

Watch Your *Doctrine*

Session 2: God Speaks with Pastor Colin Smith

Here's the conviction that I want to commend to you, and it lies at the heart of all that we do in the ministry of Open the Bible. God has spoken through His Word. God speaks when His Word is opened.

A few years ago, I was invited to speak at a conference for pastors where there were two plenary sessions, one in the morning, the other in the evening, and break-out sessions in the afternoon. I was the speaker for the evening session. The morning speaker opened his talk by saying there are three ingredients in any transformation: experiences, relationships, and information.

“Now,” he said, “the Bible is information, and the problem is that we spend most of our time on information, to the neglect of experiences and relationships.” I had no problem with what he said about the importance of experiences and of relationships. But I had a huge problem with him dismissing the Bible as information. Information!

My talk in the evening session was on Acts 6 where the apostles say let us give ourselves to the ministry of the Word and to prayer. Why would you do that if the Word is only information?

I spoke with the brother during the day and thanked him for some good things he said in his talk. “But,” I said, “I think we have a very different view of the Bible.” The Bible is more than information. It is living seed, bread, milk, honey, a sword, a hammer, a lamp, a mirror, and it is gold. The Bible is much more than information. It is the living Word by which God brings transformation. And if you believe that, it will shape and drive your strategies for evangelism, discipleship, and pastoral care.

In this session we're going to look at: how Scripture came; what Scripture is; and what Scripture does.

1. How Scripture Came

And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:19–21)

Notice that he says, “No prophecy of Scripture.” He is talking about the Old Testament, and he distinguishes the ‘prophecy of Scripture’ from all other prophecy.

It's easy to get up and say that you have a message from God. Anyone can do that. Though if you had lived in ancient Israel, you would have thought twice before you did, because in Israel the penalty for being a false prophet (that is saying that a message came from God when it really

was only your own thought) was stoning. There weren't many things you could get stoned for in Israel, but this was one of them!

The reason for the severity of this law was to remind people that it is no small thing to claim the authority of God for your own ideas. That should be sobering to any Christian who talks lightly about 'the Lord told me this, that, and the other.' If you talked like that in ancient Israel you would have been up for a hearing before the elders. And, if they concluded that you were claiming God's authority for your own ideas, well, you wouldn't be making any more statements about what the Lord had told you!

People in ancient Israel knew that there was a world of difference between the thoughts of men and the Word of God. The world is full of ideas that various people want to push on us. Peter says the Scripture isn't like that! It doesn't belong in that line up. It's not another special interest group pushing their view of life on us. Don't put the Old Testament prophets in that long list of interpretations of God, life, meaning, and existence. The Scriptures don't belong there. They're different!

How are the Old Testament prophets different?

...knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man.

(2 Peter 1:20–21)

Now, Peter answers positively: "*...but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit*" (2 Peter 1:21). The best way to grasp what Peter is saying here is through a story in Acts 27. Paul is under arrest and he is being taken as a prisoner to Rome. Luke describes the journey:

We sailed slowly for a number of days and arrived with difficulty off Cnidus, and as the wind did not allow us to go farther, we sailed under the lee of Crete off Salmone... But soon a tempestuous wind, called the northeaster, struck down from the land. And when the ship was caught and could not face the wind, we gave way to it and were driven along.

(Acts 27:7, 14-15)

The word Luke uses here for the ship being "driven along" by the wind is the same word Peter uses for the prophets being "carried along" by the Spirit. How much control do you have when you are in a ship being carried along in the storm? Not much. The direction of the boat was controlled by the wind. The message of the prophets was controlled by the Spirit.

The words of the prophets came from God. These men did not control the message. The message controlled them. It came to them from God like a mighty wind. They were carried along in it so that what they wrote was exactly what God wanted them to say.

2. What Scripture Is

a. Inspired (God-breathed)

The word inspired was used in the old King James translation of the New Testament from the 16th Century. The problem with the word 'inspiration' is that it is used in different

ways. I feel inspired when I listen to great music. We say that a sports team are *inspired* when they put in a great performance. Inspiration needs to be explained.

The word that is used here in the original is *theopneustos*. It's a combination of two words *Theos* - God and *pneustos* – breathed, which literally means God breathed. And modern translations are helpful in giving a literal translation. The New International Version says, "All Scripture is God breathed." The English Standard Version says, *All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work*" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

"The meaning is not that God breathed into the Bible, but that God breathed out the Bible," as Donald Macleod has said. When we speak of Scripture being 'inspired,' the inspiration we refer to lies not in the human authors of the Bible, not in the readers of the Bible, but in the Bible itself. '*All Scripture is breathed out by God.*'

Some deny inspiration. They do not believe that the Bible is inspired. They think that the Bible is a human document: Man's word about God rather than God's word to man. It therefore reflects man's evolution from crude and primitive thoughts about God to thoughts that are more refined and because the evolution of thought continues, therefore the Scripture cannot be authoritative or final. The Bible then becomes an important voice in our conversation, a book in the library. 'This is what the Bible says, but what do you think?'

