

The Bible is God's Word... and we NEED it

Discuss

An unbeliever says to you, "Why should I believe that the Bible is the word of God?"
What do you say? What do you do?

Introduction

Welcome! Today we begin a new series looking at the Doctrine of Scripture.

The word "Doctrine" is an unpopular one. It doesn't sound much fun! Some people say it's divisive. It's hard work, and doesn't it just give us "Head Knowledge"? Right at the start I want us to see that sound doctrine matters. Listen to the job of the Christian minister:

^{ESV} Titus 1:9, He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

That word "sound" means "healthy" – healthy doctrine or healthy teaching. It's good for us – good for our souls. Because sound doctrine will help us know and love God more, and bring him glory. But there's much wrong or unhealthy doctrine around (and the Bible tells us to expect it). So the Pastor's job is both to teach truth and to refute lies. That's what we will be doing in our sessions. Stating truth and opposing lies.

By "Doctrine of Scripture" what do we mean? We're going to ask big questions about the Bible, like: Does God really speak through it? Is it true? Why do I have to obey it? How can I understand it? And those are really important questions. According to some surveys evangelical Christians spend no more than 3 minutes per day reading the Bible. Partly that's down to laziness. But it's also because we lack convictions about the Bible. We need to know His Word more. And we need to watch out for lying and devilish voices – that ignore the Bible or laugh at it or reject it as being wicked. Those are voices in our culture, and sadly in the wider church, and which resonate with our own sinful natures.

A few practical points as we begin:

- I'm mainly going to be talking from the front. But from time to time, I may ask you to turn to your neighbour and do a little work yourself.
- We love questions – so do ask anything at any time.
- We're going to look to stretch our minds and our hearts and our obedience as we study together.

What will be our method in these sessions? We're not working through just one Bible book. That's a good thing to do, because God has arranged the Bible in individual books. That's why our custom here at Immanuel of mainly studying books of the Bible is a good custom. But in these sessions we're not going to stick with one single passage or book. We'll look through the whole Bible for what it has to teach us about... well, the BIBLE! We'll be adopting a systematic approach.

Here's a quick overview of what we're covering. We have 4 sessions:

1. The Bible is God's Word... & we NEED it
2. The Bible is true and powerful
3. The Bible is clear... though not always easy
4. The Bible is enough

We're going to work hard. So expect to have to concentrate! And since we're all at different ages and stages when it comes to Christian things we'll all have to exercise patience: for some grappling with new things, for others hearing familiar truth. But we trust all of us will be blessed as we try to better love the Lord with heart and mind. And as we look to grow our convictions about God's Word the Bible.

The Necessity of Scripture: why we need the Bible

Here is THE big question: How can I know God?

The NY Times recorded a story from Atlanta, Georgia. A 41 year old fashion designer called Joyce Simpson claimed she saw the face of Jesus in a fork-full of spaghetti on a billboard advertising Pizza Hut. And all over Atlanta, people started staring closely at Pizza Hut ads. And, of course, we laugh!

But who's to say God doesn't reveal himself in plates of food? Why are we so confident that God reveals himself in the Bible? Or perhaps we're not so confident. Do we have nagging doubts about the Bible as the means of knowing God?

Lets start off by looking at human attempts to find out about God.

1. Human attempts to know God

Imagine for a moment that we've lived all our lives in this room – within these four walls, with no windows, doors, or glimpses into what's outside. This is our world. Then a rumour starts: there's something out there, and someone's saying that there's God out there. But how do we find out if that's true?

(i) Reason. We try to work out God with our minds. Much of what has been written about God over the last 200 years or so, following a movement called the Enlightenment, has pursued reason.

The assumption is that human beings have powerful minds and intellects. So we can work out who God is, what he's like, and what he wants of us. Perhaps we do it by looking at the natural world. Or we could compare the different religious beliefs of different groups of people.

(ii) Institutions. This is a second way people try to relate to God. By following the teaching of an organised religion or a group of people. It might be a church, or a cult, or your local temple, or mosque. The thinking goes like this. "Here's this group of people. And they seem to know something about God – what he's like, how he wants me to live and so on. They've got a guru or holy man. And so I'll listen to them."

Perhaps that institution is the Church, or a part of the church. If you were to ask many Bishops within the Church of England they would tell you that the opinions of groupings within the church (or even of unbelievers) actually tell you what God is like and how he's to be worshipped.

