

# THE BOOK OF BOOKS

## THE DOCTRINE OF SCRIPTURE AND THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

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## THE BOOK OF BOOKS The Doctrine of Scripture and the Ministry of the Word

“Since Your Majesty and Lordship desire a simple reply, I will answer without horns and without teeth. Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.”<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, Diet of Worms, 1521.

“The authority of Scripture is a key issue for the Christian church in this and every age. Those who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are called to show the reality of their discipleship by humbly and faithfully obeying God’s written Word. To stray from Scripture in faith or conduct is disloyalty to our Master. Recognition of the total truth and trustworthiness of Holy Scripture is essential to a full grasp and adequate confession of its authority.”<sup>2</sup>

“But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:14-16).

### Is There Famine in the Land?

The book of Ruth opens with these words: “In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land.” Students of the Hebrew Scriptures will instantly associate this famine with divine displeasure (cf. Lev. 26:18-20). This was the period of Israel’s dark age when even the heroes were morally corrupt. These days were summarized in a sentence: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit” (Judges 17:6; 21:25). In other words,

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<sup>1</sup> Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1950), 144.

<sup>2</sup> The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, Preface, 1978.

people despised authority and lived by their own rules. God's blessing was obviously withdrawn and people were suffering because of their sin.

In famines people will grab anything to eat. They will rummage through trash cans, collect bugs, pick kernels of corn out of manure, and sometimes even eat their own children. Famines are desperate times.

However, Ruth's opening statement also draws attention to the fact that there is more than one kind of famine. There is a famine that seems less pressing, but the consequences are far more enduring. Amos saw desperate times ahead when he said, "The days are coming," declares the Sovereign LORD, "when I will send a famine through the land—not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD" (Amos 8:11). Americans are experiencing today a period of unprecedented wealth and prosperity unlike the world has ever known. And yet there exists within the soul of America, and even the American church, a distressing shallowness and hollowness. This modern famine of the word of God is effectively wilting spiritual life in our nation.

In this land of plenty, eating habits are abysmal. We consume more junk food and demand things that are pre-packaged. We want products that digest easily and don't take long to prepare. Nutritional value is a low priority. If this were true only of our physical diet, that would be one thing. But it is also true of our spiritual diet. We want instant spirituality with little effort. But that formula does not exist. The Psalmist speaks of those who, "soon forgot what he [God] had done and did not wait for his counsel. In the desert they gave in to their craving; in the wasteland they put God to the test. So he gave them what they asked for, but sent a wasting disease upon them." (Psalm 106:13-15). The Authorized Version says that God sent "leanness of soul." This is a terrible indictment upon a people for their negligence of God's word.

And yet this withering of soul is the very thing that characterizes the current age. St. Paul saw famished days when he said, "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths" (2 Tim. 4:3-4). In Ruth's opening verse we are reminded that this story takes place around Bethlehem—Hebrew for "the house of bread." Christians are alerted to the fact that from here ultimately came the Bread of Life—the living Word of God. Here is God's answer to the famine in the land. In Christ Jesus of Bethlehem, the eternal Word from heaven, there is food for the soul that satisfies until eternity.

### The Book of Books

Toward the end of his life the apostle John was exiled to the island of Patmos where he received the remarkable vision that has intrigued and baffled Christians to this day. He was repeatedly taken from the chaos of this world to the glories of heaven's throne, witnessing things both outrageous and wondrous. But St. John's experience was not intended merely for him. God made clear to the aging apostle that this vision was to be preserved for the church when he said, "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches" (Rev. 1:11 and 1:19). After seeing and hearing amazing things St. John was instructed, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true" (Rev. 21:5). This prophecy, now preserved as the book of Revelation, concluded with a dire warning to anyone tempted to add or take "words away from this book of prophecy" (Rev. 22:18-19).

Two of the most fundamental truths of Christianity are these: God exists and God has spoken. The Christian faith is a revealed faith—a religion born from a book. It is founded upon sixty-six books all claiming to be the Word of God. We call this collection of books the Bible. Although each book from Genesis to Revelation is of human composition, the various authors of the Bible are regarded as men who "spoke from God as they were

carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21). The Bible’s source and character are divine. Even the apostles, who were largely responsible for giving us the New Testament, were promised that when the Spirit of truth comes, “he will guide you into all truth” (John 16:13). Thus their words have heaven’s seal upon them. Without the Bible there would be no church, for its very foundations are the writings of the “apostles and prophets” (Eph. 2:20). Since the Bible is God’s word, Christians are called upon to regularly read it, fervently hear it (Rev. 1:3), faithfully memorize it (Psa. 119:11), diligently study it (2 Tim. 2:15), prayerfully meditate upon it (Psa. 1:1-3), willingly obey it (James 1:22), and cautiously guard it (2 Tim. 1:14; Jude 3-4).

When God speaks, things happen. The Psalmist says, “By the word of the LORD were the heavens made....For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm” (Psalm 33:6, 10). When God transforms lives through Christ, he does so “not with perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Pet. 1:23). When God sent Jesus, his Son, as our Redeemer, we are told “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” that we might see the glory of God (John 1:1, 14). Peter said of Jesus, “You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68). From the spoken word, to the inscripturated word and finally the Living Word (Heb. 1:1-2), God has spoken and still speaks with life-altering power.

This is why the Bible is the church’s great treasure. It is the very wisdom of God. After referring to the Bible variously as God’s law, statutes, precepts, commands and ordinances, David says, “They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward” (Psalm 19:10-11). In Proverbs 8, the great Wisdom chapter, the Lord exhorts, “All the words of my mouth are just; none of them is crooked or perverse....Choose my instruction instead of silver, knowledge rather than choice gold, for wisdom is more precious than rubies, and nothing you desire can compare with her” (Pro. 8:8-11; cf. 3:13-18).

John enjoyed a unique privilege when, “in the Spirit” (Rev. 1:10), he witnessed the glory of Christ and was granted access to the eternal counsels of God. But we are no less privileged than John for want of such an experience, for we have the mind of God on the pages of Scripture. The Westminster Shorter Catechism’s question #3 teaches that, “The Scriptures principally teach, what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.” In other words, the Bible is our window into heaven by which the Spirit gives us glimpses into all that is necessary for life and godliness. Our journey into the Christian faith begins and ends with words spoken by God. We must understand them and respond to them, always remembering that, “Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (Deut. 8:3).

#### A God-Breathed Book

The Bible is the most widely published, broadly distributed, and powerfully influential book ever! Over the centuries it has affected movements in music, literature and art, given birth to modern science, and elevated the human condition in every way. It has also been scrutinized by critics, dissected by scholars, and constrained by despots. Having endured vicious attacks, scathing ridicule, and outright banishment, it nevertheless continues to shape nations, change individuals, and terrify tyrants. It is a force in the world that must be reckoned with.

