. Much of the knowledge of the faith once delivered to the saints has been lost by those who should know it. A missionary today must also address the Word to those who do not know Christ and have not heard the authentic gospel. He must speak to professing Christians concerning the faith and call the unbelieving to repentance and faith in Christ.

At a time when reading of solid material has declined and attention spans are short, these limitations of readers set before the pastor or missionary a difficult task. Materials are hard to find that are sound in doctrine, address these difficulties, and are truly useful. In the 1940s Rev. Herman Hoeksema met the need for short messages in his radio sermons, some of which were later compiled in book form. His *Wonder of Grace* is an excellent example of this. Another book, written by Rev. Ronald Hanks and Rev. Ronald Cammenga and titled *Saved by Grace*, more extensively develops the sovereignty of God and the five points of Calvinism from the Scriptures.

Doctrine according to Godliness continues in the line of such efforts to explain doctrine in a simplified way. Rev. Hanks's book is the fruit of much diligent labor expended on the mission field. He developed most of the articles found in this work over a number of years as missionary pastor in Northern Ireland, where the Reformed faith once flourished among the Presbyterian churches.

Each brief yet thorough exposition is complete in itself and sets forth a basic doctrinal concept. At the same time, the author develops the line of the Reformed faith in its unity in each succeeding article. This gives

to these doctrinal studies a twofold character. Each article, or several together, can stand as a brief development of a specific truth or doctrine, providing material to answer specific questions that are often asked. At the same time, the development of the articles, following the line of Reformed doctrinal thought, allows the work to be considered as a whole. In this latter aspect, *Doctrine according to Godliness* may well serve as a basic manual of Reformed doctrine or dogmatics.

Such an approach makes the material suitable not only for Reformed mission work, but also for study and discussion in the established congregation or in Christian education. The book in its entirety can serve as material for group study or discussion. Individual articles can be used topically as well. Those called to teach in various capacities—whether they are elders, parents, teachers, or leaders of Bible societies—will find here doctrinally sound resource materials to aid them in their preparation.

Reading these articles will equip the believer to be ready to give an answer for the hope that lies within him. For one who finds the weighty character of a dogmatics text somewhat daunting, the material covers the scope of Reformed doctrine in a way that leads the reader to the Scriptures and to further study.

Limiting each article to one or two printed pages in which the contents are both thorough and complete is a difficult format to carry out. It is no small accomplishment that Rev. Hanko has done this so effectively. Bringing the truth to bear on the Christian's life and walk, the author has also provided us with a useful devotional. By combining faith and practice, doctrine and life, truth and application, the articles both instruct in knowledge and edify for a walk of godliness. The title of the book is thus well chosen.

May the Lord continue to use the fruit of these labors in the cause of his kingdom and glory.

Rev. Thomas Miersma

PREFACE

This book has its origin in a series of approximately two hundred articles written for a study sheet that was distributed over a period of eight years as part of a mission work in the United Kingdom. The reception of those articles, as well as the encouragements received from many readers, are the occasion for putting the articles together in book form.

A few of the original articles have not been included, but about fifty new articles have been added to fill in gaps in the subject matter. Most of the original articles have been revised, and a few have been entirely rewritten.

The book follows the customary divisions of Reformed theology, and the six main sections of *Doctrine according to Goldiness* are the six divisions of dogmatics, even though the traditional names for those divisions are not used.

When the articles were originally written as a mission witness, they were as simply written as possible, abundant Scripture proof was supplied, and an effort was made to show how the doctrines of Scripture apply to life. All this is retained, believing that it may be of further use in teaching the Reformed faith on the mission field and in the churches.

The articles are also very brief in the hope that those who know something of the Reformed faith will be encouraged to read further. It is my conviction that one of the things that has contributed to the decline of Reformed churches in the United States and elsewhere is a lack of reading on the part of God's people. I trust that these articles, easily read, will encourage deeper study of the doctrines of grace and of God's sovereignty in salvation.

May God bless these efforts and use them for good.

Rev. Ronald Hanko

INTRODUCTION

The Importance of Doctrine

Doctrine is not highly regarded anymore. In many evangelical churches there is such ignorance of doctrine that even the fundamentals of Christianity are not well understood. Even in churches that remain faithful in their teaching and preaching, there is often little interest in learning and understanding doctrine. The youth are, for the most part, bored by it, and their elders are content with a superficial knowledge of the doctrines of the Reformed faith.

Very often the symptom of this lack of doctrine is a constant agitation for more “practical” preaching and teaching along with a greater emphasis on liturgy and on the other parts of the worship service until the sermon is all but squeezed out. On the part of the preachers themselves, one finds less and less biblical exposition and more and more illustration, storytelling, and entertainment.

Symptomatic of doctrinal indifference in the private lives of God’s people is complete disinterest in reading good Reformed books and periodicals. In some cases these are purchased and not read; in others there is not sufficient interest even to purchase them. If any reading at all is done, it is superficial, mostly of the “how-to” variety. Almost nothing of substance is read, and most would consider a book of doctrine too deep even though their fathers and grandfathers, who had far less education, not only were able to read theology, but read it widely and well.

If the church and the lives of God’s people are to be rescued from superficiality, decline, and all the church troubles that afflict us today, there must be a return to doctrine. For proof we need look no further than the great Reformation of the sixteenth century. Above all, the Reformation was a return to doctrine—to the doctrines of justification by faith alone, of sovereign grace, of the church, and of the sacraments. Without an interest in or return to doctrine, we cannot even hope for revival and renewal in the church.

In 2 Timothy 3:16–17 the Word of God tells us that Scripture is profitable for many things, but for doctrine first of all. Indeed, if it does not first teach us doctrine, it is not profitable for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness. To all of these, doctrine is not only first, but also foundational.

