Understanding Theology in 15 Minutes A Day for 40 Days

Day 3

How Do We Know the Bible Is the Word of God?

In chapter 2 we saw that God's specific or special revelation to us is the Bible. This is the primary (though not exclusive) source for what we know about God and the various subjects of theology. So it is absolutely vital that we understand what the Bible claims about itself, and the implications that follow.

Christians refer to the Bible as the Word of God, but why? One of the main reasons we know this is true is that it makes this claim for itself. Is the assertion invalid because Scripture makes it? Not necessarily. And there is a lot of supporting evidence.

There is **extra-biblical** ("outside the Bible") **evidence** that the Bible is God's Word. For example, prophecies recorded in Scripture happened in history. The Messiah's birth was foretold to be in Bethlehem (**Micah 5:2**); the birth of Jesus fulfilled that prophecy. Isaiah mentioned the name of a Persian king, Cyrus, more than 150 years before he reigned (**Isaiah 44:28; 45:1**). **Daniel 11** is an amazingly detailed prophecy of a series of Greek kings who reigned between the Old and New Testament periods.

Who knows the future well enough to reveal it before it happens? Only God.

Archaeological finds also contribute to the Bible's claim. For example, though some biblical critics had claimed there was no King Belshazzar in Babylon (**see Daniel 5**), archaeology has confirmed his existence. Many such external evidences confirm that the Bible is what it claims to be.

Inspiration

The most straightforward claim within the Bible itself is the foundation of Christian belief in its "inspiration." The first phrase of **2 Timothy 3:16** says, as the *New International Version* renders it, *"All Scripture is God-breathed."* Some versions, such as the *New American Standard Bible*, translate this as "All Scripture is inspired by God." But the NIV wording is quite literal.

The Greek word, which precisely means "God-breathed," is found only here in the New Testament, so possibly Paul coined this term to convey exactly what he wanted us to understand about the nature of Scripture.

The **first** implication is that the Bible begins with God, as is true of all divine revelation. He is the ultimate source of what is written in it. **Another** implication comes from the imagery of "breathing out," namely, speaking or communicating. The Bible finds its source in God and is the result of his having willed to communicate with people.

Another important text regarding the doctrine of inspiration is **2 Peter 1:20–21**, which speaks of the process God used to communicate his written Word. **Verse 20 says**, *"Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation."* The Greek word rendered *interpretation* is used only here in the New Testament and is challenging to translate. In light of **verse 21** (below), it seems a better sense of what Peter is saying is as follows: *"No prophecy of Scripture ever comes about by the prophet's own imagination"* (NET).

Peter's concern here is with the origin of Scripture, and in **verse 20** he rules out the prophets—the Bible's human authors were *not* its ultimate source. And **verse 21** provides the denial's explanation: *"For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."*

The first phrase is Peter's restatement that the Bible did not come about by its human authors deciding on their own what they wrote. The ***New Living Translation*** puts it this way: *"Above all, you must realize that no prophecy in Scripture ever came from the prophet's own understanding, or from human initiative. No, those prophets were moved by the Holy Spirit, and they spoke from God."*

The origin of Scripture, once again revealed to be God himself, is to be understood first and foremost as an act of his will. Having determined to communicate (reveal), he did so through the agency of his Holy Spirit, the Bible's divine author, who caused its human authors to write what they wrote.

Based on these texts regarding the nature of Scripture, the Christian doctrine of biblical inspiration can be summarized something like this: God took the initiative in choosing to communicate; he did so through the work of the Spirit, who in turn empowered the human

authors. The result is that what the human authors wrote was in every sense the Word of God. So the doctrine of inspiration emphasizes that God is the ultimate author but also affirms the human writers as authors. This is called the *dual authorship* of Scripture. The Bible is primarily God's Word but also legitimately the words of the various human authors.

Theories of Inspiration

Down through the centuries since the New Testament books were completed and added to the Old Testament, many have claimed to believe in biblical inspiration under definitions that differ to some degree from what the Bible says on the matter. The following are "defective ideas of inspiration":

Verbal dictation*, or *mechanical inspiration, is the view that God fully dictated the Bible, and that the human authors merely wrote down what he told them to record, basically reducing them to word processors with a heartbeat.

There is some truth in this. For example, Moses wrote down the Law as God instructed, and maybe some prophetic messages were received from God word-for-word. But if he dictated the entire Bible, there would be one style of writing—God's—and this is not what we observe. Each human author has a different style.

The apostles Paul and John, for instance, had very distinct styles, including favorite vocabulary and ways of "packaging" what they wrote. So most of the Bible does not fit with divine dictation. Rather, God normally worked through the human authors' intellects, experiences, and manners of expression in such a way that what they wrote was exactly what he intended. There is mystery here in terms of how this worked, even as the implication is clear that the words the authors chose were the exact words God intended.

Dynamic inspiration is the view that the ideas or concepts are divinely inspired but not the very words used to express those concepts. That is to say, God made sure the human writers accurately communicated his ideas, but he gave them complete freedom to express those ideas through whatever words they selected.

There certainly is truth here also. Scripture's ideas and concepts most definitely are inspired. However, the Bible itself (e.g., Jeremiah 23:30–36; 26:12–15) claims that the very original *words* the human authors used were the ones God intended.

Human intuition is the view that the Bible is not God's Word at all, just great human literature that reflects human intuition and insight into the human condition. This notion is attractive because this is exactly how, in English, we often use *inspired, inspiring*, and *inspirational*. It is common to hear someone comment on how "inspiring" a pastor's sermon was, or how "inspired" a poet was when she wrote a certain poem, or how "inspirational" a Bach composition is. These comments usually imply that the pastor, poet, or composer has produced something remarkable and meaningful, an excellent *human* work of literature or art. Specifically, this understanding of Scripture is reflected in a more liberal Christian view of the Bible.

The obvious problem, however, is that this would drain the supernatural dimension from the Bible, and it contradicts explicit internal claims. Again, **2 Timothy 3:16** pointedly says the biblical "writing" (the literal meaning of the Greek word translated *Scripture*) is inspired, not the writers themselves.

Due to these deviations from the historic understanding of inspiration, evangelical theologians now tend to refer to the *verbal, plenary* inspiration of Scripture. ***Verbal*** clarifies that not only the Bible's ideas but also its very initial words (Hebrew and Greek) are from God. ***Plenary*** clarifies that not just some, but ***all*** of its words are from God.

INTERESTING FACT

The **opening verses of Deuteronomy** contain an intriguing interplay that illustrates the Bible's dual authorship: "These are *the words Moses spoke* to all Israel.... *Moses proclaimed* to the Israelites all that *the LORD had commanded* him.... *Moses began to expound* this law, saying: '*The LORD our God said* to us at Horeb ...' " **(1:1–6).** Deuteronomy indeed accords with the words of Moses but also and primarily is the Word of God.