

## The sufficiency of Scripture

### Introduction

Here's where we've got to so far in our studies in the Doctrine of Scripture: God has spoken. He has spoken in the Bible – the Scriptures are the very words of God, breathed out by Him. He has spoken in the Bible perfectly and authoritatively. And he has spoken clearly, such that all Christian people can hear his voice in the Bible for themselves.

James Montgomery Boice poses the question which we're tackling in this session:

"Do we believe that God has given us what we need in this book? Or do we suppose that we have to supplement the Bible with human things? Do we need sociological techniques to do evangelism, pop psychology and pop psychiatry for Christian growth, extra-biblical signs or miracles for guidance, or political tools for achieving social progress and reform?

"It is possible to believe that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice, and yet to neglect it and effectually repudiate it just because we think that it is not sufficient for today's tasks and that other things need to be brought in to accomplish what is needed. This is exactly what many evangelicals and evangelical church are doing." (*Whatever happened to the Gospel of Grace*, p72)

### 1. God has told us all we need – through Jesus, in His Word

- "Once for all time" - *hapax*

Here's some Greek! The word *hapax* means "once for all time." And in the Greek New Testament there are two crucial occurrences of this word – two things that are said to be "once-for-all-time."

Firstly, we learn that Christ died for sins "once-for-all-time."

<sup>ESV</sup> 1 Peter 3:18, For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit<sup>1</sup>

This means we do not have to (and of course cannot) repeat his sacrifice. Here we learn of the *sufficiency of the Cross*. Because God's work of salvation was successful it is all we need. (By implication, therefore, Reformed and Protestant Christians reject the Roman Catholic idea of Christ's repeated re-sacrifice in the Mass).

The second *hapax* teaches us that *God's revelation* is both successful and sufficient.

<sup>ESV</sup> Jude 1:3, Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.<sup>2</sup>

Our key phrase is in that last sentence: "the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints." There is a "faith" – which here means a truth or a body of teaching – that has been given to God's people "once-for-all-time." (See also Revelation 22:18-19, nothing is to be added to or subtracted from God's Word).

<sup>1</sup> In 1 Peter 3:18 the original language simply states that "Christ suffered once for sins" (Χριστὸς ἦπαξ περὶ ἀμαρτιῶν ἔπαθεν). The NIV translation "once for all" is arguably unhelpful, in that to some ears this rendering implies something about the extent of the atonement, namely that Christ died for all people. This simply isn't the point of the sentence. It has to do with the absolute sufficiency of the Cross for all time.

<sup>2</sup> NT Greek: ... ἐπαγωνίζεσθαι τῇ ἦπαξ παραδοθείσῃ τοῖς ἁγίοις πίστει.

- **The Bible's sufficiency: other key Bible texts**

What we're going to do is see how some other key Bible texts show us the all-sufficiency of God's Word. They speak to the subject in several different ways.

<sup>ESV</sup> Hebrews 1:1-4, Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets,<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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,<sup>4</sup> having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Hebrews 1:1-4 speaks of *finality*. In the table below you'll see the first two verses set out in parallel. Notice what is similar, and what is different, between the two columns.

In the past...	<b>But in these last days...</b>
...God spoke...	<b>... he has spoken...</b>
...to our forefathers...	<b>... to us...</b>
...through the prophets...	<b>...by his Son</b>
...at many times and in various ways,	.

Back in OT times God spoke to forefathers through the prophets in many different ways. The result was the speaking and writing ministry of the prophets which gave us the books of the OT.

Now, we are living in these "last days." This is the NT phrase describing the whole period between Jesus' ascension and future return in glory. Thus, we find ourselves living in the same era of salvation-history as the people to whom the letter to the Hebrews was written. And in these last days we're told that God has spoken "to us" – that is, to all God's people (which is a key implication of Pentecost and the pouring out of God's Spirit on all types of person).

But *how* has he spoken? He has spoken by his Son, Jesus. And notice in the table above that this is where God's revelation stops. (You could put a large full-stop in that last box). This has a big implication for the revelation which is given us about Jesus – that revelation being given us both by Jesus and by his commissioned apostles in what we call the New Testament. That revelation is enough.

Why is this so? It has to do with who Jesus is and what he has done. It's sufficient because the words of Jesus come from the mouth of one who is "heir of all things" and the one who "created the world." And it's sufficient because the saving work of Jesus is completed and sufficient: notice that having accomplished the work of redemption we're told Jesus "sat down" - a picture of his perfect and saving rule.<sup>3</sup>

Thus Hebrews 1:1-4 implies that *there need not be any further "special revelation" from God*. It isn't necessarily saying that it couldn't happen. But it does imply that there's no need for it, that God hasn't promised it, and that Christian people shouldn't look for it.

