

ARTICLE I: THE SCRIPTURES

The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God's revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. It reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.

Exodus 24:4; Deuteronomy 4:1-2; 17:19; Joshua 8:34; Psalms 19:7-10; 119:11,89,105,140; Isaiah 34:16; 40:8; Jeremiah 15:16; 36:1-32; Matthew 5:17-18; 22:29; Luke 21:33; 24:44-46; John 5:39; 16:13-15; 17:17; Acts 2:16ff.; 17:11; Romans 15:4; 16:25-26; 2 Timothy 3:15-17; Hebrews 1:1-2; 4:12; 1 Peter 1:25; 2 Peter 1:19-21.

Exposition

“Revelation.” When many Christians first encounter this word, they may think of the book written by the Apostle John, but there are also ways to use the term theologically. In theology, we use the word to talk about two categories of God’s speech. The first category we call “general revelation.” General revelation is how God speaks to all people in all places. Some ways that God speaks through general revelation are his providential care of creation, his justice, and his role as the Creator. For instance, when we recognize the meticulous unfolding of various events, whether in the natural world or in history, we are driven to wonder. Or, when we see goodness praised and wickedness punished, we are often satisfied, and when the opposite happens we are outraged. Further, when we consider the fact that all things have a source and a purpose, we are driven to wonder what their source and purpose are. Thus the Apostle Paul could write that all people have known God, though they have not honored him as God, through the things that have been made (Romans 1:18ff). Creation, which all people in general perceive, is the place where we first interact with God’s revelation.

Let me make two side notes before we move on. Though I have here been looking at the perception of the world around us, we must also recognize that we too are creatures, creatures in a peculiar relationship with God as his image bearers. As such, we know ourselves as creatures who have been cared for, who have a source, a purpose, and guilt. Thus, we actually come to a knowledge of God through general revelation immediately in our very existence and mediated through the existence of those things around us. Second, general revelation, because it is the perfect God who reveals himself, is true. God remains the speaker through it, but its state of longing for renewal and our fallen hearts and minds distort our interpretation of it.

We usually call the second category of revelation, “special revelation.” This form of revelation is the manner in which God specifically makes known his plans for man and creation; he makes known his mind in a particular or special way. The confession makes a few claims we will work through. First, “The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired.” It is crucial we do not misunderstand our statement right here at the beginning. The text itself is divinely inspired, that is, it is the “breathed-out” Word of God (2 Tim 3:16). Men, it tells us, spoke as they were carried along (2 Pet 1:21). The reason we want to make this clear is that we will also recognize the men who wrote portions of Scripture, such as Peter or David, had also committed real sins. We do not want to convey the idea that each author was correct in everything they ever said or did. However, when they took up the pen and wrote the books we now possess, their words were the very words intended by the Holy Spirit, and those words *are* correct in everything they say.

Next, we confess the Bible is “God’s revelation of Himself to man.” We saw above that God reveals himself in creation as well, but he especially makes himself known in Scripture. We do *not* claim the authors were simply making claims about their experience of God and that the Bible is, therefore, a merely human testimony about God. Rather, the Bible is God’s testimony about himself. He is the active speaker (see below on *concursum*). As such, “It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction.” Even while we continue to live our lives in such a way that we make wise choices that seem to better serve God’s glory and our good, we must remember the Bible itself is the surest deposit of uncorrupted instruction for faith and godliness.

The Bible’s central message is Christ, “the focus of divine revelation.” Let us remind ourselves of the biblical storyline. In the beginning, God created man holy and happy, in perfect communion with God and therefore blessed. But man, in direct disobedience and

faithlessness toward God, stretched out his hand and took of the only item God had forbidden him. Though mankind was cursed with death and decay, and all creation with him, God promised that he would remove the enmity between him and his creatures through a son of the woman who would defeat the serpent. While the storyline progresses, God makes clear this son would come through Abraham, and further, he would be a king in the line of David of Israel. This yearning hope of the prophets came in a manger, and died on a cross, and rose, and ascended into heaven where he reigns even now. His chosen apostles went out into the earth to call people to follow him, and some of them did this in writing. The scriptures, therefore, focus on Christ because the scriptures are God's testimony about what he has done, is doing, and will do in the world through Christ. This message would be pointless if it was not trustworthy because it is a high and lofty claim. But God has not given a word mixed with error; he himself has spoken as the one who is Truth. We know, therefore, that "all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy" and that it is "truth, without any mixture of error."