Related to "institution" is "tradition." It's where we think certain things about God because individuals and groups *in the past* have done so.

(iii) Experience. This is the third common way of trying to relate to God – by trying to sense Him in our experience. This is a really common way of thinking in our culture today.

We might use prayer or meditation techniques as kind of spiritual radar – sending something out in the hope that something will bounce back, telling me something about God.

That information about God might come in the form of feelings or hunches ("I kind of feel that God is saying something to me"). If I feel good about a certain thing I assume that God is telling me "it's good".

Or perhaps I get truth from God by trying to interpret events. (E.g. I'm sitting on the bus and find myself next to a French woman. Clearly God is telling me to go to France on holiday... or is it on a gap year... or is he telling me to marry a French woman...?).

Down the years some have argued that this isn't as ridiculous as it sounds. Here the influence of man called Schleiermacher is important. He taught that all people have a religious urge within us, so that that we feel is authentic revelation about God.

When human beings try to find out what God is like, those are the main groups of approaches: REASON, INSTITUTION & TRADITION, and EXPERIENCE. But each one of them is utterly flawed. Why?

2. Human attempts to know God are wicked and futile

They can't enable us to find God, to hear him or relate to him. Why? Each one relies on HUMAN effort. Reason, Institution and Experience sound different – but each have this one thing in common: each is a form of liberalism, which makes man's mind determinative. Each assumes that, on our own, we can come up with the answers.

We need to see how the Bible exposes ALL human efforts to work out God as both wicked and futile. We cannot know him – for we are too small and we are too sinful.

- **We are too small.**

God's ways are totally unlike ours. We are tiny, limited, finite creatures. God is God. And we are not. It is simply impossible for us to work him out. Our minds and our experiences are too small, too limited to work him out.

^{ESV} Isaiah 55:8-9, For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. ⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Or what do you make of these wonderful, humbling words from the book of Job? Who's in control of life and death? What's the difference between man and God?

^{ESV} Job 40:9-15, Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his? ¹⁰ "Adorn yourself with majesty and dignity; clothe yourself with glory and splendor. ¹¹ Pour out the overflowings of your anger, and look on everyone who is proud and abase him. ¹² Look on everyone who is proud and bring him low and tread down the wicked where they stand. ¹³ Hide them all in the dust together; bind their faces in the world below. ¹⁴ Then will I also acknowledge to you that your own right hand can save you. ¹⁵ "Behold, Behemoth, which I made as I made you; he eats grass like an ox.

^{ESV} Job 41:1-3, "Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook or press down his tongue with a cord? ² Can you put a rope in his nose or pierce his jaw with a hook? ³ Will he make many pleas to you? Will he speak to you soft words?

^{ESV} Job 42:1-3 Then Job answered the LORD and said: ² "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. ³ 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.

- **We are too sinful**

Here we must listen carefully to God's word in Romans chapter 1:

^{ESV} Romans 1:18-21, For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his 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. So they are without excuse. ²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

These are complicated sentences. But the point is clear. God can be seen in his creation (v20). But men suppress the truth about God (v18). We shove that truth to the backs of our minds, because we know that His truth shows up our wickedness. The truth about God is like a bright electric light shining into the grubby corners of our lives. We find it much more convenient to try to pull out the plug.

- **The implication: humility**

Reason, Institution, Experience – they cannot bring us to know God.

This truth cuts sharply against our culture which exalts man and his wisdom. The last 200-300 years have shown a growing confidence in the mind and the abilities of human beings. But we're far too small to know God.

More than that, the Bible tells me that people don't even want to know him anyway. We are truth suppressors. The world around us says that we are morally OK – or at very least morally neutral. So it's a shock to hear the Bible say that every human being, deep-down, is anti-God and completely unwilling to receive truth about God.

Come back to our imaginary room. We can use our reason to try and work out God. And we can be clever men and women in the eyes of the world - lecturers or vicars or journalists. Or we can follow institutions and ancient traditions; we can set up churches and universities. Or we can follow hunches and experiences. But because we're so small, we'll never know if our conclusions are right. And because we're so sinful we'll always prefer to invent our own god rather than believe in the true God.

The Bible calls us to humility.

Here's a good test for us: have you ever heard someone start a sentence with these words – "I like to think of God as..." We have no right to begin sentences in that way. God cannot be subject to the scrutiny of man.