Scripture emphasizes the importance of doctrine in other ways. We learn from John 17:3 that the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ is

eternal life. Nothing is more important than that. Doctrine, properly taught, understood, and believed, is that knowledge of God and of his Son. Scripture teaches nothing else. “Search the scriptures,” Jesus says, “for they are they which testify of me” (John 5:39).

Let us, then, give heed to doctrine. It is the province not only of the theologians but of every one who desires life eternal. Let us not set doctrine aside in the interest of more “practical” matters, but understand that doctrine reproveth, corrects, and teaches the way of righteousness. Above all, it brings us face-to-face with the living God himself, in whom we live and move and have our being. To be without doctrine is to be without God.

———— *part 1* ————

GOD AND HIS WORD

Revelation

One of the most marvelous of God's works is his revelation to us. Just the fact that he does reveal himself is a great and wonderful thing. He is sufficient unto himself, has no need of anyone or anything besides himself, and yet chooses to reveal himself in all the works of his hands.

Even more wonderful is that God reveals *himself* to us. We are only creatures, the work of his hands, less than dust before him. He is the Almighty, the infinite and eternal God, who cannot be comprehended. Yet he makes himself and his glory known to us.

Especially when we remember that he is, according to 1 Timothy 6:16, the one whom no man hath seen, nor can see, pure Spirit and forever invisible to our eyes, do we realize that revelation is a miracle. That he who is so great should speak in human language and in a way that the simplest of us can understand is almost unbelievable. Calvin spoke of God "lispering" to us as a parent lisps to his little child. That is the miracle of revelation.

Part of that miracle, of course, is that God makes himself known to *sinners* who have closed their minds and hearts to him. In this we see the connection between the miracle of revelation and the miracle of grace and realize that revelation has its ultimate purpose in the salvation of God's people.

That brings us to the different ways in which God reveals himself. The Belgic Confession of Faith, following Psalm 19, speaks of two ways, through creation and through Scripture,¹ but there are other ways as well. God also reveals himself in history, which really is "his story," in the conscience of every man, and in the Old Testament directly by dreams, visions, angels, and other means.

God's revelation in creation is described in the Belgic Confession as a "most elegant book."² Just as the work of a master painter or sculptor reveals something of the artist, so do God's works reveal something of himself. Nevertheless, that revelation, as well as God's revelation in history and in the conscience of man, is a terrifying book to unsaved sinners. The unsaved sinner can read nothing in that revelation but wrath

1. Belgic Confession of Faith, Article 2.

2. *Ibid.*

and judgment, and for that reason he also corrupts that revelation and puts it away from himself (Rom. 1:25).

Only in the Scriptures does God reveal himself through Jesus Christ as the Savior of his people. For that reason we think especially of the Scriptures when we think of revelation.

Having known God through the Scriptures, we can also profit from God's revelation in creation and history. As Calvin suggested, the Scriptures are the eyeglasses through which we are also able to read in creation something of God's love and grace. Scripture teaches us to see in sunrises and in lilies, in seeds and in mountains, evidences of the great God of our salvation and of his grace.

Let us learn to read that "most elegant book" of creation, but let us not neglect that greater book, the Word of God in the Scriptures. There we learn to know him who has so graciously revealed himself to us in his Son.

General Revelation

"General revelation" is the term often used to refer to God's making himself known in creation, conscience, and history. The term is used in distinction from "special revelation," God's saving revelation through Jesus Christ in the Scriptures.

General revelation is referred to in a number of passages, but most clearly in Romans 1:18–32. That passage speaks of God's making himself known in the things of creation (vv. 20, 25) and in the conscience of man (v. 19; notice the words *in them*).

This general revelation, however, has no saving power. It is not even a kind of grace, although many speak of it as an example of so-called common grace. Instead, as Romans 1 makes so clear, this general revelation is of the *wrath* of God and only serves to leave the wicked without excuse (vv. 18, 20).

Certainly, then, general revelation does not provide another way of salvation. The idea that the wicked can be saved by a moral response to this general revelation is wholly without ground in Scripture and is just another form of salvation by works and of religious humanism.

This idea that general revelation has saving value is flatly contra-

dicted by Romans 1 itself. The wicked do see the “invisible things of God,” particularly his eternal power and Godhead (v. 20). There is even an *internal* aspect to this manifestation of God. Verse 19 says that the things that may be known of God are manifest “in them.”

This has important implications. The manifestation of God in the things that are made is the reason no one will ever be able to plead in the judgment that he did not know God. There is, as far as Romans 1 is concerned, really no such thing as an atheist. Therefore, the wicked who never heard the gospel can and will be condemned in the judgment day as a result of this manifestation.

Nevertheless, the only result of this manifestation of God, as far as the wicked are concerned, is that they refuse to glorify God, continue unthankful, and change the glory of God, manifested to them and in them, into images of corruptible things (vv. 21–25).

Put simply, this means that the idolatry of the wicked is not a seeking after the God whom they do not know or an attempt, however feeble, to find him. It is rather a turning away from the true God, *whom they do know*.

They are not, according to Romans 1, seeking truth, but suppressing it (v. 25). Their philosophies and religions do not represent a small beginning of truth or a love of truth, but truth refused and turned into lies. Confirming all of this, Scripture also makes it clear that salvation is only through the preaching of the gospel (Rom. 1:16; Rom. 10:14, 17; 1 Cor. 1:18, 21). There and there alone, Christ is revealed as the very power and wisdom of God unto salvation, so that without the gospel there is ordinarily no hope of salvation.

General revelation, therefore, only serves to increase the guilt of those who do not hear or believe the gospel. To teach otherwise is to deny the blood of Jesus Christ and his perfect obedience as the only way of salvation and to slander him and his cross.

