

Chapter 1: Is the Bible the Word of God?

The Key Importance of the Bible

Years ago, a Pentecostal church in Venezuela invited me to give a talk about Christian leadership. (They liked a lot of the Lutheran church's teachings and outreach through Christ for All the Nations – Lutheran Hour Ministries – and wanted to hear more.) One of the points I made during the conference was that a good Christian leader needs to know the Bible and to put it into practice. One of the participants raised his hand and asked, "But if the Holy Spirit is leading us, why do we need to study the Bible?" Others nodded their heads. After all, the Bible itself says that "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." (2 Corinthians 3:6, NASB)

On the other end of the spectrum, some modern and postmodern theologians affirm that the Bible is just like any other book. They believe that the Bible is not inherently special, that it has errors like other human books have. According to them, the Bible is important only because many people appreciate it and resonate with it, and because it gives testimony to the religious ideas of an influential group.

Yet millions of other Christians affirm that the Bible is different from any other book, and that it is of key importance to study it, to understand it, and to put it into practice. Why? What's so important about the Bible?

Some people feel that the Bible is important because of its literary beauty. It's true that the Bible is a literary masterpiece. Phrases and stories and poetry and illustrations from the Bible continually appear in the writings of great authors throughout history and down to the present day. They recognize the literary value and impact of the Bible.

Other people acknowledge the Bible's importance because of its influence. Not only has the Bible changed individual lives; it has also changed history. The Bible's moral code laid the foundation for the laws that govern our societies, particularly in Western countries but also around the globe. The Bible's insistence upon love and charity led to the historical development of hospitals, orphanages, and education even for people who could not pay. The development of science and the scientific movement came about because the first scientists believed firmly in Biblical teachings – in particular, that one God created the world and set natural laws in place. These are just a few of the areas where the influence of the Bible has been profound.

Still other people find the Bible important because of its deep philosophical and theological ideas. It is true that the Bible tackles difficult philosophical questions. What is the purpose of our existence? Why is there evil in the world? What actions are morally right or wrong, and who determines which is which? Is there anything beyond this life? How can I know if God exists?

Nevertheless, the Bible is not important only for its beauty or its usefulness or its influence, or even for its philosophical thought. **Above all, the Bible is important because it is God's Word.** The Bible represents what God wants to communicate with us.

This means that the Bible is significantly different from any other book. Other books communicate messages from human authors. The Bible communicates messages from God himself to us.

This also means that the Bible is the **sword of the Spirit** (Hebrews 4:12, Ephesians 6:17). The Holy Spirit speaks to us through the Bible. It is true that, on occasion, God has spoken directly to certain individuals. However, that is the exception. The Holy Spirit does not speak directly to

everyone, nor does he do it all the time. God has chosen to communicate with everyone, at every time, through the Bible. If anyone says that the Holy Spirit is guiding them, and yet doesn't care to spend time studying the Bible, he or she is mistaking the Holy Spirit for something else.

All too often, people have been deceived, thinking that God was speaking to them when in fact he was not. A friend of mine says that the Holy Spirit tells him directly what he needs to do; and yet, very often his "Holy Spirit" seems to lead him astray. For example, he has committed adultery and has refused to reconcile with people with whom he has a conflict, because the "Holy Spirit" told him that this was "for the best." Satan can disguise himself as an "angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14). The Bible is like a compass which shows us the right way, and helps us distinguish between what really comes from God and what doesn't.

How Can We Be Sure that the Bible is the Word of God?

If the Bible really is the Word of God, then clearly it is of key importance. But how can we know if it is God's Word? There are plenty of religious books in the world that claim to be from God. For example, Muslims claim that the Quran is God's Word. Hindus have their own collection of sacred writings. The Mormons claim that the Book of Mormon comes from God. Words are cheap. How can we know if the Bible really is a communication from God? Here is some of the evidence:

1. The testimony of the Bible itself: First of all, the Bible itself claims to offer words from God. For example, 1 Corinthians 2:13 states: "This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit..." (NIV) The Bible repeatedly affirms: "Thus says the Lord..."

At first glance, this evidence would seem to be both blindingly obvious and completely worthless. Of course the Bible claims to be God's Word! But we just said that words are cheap. Surely what the Bible says about itself doesn't carry any weight.