For Christian people this truth should also be deeply encouraging. Sometimes we are scared by those who loudly deny the God of the Bible –perhaps secularists like Richard Dawkins, or perhaps well-known false teachers within the Christian church. Because that person is famous or highly intelligent (e.g. they've got a PhD or they're a Bishop) we're tempted to think they might be right.

But the Bible says we are ALL too small and ALL too sinful to know God by our own efforts. And when we're distressed or astonished by the illogical or wicked things that non-believing friends believe we'd do well to remember the same truth: we are small and sinful people – and we hate the truth when we meet it. Don't be surprised by illogical and wicked unbelief.

So, if I am to know God He will have to take the initiative. Standing outside the box of time and space he will have to do two things:

Reveal himself clearly and unambiguously;

Change me so that I can believe his revelation when I encounter it.

God will have to deal with both of these problems. The great news is we've got a God who is into communication.

3. Our God is a speaking God – we can know him because he has revealed himself

Our God is a speaking God. When he wanted to create the universe, how did he do it? By speaking (Genesis 1:1-5 etc – "And God said"). He's a God who wants to make himself known. And he does that supremely by speaking. What we're talking about here is "revelation."

- **Definition: “revelation”**

What do we mean by that word? We’re not talking about the Bible book we call “Revelation” (we could say that’s “Revelation” with a capital “R”). We’re talking about this: truth that God reveals to us which otherwise we would not know. It is the opposite of us discovering stuff about God on our own.

HOW has God revealed himself?

- **General revelation**

This is “revelation” which is known “generally” – it’s known to everyone, whether they’re Christian or not. God has made it so we can know a certain amount about Him from the world he made. He doesn’t only reveal himself in words, but also through his works.

^{ESV} Psalm 19:1-6, The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. ² Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. ³ There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. ⁴ Their measuring line goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them he has set a tent for the sun, ⁵ which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy. ⁶ Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them, and there is nothing hidden from its heat.

The creation speaks of God’s glory (Ps. 19:1-2). He is a great creator God. Of this it speaks all the time and to all people (vv3-4). From this “general revelation” there are certain things about God which everyone everywhere can know. He has left his fingerprints all over the world. The apostle Paul makes the same point in Romans 1:19-20, speaking of the God who has left signposts to his divinity and power everywhere:

^{ESV} Romans 1:19-20, For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his 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. So they are without excuse.

- **The limits of general revelation**

This is really important. There is a limit to what can be known about God from general revelation.

Even in the garden of Eden (even before man had sinned), God did not create the world and leave Adam and Eve to work out what He is like and how they should live. He spoke to them, He revealed himself in words (Genesis 2:16).

But outside of Eden the situation is much worse. The knowledge of God that we see in creation really is knowledge of God (Romans 3:21, they “knew God”). But what do we do with that revelation? Our minds become “futile” and we worship creatures instead of the creator (v23).

As a result, all people everywhere “are without excuse” (v20). No one on the judgment day will say: “This is unfair, I never knew you.” Knowledge of God in the creation renders man’s idolatry inexcusable. It means that God is just in condemning. But it is not enough to save.

- **Special revelation: God addresses his people verbally**

Wonderfully, our God longs to speak to his people. He makes himself known in what’s sometimes called “special revelation”. This means that he uses words to address his own special people. And God’s Word isn’t just information about God. It is power from God. It has the power to open spiritually blind eyes and save people – in a way that creation cannot and was never intended to.

In the Old Testament one of the key distinctives of the true God is that he does speak. Listen to how false gods are described:

^{ESV} Psalm 115:4-7, Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. ⁵ They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. ⁶ They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. ⁷ They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat.

God is a speaking God. We'll see much more of this in the next few sessions. He speaks to his people through his prophets and apostles, through the testimony which His Holy Spirit moved them to write down. But above all, it is in Jesus Christ that God reveals himself. When Jesus Christ became a man, God himself took on a human nature. He perfectly reveals God to us – in his words and works. Through Jesus "God has spoken." He is the final word on God.

^{ESV} Hebrews 1:1-3, Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. ³ He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high...