The Word of God

God is so great that we cannot know him unless he reveals himself to us. He is so great that we cannot see him or touch him (1 Tim. 6:16), and so he reveals himself to us as our Savior and Father by his Word. We ought

not to be surprised about that, since speech is the principal means of communication even among ourselves, who were created in his image.

Nevertheless, that God speaks to men is a miracle. It is a miracle, in the first place, that the infinite and eternal God should speak of himself and his own glory in our limited and imperfect speech and yet make something of himself truly known to us. It is *God* whom we know and with whom we have fellowship through his Word.

In the second place, God's speaking to men is a miracle because, just as with human language, that speech of God to us is more than just a means of communication. It is the means by which we have fellowship with God, know him, and love him. As a man knows and loves the voice of his beloved wife above all others, so really do we know and love God through hearing his voice (Song of Sol. 2:14).

In the third place, God's revelation of himself through his Word is a miracle because the Word is not mere sounds in the air, nor marks upon a page, but living and abiding (1 Pet. 1:23). It is a Word that we not only hear and read, but that takes on visible form and becomes a tangible revelation of the living and unseen God (1 John 1:1) so that though God is forever unseeable, we do see him in the person of his Son, the Word made flesh.

Finally, the Word is a miracle because it is an act of the greatest possible condescension and mercy that God should speak to us. Since we have fallen into sin, would it not be more fitting that he withdraw himself and hide himself from us? Yet he speaks, and speaks peace.

That God speaks in mercy as our Father and Savior is possible only because of the inseparable relation between the Word made flesh and the Word written and read and preached. Neither can exist without the other. Only through the written Word do we know the living Word; there is no other possibility, whatever those who speak of direct revelations may claim. Nor is the written Word understood and received unless one also knows and receives it through that living Word made flesh.

There are errors to be avoided on both sides. On the one hand, we must avoid all talk of knowing and believing Christ apart from the Scriptures, as though, now that the Bible is complete, we can have fellowship with him, hear him, and see him apart from those Scriptures. On the other hand, we may never forget that to read the Scriptures and *not* find Christ in them (John 5:39–40) is to read them without understanding and in vain.

So that these Scriptures may never be doubted or forgotten, they have been given to us in written form and preserved in that form by God from the earliest times. It is by these Scriptures alone that God is pleased to make himself known in and through our Lord Jesus Christ. “They are they,” Jesus says, “which testify of me” (v. 39). Let us then give the more earnest heed to them (Heb. 2:1).

Scripture

Why do we need the Word of God in written form? Has not God in other times and places revealed himself in different ways and made himself known to his people? Did he not give his Word long before it was written? Is it not a form of idolatry, therefore, to suggest that the written Word of God is the only word to which we must give heed, the one rule for our faith and life?

The fundamental reason we do not have and should not want God’s Word in any other form than the written form in which he has given it is that “All men are of themselves liars and more vain than vanity itself.”³ God’s written Word remains as a testimony against all their efforts to deny, twist, and corrupt what he has said to them.

This is not to say that men do not still neglect and twist and disobey and refuse to hear the Word as it is infallibly written for us in the Scriptures, but its written record leaves them without excuse.

In the end they cannot really deny that the creation as told in Genesis 1 and confirmed throughout Scripture is the story of divine creation in six days. Nor can they deny that Scripture teaches that women ought to keep silence in the church. They may call this teaching time-bound and culturally conditioned, but what the Word says is clear. Denying it, they lose not only the Word of God, but also eternal life (Rev. 22:18–19).

Besides the fact that all men are liars and corrupt the Word of God to their own ends, we are by nature so corrupt and depraved that we would not get God’s message straight if he had left us with only his spoken Word, whether through angels or prophets or directly. We would surely misunderstand and corrupt the spoken Word.

3. Belgic Confession, Article 7.

We would not even remember what God had said if he had not given us his words in written form. Who of us remembers perfectly the sermon he heard spoken last Sunday? Or who can be absolutely certain that he heard and remembered correctly? Ask two witnesses what someone else has said, and almost always you will get two different versions of whatever was spoken.

Also there are many things God has said that do not sit well with us—things that we do not like to consider or hear. There is always the possibility that we will put them out of mind and forget them, as we do so often, or that our hearing of them will be colored and interpreted by our weakness and sin. That men do this with even the written Word is proof that they and we would certainly do it with the spoken Word.

In his wisdom and mercy, therefore, God has given us his written Word, so that we cannot claim we never heard it or heard it incorrectly. We must, then, have the highest possible regard for the written Word and not seek elsewhere for the knowledge of God and of his will.

The Sufficiency of Scripture

Have you ever thought that your faith would be much stronger and your life more holy if only you could have walked with Jesus himself as the apostles did—if you could have seen his miracles, heard his teaching, and followed him around through Galilee and Judea? Peter tells us that we must not think this way when he calls Holy Scripture “a more sure word of prophecy” (2 Pet. 1:19). We have something better and more sure than the apostles had who were “eyewitnesses of his majesty” (v. 16). Think of that! Can you imagine any stronger statement of the value and sufficiency of Holy Scripture?

Let us look at what Peter says. In 2 Peter 1:16–18 he is talking about the transfiguration of Christ. Not long before his death Jesus was “transfigured” on a mountain in Galilee. You will find the story in Matthew 17:1–8, Mark 9:2–8, and Luke 9:28–36. The three disciples who were there—Peter, James, and John—not only saw Jesus and Moses and Elijah, but they also heard the voice of God himself testifying of Jesus. What is more, they saw Jesus in his heavenly glory, as we will see him when he

comes again. That is why Peter speaks in verse 16 of seeing his “power and coming.” What could be better than that?

Peter knew we would think that way. He knew we would ask, “But what about us? How can we know and be sure? We did not see him. We were not ‘eyewitnesses of his majesty.’” Peter answers these questions before we even ask them when he tells us that Scripture is a *more sure word* of prophecy. It is more sure than being an eyewitness. That is part of what we call the *sufficiency* of Scripture. In Scripture we have everything we need for faith and life.

