

Critical Issues Commentary

A monthly commentary on Biblical concerns that impact you

“God Has Spoken”

written by Bob DeWaay

“God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.” (Hebrews 1:1,2)

The New Testament claims to be Jesus Christ's teachings, will, and purpose for the church in written form. God has spoken to us in Jesus Christ and His word is full of meaning, power and authority. God cannot lie, so His word is unchangeable and infallible. God has spoken and the Holy Spirit has convicted Christians throughout church history to listen. We really want to know, “what has God said and what does this mean to me?”

There are several issues about the Bible as the written form of God's revelation of Himself to mankind. One of them is authenticity. Is the text (consisting of many ancient, extant manuscripts) authentic? The evidence shows clearly that it is. Josh McDowell has written two excellent volumes which have gone through many printings called Evidence Demands a Verdict that document evidence for the Christian faith and the reliability of Scripture.¹

Another issue is inspiration. Did God inspire the human authors of Scripture to write inerrantly the truths that He gave them or is the Bible a collection of flawed writings of religious people merely writing their own ideas about God and man? Jesus taught that God inspired the authors of the Old Testament. For example, when He quoted **Genesis 2:24**, Jesus attributed the teaching to God, giving divine authority to the passage (see **Matthew 19:4-6**). Other evidences such as the exact nature in which Biblical prophecy has been fulfilled can be given to demon-

strate the inspiration of Scripture. Jesus said, “. . . These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (**Luke 24:44**). The Jews divided the Scripture into these three categories and would have taken Jesus' statement as a reference to the entirety of the “tanakh” (Old Testament). The uninspired words of man would not have the weight of compulsory fulfillment that the inspired words of God have. This passage shows Jesus' view of the inspiration of Scripture.

The confirmation of Biblical history through modern archeology also serves to show the reliability of Scripture. That the moral precepts of the Bible have endured through the ages and that the keeping of them has proved beneficial and the transgressing of them harmful is further evidence of the inspiration of Scripture.

The Authority of Scripture

The issue that we will explore in this article is that of authority. Is the written Word of God authoritative and normative (prescribing the norms or standards for belief and practice) for the Christian? Concerning “has spoken” in **Hebrews 1:2**, Greek scholar A. T. Robertson writes: “First aorist indicative of *laleō*, the same verb as above, ‘did speak’ in a final and full revelation.”² The full and final revelation of Scripture will not be embellished, superseded or antiquated through the entire period of church history until our Lord's bodily return. God has spoken and we will be judged concerning our faith in and obedience to what He has said in Scripture.

Why would God choose to leave a written record of His revelation? In Exodus we have the account of the giving of the ten commandments. “And when He had finished speaking

with him upon Mount Sinai, He gave Moses the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written by the finger of God . . . And the tablets were God's work, and the writing was God's writing engraved on the tablets” (**Exodus 31:18 & 32:16**).

God Writes on Stone

In this case God produced His written Word without using a human writer. God wrote His word directly onto the tablets of stone. God wrote in Hebrew. Moses and the people of Israel were able to read what God wrote. This incident shows several things about written documents as vehicles of God's self-revelation. God condescended to make His will known to man in a language that the recipients could understand. Though God is infinite and any human language is finite, God was able to use the agency of written words to meaningfully communicate eternal, infallible truths by which man will be judged.

By writing these words on stone God showed the immutability (unchangableness) of His word. The stones were to be kept in the arc of the covenant, typifying their ultimate fulfillment in Christ. Not only is God able to communicate meaningfully to man through written language, but also He is able to preserve that communication throughout human generations and cause it to bear fruit in the lives of those who hear and believe. God forbids man to alter, adulterate, or ignore His written word. He made a major impact (smoke, fire, brilliant light) when He gave Moses His written word.

For you have not come to a mountain that may be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words that sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word should be spoken to them. For they could not bear the command, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it will be stoned.” And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, “I am full of fear and trembling.” (**Hebrew 12:18-21**)

Is the New Covenant less consequential? **Hebrews 12:25** says no! - "See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less shall we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven."