However, we need to start with the Bible's clear declarations, because people again and again have misrepresented what the Bible says about itself. For example, some theologians say that the Bible doesn't present itself as God's Word but only gives testimony to what some people think about God. Others claim that the Bible contains many great spiritual truths, but is not the Word of God.

These ideas do not reflect what the Bible itself says. The Bible states clearly and forcefully and repeatedly that it is setting forth what God wants to communicate, not what people think about God. If indeed the Bible is not the Word of God, then that would mean that on a very fundamental level, the Bible is either a lie or a huge mistake. Any "spiritual truths" embedded in such falsehood would be automatically suspect.

So let's be clear. The Bible claims to be the Word of God. To substantiate that claim, we need to look at further evidence.

2. The testimony of Jesus Christ: Jesus Christ accepted the Old Testament as the Word of God and said that the Holy Spirit would guide the apostles, who wrote the New Testament. For example, in Matthew 11:13, Jesus said, "For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John." (NASB) The "Law and the Prophets" refers to the books of the Old Testament. Again, in John 16:13, Jesus said to the apostles, "When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come." (NIV)

On the one hand, as I've said before, talk is cheap. However, even the most critical of scholars would agree that these words cited by the Bible accurately represent Jesus' attitude. And Jesus' words have weight. He rose from the dead! No other religious book has a testimonial like this. Mohammed testified that the Quran was revealed to him by Allah (God); but Mohammed is now dead. Joseph Smith testified that an angel revealed the Book of Mormon to him; but Joseph Smith is also dead. All the authors of all the other sacred writings in the world are dead. Jesus is alive! If anyone is an expert on what God says, it must be Jesus Christ.

3. The testimony of prophecy: Plenty of Biblical prophecies have been fulfilled, often dramatically. Examples range from the rise of Cyrus the Great (Isaiah 44:28 – 45:6) to the siege and fall of Jerusalem (Luke 21:20-24), to the birthplace of the Savior (Micah 5:2) to the details of Jesus' crucifixion (Psalm 22, written centuries before crucifixion was even invented).

In fact, so many Biblical prophecies have been fulfilled, that doubters have a very tough time justifying their position. From the beginning of the Christian church, leaders like Justin Martyr pointed to the fulfillment of prophecies as important evidence for the truth of the Christian faith. People who try to deny this evidence are forced to the extreme measure of claiming that the prophecies were written after the fact (that is, after the events had already occurred). For example, they say that Isaiah 44-45 was written after Cyrus was crowned, and that Luke 21 was written after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD. However, there is absolutely no evidence to support this claim. Furthermore, some prophecies (like Micah 5:2, Isaiah 53, Psalm 22, etc.) cannot by any stretch of the imagination be "after the fact."

Of course, some prophecies have yet to be fully realized. For example, the "new heavens and the new earth" (Isaiah 65:17, Isaiah 66:22, 2 Peter 3:13) have yet to come about fully. Also, some prophecies (like those in the book of Revelation) are very symbolic and open to different interpretations. However, the multitude of clear prophecies that have already been fulfilled constitute a powerful argument in favor of the Bible being the Word of God.

By contrast, other "sacred writings" cannot say the same. For example, Charles Russell, the founder of the Jehovah's Witnesses, claimed that someone who read the Bible might be lost eternally, but someone who read his own writings would find salvation. Yet he repeatedly made predictions about the date of the end of the world which did not come true. First it was to come in 1914, then in 1915; then the Watchtower (the official teaching periodical of the Jehovah's Witnesses) switched the date to 1925, then to 1975, and finally the Witnesses claimed that Jesus had come "invisibly" back in 1914. Deuteronomy 18:22 states: "If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him." (NIV)

4. The testimony of history: Historical records and archaeological discoveries have often confirmed the historical veracity of certain parts of the Bible. Archaeologists (people who study the remains of ancient civilizations) have again and again found the remains of cities where the Bible claims they would be. They have found written evidence of customs described in the Bible.

Obviously, historical records are very incomplete. Also, many times archaeological evidence is open to interpretation. For example, the remains of an ancient building were found at Megiddo in Israel. Some archaeologists thought that the building was part of the stables of King Solomon (2 Chronicles 9:25). Others, however, thought that the building was from a different time than that of King Solomon. Nevertheless, all of them agree that a city was at that site – a site which is mentioned in the Bible.