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<sup>3</sup> In Hebrews 1:1-4 there are two finite verbs; all the other verbs are participles. This helps us discern that the main point here is the finality and sufficiency of the Son of God: "he has spoken" and "he has sat down." His revelation and his salvation are perfect and complete.

<sup>ESV</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16-17, All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,<sup>17</sup> that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

<sup>ESV</sup> 2 Peter 1:3-4, 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,<sup>4</sup> 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.

Here we notice briefly that Scripture is sufficient to accomplish what God wants it to do. It makes the man of God “competent” and “equipped for every good work.” Is there a work to which God calls the church? Then, the Bible is sufficient for that task.

And in the Scriptures God grants to us “all things” necessary for “life and godliness” – through our knowledge of Christ in his “precious and very great promises.” In the Scriptures we may not find absolutely everything we need (e.g. if you’re a nuclear physicist the Bible won’t give you a blueprint for a nuclear power station). But it will tell you everything you need about pleasing God and gaining eternal life. (And you’ll find much in the word which does actually speak to your studies in nuclear physics, as you subject that discipline to the rule of God’s Word).<sup>4</sup>

In the light of all that the Bible says about itself here is a good definition of the sufficiency of Scripture:

*Because of the ways in which God has chosen to relate himself to Scripture, Scripture is sufficient as the means by which God continues to present himself to us such that we can know him, repeating through Scripture the covenant promise he has brought to fulfilment in Jesus Christ.<sup>5</sup>*

So, we don’t need new, inspired and inerrant words from God. The Bible says: you’ve received from God all we need through the Word. It also gives us a warning...

## **2. God calls us NOT to receive new revelation but to remember what we have heard**

This is a key warning and teaching of the New Testament apostles.

### **• The apostle Peter – 2 Peter 1:12-2:2, 3:1-2**

The Apostle Peter is at the end of his life (1:13-14). This is a man who has heard revelation direct from Jesus and direct from the Holy Spirit. What will he tell the next generation of Christians?

<sup>ESV</sup> 2 Peter 1:12-2:2, Therefore I intend always to remind you of these qualities, though you know them and are established in the truth that you have.<sup>13</sup> I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder,<sup>14</sup> since I know that the putting off of my body will be soon, as our Lord Jesus Christ made clear to me.<sup>15</sup> And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things.<sup>16</sup> For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.<sup>17</sup> For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,"<sup>18</sup> we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.<sup>19</sup> And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention

<sup>4</sup> Sometimes the sufficiency of Scripture is spoken of in two different ways: “material” sufficiency, which affirms that Scripture contains everything necessary for faith and life; and “formal” sufficiency, which affirms Scripture’s ability to be its own interpreter. Formal sufficiency is closely related to the clarity of Scripture.

<sup>5</sup> Timothy Ward, *Words of life: scripture as the living and active word of God*, p115.

as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts,<sup>20</sup> knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>2:1</sup> But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.<sup>2</sup> And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed.

<sup>ESV</sup> 2 Peter 3:1-2, This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder,<sup>2</sup> that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles,

Will Peter give the church a new revelation? No. He wants to "remind" them of something that they have already received. And he wants them to "recall" and "remember" the words of the prophets (that's the OT) and Jesus' command through the apostles (that's the NT).

In 2 Peter 1:16-21 we see the reason why. We'll notice it most clearly by spotting the contrast between "we" (i.e. the apostles) and "you" (the Christians receiving Peter's letter).

- "We" were eyewitnesses of Jesus. "We" actually saw his glory with our own eyes! Thus, we have the true revelation of God.
- "You" must listen to us. You need to listen to the God-appointed eyewitnesses and to our words. Because our words are not our own, but are driven along by God the Holy Spirit.

- **The apostle Paul – 2 Timothy 1:13, 2:2, Ephesians 3:2-5**

The apostle Paul, at the end of his life, says much the same thing as he writes to Timothy, pastor of the church in Ephesus:

<sup>ESV</sup> 2 Timothy 1:13, Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.<sup>14</sup> By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.

<sup>ESV</sup> 2 Timothy 2:2, ... and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

What is the pattern of sound teaching which Paul refers to? It's "what you heard from me" – i.e. the apostolic gospel. This is the pattern or model which Timothy in the post-apostolic era is to stick with. For the gospel message is like a "good deposit" or treasure that is entrusted to him. His job is to "guard" it.

What is the next generation to teach and believe? What they have "heard from me" (i.e. Paul the apostle). That's what you're to teach, believe and pass on to others, says Paul. It's not a call to innovation, but to stick with the old, old story.

Writing to the Ephesians the apostle Paul reinforces the message. Notice again the contrast between "me" (the apostle) and "you" (the church).