But do you know why Scripture is a more sure word? Peter explains that, too, by talking about the inspiration of Scripture: “The prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (2 Pet. 1:21). In other words, Scripture was not written because the authors of the various books wanted to write. They were not the ones, finally, who decided what to write and how to write it. In all their remembering, consulting of sources, planning, actual writing, and editing, the Holy Spirit “carried” them. That is what the word translated “moved” really means. They were carried! The real author of Scripture is the Holy Spirit.

The result is that Scripture is a light shining in a dark place. This world is the land of the shadow of death, a land darkened by the wrath of the Lord (Isa. 9:2, 19). Scripture tells us that there will be no night in the new heavens and earth, but on this earth there is no day. From a spiritual point of view, this world is all darkness. It is only, ever, night. And all around us the darkness deepens in these last days. In that darkness the light of Scripture shines, and until Christ the Day Star arises, it is the only light we have.

Take heed to the Bible, therefore. Its light does not shine when its covers are left closed. Read it daily. Study it with the prayer that God will make its light shine in your heart. Meditate on its precious truths. And follow it as a light on your life’s pathway.

The Inspiration of Scripture

In some ways the doctrine of Scripture’s divine inspiration is the most important of all doctrines. Every other doctrine and all instruction in

piety and godliness come from Scripture. Without Scripture we cannot know God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent, whom to know is life eternal. All that God reveals of himself in Christ is there. Without Scripture we cannot know how to please God. Scripture is our only guide for holiness. If Scripture is not the inspired Word of God, we lose everything.

This doctrine of inspiration is taught in 2 Timothy 3:15–17. There God says of his Word that it is all “God-breathed” (the words *given by inspiration of God* are a translation of one Greek word meaning “God-breathed”). This is a very striking way of saying that Scripture is the work of the Spirit of God (“breath” and “Spirit” are the same word in Greek), and that Scripture is therefore the very speech of God’s own mouth.

Because Scripture is the breath of God, it must be perfect and without error. To speak against Scripture is to speak against God himself. When we read the Bible, we hear the sweet voice and smell the sweet breath of him whose lips are “like lilies, dropping sweet smelling myrrh” (Song of Sol. 5:13). Who, then, dares to be critical?

Scripture in 2 Timothy 3 does not only teach *inspiration*, but also teaches *plenary* inspiration. The word *plenary* means “full” or “complete” and refers to Scripture’s inspiration in all its parts, in all the different kinds of literature that it contains, and in all matters that it addresses. Not only in its doctrines, but also in matters of geography, history, science, culture, and life, it is God-breathed and therefore perfect and infallible. Even its grammar is God-breathed, a reason we must insist on a careful translation of Scripture and must not be satisfied with anything less.

Because the Scriptures are fully inspired, they are profitable in four ways: doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness (vv. 15–17). Without speaking in detail of each one of these, notice that there is a beautiful completeness here. The Scriptures are profitable for *everything* we need for salvation. They show us the way of salvation (the basic meaning of *doctrine*). They bring us to the way by convicting us of sin (*reproof*), without which we will never know our need of Christ and his cross. They keep us in the way by *correction*, thus restoring us when we are weak and wandering. They also nurture us in the way (the word translated as *instruction* is the same word that is translated as “nurture” in Ephesians 6:4). They lead us to spiritual maturity, perfection, and

glory in Christ. There is nothing else necessary in the Christian's life! The Scriptures are able to make us "wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (v. 15).

What more can we ask? Let us, then, receive the Scriptures as God-breathed and use them accordingly.

The Plenary Inspiration of Scripture

The word *plenary* means "full." We speak of plenary inspiration, therefore, to emphasize that Scripture is fully inspired.

That is a truth that needs much emphasis today because there are those who, while claiming to believe in the inspiration of Scripture, deny that *all* of Scripture is inspired. Perhaps they do not accept the creation story of Genesis 1–3, or what Paul says about the place of women in the church, or the testimony of Romans 9 concerning sovereign, double predestination. Perhaps they claim that Scripture is accurate in matters of doctrine and salvation but not in matters of geography, natural history, science, and history. They do not believe that *all* Scripture is given by inspiration.

Over against all such claims we believe in *plenary* inspiration, which means several things.

First, plenary inspiration means that all the books of Scripture (and no others) are inspired by God. There is no one of them that has any less authority or necessity than any other.

Second, it means that Scripture is inspired in the different kinds of literature in which it is given. History, poetry, letters, prophecies: all are "given by inspiration of God, and profitable" (2 Tim. 3:16).

Third, plenary inspiration means that Scripture is inspired also in all matters of science, natural history, history, and geography. Indeed, there are some remarkable examples of this. Scripture has always taught, for example, that the earth is round, even when men did not believe it to be so (Isa. 40:22). It taught the hydrologic cycle before it was understood by science (Ps. 104:5–13). The belief that God is the inspirer of Scripture and the great Creator absolutely rules out any possibility that Scripture should be incorrect, even in its smallest and most insignificant details.

Fourth, it means that Scripture is fully inspired in all matters that pertain to our own lives. There are no commands or requirements of Scripture that are time-bound or culturally conditioned. Though given through men, all that Scripture says comes from the eternal God and cannot be set aside as having no application to us.

Fifth, plenary inspiration means that even Scripture's grammar, vocabulary, and syntax are inspired. It makes a difference that God said *seed* and not *seeds* in Genesis 17:7 (see also Gal. 3:16). It makes all the difference in the world that we are justified *by* faith or *through* faith, but not *because of* faith. Every letter, every word, and every sentence is important and must therefore be carefully translated. Because of plenary inspiration we do not accept paraphrases of Scripture, or even Bible versions that are a compromise between accurate translation and paraphrase, such as the New International Version (NIV).