Some locate inspiration in the hearer or reader of the Bible. The Bible Becomes the Word of God when we feel God speaking to us through it. This locates inspiration in the reader. God speaks through the Bible, and it becomes the Word of God when God speaks to me through it. But the Bible is the Word of God irrespective of our feelings about it. The Bible is God's Word to us whether we read it or ignore it, like it or loathe it, believe, or despise it.

This is important in answering the person who says, 'I read the Bible, but I don't feel that God is speaking to me.' The Bible does not *become* the Word of God when I feel it is speaking to me. It *is* the Word of God.

Some limit inspiration to certain parts of the Bible. The Bible *contains* the Word of God. The Bible is inspired in parts. Who decides which parts? Often this is stated as inspired in its doctrine, but not in its history, or cosmology. This approach also allows the Bible to be shaped to suit preference: affirms about Jesus and salvation, but its teaching on sexual ethics were for a different time and are not the Word of God for us today. This is very different from "All Scripture is *theopneustos*". But we believe that God has spoken in His Word.

All Scripture is breathed out by God. God never changes, and since God has spoken, it follows that what God *said* is what God *says*. The Bible is more than the word God *has* spoken. It is the Word that God speaks to us today.

Notice the present tense when Peter quotes Scripture in the Pentecost sermon.

*'And in the last days it shall be, **God declares**, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.'* (Acts 2:17)

God had said through the prophet Joel "I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh." Peter quotes this, but when he does, he does not say, 'God *declared*, I will pour out my Spirit...' He says, "God *declares*, I will pour out my Spirit.' This is more than a word God has spoken in the past. This is what God is saying to you today! This conviction, that what God said in Scripture, rightly understood and applied, is what He is saying to us today is at the heart of authentic Christian ministry.

We also find it in Hebrews 3:7–9:

Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years."

Again, notice the present tense. The writer of Hebrews is quoting Psalm 95:7–11. These were words that God breathed out to David, hundreds of years before the time of Hebrews. But the writer of Hebrews quotes these words in the present tense. This is what the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you hear His voice do not harden your hearts." Scripture is not only the Word God has spoken, it is the Word that God speaks, and in the preaching of His Word, He speaks it to us today!

See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. (Hebrews 12:25)

The writer to Hebrews is describing something that happened 1500 years before. But these are more than words that God has spoken. What God said then is what God says now. So "*see that you do not refuse him who is speaking.*"

b. Inerrant (without error)

The word *inerrant* (without error) came into use to express robust commitment to the inspiration of Scripture. The Bible is God-breathed. If God has breathed out His Word, it follows that the Word God has breathed is without error.

A book could have many errors and still be inspiring to the reader. Moses, Isaiah, and Paul could have been given great insight and still have got it mixed up with their own bias and prejudice. But what God has spoken must, by definition, be inerrant.

Inerrancy is not an *adequate* word to describe what we believe about the Bible. A railway timetable may be inerrant but that would not mean that it was breathed out by God. Inerrancy is a clarification of what it means for the Bible to be inspired or God breathed.

Inspiration describes our conviction about Scripture. Inerrancy protects a proper understanding of inspiration.

Never underestimate the danger of a diminished view of Scripture. Jesus says,

“For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?” (John 5:46-47)

You will meet many people who profess to be Christians say that they believe in the Bible, but they ‘don’t buy all this stuff about inerrancy.’ What happens is that people start chipping away at the Bible. They see it as a book that contains many wonderful things especially about Jesus, but they do not receive it as the Word of God.

But notice what Jesus says here: *‘If you believed Moses, you would believe me.’* If you lose confidence in the Old Testament, it won’t be long before you lose confidence in Jesus as well. *Moses wrote about me!* If you don’t believe Moses, you won’t believe Me! If you come to the Bible as a critic, the Bible will be a closed book to you. We must come to the Word of God with humble hearts and with a true recognition of our position before Him.

God, I don’t even know you, so I need you make yourself known to me through your Word. Lord, the truth is not in me, I need you to teach me through your Word. Lord, I do not have faith: I need you to give me faith through your Word.

c. Infallible (Never Failing)

God always delivers what He has promised in His Word.

