
WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BELIEVE IN THE BIBLE?

Christianity believes in a God “who is there and who is not silent” (Francis Schaeffer)—a God who has created the universe, placed us in it, and has spoken to us. Understanding *how* God has spoken to us is perhaps the most important question we can deal with, a question that impacts our relationship with God, our view of the world, and our very souls. Historic, orthodox Christianity has never been founded on the words of men (though many men have tried in vain to make it so); it has always been rooted and circumscribed by the revelation of God’s word. But where is God’s word found?

I. THE NATURE OF GOD’S WORD

“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (Heb 1:1-2). Throughout human history, God has verbally revealed Himself in many ways: from His personal address to Adam or Abraham to the inspired preaching of Jonah, Amos, or Ezekiel. He also sent His word in writing to His people: from the tablets of the Mosaic law to the written message of Isaiah or Jeremiah. But the grandest expression of God’s Word was found in the very person of Jesus Christ, who is called “the Word of God” (John 1:1; Rev. 19:13).

- A. Inspiration: What we know of Christ is dependent upon the written word of the gospels by men like Matthew and Luke. However, this does not make the books of the Bible the words of men, for Christ commissioned certain men to act as His authorized representatives, His apostles. He *inspired* them with His word (John 14:26), so they spoke for Him (Matt. 10:40). All of the words in Scripture are God’s own words, “breathed out” (inspired) by God through human writers (2 Tim 3:16).
1. *In the Old Testament*: We see this where Moses is called as a mediator between God and Israel, to be a prophet who speaks with God “face-to-face” (Ex 20:18-21). We see it when the prophets preached “thus says the Lord.”
 2. *In the New Testament*: What the apostles themselves wrote was to be accounted as the very word of the Lord (1 Cor. 14:37). Their written letters came to have the same authority as “the other scriptures” (II Pet. 3:16).
 3. *The Mystery of Inspiration*: Though it is a great mystery, the Bible is both fully human and fully divine. It was written by men and reflects their circumstances and personalities, but it is at the same time God’s very words to us. These men were not in a trance as they wrote, nor were they mechanically taking dictation. Rather, it was a Spiritual work as men wrote “as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet 1:21). God was sovereign over the authors of the books of the Bible, ensuring that what they wrote is what He intended for us to have as His words.
- B. Inerrancy: The fact that the Bible is inspired by God guarantees its truthfulness in all its parts. For God Himself is without fault, “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). Thus, the effect of inspiration was to keep the human author from error in recording God’s words—whether in the historical facts or the theological teachings. B. B. Warfield uses the image of a stained glass window to represent the human authors. When the light of God’s truth streams through the window, it refracts into the brilliant colors of the Bible. One could easily think that because the light doesn’t remain constant as it goes through the window, it is less pure. But God put the window there in the first place! The human authors were God’s own creation, under His sovereign providence, so that the colors would be exactly of His choosing. The patterns we see are precisely ordered by God and can be called, in their entirety, God’s very Words.

II. THE NATURE OF THE BIBLE

If the Bible is fully inspired by God's own Spirit, then it addresses man with divine authority. We should listen to God's word. For this reason, Christianity has often been known as "the religion of the book." The Scriptures, says one Church Father, are "a scarlet cord" to lead us to the Savior, Jesus Christ. Therefore, considering the claims of the Bible and its role in faith and life is anything but an irrelevant, scholastic issue. But the fact that God has revealed Himself to us through the words of the Bible has generated many questions from Christians and non-Christians alike.

