



THE WORD OF GOD AS THE SUFFICIENT AUTHORITY FOR MISSIONS

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

“You have so much in English; we have so little in Bengali.”

It was 1968. These heavy words, spoken by a Bangladeshi woman named Basanti Das to an American missionary lying ill with a mysterious virus, hung in the thick, humid South Asian air. The Baptist mission worker, Jeannie Lockerbie, had no more than arrived when she fell ill, along with all but five of her teammates. Some were bedridden and quarantined for as long as eleven months. Basanti, a schoolteacher and translator, had come to visit Lockerbie and was eyeing her impressive bookshelf.¹

Basanti’s lament haunted the missionary. William Carey, known as the father of the modern missions movement, had built his ministry in the Asian subcontinent around Scripture translation and the establishment of a printing press. Yet 175 years after Carey’s landfall,

1 For the full story, see Loren Skinker, “All Things for Good,” ABWE, published July 13, 2020, <https://www.abwe.org/blog/all-things-good>.

Bengali believers still faced a biblical and theological famine. Once she recovered, Lockerbie began a literature ministry, and the team committed to translate the New Testament into the language of the nearby Tripura tribesmen. When the translation was finished, the tribal chief told the missionaries, “Now that we can understand the Bible, we have no excuse not to obey.”

God does his saving work in his world through his written Word. The accomplishment of God’s mission depends on Scripture being read, understood, and proclaimed in the heart languages of peoples from all the nations. This is what the framers of the Westminster Confession of Faith meant in 1647 when they noted that the Bible is “to be translated into the vulgar [that is, common] language of every nation unto which they come, that, the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship him in an acceptable manner; and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope.”²

Yet in our era, even Christians are tempted to question the centrality of Scripture. In the United States, a prominent evangelical multisite church pastor, whose weekly attendees total more than forty thousand people, preached in 2018 that we must “unhitch” ourselves from the Old Testament and argued that the maxim “for the Bible tells me so’. . . is where our trouble began.”³ Similar problems plague the mission field. Translations of the New Testament only outnumber translations of the whole Bible (both testaments) by about 2.6 to 1.⁴ Worse, a growing number of Muslim Idiom Bible translations (MITs) intentionally remove or redefine terms like “Son of God” in an effort to encourage Muslims to “convert” to Christ without transgressing the formal boundaries of Islamic religious identity.⁵ Wherever we turn, the

2 Westminster Confession of Faith (henceforth WCF) 1.8.

3 Andy Stanley, “Aftermath, Part 3: Not Difficult // Andy Stanley,” YouTube, 39:44, April 30, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pShxFTNRCWI>.

4 United Bible Societies, “About Us: Incredible Growth in Scripture Translation,” UBS Translations, United Bible Societies, accessed July 25, 2020, http://www.ubs-translations.org/about_us.

5 One example is the “translation” titled *The True Meaning of the Gospel and Acts in Arabic*, ed. Mazhar Mallouhi (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar Al Farabi, 2008). This translation, for instance, butchers Matthew 28:19’s injunction to “[baptize] in the name

Bible is under attack—even from within the ranks of Christian workers. Yet we cannot even begin to approach the missionary task without a rich understanding of and reverent awe for the written Word of God.

THE CENTRALITY OF SCRIPTURE

For much of church history, from the early centuries of the church through the medieval period, Scripture was largely inaccessible. With the exception of the Vulgate, Jerome's Latin translation of the Bible from the fourth century, the Word of God was only readily accessible by an elite, educated few. But the dam began to break through the sacrificial efforts of proto-Reformers like William Tyndale, John Wycliffe, and their spiritual heirs, the Reformers. They were convinced that for the kingdom of Christ to spread salvation to every nation, tribe, and tongue, as promised in Revelation 5:9 and 7:9, the written Word of God needed to be available in the primary language of the average man. Tyndale wrote, "It was impossible to establish the lay people in any truth, except the Scripture were laid before their eyes in their mother tongue."⁶

The invention of the movable-type press and the value the Protestant Reformation placed on God's Word marked a turning point in the availability of Scripture, and the modern missionary movement starting in the eighteenth century opened the floodgates of global Bible translation as never before. At the onset of the nineteenth century, Scriptures were available in just 68 languages; now, Scriptures are available in at least 2,479 languages, with 451 languages possessing entire Bible translations—a 3,546 percent increase.⁷ It is no wonder that Christianity has grown explosively throughout the Global South in

of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" into "cleanse them with water in the name of God and His Messiah and His Holy Spirit." See David Harriman, "Epilogue: Force Majeure: Ethics and Encounters in an Era of Extreme Contextualization," in *Muslim Conversions to Christ*, eds. Ayman Ibrahim and Ant Greenham (New York: Peter Lang, 2018), 491.