A railway timetable may be inerrant, but if the train did not arrive in time, it would prove to be fallible. The timetable does not have the power to deliver what it promises. But the Bible is the Word of God and God delivers on all that He promises. God’s Word is inerrant and infallible. It delivers!

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:14-17)

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10-11)

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. (Hebrews 4:12-13)

3. What Scripture Does

Choose strategies that put the Bible at the center of your evangelism, discipleship, and pastoral care.

a. Evangelism

The word of God is the living seed that brings new life.

From childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 3:15)

You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God. (1 Peter 1:23)

Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth... (James 1:18)

Faith comes from hearing and hearing through the word of Christ. (Romans 10:17)

Make sure that the Bible is at the center of any plan you adopt for evangelism.

b. Discipleship:

“All Scripture is breathed out by God... that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). It would be hard to come up with a better description of discipleship than that.

“It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” (Matthew 4:4). The Word of God is not only what we are saved by, it’s what we live on!

Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth (John 17:17). The Word of God will make us what Christ calls us to be.

Make sure that the Bible is at the center of any plan you adopt for discipleship.

c. Pastoral Care

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness. (2 Peter 1:3-6)

*The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul;
the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple;
the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes.* (Psalm 19:7-8)

Make sure that the Bible is at the center of any plan you adopt for pastoral care.

Conclusions

What you believe about the Bible will shape your ministry. As your convictions about the Bible are shaped, you will end up adopting one of three postures towards the Bible: the Bible beneath us, the Bible beside us, the Bible above us.

Some people think that the Bible is beneath us. They come to the Bible as critics, who decide which parts of it they will believe. How does this fit with what I think, what I feel, what I experience? What do I find here that is true for me?

If all we had in the Bible was a collection of ancient insights, that would be entirely reasonable. But if God has spoken, our calling is to listen to, believe, and obey all that He has said.

Some people think that the Bible is beside us. That it needs to be interpreted through the lens of all that the church has said about it over the centuries. But that is to confuse what God has said with what the church has said. We should be very thankful for the wisdom that has come to us from earlier generations of Christians, but the Bible should not be evaluated in the light of what others have said. What others have said needs to be evaluated in the light of the Bible.

I hope and pray that you will be among those who see that the Bible is above us. Some years ago, I was invited to speak at a conference for pastors in India. I worked with a translator, and was trying my best to communicate with gestures as well as with words. At one point, I was calling the brothers to be men who lived and preached under the authority of the Word of God. I lifted the Bible above my head to illustrate the point.

On the last day, the conference leader called on us all to stand, to open our Bibles, and to place them over our heads. He then led us in a prayer of commitment in which we pledged ourselves to be men under the Word. A friend took a picture of this, which I treasure, because it captures the life I want to live and the ministry I want to have. It captures what, with all my heart I would want for you.



I'm inviting you today to settle your conviction about Scripture before God today. You may have questions. We all do. Questions never end, and some of them won't be answered this side of heaven. Don't waste the ministry you could have. Settle your conviction about Scripture before God today.

Billy Graham tells us about how he did this, and how it transformed his ministry. He had started out confident that the Bible was the Word of God. Then he read some authors who did not believe this, and he had a friend, Chuck Templeton, who was telling him that not everything in the Bible was true.

Billy Graham and Chuck Templeton were scheduled to speak at a mountain retreat in California. When they were there, Templeton said, "Billy, you're fifty years out of date. People no longer accept the Bible as being inspired the way you do. Your faith is too simple. Your language is out of date. You're going to have to learn the new jargon if you're going to be successful in ministry."

The director of the conference was a woman by the name of Henrietta Mears. She was confident in the truth of the Bible and as Chuck Templeton was pulling Billy one way, she was pulling in the other. Billy Graham says, "I ached as if I was on the rack." One night, he went out into the forest. He came to a tree stump and knelt down with his Bible on the stump in front of him.

"O God! There are many things in this book I do not understand.
There are many problems with it for which I have no solution...
I can't answer some of the questions Chuck and others are raising.
Father, I am going to accept this as Thy Word – by faith.
I am going to allow faith to go beyond my intellectual questions
and doubts, and I will believe this to be your inspired Word."

This is Billy Graham's testimony:

"When I got up from my knees... that August night, my eyes stung with tears. I sensed the presence and power of God as I had not sensed it for months. Not all my questions were answered, but a major bridge had been crossed. In my heart and mind, I knew a spiritual battle in my soul had been fought and won."

(Just As I Am)

May that battle be fought and won in your heart also. May you live and serve joyfully under the Word of God.

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