

The Word of God: Inspiration

Introduction

What would you do if you wanted to leave a message for someone who was going to live many years in the future from now? Would you send them a text message? Probably not.

What would you do if you needed someone across the other side of the planet to know an important piece of information? Would you hire one of those guys who write messages in the sky with their planes? Probably not.

What would you do if you had a timeless message that was the only cure for the oldest disease of mankind—a disease called death—and you wanted to pass it on to all peoples, in every generation and in every land? I'm guessing you wouldn't just write in to your local newspaper about it.

But you might want to put it into a book. After all, books are easily transportable, can last a long time if cared for, and can be readily copied, multiplied and distributed. God has committed his life-giving and guiding message of the gospel, the good news that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the pages of a book: the Bible.

The Bible is the book of books, outselling every other book in history. They reckon that somewhere near five billion copies have been printed and distributed in the last 200 years (and they don't even know about the six Bibles I have in my house). That works out at about one Bible every one and a quarter seconds.

There is clearly something to this book of books. People have devoted their lives to translating it, printing it, smuggling it, studying it and writing about it. Many have even been killed protecting it. But for most of us, the Bible sits on our shelves next to that Britney CD we bought, both desperate to be used more. So if you want to know what is so incredible about this book of books, put this one down and start reading your Bible. Go ahead! But if you want to know more about what makes the Bible so special, feel free to read on.

The Bible is the breath of God

The first thing that most people want to know about a book is what it's about. When it comes to the Bible the first thing you need to know is not what it's about, but who wrote it—that is, who the author is and where the words in the Bible come from.

Some people dismiss the Bible as the uneducated ramblings of primitive and unscientific men and women. Perhaps the thinking is that anyone who grew up in a time before you could send a text message has nothing to contribute to sensible discussion. But this is a mistake. Sure it's true that real men and women, at least some of whom were well-educated, wrote the words down on the page. Yet the Bible actually comes not from men and women but originally from God himself. It is one of his great acts of grace that God 'speaks' and in so doing reveals himself to us. Otherwise, we would be unable to know him with any certainty.

Just as God revealed himself to Adam by speaking to him in the garden of Eden, just as he spoke to Abraham when he was looking at the night sky, and just as he spoke to Moses from a burning bush that didn't burn up, he speaks to us today through his Scriptures. The Bible may appear to be the words of men, but the truth is that something more significant happened when the men and women who penned the Bible wrote things down. **2 Peter 1:20-21** makes this pretty 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.

The Apostle Peter, a one-time coward (he denied even knowing Jesus when quizzed by a waitress) who turned into a hero of the Christian faith, says that when it comes to thinking about the Bible (here given the codename "prophecy of Scripture"), the most important thing is that it doesn't come from the prophet (the human writer) himself. Instead, "men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit". The words are from God the Father, spoken and written by men who were carried by God the Holy Spirit.

The Bible is inspired

You might ask: In what way is the Bible from God? Serious Christian thinkers (called theologians) say that the Bible is 'inspired' by God, which sounds fair enough because God is a fairly inspirational guy. But there have been songs and poems and essays and paintings and sculptures that have also been inspired by God, yet you don't see Christians carrying a painting or sculpture under their arm on the way to church.

So what makes the Bible more important then? When theologians say 'inspired', they actually mean that God breathed the words out himself. It's not just that God's love and mercy and greatness filled some people with the creative urge to start writing the Bible, in the same way that it might cause some people to start writing a song. The answer is that the Bible actually

comes from within God and he breathed it out. **2 Timothy 3:16** says just this: “All Scripture is God-breathed”.

Normally when you think of someone’s breath, you think of bad breath if they haven’t brushed their teeth, or minty fresh breath if they have. But when we say “God-breathed”, we are just making the close connection between breath and speech. Or, to put it another way, if you stop breathing, you stop talking. In the same way as our breath carries our speech, so God’s breath carries his words from within his heart, inside himself, to the pages of the Bible.

Lookup the following passages to observe the inseparable connection between the word of God and the Spirit of God...

Genesis 1:1-3

Psalms 33:6

Isaiah 40:13

Isaiah 61:1

John 3:34

John 6:63

2 Peter 1:20-21

2 Timothy 3:16

Reflect on what an amazing statement this is! The Holy Spirit has given this book that we hold to us! God has spoken to us!

This happens by the Holy Spirit through the human authors of the Bible. But because the Holy Spirit is in charge, it means that the words the human authors used were those that God intended to be used (and those words are not subject to error in the way that so many human words contains mistakes—but more about this in the next chapter).