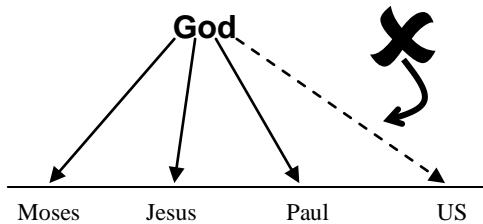
<sup>ESV</sup> Ephesians 3:2-5, assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you,<sup>3</sup> how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly.<sup>4</sup> When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ,<sup>5</sup> which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.

Paul says that direct revelation from God ("the mystery") was given "to me" – i.e. to the apostle. But it was given to Paul "for you" – i.e. for the sake of and benefit of the church. How will the church benefit from it? As church members "read this" they will get to know Christ.

- **Summary and a warning: be suspicious of other voices**

One could summarise what we're saying like this: God spoke directly to Moses (the voice of God on the Mountain and in the tent of meeting). God spoke directly to Samuel (remember the voice in the night, "Samuel, Samuel") and the other OT prophets. God spoke directly to Jesus. God spoke directly to Paul and the other NT apostles. But with the death of the apostles he ceases to speak his revelation in this direct fashion.

Here's the same point expressed in a diagram:



What's the point? We're not to receive new revelation, but remember what we've heard.

The Australian evangelist John Chapman would sometimes illustrate this point by imagining a brilliant visiting speaker turning up a local church. The minister introduces him: "We've a big name speaker tonight! He's got a global ministry. He's promising us a word from God. Let me introduce to you... the Lord Jesus Christ! And now, Jesus, what have you got to say to us?" In reply, Jesus walks to the pulpit, picks up a Bible and says: "Here is all I've got to say."

It's worth noting, too, that all the way through the Bible God's people have always – at each stage in God's salvation story – had to trust in God's *already-given-Word*. More than that, looking for novelty is always a sign of unfaithfulness.<sup>6</sup>

So, an important application of the sufficiency of Scripture is that the Christian, Church, and church leader is to be suspicious of claims to offer fresh voices from God. We don't need and shouldn't look for fresh words from God. Of course, God *can* speak directly. He occasionally does EXTRA-ordinary things, but we shouldn't imagine that they are ordinary or normal. His Word is more than enough.

Put another way: the word that God speaks to us now is the word that he first spoke through his apostles and prophets of old (Moses, Jesus, Paul etc). In order to hear God's word to us today we attend to what he spoke to them back then. We shouldn't short-circuit this process in search of direct revelation from God.

Christians can, in effect, deny the sufficiency of Scripture.<sup>7</sup> In fact we all can. But real dangers lie here.<sup>8</sup> We're not to receive new revelation, but *remember* what we have heard. (For some church-historical perspectives on the sufficiency of Scripture see the Postscript, below).

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<sup>6</sup> Take, as an example, Elijah in 1 Kings 19. The prophet is in fear of death at Jezebel's hands and flees, wanting the Lord to take his life from him. He is sustained and encouraged by an angel of God and goes to Horeb, the mountain of God (also in the Bible known as "Sinai," from where God spoke to Moses and gave him the law). It is likely that Elijah went there in search of a fresh word from God – and where better to go, one might think. And perhaps we know what happened next. The Lord passes by. There's a great wind and earthquake and fire – but three times we're told that God is "not in" any of those phenomena. Finally there is "the sound of a low whisper" (ESV translation), often thought of by Christians as a "still small voice" (v12). This phrase is hard to translate. It may actually imply "a loud silence." In other words, God was telling Elijah that he had nothing more to say! By implication, he needed to stick with the revelation of the law that he had already given. Perhaps this is why the Lord twice asks Elijah the question, "What are you doing here?" (v9, v13). He shouldn't have been looking for a fresh word from God!

### **3. God is still speaking what he has spoken**

Here's a possible objection that we might raise following on from our previous point: "it sounds like you're saying that *God doesn't actually want to say anything TO US or FOR US.*" After all, we want to hear God's voice address us personally, because we want an intimate relationship with God.

Of course, we mustn't look in the wrong place to hear the voice of God. But the good news is that God is *still speaking what he has spoken*. Sometimes, though, we get this badly wrong.

Here's an illustration: Imagine a lawyer sitting in his office, with a tricky law question that he needs to solve. Where does he go for the answer? He could go to his law library. There's row after row of dusty leather-bound books containing English case law. They are his authoritative guide – they're always right. But reading through that stuff is long and tedious. But there's a telephone on his desk. So, don't bother looking at a book. Ring another lawyer who's a friend – it's much more direct, relational and fun.

Sometime we think that the Bible is like the law library. It's true, right, authoritative, etc. But in practice we'd rather go for the telephone (talking to people, following our own hunches, etc), although if we heard something odd we'd probably check it out in the Bible.

We must understand that the Bible is the telephone. It's God's direct revelation to me. When we pick it up our creator and redeemer is on the end of the line. And he loves it when we pick up the phone.