God does speak in written form. The rest of God's revelation to Moses was written by Moses (the Torah, the first five books of the Bible) and preserved by the Jews throughout the centuries. An extant piece of Isaiah that includes chapter 53 was discovered in the Dead Sea scrolls. It is dated before the time of Christ and agrees explicitly with much newer manuscripts that previously were the oldest available. The caretakers of God's written word saw to it that nothing was lost in transcription. Jesus said, "For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished" (**Matthew 5:18**).

God's Word in written form is authoritative. Jesus also said, "... the Scripture cannot be broken" (**John 10:35b**). The Gospels record the teachings and works of Jesus as a testimony of God's revelation of Himself and His will to man for all generations. John said, "but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name" (**John 20:31**). The purpose of God's written word is to bring us to salvation. Paul wrote to Timothy,

And that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. (**2Timothy 3:15-17**)

Peter considered Paul's writings equal to scripture: "and regard the patience of our Lord to be salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the

untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction" (**2Peter 3:15,16**).

Building On The Rock

The Old and New Testaments together serve as God's authoritative word to mankind for all generations. There is a definitive teaching of Christ that has been revealed, the content of which serves as our guide and will serve as our judge. Matthew 7:24-27 is a parable about men who built houses. One built one on a large rock, the other on sand. When the inevitable storms of life came, the house built on the unstable foundation came apart and fell to ruin. Jesus clearly defined who it is who builds on the rock: "Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine, and acts upon them, may be compared to a wise man, who built his house upon the rock" (**Matthew 7:24**). Which words are **these** words? They are Jesus' teachings. His word is authoritative for the church throughout the generations. His word has been recorded in written form by Holy Spirit inspired eyewitnesses - the authors of the New Testament. Hearing and acting upon the truth as revealed in Jesus Christ is building one's spiritual house on a firm foundation.

Jesus taught His disciples:

... If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him, and make Our abode with him. He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father's who sent Me. These things I have spoken to you, while abiding with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you. (**John 14:23-26**)

The reception of the Holy Spirit followed the events which are the basis of salvation history: the death, burial, resurrection, and bodily ascension of our Lord into heaven. He, the Holy Spirit, inspired the New Testament apostles, bringing to their remembrance the teachings of Christ, impressing on their minds the spiritual

significance of the events that they had witnessed, empowering them to be His witnesses, working powerfully to demonstrate the veracity of their preaching, and imparting to them the teachings of Christ ("... the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" - **Jude 3b**). These teachings have been preserved and transmitted to the church as the New Testament.

The same Holy Spirit who inspired the human writers of the New Testament anoints and illuminates those who respond in faith to the "word of **the faith**" (In **Romans 10:8** there is a definite article in the Greek text) and brings to bear on their hearts the meaning of Christ's teachings and the urgency of obedience to them. Christ's word is authoritative for all Christians in all ages.

All of the Scripture is the teaching of Christ. Jesus Christ is eternal God, the second person of the Trinity. As such He inspired Moses and Moses wrote of Him. "For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote of Me" (**John 5:46**). Peter wrote "This is now, beloved, the second letter I am writing to you in which I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, that you should remember the words spoken beforehand by the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken by your apostles" (**2Peter 3:1,2**). This shows both Old and New Testament authority recognized during the life of Peter.

Peter had previously written in this epistle,

And so we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts. But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. (**2Peter 1:19-21**)

The sure word of prophecy is Scripture. Peter and the others were eyewitnesses - "For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty" (**2Peter**

1:16). That Scripture is of no private interpretation does not mean that private persons (laity) cannot understand or interpret it. It means that the meaning of Scripture is the one the Author (The Holy Spirit) intended. It therefore has one meaning rather than multiple meanings. We cannot say, “The Scripture means this to me, something else to another person and yet something other for someone else.” Whether we yet grasp the meaning of a passage, it’s true meaning this the one originally intended by the Author and that meaning is normative for all Christians.