We are not saying at this point that God dictated the Bible to the human authors and that the Holy Spirit was checking their work, like an over-enthusiastic English teacher. This is clear once you start reading the Bible. There are different styles of language: poetry in the New Testament epistles. They cover different time periods. There are different writers who use different languages and different modes of expression. Paul is not the same as Peter or David or Isaiah or Matthew. We are just saying that the guys and girls who penned the Bible didn’t just make it up themselves. Their writing originated from God and was carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Precious words

The people who actually wrote the Scriptures realized that because God had inspired or breathed out the words in the Bible, there was something special about them. For instance, in **Psalm 19** King David says:

*The law of the Lord is perfect,
reviving the soul.
The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy,
making wise the simple.
The precepts of the Lord are right,
giving joy to the heart.
The commands of the Lord are radiant,
giving light to the eyes.
The fear of the Lord is pure,
enduring forever.
The ordinances of the Lord are sure
and altogether righteous.
They are more precious than gold,
than much pure gold;
they are sweeter than honey,
than honey from the comb. (Ps 19:7-10)*

All those terms—law, statutes, precepts, commands, ordinances—are different ways of saying ‘the word of God’, which we have preserved for us in the pages of the Bible. But pay attention to what King David says about them. They are perfect and they revive or give life to the soul. They are trustworthy words that make the simple wise (in Bible talk, the simple are those who are young and inexperienced). The words of God are right and righteous, they give guidance (light to the eyes) and joy to the heart, and they are more precious than gold and sweeter than honey. That is not something you could say of the words in any other book.

What I suspect David was getting at in Psalm 19, although he doesn’t quite say it in this way, is that the words in the Bible are precious because without them we could not understand God very well at all. We could work out some things about God by looking at the world around us by using our brains. The process of thinking about God based on human observation (looking) and reason (thinking) is called ‘natural theology’, and some of its key players include Plato (429-347 BC), Aristotle (385-322 BC) and Thomas Aquinas (1226-1274 AD). But the problem with natural theology is that you can only work out so much about God by looking at the world he made and by thinking about him. (There’s also the problem that sin has damaged our ability to observe and reason and think properly. This is clear from the way

most human observation, thought and reason directs people away from God rather than towards God—but more about this in a couple of chapters.)

The Apostle Paul basically argued that we can only work out enough about God to be without excuse if we ignore him. This is because enough about him can be seen from the world he created to know that he exists (Rom 1:20), but human beings invariably push that knowledge to one side and ignore God. An American theologian with a French-sounding name, Donald Bloesch, says something similar:

The knowledge of God through nature and conscience apart from the revelation in Christ... it is not a saving knowledge but a condemning knowledge.

A French theologian with an American-sounding name, John Calvin, made it clear that it wasn't just that sin got in the way and disrupted our ability to understand God. Our human smallness before God is a problem that existed before sin even came into the world. Calvin said:

Indeed, how can the mind by its own leading come to search out God's essence when it cannot even get to its own?

Why special revelation is so special

To know God with our minds, hearts, spirits and lives, we need the precious words of the Bible. We need God to tell us what he has to tell us about himself. That's why David is so amped about the words of Scripture; they tell us what we otherwise could not work out for ourselves: what God is like, what he has done and what he wants from us. The Bible is sometimes called 'special revelation' (as opposed to general revelation or natural theology), and I reckon it is special because without it we'd still be sitting on a mountain or in a dark room trying to work out who God is and what he wants from us.

Special revelation—that is, God speaking intelligible words, which are recorded in the Bible and proclaimed accurately to hearers—is the only thing that allows us to properly interpret God's actions. Special revelation is how God communicates his purposes and his character and nature. It often combines an event and an explanation,[4] so the algebra nerds among us could turn it into an equation like this:

$$\text{Event} + \text{Explanation} = \text{Revelation}$$

Working through various spokesmen, God explains what a particular event means, so we can understand what it teaches us about God and what he wants from us. Sometimes the explanation and the event are the same thing—for example, when we hear sermons recorded in Scripture, like Jesus'

famous Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Sometimes the explanation happens after the event, and sometimes with prophecy the explanation happens in advance of the event. Sometimes the explanation happens at the same time as the event—for example, when Jesus hangs on the cross, he cries out that God has forsaken him (that is, turned his back on Jesus and poured out judgement upon him). Without Jesus' words interpreting the event of his crucifixion for us, we might be left thinking that it was just a particularly painful experience without understanding the spiritual significance of the suffering he endured from God.

Jesus is the focus of the Bible

This is a useful point at which to pause and focus on one of the great things about the special revelation in the Bible: without it, we would not understand that Jesus is the centre of God's work and the focus of his revelation. He is the Word become flesh who lived among us, as the Apostle John said (John 1:1-18). Jesus himself said that the whole Old Testament pointed to him and was fulfilled in him (Matt 5:17-20). And from Jesus Christ, who is the very midpoint of God's work in speaking to the world, the message of God's work in the world continues to go into the whole world. God might have spoken to particular people like Abraham or Jesus' disciples, and worked in special ways with particular nations like Israel, but ultimately God's message in the person and work of Jesus is intended for the whole world.

This message was first passed on by the preaching of written down in the Bible. It is really the Bible that ensured that the events of God and their explanations (through his spokesmen) did not get lost in time and space, but were passed on from generation to generation and from place to place. The Bible is a book of precious words, the inspired breath of God, because it communicates across time and geography and culture that God made us, loves us, pursues us despite our sinfulness, and saves us from our sinfulness in the person of his own Son, the dear Lord Jesus Christ. It would be impossible for us to decipher this ourselves without the Bible.

So we ought to treasure God's words, in the same way that King David does in **Psalm 19** (you might want to look over Psalm 19, or Psalm 119 if you're feeling ambitious). These words of God are precious words, coming as they do from the very heart of God. The follow up question is: Can we actually trust them? That's where we turn in the next chapter.

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