There is one special quality about this Book of books that places it in a league of its own. The Bible is a God-breathed book. Paul said it most pointedly, “All Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16). Paul means by this that the Bible is inspired. We do not mean that the Bible is merely inspiring, as that is a quality many great books possess. We mean, rather, that the Bible is God’s Word and that in it he has “given us everything we need for life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3). God has spoken, and preserved his message in the form of a book. No one disputes the fact that the Bible was penned by human authors, each of whom left his own

style and character upon it. Nevertheless, the final product gives us the very words God intended us to have so that we might know him and do his will. Peter makes this clear, “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter. 1:20-21).

Since the Bible is a God-breathed and divinely-inspired book, it has a specific purpose. Paul continues, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). Sinclair Ferguson has pointed out that the ministry of the word, “gives expression to four things: instruction in the truth, conviction of the conscience, restoration and transformation of life, and equipping for service.”<sup>3</sup> The Bible, in other words, is profitable for shedding light on these four crucial areas of which we would otherwise be blind: the knowledge of God, our sinful condition, his plan of redemption, and how we should live for his glory. These things make the Bible a timeless book because it deals with things that transcend time and place. Certainly, times change and people change but not in any fundamental way. The God who does not change (Mal. 3:6) has spoken his unchangeable word (John 10:35) to people who do not change in their basic human nature (Jer. 13:23) apart from God’s gracious intervention.

Although the above Scripture spoken by Paul and Peter refer specifically to the Old Testament, they may be applied to the New Testament as well. With the coming of Christ, God gave his final revelation (Heb. 1:1-2). Before Jesus departed the world, he told his apostles, “When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth” (John 16:13). He thus assured the Holy Spirit’s divine inspiration of the apostles’ writings.

The motto of a small town newspaper in the Southwest is “The

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<sup>3</sup> Sinclair Ferguson, “*Preaching to the Heart*,” *Feed My Sheep: A Passionate Plea for Preaching* (Morgan, PA: SDG Pub, 2002), 200.

Truth Well Told.” Ideally this should be the goal of all our nation’s media services, but unfortunately it is not always the case. But here is a book that can always be trusted as THE TRUTH WELL TOLD. It is so because it is God-breathed. Peter assured his readers, “We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty” (2 Pet. 1:16). He also made clear that his hope and trust was not in the powerful experiences that he witnessed. Rather, he said, “And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place” (2 Pet. 1:19). He could say this only because, in serving Jesus, he lived by the Book—a God-breathed book.

### An Authoritative Book

When Moses died, Joshua was appointed as his successor. He became Israel’s new leader. His future success, however, was not the product of proven experience or natural talent, but the state of his soul—his life before the living God.

Joshua’s authority as leader emerged not from his position of power but from humble submission to the sole authority under which men and women must live. His life was ordered and shaped by enduring principles. His character was not formed by popular trends but timeless truths. He kept Israel’s future hope alive, not by making empty promises, but by directing people to the eternal promises of the living God. He was not only a man of his times but a man for the ages. This reality hinged on his obedience to this charge: “Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful” (Joshua 1:8).

The Bible is our only infallible rule of faith and practice. Because it is a God-breathed book, it is therefore an authoritative book. Its promises and precepts are repeatedly introduced with such phrases as, “thus says the Lord,” “it is written,” and “verily,

verily.” It offers commandments and promises, not tips and suggestions. The authority we rightfully grant to our pastors and teachers or to our creeds, confessions, and catechisms is only valid in so far as they faithfully represent Biblical teaching.

Anyone in authority must live under authority. Honesty should make us admit that all of us do live under some authority. For some people it is an inflated ego. Such people are like the wicked in the days of the Judges who recognized “no king; everyone did as he saw fit” (Judges 21:25). In other words, there are those who have no authority but themselves. Others bow before some modern pop-cultural icon. It may be a movie star, a sports hero, a musical entertainer, a university professor, or perhaps someone who shouts louder than anyone else. These “authorities” are often mimicked in dress or behavior. Still others try to stand on the slippery ground of personal intuition, mystical experiences, or subjective feelings. The point is this: we all rest on something that we consider a final court of appeals; that is, something we consider authoritative.

Peter wrote his two letters for this purpose: to “stimulate wholesome thinking.” He showed us the authority for such thinking when he said, “I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles” (2 Peter 3:2). He was pointing out that the Bible is the authoritative standard for life and godliness. It is our ground for hope and a future. Similarly, Jesus insisted, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matt. 5:17). Furthermore, he said, “These are the Scriptures that testify about me” (John 5:39). Thus, the Bible is also an authoritative witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the book of supremely excellent promises. It points us to Christ and forgiveness in him.

Often we consider someone an authority because we like them, respect them, or agree with them. This is dangerous, especially if he or she is not abiding by the admonition given in Joshua 1:8.

The apostle John reminds us that the Lord’s authority supersedes all others. He said, “We accept man’s testimony, but God’s testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son” (1 John 5:9). Should we not regard the integrity of his holy and righteous character more than our own fleeting disposition toward him at any given moment? The psalmist writes of the holy Scriptures, “By them is your servant warned; in keeping of them there is great reward” (Psalm 19:11).

The Bible is authoritative because it proceeds from the mouth of God whose word is truth. As long as we remain in sin, we avoid and resist the influential authority of God’s Word. But, like Joshua, we, too, must meditate on it day and night so that we may be shaped by it and lead repeatedly to Christ by it. Hebrews says, “Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful” (Heb. 10:23).

#### An Inerrant Book

If the Bible is a God-breathed book as 2 Timothy 3:16 teaches, then it possesses at least two fundamental qualities. First (as discussed above), it is an authoritative book. The words of the Lord must be heard and obeyed. Second, it is an inerrant book. That is, it contains no errors. The words of the Lord are trustworthy and true. Paul writes to Titus reminding him that God, “who does not lie” (Titus 1:2), promises life eternal. If the Lord is indeed the very embodiment of truth, then the words that he speaks can contain no error. The psalmist says, “The words of the LORD are flawless, like silver refined in a furnace of clay, purified seven times” (Psa. 12:6; Cf. 18:30; Pro. 30:5).

Yet, history documents, there are those who claim that the Bible is full of errors. They say the gospel accounts conflict with one another; the Bible is scientifically inaccurate; or it is historically flawed. Surprisingly, some self-professed evangelicals are willing to concede these things, claiming that the Bible speaks primarily to matters of faith, not history and science. But if the Bible cannot be regarded as true when it speaks to matters we can establish

empirically, such as history or science, how can we be certain that it speaks truthfully when it deals with matters we cannot establish empirically, vis a vis forgiveness (Cf. Mark 2:10-11) or the promise of eternal life (Cf. John 3:8)?