People who have tried to cast doubt on the Bible's historical accuracy often end up looking foolish. For example, the Old Testament refers to the Hittites again and again. For a time, some scholars considered this to be a glaring error in the Bible, since they couldn't find any other evidence that the Hittites existed. However, little by little the archaeologists began to uncover records and other evidence of the Hittites. It turned out that not only did the Hittites exist, but at one time they had an empire based in what is now Turkey.

In more recent times, certain scholars cast doubt that King David really existed. They thought that the stories of King David in the Bible were just fables or legends, like the legend of King Arthur in England. These scholars had their theories blown away by the recent discovery of an ancient inscription with King David's name.

By contrast, many other "sacred writings" have little or no connection with historical events. Some religious books even make false historical claims. For example, the Book of Mormon speaks of civilizations in the Americas, but no remains of those cities or nations can be found. On the contrary, the "history" in the Book of Mormon is suspiciously similar to a fictitious novel written by Spaulding during Joseph Smith's time.

5. The testimony of the unity of the Bible: The different writings that make up the Bible were written by many different individuals living in different countries in different continents, in different centuries. Yet the Bible as a whole shows a remarkable unity in its message and main themes. Of course, each book of the Bible has its own perspective on the message of salvation. However, those perspectives harmonize with each other and complement each other. For example, the themes of Creation and New Creation appear again and again from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation. In the same way, the themes of Sin and Forgiveness turn up repeatedly.

If someone were to gather together a bunch of people at random, and ask them all to sing whatever they wanted, the result would be noise and confusion. However, if a conductor were to give that same group of people a piece of music and lead them in singing together, the result would be much different. It could be that some people would be singing different parts (soprano, alto, tenor, bass), but it would all work together in harmony and beauty. In the same way, the harmony shown by the different parts of the Bible indicates that God is behind it as the "conductor."

Skeptics at times try to attack the unity of the Bible by trying to find contradictions. They can't find many – and most of the supposed contradictions that they do find are easily explained if one pays attention to the context. I have not yet heard of any "contradiction" that couldn't be resolved. However, even if we were to accept all of the supposed contradictions proposed by the skeptics, these would still be overwhelmed by the sheer number of connections and common themes and even common phrases that are shared by the different parts of the Bible.

These are not the only pieces of evidence which support the claim that the Bible is God's Word. Many Christians also point to the lives that have been changed by the Bible, from the apostles down to the present time. Others have noted that, in spite of all the persecution and attacks on the Bible, it has not only endured but remains the overall best-seller even in our times. These facts point to God's hand behind the Bible.

Many Christians also affirm that if you read the Bible, the Holy Spirit will speak to your heart and assure you that what you've read is indeed the Word of God. This may well be true, but it is a very subjective kind of evidence. Our hearts can be deceived. For example, some Mormons claim that their hearts "burn within them" when they read the Book of Mormon.

Still, as we've seen, there is an awful lot of objective evidence that the Bible is indeed God's Word. And since it is God's Word, we can expect that the Holy Spirit will be working through it to transform our lives. You may or may not have "feelings of the heart" when you read the Bible; sometimes God lets us "feel" his presence and sometimes he doesn't. However, in either case, the Spirit will be using the Bible as his instrument.

Some people doubt or deny that the Bible is the Word of God, in spite of all these pieces of evidence. As the saying goes, there is no one so blind as he who does not want to see. Every day we go ahead and do many things based on much weaker evidence than that which supports the Bible's claims. For example, we get on buses and planes all the time, trusting that we will reach our destination safely and on time, even though we know nothing about the driver (or pilot) or the maintenance crew or the factory workers who made the vehicle. That requires a lot more faith than believing that the Bible is the Word of God.

The "Inspiration" of the Bible

Although the Bible is a communication from God, God himself did not physically write the words on a page. Instead, God chose a number of different individuals to write different parts of the Bible. Various prophets wrote the different books of the Old Testament. Several apostles and evangelists wrote the books of the New Testament.

These people wrote while under the **inspiration** of the Holy Spirit. That is, the Holy Spirit guided them, led them. In this way, they didn't write their own ideas or opinions, but what God wanted to say through them. The English word "inspiration" literally means a "breathing in." 2 Timothy 3:16 states that all Scripture is "θεόπνευστος" that is, "God-breathed." God "breathed" his Spirit upon the authors of the Bible. He worked with them and guided them so that they wrote, in their own human words, what God himself wanted to say.