- A. Is the Bible Necessary? It is true that God has revealed Himself in different ways. We see His glory in Creation. He often spoke directly to men and women. He often showed Himself in dreams. Are we limiting God by saying that the Bible alone is His word to us? Of course, God could have revealed Himself any way He chose—in that sense, Scripture is not "necessary." But God has chosen to give us the Bible as His lasting, infallible, special revelation of Himself and His salvation. It contains truth that cannot be found anywhere else in the universe. For that reason, the Bible is and will continue to be necessary for instructing people in the message of God (Jude 3).
- B. Is the Bible Authoritative? The Bible is not a word from God; it is THE Word of God. Many Christians believe that the Scripture is very, very important, but in their lives they do not show they believe it to be God's authoritative word. Instead, they turn to cultural traditions, human reasoning, or internal feelings as ways God speaks authoritatively. But we cannot pick and chose among the "many ways" we *think* God speaks. If we would know and follow God, we must know and follow His clear word. This is the Bible's own testimony about itself (Isa 8:20; Isa 55:11; John 17:17; 2 Tim 3:14-17; Heb 1:1-4; 2:1-3; 4:12; Ps 119:9-11; Matt 4:4; 1 Cor 4:6-7; Col 3:16).
- C. Is the Bible Clear? Many of the complex passages in the Bible have led people to believe that it is a book that can only be understood by experts and scholars. However, the Bible is clear enough on all the essential issues of faith and doctrine that a child can understand them (Deut 30:11-14; Rom 10:8). On the other hand, because it is God's revelation of Himself, it is deep enough that the most brilliant theologian will never delve fully to its depths (Rom 11:33-36; 2 Pet 3:16). This doctrine is often called the "perspicuity," or "see-throughableness," of Scripture.
- D. Is the Bible Alone? Does the clarity of Scripture mean that all people are left alone to figure out what the Bible means? During the Reformation, many Christians called out to a church corrupted by greed and immorality to be reformed by the Bible. *Sola Scriptura* ("Scripture alone") was their battle cry as they attacked false doctrines and oppressive rituals—the Bible alone is authoritative for faith and practice. However, the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* has often been misunderstood and misrepresented. The Scriptures alone are God's word, but the Scriptures are not alone, for instance:
1. *The Holy Spirit:* God Himself is actively working through the word (John 14:26), enabling people to understand God's word in the Bible. In fact, this is how the Spirit speaks, not speaking words of His own, but speaking to us what the Father and Son have told Him to say (John 16:13-14).
 2. *The Church:* The Church is founded on the Word of God spoken through the Apostles and prophets (Eph 2:20), and so it stands under the authority of Scripture. The Church is imperfect and fallible in this age and must always be reformed by God's word. However, God has not left each person alone to understand the word. The collective wisdom of the Church, her elders, and teachers is a great aid to understanding the Bible.

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3. *The History of Doctrine*: While tradition is not authoritative in the same way Scripture is, it can be helpful. Christians are rightfully suspicious of new and innovative doctrines—why did the Spirit not make that clear before? It is noteworthy that even the oral preaching and teaching of the apostles were to be tested against the Scriptures, as we see from Paul's commendation of the Bereans (Acts 17:11). This is why the Reformers went to great lengths to show the Church that they were not saying anything that other Christians throughout the centuries have said before. Tradition can be fatally wrong, so it must always be brought under the lens of Scripture. Nevertheless, it can be a helpful in understanding the Bible.
- E. Is the Bible Enough? Is this really the only way God speaks to us? What about our inner spirit? The Bible is not a replacement for a doctor's medical training or sufficient to teach us the rules for badminton. Yet the Bible points to itself as the only rule for faith and practice. In other words, the Scriptures are the complete, reliable transcript of God's words to us. There is no "second voice" or unwritten word of God available to us in this world. Theologians call this doctrine the sufficiency of Scripture. But this doctrine is also the source of great objections and difficulties.

III. BELIEVING THE BIBLE

- A. Objections: Such a brief treatment of these deep issues is likely to raise more questions than answers. But whether or not we understand it, all of it—inspiration, inerrancy, necessity, authority, clarity—boils down to the question of sufficiency. Is Scripture really enough for us in this world? There are several common objections:
1. *"I don't want to limit God"*: Do people really care about limiting God, or are they concerned about limiting themselves. But what if God has spoken definitively in the Bible? Our choices are no longer up in the air; our standard is no longer our own desires; our obligation is to obey it fully, in all of life. People don't want to believe that God has spoken to us through the Bible because they don't like what He's said.
 2. *"That seems so impersonal"*: Do people really think that the Bible is irrelevant, or do they think it is too relevant? But if God is speaking to us—to our life, to our choices, to our desires—you are obligated to listen and obey. God's word trains us for "every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17). Yet how can something written so long ago be relevant and useful? It was never simply a word from man. It was God speaking through the Spirit (2 Pet 1:16-21).
 3. *"I just want to know God's will for my life"*: Do people really want to know God's will, or do they want assurances of peace, comfort, and security about their choices? In fact, this is really a way to *avoid* doing God's will. We obsess about the future and circumstances that we don't know or can't control and ignore the clear commands from God to love Him and love our neighbor. We aren't seeking God's will until we struggle with why we ignore those we consider "uncool," why we gossip, why we are addicted to porn, why we are materialistic, why we don't give to others, etc.
- B. Obedience: God has already told us in His word all that we need to know about everything He calls us to believe (see Luke 16:19-31 for a cautionary tale on this subject). God has not told us everything, or we would be God. The Bible is not *exhaustive*; it is *sufficient*. God has told us what kind of God He is: what He is like, what He has done on our behalf, what He requires of us. God has told us what kind of people we are to be—how we are to live, what we are to believe, what we are to desire. However, God hasn't told us about the particular circumstances of how to work these things out. He has told us to be faithful to Him regardless of the situation.