It is impossible to answer all the critics' objections to the Bible's inerrancy in an essay like this. However, a few thoughts can be suggested. With regard to the alleged conflicts between the gospel accounts, it should be considered that each author is recording events with his own perspective in view. Details sometimes differ, not because they are in conflict, but because they serve the author's own purpose. They are writing from different vantage points and therefore see different things. Like several eye-witnesses of the same event, their differing accounts need not be seen as in conflict, but together giving a more complete picture. The gospels can be harmonized or blended to give us a fuller picture of the truth.

For decades we have known how valuable the Bible is to the archeologist and historian. Over a century ago many biblical characters were thought to be fictitious because they were not known to history. But discoveries such as the Moabite Stone which mentions Israel's King Omri (1 Kings 16:21ff), and Sennacherib's Prism which preserves a record of the Assyrian King's siege of Jerusalem under Israel's King Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:13ff), lend historical credibility to the Bible. More recently the El Dan Inscription discovered in 1993 preserves the memory of Israel's greatest king in the phrase "the house of David," and an ossuary or bone box bearing the name of Caiaphas the High Priest has been discovered. Although it is not the Bible's purpose to serve as a history book, it has nevertheless been a friend to historians over the years.

Although the Bible is not a science text, it does often speak with remarkable accuracy regarding things we now know to be scientifically valid. Job, for instance, says that God "suspends the earth over nothing" (Job 26:7). It is furthermore observed that, "He inscribed a circle on the face of the waters at the boundary

between light and darkness" (Job 26:10 – ESV; cf. Isa. 40:22). The Lord raises the question to Job, "Can you bind the beautiful Pleiades? Can you loose the cords of Orion" (Job 38:31)? These are extraordinary observations in a pre-scientific day replete with mythology as a means to address questions of origins. Job recognized that the earth was not set on the back of some animal, but suspended in the universe; the earth was not flat, but spherical, for as the sun shines upon the earth, the dividing line between day and night would be a perfect circle on a sphere; and how would Job know that the star clusters found in the Pleiades and Orion are in fact gravitationally bound as we now know today?<sup>4</sup> We must recognize that the Bible does not ordinarily speak in "scientific" language but in the language of common discourse. For example, it refers to the sun rising and setting (cf. Malachi 1:11), rather than detailing how the earth rotates on its axis. But even scientists speak this way all the time. It is language that is understood, and no one questions its truthfulness.

The Bible's real purpose is to reveal all the events leading up to and culminating in the redemptive work of Christ. But, in the process, it touches many other areas along the way, and it does so without error. This is what we would expect if Scripture is God-breathed. Jesus said that "the Scriptures cannot be broken" (John 10:35). God has given us a trustworthy witness not only to its factual reliability but equally important to his love and grace. We do well to pay attention to these attestations.

### A Complete Book

When it comes to the Bible a topic of ever present concern is this: which books belong in it? This deals with the issue of the canon. Canon means "rule" or "law" and involves the Scriptures as the authoritative standard for faith and life. Why are there only 66 books in our Bible? Why not more? Are there some that should

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<sup>4</sup> These three observations regarding the book of Job were received as lecture notes from Astrophysicist and Biblical Scholar Robert C. Newman, Ph. D., Biblical Theological Seminary, Hatfield, Pennsylvania.

not be there? With all the “religious” writings in the ancient world how did these make it into our Bible and others not? Answers to these questions are interesting, involved, and complex, being both historical and theological in nature. But for our purpose we can chart a fairly straightforward approach to resolving the issue of canonicity.

The key to the canon of Scripture is Jesus Christ. The Old Testament was the Bible Jesus used. It was identical with the Old Testament Scriptures that we recognize today. However the individual books were divided differently and placed in a different order. For example, the books of Samuel, Kings, Ezra-Nehemiah, and the Chronicles were regarded as one book each. Today we divide them into two books each. Furthermore, the twelve shorter prophetic books known today as the Minor Prophets were combined as one book in Jesus’ day. That gave the first century Jews a 24-book canon instead of the 39 we observe today.

The arrangement of the books was different in Jesus’ day as well. Jesus recognized the common threefold division. The first five books called the Pentateuch or The Law was foundational to all that followed. The Prophets included not just Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve, but what we today regard as historical books: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. All others were classified under a third division called The Writings with the last book being the Chronicles. This included all the poetical books as well as some which we regard today as prophetic and historical. Thus, when Jesus denounced the Pharisees in Matthew 23:35 for their part in killing God’s messengers, he charged them with bearing guilt for, “all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel (Gen. 4) to the blood of Zechariah the son of Berechiah” (2 Chron. 24:20-22). The two examples he mentions are from the beginning of the first book and the end of the last book of his Bible—from Genesis to Chronicles. He was in effect granting divine authority to the Old Testament, from the first to the last book. We would say today, “from Genesis to Malachi” by our modern ordering.

While Jesus was on the road to Emmaus, he discussed the Scriptures with his two companions. Luke 24:27 says that “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.” Later Jesus said, “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44). The Psalm, being the most significant book in the Writings, is mentioned as representing the whole. The first verse mentions two of the divisions, the second all three. In effect the Lord was affirming as authoritative the whole of the Old Testament. Interestingly, the books known as the Apocrypha which are in Roman Catholic Bibles as part of Scripture are never mentioned. This is why Protestants do not accept them as the word of God.

Although the canonization of the New Testament takes on a different form, the key is still Christ. We recognize that the Lord called and appointed twelve men to the office of apostle (Mark 3:14), and granted them certain identifying marks (2 Cor. 12:12). This office was foundational for the establishment of the early church. The apostles were thus granted authority and gifts for divine revelation. Paul said in Ephesians that the church was “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Eph. 2:20). Clearly the authority of the apostles was seen as equal to that of the prophets. In other words, the church was built on the Bible of the Old and New Testament.

Jesus had previously indicated that the Holy Spirit would grant the apostles inspirational gifts to establish divine truth. Among his final words to the apostles before he went to the cross were, “I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth (emphasis mine). He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you” (John 16:12-14). This is not a promise to all Christians regarding spiritual guidance in general. Rather, Christ

is promising the apostles the gift of divine inspiration from the Holy Spirit. This is consistent with what St. Peter said in his second epistle, “For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21). St. Paul similarly said to the Thessalonian Church, “When you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe” (1 Thess. 2:13). This is why Acts records that when the early church gathered for worship, among the varied activities, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42).