Note well: we have to be careful with the word "inspiration." It has different meanings depending on the context. Sometimes we say that a song or a poem is "inspired." What we mean is that the song or poem moves us emotionally. Other times we say that a certain person's life is an "inspiration." We mean that this person's actions are exemplary, that we are encouraged to imitate his or her life. In these cases, "inspiration" refers to a human accomplishment that motivates us to feel awe and appreciation, and which we may want to imitate.

However, when it comes to the Bible, we use the word "inspiration" in another sense. The "inspiration" of the Bible means that God moved the authors of the Bible in such a way that they communicated God's message rather than their own human ideas. The "inspiration" of the Bible is God moving to communicate, not humans being impressive.

Now, since the Holy Spirit inspired (guided) the human authors of the Bible, then the same Holy Spirit can help the human interpreters of the Bible. In fact, it's simply not possible to fully understand the Bible without the Holy Spirit's help. Thus, the **first guideline** for interpreting the Bible is:

1. Pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance.

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. (James 1:5, ESV) If I write a book, I am the best interpreter of what I say in that book. If you are not sure what something I wrote means, you should ask me, the author. Since the Bible is the Word of God, the Holy Spirit (the "divine author") is the one best suited to help us to interpret it correctly.

Today, many people read the Bible like any other book, like any other human literature. They may understand quite a bit about the Bible. They may appreciate its beauty as literature. They may know lots of historical details. They can analyze the ideas that the Bible presents. However, without the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they will never be able to fully comprehend nor completely accept the message of salvation which is at the heart of the Bible.

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Corinthians 2:14, ESV)

The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing. (1 Corinthians 1:18a)

Example: Interpreting John 3:16

If we read the Bible like any other human book, we will indeed be able to understand quite a few details about John 3:16. We can appreciate the beauty of the sentiments expressed in the book of John. We can analyze John's use of certain key words such as "world" and "eternal life." We can look up historical details which help us understand Nicodemus' situation and his position as a leader in Jewish society at that time. We can understand that the phrase "only-begotten Son" refers to Jesus Christ.

However, if we only look at John 3:16 from a human point of view, we will never accept that this verse is a message from God himself for us, a promise of personal salvation. Other people may believe, but we won't. Because of that, we will lose the most important part of the meaning of this verse.

By contrast, if we recognize that John 3:16 is God's Word, and ask the Holy Spirit to guide us, our eyes will be open to this message of salvation. We may or may not understand all the details. However, we will have captured the heart of the verse. The details may be cleared up in time, as we continue to study the Bible and grow in our understanding.

Challenges

The Gnostics

As we have seen, plenty of people believe that the Bible – or at least parts of it – is not in fact God's Word. For example, at the time of the early church, a number of "gnostic" sects arose. The "gnostics" were heavily influenced by Neo-Platonic Greek philosophy; particularly, they bought into the idea that everything in the material world (including the body) is evil, and that only what is spiritual (non-material, ideal) is perfect. The Old Testament, by contrast, shows God as the creator of the material world which is "good." The gnostics believed that the Old Testament

came from an inferior god, perhaps even an evil god. According to them, it could not be relied upon as God's Word.

The New Testament was a bit more acceptable to the gnostics, but even so, it did not provide much support for their beliefs. Thus, different gnostic groups wrote their own versions of the gospels. For example, the so-called "Gospel of Peter," "Gospel of Judas," and "Gospel of Thomas" are in fact gnostic creations, written long after the time of the apostles. Today sometimes we hear in the news about "lost" gospels being found, gospels which supposedly were "suppressed" by the Christian church. While that kind of "news" might sell papers, it twists the historical facts into a pretzel. None of these "gospels" were either lost or suppressed; they were the fabrications of several related sects that died out over the course of time. The gospels of the Bible (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) have strong links to the apostles and evangelists (including fragments of manuscripts dated very close to the time of the apostles). The gnostic "gospels" were written much later by people who were only interested in pushing their own, non-Christian agenda.

In a similar way, in ancient times, Marcion of Rome did not accept the Old Testament as the Word of God because it didn't fit with his own ideas. He only accepted a much-edited version of the gospel of Luke, together with some of Paul's letters.

