

SEMINAR : WHY CAN WE TRUST THE BIBLE ?

All Saints', November 2024

THE CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGE

Many people today have dismissed the Bible as disproved by science, historically unreliable, or culturally unacceptable, without even reading it, or considering what the Bible has to say about itself. The danger is to judge the Bible by what people think is relevant to our day and then to reject it, which is a form of intellectual arrogance. But this is not new. The church has always faced the decision between supernatural revelation and human adaptations, between the voice of God and the ideas of men, ultimately between truth and opinion.

“Where the human mind is concerned, it is idle to speak of an authority which can simply be imposed ... The real question is whether there is an authority that can impose itself, which can freely win the recognition and surrender of the mind and heart of man”. (James Denney) “It is a necessary condition of properly accepting the Bible to be the Word of God that one’s main reasons for doing so arise out of the Scriptures themselves.” (Prof Paul Helm) We are not making judgments based on abstract theory but as a reaction to the actual content of the text. Our task is to see what the Bible says about itself as the revelation of God and then to examine whether or not it actually functions in that way.

THE BASIS OF REVELATION

The Bible sees its own purpose as to bring human beings into a personal knowledge of, and fellowship with, the living God. It does not argue the existence of God, but reveals him. If God (infinite) is to be known by mankind (finite) it must be by self-disclosure. God’s grace - received by faith - is the basis of such knowledge. General revelation - through creation - universal knowledge of God (Rom 1)
Special revelation - through the person and work of Christ - the new creation.
Revelation is the religious “object” (God) determining the character and truth of religion to the subjects of religion. Our authority principle is God the Trinity in self-revelation. This is neither subjective nor authoritarian, but infinite and personal.
Revelation is always purposeful. God acts (in history - supremely in Christ) and God speaks (in Scripture - supremely in the Word made flesh) to reveal himself to ignorant, guilty humanity. Revelation is divine in origin, generated by the Holy Spirit, thus carrying divine authority. The Spirit of God reveals the mind of God through the Word of God.
EVENT + EXPLANATION = REVELATION.

THE BIBLE’S OWN TESTIMONY

2 Tim 3:16 All Scripture is “God-breathed” - spoken by his breath (Spirit) and recorded in writing, via inspired human channels. So what Scripture says, God says. This is known as “verbal inspiration” and is clearly taught in both testaments. In the OT it was “an uncontested axiom of rabbinical instruction that every syllable of Scripture had the veracity and authority of the word of God” (Prof. Wayne Grudem). The NT writers

confirm and continue this high view through their many quotations and allusions to the OT.

2 Pet 1:21 Scripture writers were “carried along” by the Holy Spirit, so that they “spoke from God”. The ultimate source was not in themselves (v20), not their decision, but they were God’s agents to produce “something completely reliable” (v19).

This claim is made by the Bible writers, experienced by Bible believers and supported by Bible evidence. Nor is this a circular argument. (1) The Bible claims to be the Word of God (2) The only person who can tell us if it is, is God (3) He must use words to tell us (4) No such word exists outside the Bible. How does it “work”? We come to the Bible open-minded and through reading it become convinced that Christ is the Truth, without having formulated any doctrine of Scripture. Then having bowed to his lordship, he sends us back to the Bible as his living and enduring word.

THE TESTIMONY OF THE LORD JESUS

Christ’s claim to be the Truth (Jn14:6) was endorsed by God the Father in the resurrection and ascension. As Truth personified, how does Jesus teach us to think about Scripture?

1) The Scriptures are the “word of God”, which cannot be broken, or set aside (Jn 10:34-35) and are therefore the supreme authority over tradition (Matt 15:2-6), over human teaching (Matt 15:7-9) and over religious leaders (Matt 15:12-14). See also Matt 4:1-10, Mk 7:9,13; 12:24.

2) The Scriptures are to be revered in their entirety. We are not to pick and choose, nor to base our beliefs on a proof text in isolation from others. In Matt 22:44f Jesus reproaches the Pharisees for ignoring Ps 110:1 (the divine Messiah) and in Mk 12:18-27 the Sadducees for using Deut 25:5 without taking into account Ex 3:6. See also Matt 12:1-8.

3) The Scriptures are the guide for life. Jesus used the OT to discover God’s will and determine his conduct (Matt 26:24,31,53-56; Lk 18:31-33, 21:22; Jn 19:28)

4) The Scriptures display Christ himself. If we are to know him, we must know them (Lk 24:27,44; Jn 5:39,46). The risen Lord teaches his disciples that they must meet him in the Scriptures. Jesus saw himself depicted in the Passover (Matt 26:26ff), as the uplifted serpent (Jn3:14) and the suffering servant (Lk 22:37). Note how he regarded the narratives and characters of the OT as historical fact (e.g. Matt 12:41).

5) The Scriptures are the abiding rule for the church. It may sound convincing when someone says that they have Jesus as their authority, not a book, but Christ himself taught his disciples to use the book to understand him (Lk 24:26-27, 41-45).

6) The Scriptures are meant to be known and used. Jesus had a comprehensive knowledge of the OT. He quoted with ease from Gen, Ex, Lev, Num, Deut, Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Micah, Zech and Malachi - at least!