The Bible of the early church was that which bore Jesus’ authorization. Since he used and affirmed the Old Testament Scriptures as God’s word (Matt. 5:17-19) there was no dispute regarding them. But he also appointed apostles with spiritual gifts to bring forth the New Testament Scriptures as the final revelation of redemption accomplished and applied. As has often been said of the relationship between the two testaments, “The Old is the New concealed; the New is the Old revealed.” Nevertheless, because of human limitations it took time for the church to receive and recognize all 27 books that now make up our New Testament. Each one was inspired when it left the pen of its writer. Some were recognized as such very early, like the four gospels and ten of St. Paul’s epistles. Others took a little longer like Hebrews, James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2-3 John, and even Revelation. There were even some books like the Epistle of Barnabas, Shepherd of Hermas, the Didache, Apocalypse of Peter, and the Epistle of Clement that, because of their character and value, were thought by some to be genuine Scripture. But in the end the church recognized the stamp of Christ, the authority of the apostles, and the mark of Holy Spirit inspiration on only those 27 books that are now in our New Testament canon. By the end of the fourth century this canon was fixed and the church has never questioned it since.

### A Sufficient Book

There has always been a tendency to undermine the power and

place of God’s word. During the Reformation, the primary issue the church faced was the authority of Scripture. There were those who insisted that tradition must stand along side the Bible as its foundation. This conflict gave birth to the Protestant movement insisting on Sola Scriptura (the Bible alone). When modernism infected the church in the early twentieth century, the inspiration of Scripture came under attack as human reason replaced divine revelation as a source of authority. As a consequence, churches today have divided between liberal and conservative evangelical. In the nineteen seventies, evangelicals began entertaining the idea that the Bible, though inspired, contained errors. Thankfully this slide was checked by the broad-based efforts of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy when it produced its Chicago Statement in 1978.

Today, the issue is the sufficiency of Scripture. Many evangelicals, who otherwise affirm the Bible as God’s Word, lack confidence that the Bible alone is fully adequate for the church to accomplish its divinely appointed mission on earth. They look to the therapeutic industry to solve personal problems. They follow the entertainment industry for its model of worship. They rely on studies in consumerism and marketing for approaches to evangelism. The late champion for the Biblical faith, James Montgomery Boice, wrote the following in his book, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace?*

The Reformers wanted Scripture to stand alone as the church’s true authority. Today, at least in the evangelical church, that is not our chief problem; we assert biblical authority. Rather, our problem is in deciding whether the Bible is sufficient for the church’s life and work. We confess its authority, but we discount its ability to do what is necessary to draw unbelievers to Christ, enable us to grow in godliness, provide direction for our lives and transform and revitalize society. So we substitute such things as Madison Avenue methodology for biblical evangelism, special ‘religious’ experiences rather than knowledge of the Word to promote and guarantee sanctification, special revelations for discerning the will of God for our lives, and a trust in the power of votes and money to change society. In other words, in the sixteenth century the battle was

against those who wanted to add church traditions to Scripture, but in our day the battle is against those who would have us use worldly means to do God's work.<sup>5</sup>

The apostles clearly taught the sufficiency of Scripture. Peter insisted that the Lord's "divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness" (2 Peter 1:3). Thus, the Bible alone is sufficient to bring sinners to repentance and to enable them to grow in grace. Paul counseled Timothy that the inspired Scriptures were "useful...so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). In other words, the Bible alone is sufficient to prepare church leaders to shepherd God's flock. Our own Reformed heritage has left us with this same legacy. The Westminster Confession of Faith I.6 reads: "The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture."

When Jesus taught his disciples how the kingdom of God grows, he told them the parable of the sower. In it he said, "The farmer sows the word" (Mark 4:14). He did not include an array of methods borrowed from the world. The response, or lack thereof, is not a matter of methods, but the condition of the heart, which is the province of the Holy Spirit. The implication is, the more we use worldly methods, the less certainty we have that the Holy Spirit has produced the results. The Lord said through Isaiah the prophet, "So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11). This confidence in the sufficiency of Scripture wanes in the modern church. Pioneer missionary Hudson Taylor said that, "God's work done in God's way will never lack God's supply." May the church return to that same conviction in the sufficiency of Scripture!

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<sup>5</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace?: Rediscovering the Doctrines that Shook the World* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2001), 66.

## A Well-Preserved Book

The Bible is an ancient book. For thousands of years, until the invention of the printing press, it was multiplied and passed on through the arduous process of copying and recopying by hand. Furthermore, as the Bible spread throughout the world, it was translated into many different languages from the original Old Testament Hebrew and New Testament Greek. The preservation of the Bible concerns its transmission over the centuries and its translation into other languages.

The original manuscripts of the books written by the prophets and the apostles no longer exist. They have been lost or destroyed in some way. When we consider the preservation of the Bible through the ages, we must be concerned with certain questions: Can I trust the Bible I hold in my hand, read on Sunday morning, and study during the week? Is it true to the original autographs? Is its text reliable?

It is important to know the Lord assures his people that the Bible will always endure. In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished" (Matthew 5:17-18). On another occasion he similarly said, "It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law" (Luke 16:17). As the Lord provided his written word through divine inspiration, he also promised that it would be preserved through the ages.

The Lord has accomplished this preservation through the church's dedication to keeping and maintaining the Scriptures. Paul calls the church of the living God, "the pillar and foundation of truth" (1 Timothy 3:15). In other words, the church is to preserve and uphold the truth. Through the years devoted scribes, monks and

scholars have faithfully risen to this challenge. Qumran, located south of Jericho on the west bank of the Dead Sea during the time of Christ, was a Jewish community known for the scribal efforts of the Essenes. Here, a tradition of reproducing manuscripts by hand copying, many of which were from of the Old Testament, was preserved. At this site archeologists found a Scriptorium, a large room where this careful and painstaking transcription work took place. Later, Benedictine monasteries sprang up in the Near East and Europe, many of which existed for the sole purpose of preserving and multiplying the Scriptures. Often such care was taken that if a scribal error was found on any page, the whole book was discarded. The seriousness and meticulousness with which monks engaged in their work is testimony to the Lord's preservation (cf. Rev. 22:18f).

Yet this work was carried on by frail and imperfect human beings. Consequently, errors were made and remained undiscovered until much later. Today, however, we can be grateful to the work of textual scholars. These are specialists who give their lives to study the thousands of extant biblical manuscripts for the purpose of uncovering the original words of the apostles and prophets in the highest degree possible. There has been more work of this kind applied to the Bible than any other ancient book. Such ancient works as the writings of Herodotus, Julius Caesar, or Josephus are frequently read without skepticism, even though only a few hand copies of their early manuscripts exist. We have reason for even greater confidence in the Bible which is attested to by thousands of existing manuscripts.

Long ago the prophets and apostles “spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21). Later on God preserved his written word for his church through the efforts of other faithful servants. Today we enjoy their legacy. Our Bibles are the trustworthy results of divinely inspired authors. But the Lord in his providence has also used the tireless commitment of countless faithful servants to preserve the Scriptures in their integrity.