Our faith in plenary inspiration is tested by whether or not we give this teaching mere lip service or receive Scripture as the inspired and infallible Word of God in all things, not doubting, not setting aside any part, but submitting, obeying, and believing all that God has said, and doing so even though the whole world is against us.

The Verbal Inspiration of Scripture

The doctrine of verbal inspiration is closely related to the doctrine of plenary inspiration. It emphasizes that the very *words* of Scripture are inspired by God. Scripture is not only the Word of God, but also the *words* of God.

We teach and emphasize this over against those who piously prate about Scripture being inspired in its teachings and doctrines, but not in its words and details. Such teaching is, of course, simply nonsense, for it is impossible that Scripture be the inspired Word of God in its teachings and thoughts if the words in which those teachings are given are not themselves inspired and infallible.

A belief in verbal inspiration makes us as English-speaking Christians strong proponents of the King James (Authorized) Version

(KJV). One important feature of this version, found in few of the modern versions, is that it puts in italics those words that are *not* found in the original Hebrew or Greek, thus showing those who cannot read the Hebrew and Greek the actual words of Scripture as much as possible. It may be necessary to add words in order to get a competent translation in English or in some other language, but those who read ought to know that the italicized words were added by men and not, in fact, spoken by God.

The doctrine of verbal inspiration is taught in Scripture in passages such as Psalm 12:6, Proverbs 30:5, and Revelation 22:18–19, as well as the many passages of Scripture that refer to the *words* God has spoken and caused to be written (Ps. 50:17; Ps. 119:130).

There are many remarkable examples in Scripture of the importance of this doctrine—the exact words spoken by God are important. In some cases the word choices make an enormous difference.

If Genesis 17:7 said *seeds* and not *seed*, the difference only between a plural and a singular, it would not be a prophecy of Christ (see also Gal. 3:16). This reference to Christ is completely lost in the modern versions, which retranslate the word in Genesis 17:7 as “descendants.”

Sometimes the words in the original language make it difficult to understand a passage, as in Hebrews 11:11. There Scripture says that Sara received strength to *conceive* seed. The Greek word is ordinarily used for the male and is translated elsewhere as “beget” or “generate.” Since that is the word Scripture uses, our only obligation is to figure out why Scripture uses that word, and not to change the passage, as the NIV does, to bring it into line with our own thinking. The NIV says that Abraham was enabled to become a father, even though Abraham is not mentioned in the verse at all. Such changes, and there are many in the NIV, are a denial of verbal inspiration.

There are many more examples of the same thing, but the point for us is that we need to listen carefully to what God says. To be satisfied that we have gotten the gist of it, the general import of what God is saying, is not enough. We must make sure we have heard, believed, and obeyed him exactly and in detail. If he has taken such care to reveal himself, speaking to us by the written Word, who are we to take any less care in hearing, obeying, and believing that every word of God is pure (Ps. 12:6)?

The Organic Inspiration of Scripture

There are many who stumble at the fact that Scripture was given through men. Because this is so, they think that there is a human element in Scripture and cannot quite believe the truth that Scripture is fully and completely the Word of God, without error—that there are no contradictions, no imperfections, no faults, and nothing in Scripture whatsoever that can be ascribed to human shortcomings.

We do not deny that Scripture was given through men. But this is so unimportant that in twelve of the sixty-six books of the Bible, we do not even know who the human writer was. Even where we know the author, however, the truth of organic inspiration holds.

Organic inspiration means that the inspiration of a book of the Bible began long before any book was ever written. To take the book of Ecclesiastes as an example, organic inspiration means that God began the work of inspiring that book not by moving Solomon to write it (2 Pet. 1:21), but by preparing all the circumstances under which Solomon would write, and by preparing Solomon himself as its writer.

God began the inspiration of Ecclesiastes when hundreds and even thousands of years before, he arranged the circumstances of history so that all things in Israel and among the nations would be just as Solomon found them when he wrote the book. God began the inspiration of Ecclesiastes when hundreds of years prior, he established the Jewish nation and the twelve tribes, one of which was the tribe of Judah, which later included the family of Jesse. God was preparing for that book when David became king and established his dynasty so that Solomon became king after him. God was preparing for that book even when David saw Bathsheba bathing and committed adultery with her and connived at the murder of her husband in order to marry her himself.

God arranged all the circumstances of Solomon's own life in such a way that he was not only the wisest of all men living, save Christ, but also one who fell into grievous sins. So it was that the book of Ecclesiastes, when written, was the record of Solomon's repentance and a testimony to the vanity of life without God.

Ultimately, of course, the doctrine of organic inspiration takes us

back to the counsels of eternity and to the fact that there is nothing that takes place, or ever has in all this wide world, that is not sovereignly fore-ordained of God and brought to pass by his sovereign and irresistible power. No more than we, tracing our salvation back to God's eternal decree, can claim to be the authors of our own salvation, even when we are repenting and believing and obeying, could Solomon claim to be the real author of Ecclesiastes, though he wrote the words and wrote them out of his own experience. It is the eternally decreeing and sovereign God and his Spirit who, through the living Word, are the authors of our salvation and of the books by which salvation is made known to us. What a great God! What a wonderful book!

The Infallibility of Scripture

Because Scripture is the Word of God, it is also perfect. To find error in Scripture is to find error in God. To receive Scripture as anything less than infallible is to deny the immutability and sovereignty of God.

John 10:35 clearly teaches the infallibility of Scripture. In that verse Jesus says, "The scripture cannot be broken." He uses the singular, *Scripture*, to show that the Bible is the *one* Word of God, though it was given through many different men and in many different times. Because it is *one*, any attempt to tamper with Scripture is an attempt to destroy it. No one can take away parts of it or deny that they are forever true without leaving only a ruin behind.