That's why Jesus is *called* the "Word" of God (John 1:1) – he is a living sermon from and about the one true God. That's why Jesus *speaks* the word of God – he says clearly that "my teaching is not mine, but his who sent me" (John 7:16). Jesus is the culmination, the high point, and the End of God's revelation. All that the Bible reveals is ultimately about HIM. And His is the opinion that validates the Bible.

- **Implications: we can know God... we must listen to God!**

Our sin is real. Our smallness is real. Yet we can know God! Don't take it for granted. It is amazing.

Imagine that God HADN'T taken the initiative and revealed himself. Imagine that we are in a world where small and sinful people use their reason, institutions and experiences to try to work out God. What's it like?

We're ignorant of the gospel. We don't know about the seriousness of sin, the reality of judgement, the atoning death of Christ, Jesus' resurrection and return glory. The human mind could never work these things out. The human heart will submit to these things. We're eternally lost.

Moralism is all we're left with. What's the best that reason, institution and experience can come up with? It's moralism – "we need to be better people." When liberal theologians in the 19th and 20th centuries refused to listen to the speaking God of the Bible, their message simply became "be good." Without revelation, we're ignorant of grace – we don't know humans can relate to God through grace (and can only relate to God through grace).

We have no assurance or confidence. We certainly shouldn't. Because our best thoughts about God come from our own minds. And when two of us have different thoughts about God, who's to know which is right?

But God has spoken. He has spoken the gospel. He has told us of grace. He has told of the one way of salvation and assurance. He speaks. He invites us to come and know Him. If we want to know God we must go to the Bible. If we're pointing an unbeliever to God, we must point them to the Bible.

And we must LISTEN TO GOD as He speaks to us in the Bible.

Do you remember the movie called *The Stepford Wives*? The husbands of Stepford, Connecticut decide to have their wives turned into robots who never cross the wills of their husbands. Some people are very threatened by the idea of a God who speaks. They would rather have a God who is like a dumb animal or like a "Stepford God". (In *The Stepford Wives* the husbands of Stepford, Connecticut turns their wives into robots who will never disagree with them!). They'd rather a God who does what we want or who says only what we want him to say. Or even we'd rather have no God at all – no one to rule or speak or threaten or judge. But the living God speaks in his holy word. Will we listen?

The Inspiration of Scripture: the Bible is the Word of God

There is almost no more important a statement than this: “the Bible is the Word of God.”

Think of the big disagreements between Christians and non-believers (e.g. about how you get to heaven, whether there is a God, suffering, etc). Ultimately, they all boil down to this: is the Bible really God’s Word?

Think of the big disagreements within the Christian church (e.g. between conservatives and liberals in the Church of England about a range of ethical issues and what constitutes a holy life). Ultimately, they all boil down to this: is the Bible really God’s Word?

Think of our own personal struggles to turn from sin and daily trust in Jesus. In part, these struggles flow from our convictions about the Bible. Is it really God’s Word... to me?

If the Bible is NOT the word of God, then it is essentially irrelevant. But what if it is God’s Word?

1. The “inspiration” of Scripture:

- **What the Bible says is what God says**

What does the Bible say about itself? That “all Scripture is breathed out by God.” We read:

^{ESV} 2 Timothy 3:16, All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness...

The New Testament Greek word for God-breathed is *theopneustos*. It teaches us that Scripture is inspired by God. But what does that mean? (And what does it *not* mean?) Bible words have Bible meanings and sometimes they don’t mean what we think they do.

The inspiration of Scripture has to do with its ORIGINS – with where it comes from. In 2 Timothy 3:16 Paul is saying that Scripture is “breathed out” by God. It comes from God. It is carried by his breath. It is his Word.

When we speak of inspiration it doesn’t mean “inspired” in the way we normally use that word (e.g. “Rooney had an inspired game” which just means he played out of his skin). Nor does it mean that God simply dictated the Bible.¹ He chose to use human writers (the OT prophets and NT apostles) to write His word. They had different personalities and experiences and they weren’t just writing robots.²

The Bible is God’s Word through human authors. Observe some examples of how the Bible talks without embarrassment of its two authors – divine and human.

Firstly, Peter’s words in Acts 4:25 attribute Psalm 2 to the mouth of God’s Spirit and the mouth of God’s servant David.

^{ESV} Acts 4:25, ...who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, “Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain?”

Secondly, in different parts of Scripture Psalm 110 is quoted and its authorship ascribed variously to David, God and David by means of the Spirit (see Acts 2:34, Hebrews 1:13, Matthew 22:43).