## An Accessible Book

The preservation of Scripture not only concerns its transmission through time, but its translation into other languages. At Pentecost everything changed for the church. The Holy Spirit now indwelt the people of God as the new temple. When the shekinah (the visible glory of God) settled upon individual believers as “tongues of fire” (Acts 2:4), gospel proclamation was granted fresh power. Yet, one thing remained the same: The word of God would have to be understood for hearts to be changed.

The commotion caused by the supernatural event of Pentecost attracted a diverse crowd who had gathered in Jerusalem from every corner of the ancient world. However, as the apostles began to preach on that day, what astounded the audience was this: “each one heard them speaking in his own language” (Acts 2:6). They inquired, “How is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?” (Acts 2:8). This decisive moment at Pentecost established a fundamental conviction—all people deserve the Bible in their own language.

One of the most important contributions of Reformer Martin Luther was the translation of the Bible into the German language. For nearly a thousand years the Latin version known as the Vulgate was the only Bible permitted for use in the Roman Catholic Church. John Wycliffe and William Tyndale each translated the Bible into English—Wycliffe using the Vulgate and Tyndale using the Greek and Hebrew. Wycliffe was severely persecuted for his efforts, and Tyndale was burnt at the stake. The Roman Catholic Church at the time believed that common people could not understand the Bible, and only the Catholic magisterium could be trusted with an authorized version. Thus, those who translated, distributed, or possessed the Scriptures in a vernacular language did so at their own risk.

The Westminster Confession of Faith captures the following Reformation principle:

Because these original tongues [that is, Hebrew and Greek] are not known to all the people of God, who have right unto, and interest in the Scriptures, and are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search them, therefore they are to be translated into the vulgar [or common] language of every nation unto which they come, that, the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship him in an acceptable manner; and, through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope (I.8).

When I served as a missionary among the Navajo people in the nineteen-eighties, I had the privilege of attending the dedication ceremony of the newly translated Navajo Bible. It was a thrill to witness the joy of Navajo believers over the Word of God in their own tongue. Study groups subsequently formed as people gathered to read and discuss the Scriptures. Although many did speak English, Navajo was their dominant language, and in their own language the Bible's truth came alive. The translation work did not jeopardize the church; it strengthened it.

When the apostles took the gospel beyond Israel, they used a translated Bible. This translation, called the Septuagint, was a Greek rendition of the Hebrew Old Testament produced nearly three centuries before Christ. The Apostle Paul, when dealing with excesses and extravagances in worship pointed out, "Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying?" (1 Corinthians 14:9). Elsewhere he said, "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). To hear, one must understand; to understand, one must have the Bible in his or her own language. Translation work is mission work; it is basic to the gospel's proclamation. The church is greatly indebted to those who have made God's Word available to us in our own language.

### An Understandable Book

The account of Philip's witness to the Ethiopian eunuch is one of the great evangelistic encounters in Scripture (Acts 8:26-40). It also reveals much regarding the clarity of Scripture and thus its power to convert. We see the eunuch sitting in his chariot,

ponderously reading from book of Isaiah. Chapter 53 verses 7 and 8 are specifically quoted. Philip approaches him and asks, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The eunuch says, "How can I...unless someone explains it to me?" As Philip climbs into the chariot with him, the eunuch continues, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" With that we are told, "Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:35).

This episode highlights two things. On the one hand, the Scriptures puzzled the eunuch and raised questions with which he needed help. Not everything in the Bible is equally clear. The Westminster Confession of Faith I.7 recognizes this when it says, "All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all." Even Peter recognized that Paul's "letters contain some things that are hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:16).

Nevertheless, with Philip's guidance we see how quickly the eunuch grasped the work of Christ in Isaiah 53 and desired Christian baptism as a sign of God's grace to him. The emphasis is not on how perplexing the Bible is, but how comprehensible it is. The Confession of Faith continues, "Yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them." This is an encouragement for all of us to be more diligent in reading our Bibles.

The vast majority of Scripture is understandable to the average person. One reason why the Bible is a closed book to many is because they never open it. Unfamiliar territory makes us uncomfortable. We certainly acknowledge that parts of the Bible are hard to understand. But as the Confession reminds us, "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture...it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly" (WCF 1:9). If we read the Bible

frequently, its precious truths will eventually impress themselves lucidly upon our hearts. For those “things that are hard to understand” God has given to the church ministers of the word to help shed light upon the Bible’s more obscure teachings.

The Bible’s central message of salvation by grace through faith in Christ is sufficiently clear and accessible to virtually any human mind. The reason many reject this message is not for want of clarity, but because of the hardness of the human heart. Paul said, “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14). The Ethiopian eunuch diligently sought truth from the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit applied that truth to his own heart. This can be true for you too. Pray with St. Paul, “that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe” (Ephesians 1:18-19).

## THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

### The Key to Unlocking the Scriptures

If you were given the opportunity to go back in time and participate in any moment in the Bible, what would it be? For me there is no question. As one dedicated to teaching and preaching the Word of God, I would want to walk the road to Emmaus with the two disciples and Jesus. Not only would I witness the resurrected Lord, but I would hear him explain the Scriptures in the way they were meant to be understood. Along the way, we are told, he taught them from the Old Testament. Luke records, “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). Later the Lord would tell his disciples, “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44). I would have had hundreds of questions. Merely to be there for a few hours would

be worth more than a seminary education.

Alas! This is only a dream. However, on the Emmaus Road, the Lord Jesus left us the most important clue in reading the Bible with understanding. The Scriptures have been fundamentally given to us to reveal Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. He had previously made this claim in no uncertain terms when he faced his detractors in the temple during a feast of the Jews. “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me” (John 5:39).

The Biblical story of salvation begins with a promise. Speaking to the serpent the Lord said, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3:15). This most important Scripture verse pledged a male child, born of a woman, who would one day inflict a mortal blow on the kingdom of Satan. But this child would be wounded in the act. Here is the promise that propels the Biblical story of redemption forward. Everything that follows serves to keep this promise alive and reveals the need, nature, and character of this Savior.

The Old Testament revelation does this in several ways. Most Christians are familiar with the many specific prophecies about the coming of Christ. However, less obvious is the fact that the ceremonies and symbols of Old Testament worship contain the seeds of understanding how and why the Christ was to come. Hebrews 10:1 says of the Books of Moses, “The law is only a shadow of good things that are coming—not the realities themselves.” Furthermore, numerous birth narratives in the Bible receive special attention and are threaded together with genealogies that take us from Adam all the way to Jesus. Every step in between has something to say about the Christ. The Bible presents one grand redemptive drama with a singular theme. It’s not surprising then that we find many of the individual stories repeating salvation themes in many different ways. Even the heroes of Scripture, imperfect though they were, provide dramatic

comparison with the coming Redeemer so that parents can say to their children, “Jesus is like so-and-so in this or that way.”