It is interesting that Jesus not only says that we may not break the Scripture, but also that it *cannot* be broken. He means to say that all the efforts of men to find error in Scripture or to throw off its demands are in vain. They are, when they find fault with the Scriptures, taking counsel against the Lord and against his Anointed, and he who sits in heaven laughs at them (Ps. 2:2–4). They, not Scripture, are broken on the unbreakable Word of God when they claim to find fault with the words or teachings of Scripture, for by such efforts they come under the judgment of God.

The context of John 10:35 is important, too, where Jesus quotes from the Old Testament in support of his claim to be God. He refers to Psalm

82:6, which calls earthly rulers *gods*. He says that if they can be called gods, then surely he who is sanctified and sent of the Father into the world ought not be accused of blasphemy when he says, “I am the Son of God.” Without going into the question of how earthly rulers can be called gods, we should notice that this is a remarkable statement. We would not dare to say it if it were not in Scripture, and even then we probably find it difficult to understand. Jesus assumes that the statement must be true and an infallible guide simply because it is found in Scripture. Just the way he quotes and uses Scripture is a great lesson for us on the theme “The Scripture Cannot Be Broken.”

It is significant, too, that Jesus refers to these words from Psalm 82 as “law.” He means that all Scripture, because it is the infallible Word of God, is the divine rule for our whole life. There is nothing in Scripture that is not the will of God for us, nor is there any counsel we need that is not found in Scripture. History, poems, prophecies, letters—all are God’s *law* for us. This is perhaps the most important point of all. It is not enough simply to say that Scripture is infallible and inerrant. We must also bow before it, submit to its teaching at every point, and receive it as willing and obedient servants of God. Otherwise, our confession of inspiration and infallibility is mere hypocrisy.

Do you believe that Scripture is infallible? Then ask yourself this question: “Is Scripture the *law* of God for me in everything I believe and do?”

The Authority of Scripture

Because Scripture is the inspired and infallible Word of God, it has supreme authority. There is no human authority that is greater, no man-made rule that can supersede its rule, and no teaching that can contradict anything it teaches.

It has authority in all matters of doctrine. This is implied in 1 Timothy 3:16, where doctrine is mentioned first. In that passage the authority of Scripture is not the thing being emphasized, but its profitableness. We must understand, however, that Scripture is of profit because it has authority: its teaching is always the “last word” in any matter, especially in matters of doctrine.

It has the same authority in all matters of practice and Christian living. That it was written thousands of years ago, in different cultures and to different people, makes no difference at all. Because it is the Word of God himself, who knows the end from the beginning and who does not change, the changing circumstances of life in this world do not destroy the authority of anything Scripture says.

Because Paul wrote about the place of women in the home and church in a different culture than ours does not make what he says invalid. It is not Paul who says it, but God himself.

Indeed, it is a reason for amazement to those who believe in the inspiration of Scripture to see how often Scripture, as the Word of eternal God, anticipates present-day false teachings and practices. A good example of this is found in 2 Peter 3:1–7, where the theory of evolution is undermined and destroyed by Scripture’s repudiation of uniformitarianism, the assumption that all things continue the same from the beginning of time.

Scripture’s authority is supreme even in matters of history, geography, science, or any other academic discipline insofar as it has anything to say on those matters. It does not have authority only in the area of theology and Christian living. So great is its authority that the believer must accept what it says even in the face of opposition from science.

We must understand that Scripture’s authority is the authority of God himself. To say that Scripture is the Word of God is to say that it has *all* authority. To deny it is to deny God; to contradict it is to contradict God himself.

No one can say that he accepts Scripture’s authority at one point and rejects it at another. He cannot say he accepts what it says about Jesus, but not what it says about creation. It is all God’s Word, and all of it is crowned with God’s authority. God and God’s speech cannot be accepted or rejected at will. His Word cannot be broken (John 10:35).

It is one thing to confess Scripture’s authority; however, it is another thing to bow to it. At every point in our Christian life, our submission to Scripture is tested. Nor is it easy to submit to Scripture’s commands when they cross our wills, or to Scripture’s teaching when it runs contrary to every fleshly inclination, as it usually does.

Only by grace do we obey. God, who gave Scripture, also gives us the

necessary grace. We say with Augustine, “Give what Thou commandest, and command what Thou wilt.”⁴

The Interpretation of Scripture

Because Scripture is the Word of God and the Holy Spirit its author, no one has the right to interpret it. People often speak as though they have this right. They speak of “my interpretation” or of someone else’s. That is wrong (2 Pet. 1:20). Even in controversy there is only one acceptable interpretation of Scripture, and that is Scripture’s own interpretation of itself. That interpretation is God’s own, not man’s.

One of the great principles of the Reformation was the principle that Scripture is self-interpreting. Though that may seem strange to us, it must be so, for only the author himself, the Holy Spirit of God, has the right and the power to tell us what he means. My own interpretation means nothing. Only God’s interpretation matters.

This is taught in 2 Peter 1:20–21, which states plainly that no Scripture is of any *private* interpretation. This statement seems a bit out of place at first, because the emphasis is not on interpretation, but on inspiration. Nevertheless, the doctrine of inspiration, as taught in these verses, has this as its application: no one but God himself, who inspired the Word, has the right to interpret it.

The Holy Spirit does interpret Scripture, but not in some mystical manner—not by mysteriously and secretly revealing the meaning of Scripture to us by some private revelation. It is wrong to say, “God showed me,” or “God told me,” or “God revealed this to me.” That, too, is a denial of Scripture, not only of its sufficiency, but of the inspiration of Scripture. The person who says these things is claiming that he has an interpretation of Scripture that God has given to him privately, apart from Scripture itself. The proper interpretation of Scripture is given when Scripture is compared with Scripture.