Thirdly, and perhaps most clearly is 2 Peter 1:21 which declares:

¹ Although note that some parts of the Bible are a little nearer dictation – e.g. the letters to the churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3.

² Nor does it mean that because God used sinful human authors and ordinary human words there must be mistakes. The Bible is God’s perfect word through human authors. See subsequent session on the inerrancy of Scripture.

^{ESV} 2 Peter 1:21, 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.

Here the word for “carried along” is the same word used for a boat being driven along in a gale (Acts 27:15). This helps us understand how the Bible is “God-breathed.” Men spoke it – it has human authors. But men spoke “from God” – they are God-breathed words. And they spoke as God the Spirit drove them or moved them to write.

All of which means: what the Bible says is what God says. And we need to say that this is true of the WHOLE bible. We must talk of “plenary inspiration” – plenary meaning every part. All parts of Scripture are God-breathed: not just the bits we like, even the bits we find difficult, or unacceptable. It’s all the Word of God.

- **Implication: How we treat the Bible shows what we think about God**

Or put it another way: we cannot claim to love and worship God if we don’t respond rightly to his Words.

Suppose my wife tells me the things that she loves and the things that she hates. In particular she told me that she hates dirty socks being left all round the house. What would you conclude if I declared undying love for my wife and then proceeded to leave dozens of filthy socks in every room on a daily basis? You don’t really love her unless you take her words seriously.

How we treat the Bible shows what we think about God.

Consider the *essence of sin*. Sin is ignoring the words of God. Satan’s deceit in Eden moves the woman to reject the Word of God and in so doing to reject God himself (Genesis 3:1, “Did God *actually* say...”).

Consider the *essence of godliness*. Godliness is a right response to the words of God. Psalm 1 – which is the gateway to the Psalms and describes the heart of wisdom and godliness – tells us that if we want God’s blessing we must delight in his law (Psalm 1:1-2).

Our central claim is this: that the Bible is the inspired word of God. What the Bible says is what God says.³ But how do we know that this is true? How can this claim be supported? Is there evidence?

2. Only God can confirm that the Bible is His Word

The key question is: *who can tell us authoritatively that the Bible is the Word of God?*

Is there a human being who can confirm authoritatively that the Bible is the Word of God? In our search for the origins of the Bible is there an *anthropocentric* answer?. Can human reason, or a religious institution, or personal experience provide that confirmation? For example, should I assume that the Bible is from God if it confirms what I already think or feel?

But remember the problem: humans are small and sinful. No human authority can ever stand in judgement on the Word of God. There are no man-centred proofs of the divine origin of the Bible. Man-centred answers can only be speculation (how can we know we’ve got it right?). And worse than that they are blasphemous. Who are we to pass judgement on God and on his word?

An ancient writer called Hilary of Poitiers summed up the solution: *God alone is a fit witness to himself.*

³ Over the years different people *within* churches have sought to deny that the Bible is the “word of God.” Each of these are highly dangerous. They include outright liberals who exalt human reason. Also, the claims of Karl Barth and neo-orthodoxy, who claim that God’s Word is a subjective experience within an individual Christian rather than the objective status and origin of Scripture. Also, we note here more modern writers such as James Dunn and William Webb, who claim to remain within the “evangelical” fold.

An illustration from a human court room may here be helpful. Sometimes in trials an “expert witness” is called – a person with special expertise that’s relevant to the case (maybe an expert doctor who can testify about a murder victim).

We need to be clear that the Bible is not on trial. But there IS a witness who can say to us that the Bible is the Word of God. A witness who is not small or sinful. Who is authoritative and truthful and good. Only God can do it. He is the only one who has perfect knowledge and wisdom, and who is perfectly good and trustworthy. Only he can rightly say: “the Bible is my Word.”

More specifically Jesus is able to confirm that the Bible is God’s Word. He is the witness who attests the words of God. (Our authentication of Scripture is Christological, not anthropological). He is able to tell us where Scripture comes from because of where HE comes from and because of WHO he is.

^{ESV} John 3:13, No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

^{ESV} Hebrews 1:2-3, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. ³ He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,

Therefore, because Jesus is Lord, HIS view of Scripture must be MY view of Scripture. If he says the Bible is the word of God, it is. And I must agree with him – as I must agree with Him on everything.