Biblical teaching and preaching today often errs in that it does not see the Old Testament Scriptures as Jesus did. There is an overabundance of moralistic sermons in our churches that insist that we live rightly. This, of course, is not all bad, but it doesn’t stand alone. Even more popular is the strongly therapeutic emphasis from the pulpit dispensing pop-psychology instead of the Word of God. Then there is preaching that targets only correct thinking. To be sure the Scriptures have much to say concerning how we think, believe, live, and change. Nevertheless, if we miss the fact that every nook and cranny of the Bible serves to lead us to Jesus (Galatians 3:24), we will never understand the good news it has for us. Peter understood this when he wrote that, “the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow” (1 Pet. 1:10-11).

It was said of the ancient world, “all roads lead to Rome.” Similarly, of the ancient Scriptures we can say, “all roads lead to Christ.” I can imagine what a privilege it was to hear Jesus explain the Scriptures and be absolutely clear on the many ways they reveal him. Nevertheless we have the key Jesus gave us. Let us use it with his blessing and for our joy. “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom. 15:4).

### The Priority of Preaching the Word

Near the end of his life Paul wrote Timothy to establish the things most important for the life, health, and growth of the church. The climax of Paul’s final letter was this charge: “Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the

time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear” (2 Timothy 4:2-3).

Final words are powerful. They are generally well thought out and not encumbered by other extraneous thoughts. This is the case here. Paul did not have long to live and he knew it. He cut to the chase and established the church’s priority for the future. In so doing he recognized that God’s Word was the fundamental converting ordinance of the church. When it is clearly proclaimed and disseminated, God will grow his church. This is why Paul elsewhere desired prayer support for his gospel preaching when he said, “Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should” (Colossians 4:4). This is also consistent with our Lord’s teaching in the parable of the sower. Jesus did not want his ministers to rely on clever techniques to secure decisions. A person’s response, or lack thereof, to the gospel was a matter of the heart, not a preacher’s persuasive abilities. He simply said, “The farmer sows the word” (Mark 4:14). The rest was to be left up to the Holy Spirit.

However, Paul also recognized that the church would always face the temptation to alter this divine prescription. Sadly, there is little doubt that preaching today is “out of season.” Arthur W. Hunt III in his book, *The Vanishing Word*, recognizes that, “The Judeo-Christian heritage...characteristically has been word-dependent...contrasted with paganism, which typically has been image-dependent.” He then argues, “that the image has supplanted the word, inciting pagan forms [in the church] to resurface.”<sup>6</sup> This is evidenced in the widespread dependence on such things as drama, dance, and music to communicate the Christian message to our world at the expense of the time-honored and divinely-ordered means of proclamation. This deplorable lack of confidence in the Word of God to convert the

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<sup>6</sup> Arthur W. Hunt III, *The Vanishing Word: The Veneration of Visual Imagery in the Postmodern World* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2003), p. 26.

soul and draw sinners to Christ is nothing less than the inroads of our neo-pagan culture pressing itself upon the church. Where in the Bible is there precedence for such things? The golden calf perhaps!

Paul set forth this doctrine of Biblical proclamation in Romans 10 when he said of the gospel invitation that, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom. 10:13). He then raised a series of questions by asking: How can they call if they don’t believe? How can they believe if they don’t hear? How can they hear without a preacher? How can one preach without being sent? His conclusion is this: “Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). Faith and hearing are inseparably linked. Paul stressed hearing as the primary avenue for receiving the gospel. The nature and nuances of the gospel are best received through proclamation, and not through other means.

As the Apostolic Church faced growing demands for mercy ministries, congregations were subsequently directed to ordain men to a diaconal ministry to address these needs. The Apostles said, “We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:3-4). The early church didn’t lose its focus when other things were demanded of it. There are many things that can consume a church’s energies and resources. Some are better than others. However, there are few things that the church uniquely does that no secular institution can do. Chief among them is its proclamation of the Word of God for the salvation of sinners.

In his final word Paul said to the church, “Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season.” We must not become disheartened when progress seems slow. We must not become distracted by demands to follow popular trends. We must trust the means Christ has given to build his church with the full confidence that his Word will not return void (Isaiah 55:11). Isaiah dignified this task when he said, “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who

proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’” (Isaiah 52:7).

### The Necessity of Expository Preaching

The power of God’s Word to effect change was understood by the prophet Jeremiah when he asked rhetorically, “Is not my word like fire, declares the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?” (Jeremiah 23:29). Fire consumes, refines, and purifies. With repeated blows of a hammer, resistance is cracked. The book of Hebrews puts the same idea this way: “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). These truths, along with others, reveal why preaching takes on such a prominent role in Reformational churches.

But what constitutes good preaching? Is there a correct way of doing it? For nearly three decades of pastoral and preaching ministry, I have been committed to the method known as expository preaching. Simply put, I preach through books of the Bible, or larger sections, chapter by chapter, paragraph by paragraph, verse by verse. This method has a precedent in Nehemiah 8:8: “They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.” There are other competing approaches to preaching, of course. For instance, topical preaching looks at multiple verses on a given subject and lectionary preaching follows recommended texts for the church calendar year. Although there is a place for other approaches from time to time, the backbone of the preaching ministry of a church should be systematic exposition of Scripture. I would no sooner give it up than I would any fundamental Christian belief.

Expository preaching is a safeguard to the pulpit becoming a platform for weekly social commentaries, devotional pep-talks, hobby-horse messages, or a means of manipulating a congregation to the preacher’s agenda. It takes the Bible seriously

and respects the way God gave it to us. A steady diet of expository preaching teaches worshipers how to read and regard their Bibles. We open its pages not as an encyclopedia for popular topics or a handbook for problem solving, but as an unfolding of God's redemptive plan through the ages, from cover to cover, in sequence. It is balanced because it takes everything as it comes in the text, whether I want to preach it, or whether you want to hear it. In time it gives us everything we need for faith and life in a proportionate way. It's a method that shapes the culture, rather than is shaped by the culture. It makes the church proactive, rather than reactive.

Furthermore, it relates everything to the Bible's fundamental theme, that is, the person and work of Jesus Christ. The record of God's mighty deeds, those intersections in time and space of the eternal with the temporal, is seen as part of his determination to bring salvation to his people through a Redeemer. Christian life and behavior are seen as the outworking of our union with Christ and God's desire that we be conformed to his image. Every aspect of life, that is, family, work, politics, church, recreation, love, etc. are related to the sovereign power and grace of our Savior and King. It gives legs to St. Paul's singular passion, "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). A lifetime of expository preaching will wean Christians from the world and form them into vibrant disciples of Jesus.