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1. *Search the Bible for answers:* The sufficiency of Scripture should encourage us as we try to discover what God would have us to think about a particular issue or to do in a particular situation. We should be encouraged that everything God intended to communicate to us is contained in the Bible. This does not mean that the Bible answers all the questions that we might think up, for “the secret things belong to the Lord our God” (Deut 29:29). But it does mean that when we are facing a problem of genuine importance to our Christian life, we can approach Scripture with the confidence that from it God will provide us with guidance for that problem.
 2. *Be content with Scripture:* The sufficiency of Scripture reminds us that we should be content with what God has provided in His Word, and emphasize what Scripture emphasizes. What God has revealed to us in Scripture is exactly what He deemed right for us. There are some subjects about which God has told us little, or nothing. We must accept this and not think that Scripture is something less than it should be, or begin to wish that God had given us much more information than He has. It also means that we must be content with the answers that are given to issues that are difficult and sometimes impossible for us to understand, remembering that we are mere creatures inquiring of our Creator.
 3. *Do not add to Scripture:* The sufficiency of Scripture reminds us that we are to add nothing to Scripture, and that we are to consider no other writing of equal value to Scripture. This principle is violated by almost all cults and sects. Mormons, for example, claim to believe the Bible, but they also claim divine authority for the *Book of Mormon*. Since these claims violate God’s commands not to add to his words, we should not think that any additional words from God to us would be found in these writings.
 4. *Do not count any other leading from God equal to Scripture:* Christians often speak of “God’s will” in a way that seems separate from God’s Word. This kind of language has opened the door to dangerous subjectivism. Christians have sometimes been told that the will of God in this sense comes through as a strong feeling given by God. Feelings do play an important role in human knowledge, both of Scripture and of other things. But the sufficiency of Scripture means that Scripture alone is the complete transcript of God’s words to us. Emotions (together with reason, imagination, sense perception, etc.) can help us understand and apply Scripture to our circumstances, but they cannot add anything to the words of God in the Bible. That is, emotions can sometimes make us aware of considerations that are relevant to a decision. But apart from Scripture, they cannot obligate us to make one decision rather than another. Scripture itself never advises God’s people to expect God to lead them through feelings apart from His Word. To walk in God’s ways is to walk according to His words.
 5. *Do not add more sins or requirements to those named in Scripture:* With regard to living the Christian life, the sufficiency of Scripture reminds us that nothing is sin that is not forbidden by Scripture either explicitly or by implication. To walk in the law of the Lord is to be “blameless” (Ps 119:1). Therefore, we are not to add prohibitions to those already stated in Scripture. From time to time there may be situations in which it would be wrong, for example, for an individual Christian to drink coffee, attend movie theatres, or to eat meat offered to idols (see 1 Cor 8-10). But unless some specific teaching or general principle of Scripture can be shown to prohibit these for all believers for all time, we must insist that these activities are not in themselves sinful and are not prohibited by God for His people.

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- C. Freedom: Truly wrestling with Scripture and its sufficiency could bring tremendous joy and peace to the lives of thousands of Christians who, spending countless hours seeking God's will outside of Scripture are often uncertain about whether they have found it. Instead, Christians who are convinced of the sufficiency of Scripture should begin eagerly to seek and find God's will in Scripture. They should be enthusiastically and regularly growing in love for and obedience to God, knowing great freedom and peace in the Christian life. Then they will be able to say with the psalmist (Ps 119:44-45, 165):

*I will keep your law continually,
for ever and ever;
and I shall walk at liberty,
for I have sought your precepts....
Great peace have those who love your law;
nothing can make them stumble.*

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