7) With regard to the NT Jesus promised and gave the Holy Spirit to the apostles to give them the right words and lead them into all the truth (Jn 16:7,13; 20:22). E.g. see Paul's derived apostolic authority in 1Cor 14:37 and 2Cor10:8 and Peter's witness in 2 Pet 3:16.

SOME IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

The personality of the human authors was not superseded or overridden. God chose different individuals from different contexts, training, temperaments and backgrounds, over many centuries, writing in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek to make Scripture many-faceted.

Their writing was never mechanical. They each had their individual style and vocabulary and each developed a distinctive literary genre in what they produced. For example, we need to distinguish between the didactic and the poetic, narrative and apocalyptic. All divine truth, but different presentations. They used extant documents and genealogies (Lk 1:1-4) and carefully researched what they wrote, but in all this they were "carried along" by the Spirit, so that the focus is not on the process, but the end result, which is exactly as God wanted and inspired it, so that we can speak of the infallibility of Scripture, meaning that it will never lead us astray in what we are to believe or how we are to obey, in all matters of faith and conduct.

There are many different purposes in the various forms of revelation (compare Job's comforters with Paul's doctrinal teaching). But they are always written for all God's people in every age and so for our learning. See Rom 15:4 and 1 Cor 10:11. God never lies (Tit 1:2, Heb 6:18) and so his Word is not only true but is in itself Truth (Jn17:17), hence its supreme authority. "Nowhere in either testament does any writer give any hint of any tendency to distrust or consider even slightly unreliable any part of Scripture" (Grudem). But there are hundreds of verses which encourage the opposite - complete trust in the Word.

THE EXTERNAL EVIDENCE

We can have confidence in the authenticity of the manuscripts and the accuracy of the translation into English for all of the Bible books. The earliest manuscripts of classical writers date to the 9th and 10th centuries AD., a thousand years after the death of the writers, yet no-one questions their authenticity. We have a 2nd century BC Greek translation of the OT (Septuagint) establishing the Hebrew text, while the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls (1947) confirms the Hebrew text before the time of Christ. The reverence and rigour with which the text was copied by the scribes ensured its continuing accuracy.

Establishing the text and authenticity for the NT, a fragment of John's gospel excavated in Egypt and dated to c120 AD. is the earliest evidence thus far. But from the second century onwards the number of manuscripts multiplied (e.g. Codex Sinaiticus in the British Museum dated c350AD) and with them the ability to cross-check with translations into other languages. "The Christian can take the whole Bible in his hand and say without fear or hesitation that he holds in it the true Word of God, handed down

without essential loss from generation to generation throughout the centuries” (Sir Frederic Kenyon). “There is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the NT” (Prof F F Bruce). “In the variety and fulness of the evidence on which it rests the text of the NT stands absolutely and unapproachably alone among ancient prose writings” (Prof FJA Hort, who spent 28 years studying the NT text).

For the NT the period of oral, unwritten tradition lasted only about 30 years at the most. Eye witnesses were still very much alive and any distortion could easily be refuted. But the gospels are predated by the apostolic preaching and the NT letters. By 50 AD the basic Christian message was firmly established and being clearly proclaimed.

THE INTERNAL WITNESS

The nature of the Bible is not just to provide information, but on that basis to make claims and issue invitations to its readers. God speaks and requires a response. It presents a diagnosis of the human condition due to sin and offers reconciliation through repentance and faith in Christ. It shows a different way of living according to God’s standards and provides the stimulus and wherewithal to pursue it. It is the work of the Holy Spirit not only to explain the revelation, but also to apply it personally to our hearts and this is achieved by leading us to the person of Christ, who endorses the OT and makes provision for the NT.

The Bible becomes personally and practically authoritative when we actually submit to and respond to its message. See Jn 7:17. “Emphasis does not fall on proving the existence of God and then proving by miracle and prophecy that this book of all books is God’s revelation, but it falls on proving God in experience and therefore establishing that he exists. God is proved by hearing and obeying him and finding that he is as good as his word.” (Helm). The apostles were convinced by the coherence of the teaching of Scripture with their own experience of the person and work of Christ in their lives and the life of the believing community. They could appeal to eye-witness testimony, which we cannot, but we can believe on the basis of their testimony and we do. Otherwise we could never justify believing in anything about the past more remote than a lifetime away.

The chief internal evidence for receiving Scripture as the Word of God is that we have found it to be true and to hold good in our own life and experience, as we have approached its message seriously, sought to understand its original meaning and applied it with an open heart to our contemporary situations.

“The authority of the Bible speaks not to the critical faculty that handles evidence, but to the soul that makes response. It is not so much food for the rationally healthy, but it is medicine for the sick and life for the dead. All the highest interpretation of the Bible comes from that principle of grace” (P.T. Forsyth “The Person and Place of Jesus Christ”).

RESOURCES (a few among many!)

- “All you need to know about the Bible” Brian H Edwards (Day One Publications 2017)
- “Thy Word is Truth” Edward J Young (Banner of Truth publications)
- “Scripture and Truth” edited by D A Carson and J D Woodbridge (Inter Varsity Press)
Includes article “Faith, Evidence and the Scriptures” by Paul Helm.
- “Evidence that demands a verdict” Josh McDowell (Campus Crusade for Christ)
- “The Reason for God - Belief in an age of scepticism” Timothy Keller (Hodder & Stoughton)
- “Systematic Theology” Wayne Grudem (Inter Varsity Press)

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