Unfortunately, many in the church resist this kind of preaching. It requires too much thoughtful attention. Some demand more stories, humor, props, and visual stimuli. Others cry for shorter sermons or no sermons at all. It's not popular enough, it meddles too much, or it is simply an unfamiliar approach. However, it takes time to acquire a taste for anything that is good. This is true of expository preaching. Don't settle for anything less. Embrace it wholeheartedly and God will reward you for it. Listen with pencil and notebook in hand. Read your Bible as you hear it preached. Strive to move off the "milk" of the Word and develop a taste for its "solid food" (Heb. 5:11ff). Once accustomed to this

new diet, you'll never want to return to the old ways again.

### Under the Hearing of the Word

We must never underestimate the importance of the Scriptures in the life of the church. It is God's appointed means by which the lost are saved and the saints grow in grace. Nothing can replace the ministry of the Word. Every time the Bible records the gathering of God's people, it was for the purpose of hearing God's voice through the ministry of the Word. The Word of God is vital and central to the church's worship.

We must not suppose, however, that preaching is to be received passively. Many in the African American Church are accustomed to interactive listening where the preacher is "cheered on," so to speak, with a plethora of "Amens," "Yes, Sirs!" and "Preach it brothers!" We Presbyterians may not be as expressive. But we dare not be any less attentive and engaged when God's Word is proclaimed. The Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 21, paragraph 5 insists on "the reading" and "sound preaching" of Scripture in public worship along with the "conscionable [or conscientious] hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence." The Westminster Larger Catechism #160 calls for our active attention to the preaching ministry of the church:

It is required of those that hear the Word preached, that they attend upon it with diligence, preparation, and prayer; examine what they hear by the Scriptures; receive the truth with faith, love, meekness, and readiness of mind, as the Word of God; meditate, confer of it; hide it in their hearts, and bring forth the fruit of it in their lives.

What follows is a sketch of some of our responsibilities as we attend to this most important function of the church.

Before Church: Understand the nature of preaching as the prophetic voice of Christ to his church. St. Paul expressed gratitude to the Thessalonians when he said, "when you receive

the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God” (1 Thessalonians 2:13). We too must acquire this biblical attitude toward the ministry of the Word. Through Isaiah the Lord says, “This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word” (Isaiah 66:2). Before church on Sunday, be sure to pray for yourself, your family, and especially the pastor. Paul coveted the prayers of the saints when he said, “Pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message...Pray that I may proclaim [the mystery of Christ] clearly, as I should” (Colossians 4:3-4). Realize that a love for God’s Word emerges from personal devotions and family worship. “Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long” (Psalm 119:97). Get a good night’s sleep and arrive at Sunday School and church early.

During Church: Enter wholeheartedly into all parts of worship because God blesses those with an undivided heart. “For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him” (2 Chronicles 16:9). Be an active and inquisitive listener like the Bereans of whom it is said, “were of more noble character . . . for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11). In other words, bring your own Bible, underline verses, take notes, ask questions, etc. Finally, receive the Word with the delight of a simple child-like faith. The Lord’s brother said “humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you” (James 1:21).

After Church: Talk about the sermon with other believers. Ask for their insights. Join a sermon discussion group. Raise questions with your children at Sunday afternoon lunch. Share the sermon tape with a friend. Heed the Larger Catechism #160 when it says, “confer of it,” that is, allow the Word’s fragrance to linger in your life. Then, memorize it and meditate upon it. Seek to preserve the Word of God by hiding it in your heart. The Psalmist says, “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:11). Lastly, resolve to put it into practice in your life. Take steps toward an obedient faith. Again

James says, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (James 1:22).

C. John Miller has said that we must not put our faith in “excellent sermons but in the excellencies of Christ.”<sup>7</sup> But it is through sermons that the glory of Christ is revealed. How sad it is that many miss his blessings through negligence and inattentiveness. May we become lovers of the Word and serious listeners to sermons for the praise and glory of our Savior!

### Reading of the Word

During the reign of King Josiah of Judah, the Law of Moses was discovered in the temple after years of neglect. Shaphan, his secretary, “read from it in the presence of the king.” We are told that “when the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his robes” as an act of humble contrition before the Lord. The king’s responsive heart to God’s law brought great blessing, both to himself and the nation. The Lord said to him through the prophetess, Huldah, “Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before the LORD when you heard what I have spoken...and because you tore your robes and wept in my presence, I have heard you, declares the LORD” (2 Kings 22). King Josiah will always be remembered as one of Judah’s great reformers as he brought the law of God back to its central place in the life of God’s people.

The Lord longs for his people to read his Word. The apostle John said, “Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it” (Revelation 1:3). The Bereans were regarded as having a “more noble character” because “with great eagerness” they “examined the Scriptures every day” (Acts 17:11). Peter calls us to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ (2 Peter 3:18). This cannot be done apart from the Bible. Jesus prayed to the Father

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<sup>7</sup> C. John Miller, *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), p. 133.

for us when he said, “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17). We could cite more examples, but the point is clear: growth in Christ comes to our souls through the Word of God. We must be both “in the Word” (reading and studying) and “under the Word” (teaching and preaching).

With these things in mind, I challenge you with the joyous task of reading through the Bible in a year. Many Christians have testified to the countless benefits the Lord has brought through this essential yet beneficial discipline.

Here is a workable plan I have used over the years. There are 1188 chapters in the Bible. Do the math! This comes out to about 99 chapters a month, or just 3 and ¼ chapters a day. If you begin with the calendar year you can stay on track by keeping these benchmarks in mind: by the end of the first quarter (Jan. - Mar.) of the year you will have read through 2 Samuel; by the second quarter (Apr. - Jun.), through Proverbs; by the third quarter (Jul. - Sept.), through Nahum; by the fourth quarter (Oct. - Dec.), through Revelation. This modest approach can be achieved with minimal effort.

Many Christians want to spend more time reading certain parts of the Bible, like the New Testament, the Psalms, or the Proverbs. Averaging 4 chapters a day, you can complete the Old Testament once and the New Testament twice in a year. Five Psalms a day will take you through the Bible’s prayer book in a month. The Proverbs can be completed in the same time with just one chapter a day.

I also recommend the use of the classic “Calendar of Daily Readings” developed by the nineteenth century Presbyterian Pastor, Robert Murray M’Cheyne.<sup>8</sup> This guide has the advantage of reading four chapters from four different parts of the Bible each day, so that, there is greater Biblical variety in one’s reading. It is also divided nicely for use in both family and private readings. At

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<sup>8</sup> This is produced by the Banner of Truth Trust.

the end of the year you will have read through the entire Bible once, the New Testament twice, and the Psalms twice.