And Jesus does, indeed, confirm that each part of the Bible is the Word of God. That’s what he says of the Old Testament, and of his own words, and of the New Testament.

3. Jesus confirms that the Bible is God’s Word

- **Jesus’ view of the OT: it is the word of God**

In Matthew 19:3-6 Jesus gives a quotation from Genesis 2 about the creation of marriage:

^{ESV} Matthew 19:3-6, And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" ⁴ He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, ⁵ and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh'? ⁶ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."

The two little words at the start of verse 5 are important for our purposes here: “and said.” The one who created them male and female (i.e. God) also “said” or spoke these words. This is more significant than we might realise. When the quotation is recorded in Genesis 2 it is not direct speech from God, but is the word of the narrator (Moses). But Jesus assumes that Moses’ words are God’s words. God said it.

There are many, many other examples of Jesus stating that the OT is the word of God. (E.g. Mark 7:11-13, John 10:34-35).

Notice too that Jesus says the WHOLE of the OT is God’s Word. The Jews divided the OT into the law, prophets, writings (chiefly poetry and wisdom literature). Jesus quotes authoritatively from all of its different parts – from the law (Matthew 4:4), from poetry (Mark 12:10-11), from the prophets (Mark 7:6).

And Jesus doesn’t just SAY that the OT is God’s Word. Even though he is God the Lord Jesus submits to the OT as God’s Word. For example, when the Devil is tempting him he resists him – three times saying “It is written” and quoting OT scripture as words to which he must submit (Luke 4:4, 8, 12). And when talking about himself, he says that his own ministry is all about fulfilling God’s Word in the OT (Mark 1:14-15, Matthew 26:24,53-54, Mark 8:31, Luke 22:37, 24:25-27,44-46, John 5:39-40).

- **Jesus' view of his own words: the words of God**

What did Jesus think about his own words? How picture is painted paint for us here – in Mark 13:31, John 6:63, 15:3, 8:31, 14:24?

^{ESV} Mark 13:31, Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

^{ESV} John 6:63, It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is of no avail. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.

^{ESV} John 8:31, So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples,

^{ESV} John 15:3, Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.

^{ESV} John 14:24, Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me.

Jesus says of his own words that they will last forever, that they uniquely powerful, that they must be obeyed, and that they are God's Words.

- **Jesus' view of the New Testament: the Spirit-inspired words of God**

What did Jesus say about the NT? Jesus deliberately provided for the writing of the God-inspired NT. Here are his words to the apostles:

^{ESV} John 14:26, But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.

^{ESV} John 16:12-13, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.

Jesus appoints the apostles and he promises them the Holy Spirit to teach them and to lead them into all God's truth. He is the guarantee that what the apostles write the NT they are not just writing human words. They are under the inspiration of God the Holy Spirit. They write the word of God.

- **Implication: our confidence in Scripture rests on Jesus Christ**

That's not a surprise. The whole of a Christian's confidence rests on Jesus. Confidence for our salvation, for heaven, for forgiveness – and no less with Scripture. We trust the Scriptures, ultimately, because Jesus tells us to.

That will affect the way we talk with unbelievers. When talking with a non-believer about the Bible and why we believe it we will want to point people to Jesus and his identity. (As a rule, that's what we'll want to do in every evangelistic conversation). Whilst there's a place to defend the historicity and reliability of the Bible we want mostly to point people to Jesus.

- **Implication: how we treat the Bible shows how we treat Jesus.**

We've said that our attitude to the Bible shows our attitude to God. But more specifically our attitude to the Bible shows our attitude to Jesus. Why does that matter?

Many people disagree with the Bible and cite Jesus in their defence. For example liberal Christian ministers like Dominic, my old college chaplain. He hated the idea that Jesus was the only way to heaven, and that all other roads lead to hell. And in evidence he cited Jesus and his love which would never condemn anyone – and which showed that those others bits of the Bible were wrong. Of course he was ignoring Jesus' own words on hell when he said that. But in disagreeing with the apostles and prophets he was actually disagreeing with Jesus.

One can think of other similar issues: sexual morality (“Jesus loves everyone, no matter who they sleep with – those other bits of the Bible are just wrong); the roles of women in family and church (the apostle Paul was just old fashioned and repressed).