6 William Tyndale, *The Works of William Tyndale* (1848; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2010), 1:394.

7 United Bible Societies, "About Us."

the last several decades.⁸ God's work in the world is inseparable from his Word. After all, "faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom 10:17).

God has spoken—decisively, infallibly, to all peoples, nations, and tongues in the written Word of Scripture, which contains both the message and model of ministry. The missionary task is impossible apart from a consuming passion for the Word of God and submission to its authority. But before we can explain the missiological implications of this, we must understand what the Bible *is*.

TWO KINDS OF REVELATION

The Westminster Confession (1647) and the Second London Confession of Faith (1689) both begin their systematic outline of Christian teaching not, as one might think, with the existence of God but with their doctrine of Scripture. The latter confession, to which the authors of this book subscribe, reads:

The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience, although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and his will which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord at sundry times and in divers manners to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his church; and afterward for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan, and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the Holy Scriptures to be most necessary, those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.⁹

8 Sun Young Chung and Todd M. Johnson, "Tracking Global Christianity's Statistical Centre of Gravity, AD 33–AD 2100," *International Review of Mission* 95 (2004): 167; cited in John Morgan, "World Christianity Is Undergoing a Seismic Shift," *ABWE Blog*, ABWE International, June 27, 2019, <https://www.abwe.org/blog/world-christianity-undergoing-seismic-shift>.

9 Second London Confession of Faith (henceforth 2LCF) 1.1.

These statements serve as the foundation for the rest of the confession. We have a *revelational epistemology*—that is, we know what we know because God has revealed it. In an era of subjectivity in which “truth” is relative, shaped by one’s cultural perspective or group identity, we can have unshakable certainty—not merely because of reason or sense perception but because the Author of truth has broken in from the outside and spoken an objective, understandable word. The Particular Baptists in London and the Westminster divines knew that apart from establishing the centrality of revelation, the task of theology is impossible. So, too, is the task of missions.

To this end, God has given us not just one “book” but two: creation and Scripture. The created order is God’s *natural* or *general revelation* to us. The framers of the Second London Confession refer to “the light of nature” because they recognized that the truth, beauty, and goodness of the cosmos scream of the reality of the glory of God. David testifies in Psalm 19:1, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.” The apostle Paul tells us that God’s “invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” (Rom 1:20). This general revelation extends from the cosmos all the way down to the individual human conscience, as every human made in the image of God possesses God’s unchanging moral law stamped on their hearts (Rom 2:14–15).

Often, when the importance of foreign missions is debated, the question is posed: “What about the man who lives alone on a remote island who has never read the Bible or heard the name ‘Jesus’—will he be saved?” This question assumes that either man is only accountable to God if he has been first evangelized or that natural revelation itself contains all the knowledge necessary for salvation. Both assumptions are false. With regard to the second assumption, we should note that the problem with natural revelation is not a problem with the information God reveals but with us, its recipients. In creation, we receive enough knowledge of God to condemn us but not enough to save us. We see the majesty, holiness, and power of God and recognize our guilt

and insufficiency, but by stargazing we can learn nothing of Christ, his cross, or his kingdom.

Because we cannot be saved through what we know of God in creation, God has also given us *special revelation*—his spoken, written, intelligible word. Throughout human history, this has consisted of prophetic speech and inspired writings, which have now been finalized with the coming of Jesus Christ, the ultimate Prophet (Heb 1:1–2). Penned by about forty authors over some 1,500 years in three languages and on three continents, the Bible does not represent a single culture’s narrow perspective on religion but a concrete testimony from God delivered consistently throughout history to all nations and peoples. The purpose of this special revelation is to reveal Christ (John 5:39; 1 Pet 1:10–12), conform us to Christ (2 Pet 1:3–4), and make us “wise for salvation” (2 Tim 3:15). Scripture, written by holy men carried by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet 1:21), is thus our sole and infallible rule of faith and practice. It is no wonder that David exults, “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple” (Ps 19:7).

The missionary imperative is a direct result of the fact that God has spoken decisively to all peoples, cultures, and times. The transcendent God has made himself known in the Bible. We believe; therefore, we speak (2 Cor 4:13). The question is, how do we speak? Are we free to retool and contextualize our message using any means, assuming those means are not sinful? Or are there also *particular* methods prescribed for us in that very Word?

BEYOND INSPIRATION

Many of us are familiar with the apostle Paul’s statement to Timothy that all Scripture is *inspired* or “breathed out by God” (2 Tim 3:16). Note that it is Scripture (*graphē*) itself, the end product of revelation, and not its authors that is referred to literally as “God-breathed” (*theopneustos*). It is not the case that Scripture is merely inspired in the aesthetic sense, just as we might describe an oration or concerto as