The particular schedule or program you use is not important. That you have a plan is! Christians are people of the Book. We need its transforming power impressed upon our daily lives. Remember these tips: read it prayerfully, and ask God’s Spirit to apply it to your life, helping you to be a “doer of the Word” (James 1:22). Don’t become discouraged if you miss a day or two—pick up where you left off. Also, don’t become discouraged with something that you don’t understand. Ask your pastor about difficult passages. Keep a journal of your observations, and underline or highlight verses that speak to you. Finally, share your blessings with someone else. It’s a great encouragement for other believers to hear what God is doing in the lives of those who “search the Scriptures.” Through the Bible we will be conformed into the image of Christ (Romans 8:29).

#### A Balanced Diet

As we read the Bible throughout the course of our lives, we will have our favorite portions. But the whole of it is a balanced diet of spiritual nourishment. A spiritual washing takes place in our souls as every portion of the Word of God passes through regularly. Giving Scripture a central place in our lives is fundamental to the process of our transformation into the image of Christ. This library of sixty-six books is comprehensive, supplying us with everything we need for life and godliness. Nothing can replace it! Consider how each major section of the Bible provides something distinctive for our spiritual nourishment.

The first five books of the Bible constitute the Torah or Pentateuch. These books supply us with themes of creation, sin, and covenant. It forms for us a moral framework and establishes a foundation that we are God’s people and this is his world. Next, the twelve Historical books enable us to see how God intersects with human affairs as he acts redemptively on behalf of his

people. In both divisions we are confronted with a mighty God at work.

The Wisdom literature is next; each book in this category has an exclusive and significant place in the believer's life, and should be visited frequently. Job reveals a sovereign God in the midst of suffering. It shapes our attitude toward life's hardships and reversals. The Psalms form within us a heart for God and give us the language of prayer and worship. Proverbs is the basic school of wisdom, counseling us in right living. It helps us avoid many pitfalls. Ecclesiastes keeps before us what is at stake if we suppose that God has no place in our world. The Song of Solomon instills in our hearts a quality of love that enriches both marriage and kingdom.

The large portion we call the Prophets offers glimpses of the pre-incarnate Christ. These books arouse the conscience to the reality of sin and awaken an anticipation that God will yet work mightily in behalf of his people through a Redeemer.

The Gospels, besides revealing God in Christ, presents the enduring shape of the Christian Faith. The accounts of Jesus' birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension form the enduring story of how God brings redemption to his people. Human beings are seen as lost and in need of a Savior. As such the Gospels are foundational to the discovery of ultimate meaning in life. The story of the early church in Acts supplies us with the spectacles that bring into focus the Spirit's ongoing activity in the church until Christ returns. These five books, the four Gospels and Acts, served as the New Testament counterpart to the Pentateuch.

The Epistles elucidate the Christian faith. They organize and develop the doctrines by which we live and provide the vocabulary through which we express our faith. They show us that the genuine Christian life is born out of sound doctrine—the head and heart cannot be separated. The Epistles keep us Christ-entered in confession and conduct.

The Book of Revelation concludes the Bible by keeping hope alive. Through it the curtain between heaven and earth is drawn back, and we are allowed visions into the glory of the heavenly theater. Through its powerful images a longing for Christ is awakened in our hearts that keeps us attending to the day we will see him face to face. The introductory words of this final book are appropriate for all of Scripture: "Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near" (Revelation 1:3)

All Scripture has something vital for us. Every portion serves to shape and form our lives so that we might be complete before God. If we do not take advantage of our ability to read, as well as, the availability the Bible, what will form us spiritually? The Psalmist said, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105). The spiritual benefits that result from reading the Scriptures are priceless. Let's not lose another opportunity to grow in grace through the reading of Scripture.

## Conclusion

The summer intern introduced herself. "Hello! I am a naturalist at the Saint Croix Park, and I will be your guide this evening as we look at the variety of wild flowers in the park." My wife and I had responded to an announcement in the newspaper for this nature hike. For years I have had a special interest in wild flowers. I enjoy identifying and photographing them. This hike would be a great way to expand my horizons. While on the hike, I fully expected that we might find a dozen or two contained in the park, but I was shocked to be handed a checklist for wild flowers in the park containing literally hundreds. I felt the weight of how daunting a task it would be for a novice like me to become even modestly proficient with identifying these wild flowers. But, with our guide's delightful personality and youthful enthusiasm with her subject, I found myself drawn into the enjoyment of discovering one flower at a time.

I have often thought how my role as a pastor is like that of a

naturalist. However, rather than walking through a forest or meadow and noticing the details of flora and fauna, I accompany people through the pages of Scripture, noticing the details of words and phrases. Rather than discerning the larger world of soil and water and its relationship to each flower, I help people notice the biblical soil of culture and history and its relationship to each verse. I am aware that the “novice” can find the Bible to be a daunting book. But let’s understand that you can no more master its pages at one glance than you can absorb an ecosystem in one hike. You must start one flower at a time.

Each Biblical truth, like a wild flower, has a beauty and intricacy all its own. Yet each truth is related to the whole as a flower to its environment. Taking the time to walk through the woods with a knowledgeable guide gives you a whole new appreciation for its beauty. A guide will slow you down and help you notice details, such as the shape of leaves, the texture of bark, or the number of petals on a flower. Before long, you too will find yourself noticing things with an observant eye. Reading a book on any subject can develop your knowledge base. But the key is slowing down and taking time to look.

The only reason I can guide, however, is that I have had the opportunity to walk through the Scripture with others. I have had some fine teachers and mentors—guides, if you will. This privilege of guiding others is not only the business of pastors who have studied formally, but of all Christians who have afforded themselves the opportunity to be guided through the pages of the Bible. This is the biblical pattern:

“And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Tim. 2:2). “Older women...can teach younger women to love their husbands and children...” (Titus 2:3-4). “I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also...and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures” (2 Tim. 1:5; 3:15).

Here we see men guiding men, women guiding women, and parents guiding children, “precept upon precept; line upon line,...here a little, and there a little” (Isaiah 28:10, AV). This is how we mature in our Christian faith: a little at a time, growing in our knowledge of God’s word, and consequently our love for Christ.

I love nature, and I enjoy learning about it, even though I have not studied it formally. But as Christians, God does not want us to approach Scripture as a hobby. We are to enter the quest for biblical truth wholeheartedly. The book of Hebrews chides Christians who do not join with others on the trail: “In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!” (Hebrews 5:12). If you will search the Scriptures, taking advantage of available “guides” as needed, you will discover abounding joy in your walk with Christ.

Break thou the bread of life, dear Lord, to me,  
As thou didst break the loaves beside the sea;  
Throughout the sacred page I seek thee, Lord,  
My spirit pants for thee, O living Word.

O send thy Spirit, Lord, now unto me,  
That he may tough my eyes and make me see:  
Show me the truth concealed within thy Word,  
And in thy Book revealed I see the Lord.

Mary A. Lathbury