But if you disagree with the apostle Paul or with the Old Testament you pick a fight with Christ. You cannot disagree with any part of the Bible and claim Jesus in your defence. To do so is both illogical and wicked.

Thus far we’ve seen that what the Bible says is what God says. And that Jesus confirms this for us. But is there any other evidence for the inspiration of Scripture?

4. Other evidence for inspiration

- **What the Old Testament says about itself**

Here we notice, in particular, what is said about the OT prophets. The true prophet spoke God’s words. This is clear from passages like Jeremiah 1:1-9. Even before birth Jeremiah was appointed as a prophet to the nations. The Lord reaches out and puts his words into Jeremiah’s mouth. As a result, we read of Jeremiah’s ministry those same phrases that characterise all OT prophets: “The word of the Lord came to me... Thus says the Lord” (Jeremiah 2:1, 5. See also 1 Kings 14:18, Jeremiah 37:2, Zechariah 7:7).

- **What the NT writers says about the OT**

The NT writers frequently cite OT passages, and often explicitly state that they are the words of God. There are many examples. We note just three – each from the book of Hebrews.

First, in Hebrews 1:5-13 we read a long list of OT quotations (from Psalm 2, 2 Samuel 7, Deuteronomy 32, Psalms 104, 45, and 102). The list is preceded by the author’s comment, “For to which of the angels did God ever say...”. The implication is clear. God “said” all these OT passages.

Second, in Hebrews 2:11-13 we read that “he” (that is, Jesus) speaks the words of the OT (quoting from Psalm 22 and Isaiah 8).

Third, in Hebrews 3:7 a quote from Psalm 95 is preceded by the words, “as the Holy Spirit says.” Psalm 95 was, of course, authored by King David. But the NT says its words are those of the Spirit.

So, according to the NT the OT is the word of God. And we notice from these three references in Hebrews that it is revelation from God the holy Trinity, for we read that these words are spoken respectively by God the Father,, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

- **What the NT writers say about themselves**

We’ve seen already that Jesus appointed special men who would write down the truth – apostles, guided by the Spirit, through whom God would speak. And the apostles knew that they were writing the words of God. 1 Corinthians 2:9-16 is striking.

^{ESV} 1 Corinthians 2:9, But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him"- ¹⁰ these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ¹¹ For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. ¹² Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. ¹³ And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. ¹⁴ The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. ¹⁵ The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by

no one. ¹⁶ "For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

The things that God has prepared for those who love him are unknown and unknowable – except that “these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit” (v10). This is an extraordinary statement, in which Paul speaks primarily about himself and the other apostles. He goes on to claim that he has received “the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God” (v12). Lastly he states, astonishingly, that “we have the mind of Christ” (v16).

Elsewhere we read that the apostles’ words should be received as God’s words (1 Thessalonians 2:13), that an apostle can issue commands in Jesus’ name (2 Thessalonians 3:6), and that the words of Paul were received by the other apostles as “Scripture” (which at the time meant they were of equivalent status to the OT; 2 Peter 3:15-16):

^{ESV} 1 Thessalonians 2:13, And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.

^{ESV} 2 Thessalonians 3:6, Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.

^{ESV} 2 Peter 3:15-16, And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, ¹⁶ as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.

- **What the early church did (and didn’t) do**

Sometimes people say that Christians believe the NT to be God’s word *only* because the early church decided that it was the word of God. In other words, institution and tradition is actually key in working out what is and isn’t the word of God. This is what Roman Catholics argue (believing church tradition to be positive and authoritative). It’s also what many sceptics argue (e.g. Dan Brown in the *Da Vinci Code*, for whom it is a reason to reject the Bible). Do we only believe the Bible is God’s Word because of something the Roman Emperor Constantine did back in the 300s?

This is false. The early church never said of an apostle’s writing “We now authorise this as the word of God.” The NT was already clearly recognised as the word of God very soon after the deaths of the apostles. All the early church did was to formally recognise what had already been acknowledged and to exclude other letters and supposed gospels on the basis that they were not authored by the apostles. In short, the church did not “create” the NT scriptures.

5. A common objection

- **A circular argument?**

Isn’t there a pretty big objection to be raised to all we’ve said thus far? Isn’t it all a great big circular argument? Here’s the objection, put crudely: “You’re telling me I should believe that the Bible is God’s Word. And I should believe that because Jesus and the Bible writers tell me so. But they tell me that in the Bible. So, you’re telling me that the Bible is God’s Word because the Bible says so.”