Not only does Scripture tell us what God has done *for* us, but it also tells us what God requires *from* us. "It reveals the principles by which God judges us," the confession says, which means the Bible is not a book to leave on our shelves and out of our lives. Often people cry out, "judge not lest you be judged," or even worse, "only God can judge me." While these words are true when they stand on their own, or in their original biblical context, people often say them today in scorn, scoffing, and rebellion. The fact that God will judge us ought to bring us to our knees, not be our excuse for unholy living. Rather, God has given the Bible as a means for knowing *how* God *does* judge us. He judges us as either godly or godless, as holy or evil, as righteous or wicked. How terrifying would such judgment be if we were left blind to this standard until the day we stand before him awaiting

an eternal verdict? Graciously, God has spoken in the Bible to tell us his standards. His standard is that we be reconciled to him in Christ through faith and repentance. This reconciliation demonstrates itself in holy living in home, church, and society as the Spirit produces fruit in our lives. Can we judge? Yes, and we must. We must judge our lives by the standard of the Word, and we must plead with our brothers and sisters in Christ and our neighbors outside of Christ to walk in holiness before God by conforming their lives to the same Word.

Does someone believe in God, wish to worship God rightly, and love the truth, all of which are things made known clearly in Scripture? Then we may unite with one another. The Bible, we confess, “is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union.” We may join together, be “yoked,” based on what we see constitutes the Scripture’s standards for unity.¹ Sometimes we may find ourselves working alongside unbelievers, perhaps in everyday business, or perhaps for a social cause, but we do not call this Christian unity. Further, we may find ourselves united with other Christians in efforts outside the local church that believe things we find to be impossible for unity in a local church. The standard for unity at all times, however, is Scripture.

Do we then live life with no further information or authority than the Bible? Some of this was addressed in the opening chapter, but here we can address the matter a little further. The confession says the Bible is “the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried.” Two words are helpful here: “magisterial” and “ministerial.” In theology, we will often speak of “magisterial” authority and “ministerial” authority. To help illustrate, remember that a minister is someone who functions as an “undershepherd,” which is why we call our elders “pastors.” An under-

1. See Article XIV: Cooperation.

shepherd is not the one who owns and is ultimately responsible for the sheep, but he *is* responsible for them, and he does have authority over them. Ministerial authority is authority *on behalf of* the magistrate. Christ is the King of kings and Lord of lords, the supreme Magistrate who has spoken in his Word, the Bible. However, we still have kings (or other forms of public officials) and we still have pastors. At various times, pastors and churches have united to write out documents they believe accurately reflect the teaching of Scripture, but their documents are ministerial in their authority; they seek to express faithfully what Scripture says. This means all teaching and living must be compared, ultimately, to the teaching of God in his Word, the magisterial authority.

Biblical Texts

Though many texts may be considered, as seen in the large amount of proof texts, there are three key texts often appealed to when thinking about the doctrine of Scripture: 2 Timothy 3:15–17, 2 Peter 1:19–21, and Hebrews 1:1–2. We will look at each of these in order.

2 Timothy 3:15–17

Paul is writing his final letter before he is martyred for the faith. Traditionally, the story is told that he was imprisoned at the end of the book of Acts, released, and later imprisoned again and martyred under Emperor Nero.² In this letter to his son in the faith, Timothy, he provides some final words of encouragement and exhortation. The main point of his letter is evident in 1:14, where he says, “By the

2. Most of this tradition, though not definitive, can be seen in the texts of the New Testament. In Philippians, for instance, Paul seems confident he will be released (1:25–26), and Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon would then be written during this same period, based on similarities in writing circumstances and content. Second Timothy, by contrast, bears the pathos of a man convinced of his end (4:6).

Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.” First, we may ask why he must guard it? There are many who have abandoned the faith, such as Phygelus, Hermogenes, Hymenaeus, Philetus, Jannes, Jambres, Demas, and Alexander, each of whom have not only abandoned the faith, but sought to distort it as well. Timothy must guard the good deposit against such people. Second, he must guard it because the times will be hard on him. Persecution, trials, and temptations will rage all around the pastor, and he must stand firm and guard the flock of Christ from being led astray. How will he do so? Notice it said, “by the Holy Spirit.” God preserves his people. As we get into chapter three (in addition to many points before), we see that God does so through the Gospel of Christ given to us in the Scriptures. He says that, while others have gone astray into deception, Timothy is to plant his feet in the Scriptures. They are those writings he has known since his youth, and they are “breathed out by God.” The task of remaining faithful in a faithless and difficult world demands divine preservation, which happens by the words given to us in the Scriptures. They are “able,” which does not mean “merely” able, but “fully” able to give us confidence in Christ and conform the life of believers to the will of God. We call this “sufficiency;” the Scriptures are all we need.³ We call the speech of God in the Scriptures “inspiration,” which does not mean what we usually mean when we say we are inspired; it means the Scriptures are the very breath of God. What Scripture says, God says.

3. See my point above about the magisterial–ministerial distinction. We might look at the authorities in our lives and say, “I don’t need you because all I need is Scripture.” This is not what is going on here. Remember, Paul is talking to Timothy, a pastor, who has been given the gift of understanding and teaching. We do need pastors to open up Scripture to us, and we need politicians to execute justice, and we need brothers and sisters in our lives to rebuke us and encourage us, but the authority governing the legitimacy of each of these is Scripture. The pastor and neighbor open up Scripture, and the civil magistrate ought to call good what God calls good and evil what God calls evil (cf. Romans 13:1–7).