4. *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. E. B. Pusey, ed. and condensed David Otis Fuller from Book X (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House Christian Life Library Selection series), 122.

For example, if we wish to determine the meaning of a word in Scripture, perhaps the word *baptism*, we must look up the different passages in which the word is used and the context of each passage in order to determine what the word means in Scripture and how Scripture uses it. The proper interpretation of Scripture, therefore, requires careful study so that we may learn from Scripture itself what it means. The person who thinks he can turn to a passage of Scripture and understand it without study is very foolish and proud.

We must be careful, therefore, not to impose our own ideas on Scripture, but humbly and prayerfully to receive what it says. Learning the proper interpretation of Scripture requires grace, submission, and prayer.

There is no one, not even ministers of the gospel, who may claim to be above the Word of God. Every interpretation, every creed, every sermon, may be and ought to be subjected to rigid scrutiny in light of what God's Word says, exactly because no one has the private right to interpret Scripture. For this reason, even the preaching of the apostles was subject to careful examination and criticism (Acts 17:10–11). Even that preaching, as any other, had to conform to the Spirit's own interpretation of his own Word.

May God give us the necessary grace—much grace—to seek out and find that one interpretation and give heed to it (Heb. 2:1).

The Unity of Scripture

Because Scripture is God's Word and has one author, it is also *one*. God does not speak with sixty-six different voices. He cannot, because he himself is one in power, in purpose, and in being. Because he is one, his Word and revelation are one also.

That Scripture is one is of the utmost importance. For this reason Scripture cannot contradict or be at odds with itself. One book cannot differ from another, nor the Old Testament from the New. Scripture cannot teach one thing in the Old Testament and something opposed to it in the New, nor one human writer something different from another.

It is wrong, therefore, to speak of "the theology of Paul," as some do,

suggesting that it differs from the theology of Jesus or the theology of Peter. Nor may anyone suggest that Jesus had different views from Moses or Paul or John on certain matters, such as divorce or the place of women in the church.

This doctrine of Scripture's unity is especially important over against dispensationalism, which sees no unity between the Old Testament and the New, between Israel and the church. Even the Baptist teaching that the covenant with Israel is a fundamentally different covenant than God's covenant with the church is a denial of the unity of Scripture. Scripture is one book and cannot teach two or more different and conflicting covenants.

If Scripture is one, there cannot be different revelations, different covenants, different peoples of God, or different ways of salvation. Our objections to the teaching of dispensationalism and believer's baptism, therefore, are not only based on passages that disprove specific teachings of these groups, but also on passages that teach Scripture is one and cannot be broken (John 10:35).

The notion that the Old Testament is not authoritative for New Testament Christians except where its teaching is restated in the New Testament is a denial of the unity of Scripture. What is written in the Old Testament was written for us as New Testament Christians as well (1 Cor. 10:11).

The unity of Scripture, as Jesus reminds us in John 10:35, is in himself. It is all, from beginning to end, the revelation of Christ as the Savior and of the grace of God that is revealed in him. As Spurgeon said, "Wherever you cut the Scriptures, they flow with the blood of the Lamb."⁵ To find Christ in every passage must be our goal, and in doing so we will most certainly find that the Scriptures speak with one voice.

The doctrine of Scripture's unity is important not only as a defense against other teachings, but also for our *study* of Scripture. If Scripture is one, no passage of it may ever be studied, believed, or even quoted in isolation from the rest of the Word. Nothing we ever say or think from the Word of God may contradict anything else. And this means, of course, that we must be busy with the Scriptures so that we know them from beginning to end and are thoroughly acquainted with their teaching.

The doctrine of Scripture's unity means, then, that all Scripture is

5. Location of quotation in Charles Haddon Spurgeon's writings is not known.

necessary and important and that no part of it may be neglected. We must know, read, study, learn, and give heed to all of it. Do you?

The Perspicuity of Scripture

Perhaps you have heard the *perspicuity* of Scripture mentioned and wondered what that meant. It means that Scripture is *clear and easily understood*.

Perspicuity is part of the miracle of Scripture, especially since Scripture reveals God. That he, the infinite and eternal God, not only is willing to reveal himself to us, but also does so clearly and plainly, is a great wonder.

We do not deny, of course, that there are difficult passages in Scripture, even difficult books. The Bible itself teaches us this (Ps. 78:2; 2 Pet. 3:16). Nevertheless, we believe that every doctrine of the faith, and all things necessary for God's glory and our salvation, are clearly taught.

Psalms 119:105 teaches perspicuity: "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path." Scripture could not even be called a light if it was not clear, and this verse says that it is a light for our *path*, that is, for our whole life. It is a safe and reliable guide to bring us all the way along our life's path to glory.

Because Scripture is clear, it can be understood even by the unlearned and by children. It may not, therefore, be kept from them. It ought to be translated into the language of every people to whom the gospel comes so that they may read it and have its light with them always.

There are things we must understand about the perspicuity of Scripture lest we fall into error.

First, because there are difficult passages, we must always interpret such passages in the light of those passages that speak more clearly. No interpretation of a difficult passage, for example, may contradict any important doctrine of Scripture or any rule for thankful living that is clearly taught.

Second, Scripture is clear only to believers. Unbelief cannot understand Scripture, because the things that are in Scripture are the

things of God, and they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:14). We should remember this when speaking to someone who denies an important truth of Scripture like the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. When such a person cannot see from Scripture that Jesus is God, we should not begin to doubt that Scripture plainly teaches this important truth. The problem is not in Scripture. The problem is in that man's heart and mind. Before anyone can understand anything Scripture teaches, his heart must be opened and his mind enlightened by the Holy Spirit. Without that, proof texts, logic, and argument are useless.

Since Scripture is the clear light of God's own revelation, we must follow its light. The warning and the promise of 1 John 1:6-7 are for us: "If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin."