Of course, it is a circular argument. But circularity does not make our argument untrue. Firstly, “circularity” simply describes the *logical form* of an argument – it is not an observation about truth. So what that an argument is circular? That doesn’t make it untrue (though many sceptics will wrongly assume that it does).

Secondly, this argument has to be circular. Any argument about an ultimate authority has to be circular. Scripture claims to be the highest authority in the universes, because it is authored by God. If another and external authority proved that then it would become the highest authority, even standing above Scripture.

Here's an illustration if that is all a bit baffling. In the United States the highest legal authority is the US Constitution. How do we know that? Because the US Constitution says so. If there were another document or person who said "Yes, I confirm it's the top word in the US" then THAT person would be a higher authority than the Constitution.

So too with the Bible. If it really is the Word of God, then nothing else short of God himself can confirm that. And that's what he does in Jesus.⁴

- **Other evidence**

Of course, there is other evidence that supports the claim that the Bible is God's Word. There is evidence inside the Bible – such as its unity (how extraordinary that 66 books written over centuries by many different human authors have such extraordinary unity and consistency) and the fulfilment of prophecy.

There is also evidence outside the Bible – namely the record of history and archaeology (see, for example, Josh McDowell, *Evidence that demands a verdict* and Lee Strobel, *The case for Christ*).

This other evidence is useful. John Calvin described the internal evidence of Scripture as "very useful aids."⁵ They are encouraging proofs for the Christian. But they are not ultimate or decisive. They can never be so. For, only God can attest the divine origin of Scripture.

So, when we're talking to non-believers it can be helpful to show some of this internal and external evidence (especially if asked to do so). But it will never be enough to convince. Only God can attest the divine origin of Scripture. And only God can open up blind eyes to see the Bible's origin.

6. We need the Holy Spirit to convince us the Bible is God's Word.

Have you ever thought why it is we can't simply and easily convince people that the Bible is the word of God? The answer is that all people naturally reject the Bible because they reject God. As we saw in Romans chapter 1, until rescued by Jesus we are all suppressors of the truth.

No one has ever rejected the Bible because of intellectual arguments. No one has ever rejected the Bible because of the circularity of our argument. They may think they do, but respectfully we have to say that they don't. We reject God's Word because we are small and sinful. Here's how Jesus puts it:

^{ESV} John 3:19-20, And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.

And only God the Holy Spirit can remedy this situation:

^{ESV} 1 Corinthians 2:14, The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

The same Spirit who wrote the Bible is needed to work IN US that we might believe the Bible. He inspired the prophets and apostles (so that they spoke the words of God). He doesn't inspire us (that's not a Biblical way of speaking). Rather he illuminates us, or illumintes the text to us – he lights it up, so that we receive it as the word of God.

- **Implications: confidence and praise!**

If you believe the Bible is God's Word then that is no small thing. It's a sign that of the Spirit's work within you. If you've even just begun to understand the things that come from God – that's a really big deal. Praise

⁴ In Hebrews 6:13 we see the Bible itself note that there is no higher authority or validation than God himself.

⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.8.1

God for it! Were it not for him, you'd still be lost in ignorance and unbelief and the Bible would be a dead book to you.

Are you expectant when the Bible is opened for a sermon, study, or time of personal Bible reading? It's a big deal! God is going to speak. That should fill us with awe. Where and when do you imagine that you're going to meet with God? You'll do so in His word.

What about the language we about listening the Bible? We shouldn't be afraid to say "God has taught me that...". It's right to say of things we're learning in the Word that "God has really spoken to me about...". It sounds a bit super-spiritual. But when the Bible is read and explained, there God's voice is heard!!!

And if you're talking to someone who is not a Christian what do we do? We invite them to come to Jesus – as he is presented to us in the Bible. We encourage them to read the Bible, perhaps one-to-one together with us. And we pray that the Spirit of God would convict of sin and enable them to receive the Bible as it truly is, the word of the living God.

Here's a final encouragement from the pen of John Calvin:

For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men's hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded."⁶

Homework

- Read the full transcript of this session, available online at www.immanuelbrentwood.org
- Consider: what difference does the inspiration of Scripture make to:
(a) My daily life; (b) relationships with other Christians; (c) evangelism

⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.7.4