The Scripture is Clear

If Scripture were merely the result of “an act of human will,” then there would be no authoritative word of God but mere human speculation. If the authoritative word of God was unclear and had many different but equally valid interpretations depending on the whims of the interpreter, then there would be no “sure word of prophecy.”

The statement, “the Bible is subject to many interpretations,” is a commonly given objection to Biblical authority. How many Christians, sharing something as straight forward as **John 3:16**, have not encountered that argument from an unbeliever? This usually disarms even the most bold of witnesses, causing them to change tracks or give up. This does not need to be the case.

The problem is a failure to differentiate between proposed multiple interpretations and intended multiple meanings. Of course fallen man, for one reason or another, suggests different meanings to a passage of Scripture. This does not prove that the author did not intend one meaning nor does it prove that this one meaning is not discernable. Getting back to the illustration of the Decalogue, God said “You shall not steal.” Suppose a police officer caught a thief in the act of stealing money from a store. The officer says, “you are under arrest for robbery.” The robber responds, “You cannot arrest me because the law against robbery is subject to many possible interpretations. Consider all the lawyers, laws, and cases about

what is or is not ‘stealing.’ Since there is such confusion on this matter, you should let me go right now.” In America, the robber will get his day before the judge; but there is punishment for stealing. We believe it is possible for laws to be written in human language which are clear enough to make the recipients of them accountable for their behavior.

If this is true of laws written by men, how much more true is it for that which is written by God? God wrote on stone, “You shall not steal.” Pleading the issue of multiple interpretations will not stand up in “court” on the day of judgement! Jesus said, “He who rejects Me, and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day” (**John 12:48**). If He is the Righteous Judge and His word will be the basis of judgement, then He also must be asserting that His word was clear enough to be understood, thus indicting those who reject it.

Surely there will always be “multiple interpretations” of Scripture; but there are not multiple **correct** interpretations of Scripture. The correct interpretation of Scripture is to be found in the words of Scripture taken in their native sense in their grammatical and historical context. For all major doctrines of Christianity, determining this meaning is not hopelessly difficult. Do not be put off by the specious (seeming truthful but in fact being erroneous) argument of multiple interpretations. If it were impossible to communicate truth clearly through written language, simple things such as stop signs would be useless and meaningless. People depend every day upon the reliability and clarity of human communication on issues of far less consequence than their eternal salvation. Yet when it comes to God’s clear, changeless, and eternal Word they plead incomprehensibility. It is like young children who understand you well when being told what they like to hear; but suddenly have underdeveloped communications receptors when being corrected or explained the rules. They conveniently do not understand. This perversity of human nature is described by the adage, “we hear what we want to hear.”

The issue of the authority of Scripture depends on the corollary teaching of the clarity (the reformers called this doctrine “the perspicuity of Scripture”) of Scripture. God has spoken, and He has done so in a meaningful and understandable manner.

How Far is Too Far?

Another aspect of the authority of Scripture is that of the boundaries of normative revelation. Is there an area of Biblical freedom in which we may operate; but beyond which we have departed from the faith? John warns of those who “go too far.” “Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son” (**2John 1:9**). **How far is too far?**

The idea of too far denotes a definite boundary. If there are no defined boundaries, then there can be no logical stopping place. The vagaries and religious speculations of man provide no boundaries. Either there are boundaries beyond which one leaves the will and purpose of God or there are none. To say that Christ is the only way to the Father is to say that concerning our eternal salvation there is a boundary. Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me” (**John 14:6**). To hold that, for example, it is wrong to murder shows a belief in a moral border. If there are boundaries in moral and spiritual matters, there must be a means of delineating them if they are to serve any meaningful function.

When it comes to our spiritual well-being, God is not secretive. He **wants** us to know the boundaries, within which we can “go in and out and find pasture” (see **John 10:9**). If it is true that He desires to teach us His will and His ways, then how has He done it? As previously discussed, He has spoken to us through His Son who was manifested bodily to historical, credible witnesses. He has spoken to us in real human languages, in written form and preserved that writing through the ages. He has caused those writings to be translated into the languages of many nations. He has commissioned

His followers to bring His teachings, revealed once for all to the saints, to the nations of the world. Written words that denote concrete, meaningful, and purposeful ideas about God and man are the means of establishing the boundaries of truth and error. The Bible contains those words. This is why the Scripture is authoritative and is “. . . profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness” (2Timothy 3:16b).