Bible Versions

There has been such a proliferation of Bible versions, especially in recent times, that one hardly recognizes the Word of God anymore when it is read. This constant production of new versions is no small matter. If Scripture is indeed the all-sufficient and inspired Word of God, it is very important that we use a good version of the Bible.

Before recommending a particular version, note that the proliferation of modern versions is one of the ways in which the Bible has very effectively been taken away from God's people. Because so many different versions are in use, a passage may no longer sound familiar when it is quoted or preached. Nor do children easily learn and memorize Scripture, since they are being taught from so many different versions. They hear one version at home, another in school, yet another in church, and still others in their fellowships and Bible studies, and they remember none.

It is also very telling that the many and varied versions have arisen in an age of modernism, apostasy, and doubt, not during a time when the church was strong and faithful to the Word of God. This in itself is a good reason to be suspicious of these versions. Many of them are not true translations at all but are paraphrases, such as *The Living Bible*, or something halfway between a paraphrase and a translation, such as the NIV.

It is probably obvious by this time that the only English version we would recommend is the King James Version (KJV), which is called the Authorized Version in Britain. We would recommend it for many reasons, the most important being that it is an accurate and faithful translation of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures. This is so much the case that the English of the 1611 KJV is not really the English of the 1600s, as is sometimes charged, but “biblical English,” the result of the efforts of the translators to be as faithful as possible to the original Greek and Hebrew. An example of accurate translation in the KJV is its practice of putting *in italics* all the words that are not found in the original Greek or Hebrew.

In defense of the KJV, it is not true that the modern versions are based on better manuscripts unknown to the translators of the KJV. They knew of other manuscripts, even though they did not have all of those that have been discovered since. These other manuscripts, though some of them are very old, are also very corrupt, having in them thousands of unique changes and omissions. The majority of manuscripts (80–90%), however, support what is sometimes called the “Received Text,” the text on which the KJV is based.

The need for a good, faithful, and accurate translation like the KJV is expressed in the words of its translators: “Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light; that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel; that putteth aside the curtain, that we may look into the most holy place; that removeth the cover of the well, that we may come by the water.”⁶ Let us, then, be faithful to the Word of God as he in his providence and grace has given it to us, and be satisfied with nothing less than the Word of God.

6. From the section “Translation Necessary,” originally in the preface to the King James (Authorized) Version of the Bible, 1611. Quoted here from the booklet with modern spelling as “The Translations to the Reader” (London: Trinitarian Bible Society, 1998), 12.

Knowing God

The whole of the Christian religion is knowing God. Knowing him is the purpose of Christianity, its highest goal and endeavor and its greatest blessedness. As Jesus says in John 17:3, it is eternal life.

This knowledge of God is the only true knowledge. We cannot even know ourselves without him or apart from him. That is true not only because we are sinners whose hearts are deceitful and corrupt (Jer. 17:9), but also because we are created by God to live in relationship to him (Ps. 30:5). Apart from him we cannot know who and what *we* are.

Even our deeds are judged in relationship to God. One cannot know whether his actions and words are good or evil except by comparing them to the standard of God's own perfect holiness. That explains why there are few moral standards left in today's society. The majority, even of those who have religion of some sort, do not know God. Ignorant of him, they have no moral standard.

To know God is not merely to have a head full of doctrines or of facts about God, even if these are biblical facts and truths. That is not to say that the doctrines and teachings of Scripture concerning God are unimportant. Knowledge is part of faith, and without it faith is nothing. One cannot claim to believe in a God of whom he knows nothing. Yet the knowledge of God is more—so much more that it is possible for one to know intellectually what Scripture teaches about God, and to have been taught, perhaps as a child, the doctrine of God as it is found in Scripture, and yet not know him.

The knowledge of God is also something *experiential*. God is so great, one cannot know him merely by the activity of the mind or by intellectual endeavor. One must have met him, heard him, walked with him, and known him as a man knows his friend. Indeed, when Scripture speaks of knowing God, the word *know* is synonymous with *love*. Just as Scripture speaks of a man knowing his wife to describe the loving intimacies of marriage, so Scripture speaks of knowing God. Not to love him is not to know him—not truly.

To know God, therefore, is to delight in him, to enjoy him, and to obey him. So wonderful is he in grace, mercy, and majesty that it is impossible for someone who does not enjoy him and love him to say that he knows God. That person, even though he may know very well what

the Bible says about God, is rejecting him, turning his back on him, hating him, and showing that he really does not know God at all. His mind is blinded and his heart hardened.

Do you *know* God in that true sense of the word? Do you show every day anew that he is your greatest delight and treasure? Do you love him and his glory with all your heart and strength? Do you enjoy him and obey him?

God's Names

One of the ways in which God reveals himself to us is by his names. It is for that reason that he has given us so many different names in Scripture. Those names are many because God is very great and his glory without end. Each name tells something about him, but all of them still cannot describe his infinite praises.

When we study these names, we must remember that God's names are different from ours. Our names are only labels that can be changed; and if changed, they do not change who and what we are.

God's names show us who and what he is. They are as unchangeable as God himself. To abuse and misuse those names, as some do in their speech, is to abuse God himself. That is the reason God will not hold guiltless the person who uses his names *in vain*, as though they are empty of meaning and holiness.

It is great sin to misuse God's names. That sin is forbidden and threatened with punishment in the third commandment (Ex. 20:7), but what we must remember is that it is an equally great sin *not to use* the names of God at all. A person may be damned for taking God's name in vain. He may also be damned for never naming the name of God.

The third commandment, as all the ten commandments, not only forbids something; it also requires something. It requires the holy, reverent, God-glorifying use of his names. We must learn to use the names of God, not randomly, but because of what they tell us about God.

In prayer we often use the names of God at random, addressing him