Today, no-one subscribes to the ancient gnostic beliefs. (There are groups today that call themselves "gnostics," but they are related to the New Age movement, not ancient Gnosticism.) Nevertheless, it is still tempting to select just those parts of the Bible that we agree with, and reject the rest as somehow "not God's Word."

The Jews

While the gnostics rejected the Old Testament and grudgingly accepted the New (with modifications), the Jews who do not believe in Jesus have done just the opposite. They accept the "Old Testament" as God's Word, but not the New Testament. Now, let me clarify this a bit. First of all, quite a few Jews do believe in Jesus and accept the New Testament as God's Word. In fact, virtually all of the very first Christians were Jews. Today, Jews who trust in Jesus as the Messiah and who continue to practice traditional Jewish ceremonies and festivals are often called "Messianic Jews" or "completed Jews."

Secondly, among the Jews who do not believe in Jesus, some are Jewish just because of their heritage, not because of their religious convictions. Thus, some Jews do not accept even the Old Testament as God's Word; yet they often keep up certain Jewish traditions.

Still, many Jews (from the time of the apostles up to the present day) believe that the Old Testament is God's Word but not the New Testament. It is not easy to read the Old Testament while at the same time denying its fulfillment, its completion in the New Testament. Sometimes Jewish interpreters have to go to extreme lengths to avoid the clear implications of Old Testament prophecies or symbols that were fulfilled in Jesus Christ. 1 Corinthians 3:15-16 states: *To this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts; but whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.*

The "Hermeneutic of Suspicion"

Today, quite a few people do not accept either the Old Testament or the New Testament as God's Word. After all, how do you know for sure that the Bible is from God? Some people won't accept that until and unless you prove it to them. For them, the evidences we discussed

earlier in this chapter are not enough. They think, “Maybe Jesus didn’t really rise from the dead. Maybe he didn’t say everything you think he said. Maybe the fulfilled prophecies could have some other explanation. Maybe...”

The theologians call this a “hermeneutic of suspicion.” The word “Hermeneutic” means “principle of interpretation.” Thus, “hermeneutic of suspicion” means that your main principle for interpreting the Bible is to be suspicious of it. You don’t believe it, until and unless someone provides incontrovertible proof that it is correct.

By contrast, the “hermeneutic of faith” means that your main principle for interpreting the Bible is to accept it, to believe it, unless someone can show you clear evidence that it is wrong.

The philosopher Descartes was one of the first to emphasize the hermeneutic of suspicion. He doubted everything around him. He refused to trust even in the evidence of his senses; after all, the senses can be deceived by hallucinations or tricks. Finally, Descartes found one truth that he felt he could prove beyond a doubt: “I think, therefore I am.” If there was thinking going on, obviously there must be an entity doing that thinking. From that one assertion, Descartes reasoned his way to the existence of everything else – including God and the Bible.

However, most people who follow the hermeneutic of suspicion do not come to the same happy conclusions as Descartes. They set the bar of proof so high that no evidence could ever be conclusive. For them, we can never get beyond doubting the Bible. After all, even if God himself appeared before our eyes and told us that the Bible is his Word, we could still doubt: “But what if that was just a hallucination?”

Actually, when it comes to Biblical interpretation, many people do not follow a hermeneutic of “suspicion” so much as a hermeneutic of “I’m going to close my eyes and reject this no matter what you say.” For example, some interpreters insist from the outset that we must read the Bible as a purely human book. They also categorically reject the possibility that miracles may occur. (These principles were first elaborated by interpreters using the historical critical method. Later interpreters accepted them without thinking much about it.)

This goes beyond suspicion. Ironically, no one who follows the “hermeneutic of suspicion” seems to apply it to their own beliefs. If you doubt everything, then why aren’t you suspicious of your own ideas? After all, how can you be so sure the Bible is a purely human book? How can you prove that miracles never occur?

In our normal, daily lives, we never take the hermeneutic of suspicion to this extreme. We may ask for reasonable proof, but not philosophical Descartes-style proof. For example, I normally accept that what I see with my eyes does in fact exist – unless I have been drinking or have an eye injury or have some good reason to think that my eyes may be wrong in some instance. Again, in our justice system we convict a person if it can be shown beyond reasonable doubt that he is guilty. Biblical interpreters need to apply this same reasonableness and moderation to their interpretation of the Bible.