God has not left us to grope about in a sea of religious experiences and mystical impressions to seek His person and His purpose. The boundaries are real and they differentiate the legitimate and the illegitimate. Even as God made a boundary for Adam and Eve to limit the choices they genuinely had, showing the difference between the Creator and the created, God has given us a limited arena in which to make valid choices. As with Adam and Eve, He has not left it up to us to draw the lines. He has spoken, and what He said determines how far is too far.

While teaching a class on hermeneutics a few years ago and exploring this topic, I wrote the phrase “God’s word revealed once for all in Scripture” on the black board and drew a circle around it. I suggested to the class that this was the valid boundary of spiritual belief and practice. I then erased the circle and asked, “If I were to draw it somewhere else, where would that be?” After some moments of silence, a student replied, “Draw it back where you had it.” It is very hard to decide where to stop once you go “beyond what is written” (see 1Corinthians 4:6).

The Exhilaration of the Illicit

The desire to “jump the fence” and explore the other side is part of fallen human nature. A friend of mine suggested a good sermon illustration he observed driving through the countryside. He came across a luscious pasture with a cow standing knee deep in grass. The cow had its head stuck through a barbed wire fence, straining his neck against the barbs to reach into a barren field with little grass. He

thought of how similar that was to Christians who have been given “everything pertaining to life and godliness,” (2Peter 1:3) straining themselves to find some forbidden morsel in the world. What is the point?

To the fallen heart of man, there is a certain exhilaration of the illicit. That which is forbidden holds an excitement and enticement that the familiar and permitted seems to lack. How many good and blessed marriages have been destroyed when one of the members has strayed for the excitement of the forbidden. The testimony of many is that what they thought they were gaining through an illicit relationship was sorrow and loss compared to what they had with the wife or husband God gave them.

Illicit spirituality contains a similar enticement. The Old Testament is full of illustrations of this. The Israelites often strayed from their relationship with God (even when He had just blessed them and done many miracles) to seek after forbidden gods who were really no gods at all. These false gods could not save, feed, deliver, bless or do anything for them; but they offered a religion beyond the boundaries. The pagan gods did not dictate the same moral code that God had given them. They offered an intoxicating brew of sensuality mixed with spirituality.

Today various forbidden religious experiences sorely tempt many in a similar way. Even Christians have been lured into spiritual experiences which are beyond that which is taught or permitted in Scripture. The experiences become self-validating when they are assumed to be authentic simply because the Christian has experienced them. Shocking as it may seem for some, Christians can be deceived by positive feeling religious practices and experiences that are beyond the teaching of the Bible. Some have jumped the fence and the seeming freedom they have on the other side will be as fleeting as it is illusory.

There are boundaries and the Bible draws the lines. The Bible is authoritative, clear, and speaks timelessly to the basic needs and temptations of man. To have a relationship with God through faith is to acknowledge, confess, and obey Jesus Christ as Savior

and Lord. His teachings are the standard for the life and conduct of the Christian and the church. We study and teach the Bible because we are in constant need of spiritual nourishment, and protection from the temptation to cross the line into the forbidden territory of the autonomous. Without the specific revelation offered through the written Word, we would be unable to discern that there even was a line.

God has spoken, and we have a lifetime to spend listening to, studying, and applying what He has said. This is a blessed and joyous thing and not a grievous burden. The results are righteousness peace and joy in the Holy Spirit now (Romans 14:17) and in the future, the resurrection from the dead and eternal joy in the presence of Lord.

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End Notes

1. Evidence That Demands a Verdict, Vol. 1 & 2, Josh McDowell, Here’s Life Publishers, P.O. Box 1576, San Bernardino CA, 92402

2. Word Pictures in the New Testament, A. T. Robertson, Baker, 1932; Vol. 5 page 335.

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