- **What he told them back then was for us now**

When God the Spirit moved Moses to write Exodus he didn't just do it for the sake of the Old Testament Jews, for the first readers of Exodus. He did it for us. He knew that his people in Brentwood in 2014 would need this – and so he had Exodus written.

When God the Spirit moved Paul to write Romans he didn't just do it for a bunch of first century Christians. He did it for us. He knew that his people in Brentwood in 2014 would need the epistle to the Romans – and so he purposed to have Romans written. He did it for us!

Listen to the Bible explain that:

<sup>ESV</sup> Romans 15:4, For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

<sup>ESV</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:6,11 Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did... <sup>11</sup> Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.

<sup>ESV</sup> 1 Peter 1:10-12 Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, <sup>11</sup> inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. <sup>12</sup> It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.

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<sup>7</sup> In particular, charismatic and pentacostal theology can deny the sufficiency of Scripture. Where the Bible should be ruling over God's people, it is sometimes replaced by human experience. What may this look like in practice? Claiming to be "led by the Spirit" rather than by the Word. Exalting the intuitive and the immediate ("if I think this thing, it must of course be from God"). Or explicitly claiming direct words from God ("I think God is saying...").

<sup>8</sup> When you claim the authority of God himself for what is ultimately the opinion of a human being you face several serious dangers: (i) Subjectivism: truth from God shifts and changes according to the whim of the human mouthpiece; (ii) Abuse: a Christian leader can easily take on the status of an OT prophet or mouthpiece of God. It is striking that some extreme charismatic churches (which are really cults) discourage Bible reading. In this respect they are similar to historic Roman Catholicism which exalted the authority of priests and the church as mediators of revelation from God; (iii) Perhaps worst of all: when the Bible is downplayed God's clear and powerful voice (which saves, builds up, gives joy and confidence and an eternal inheritance) is muzzled.

And that's not all. We mustn't think that our God simply spoke *back then* and is now just sitting back with his mouth shut. For...

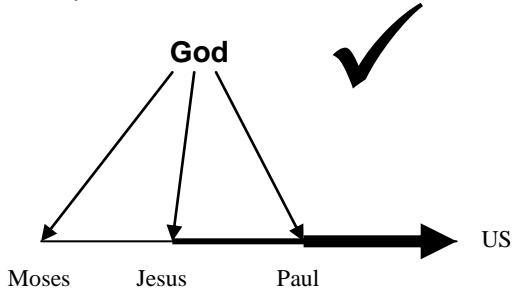
- **What he told them back then he is speaking to us now (Hebrews 3:7)**

In Hebrews 3:7 we read these words:

"Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, "Today, if you hear his voice..."

There then follows quotation from the Old Testament, from texts that were already hundreds of years old by the time the letter to the Hebrews was written. But notice the present tense verb, "says." The ancient word of the OT, the Spirit is still speaking it now... today.

So, what God said through Moses, he is speaking to us. What God said through the prophets he is speaking to us. What God said through the apostles he is speaking to us. God spoke to them back then... for us... and that word he is still speaking to us today.



#### **4. Implication: a new respect for Scripture**

The Bible is *immediate*. In it we have an *immediate encounter* with God. The Bible is the *now* word of God to us. In it God addresses his people. He is speaking to us. Presently. Currently. Now.

It's because we don't realize this that we're tempted to listen for the voice of God in other places. But we're to be suspicious of other voices and remember that when new teachings come along (and they will) they are always wrong and "destructive heresies" (2 Peter 2:1). We're not to listen to them.

One 17<sup>th</sup> century writer capture this well:

**"God indeed was not bound to the Scriptures, but he has bound us to them."**

(Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 2.2.2).

So, if we want to experience *conversions, growing holiness, perseverance in the faith, faithful ministry, guidance, social reformation and a changed society...* then we need the Bible to be read, preached and believed. For all these works it is powerful and sufficient.

Imagine some customers going into their local Christian bookshop...

A young Christian walks in and says: 'I'm looking for a book to get me started in the Christian life.'

He leaves with... a Bible.

A student goes in a few minutes later: "I'm struggling to stay Christian at university. Help!" She leaves with a Bible.

A man goes into the bookshop a few minutes later: "I've just got engaged. My fiancée and I want a book to help us in our marriage." He leaves with a Bible.

The local minister goes in. "I've been in this job for ten years. I'm exhausted. I've got new Christians, struggling students, and young marrieds coming out my ears! Basically I don't know what I'm meant to be doing as a Minister." He leaves with a Bible.

In our next two sessions we'll be thinking about *Prophecy and the sufficiency of Scripture* and then *Guidance and the sufficiency of Scripture*. But for now the question before us is this:

*Do you believe that the Bible is sufficient?*

### **Postscript: denials and affirmations of the sufficiency of Scripture in church history<sup>9</sup>**

The earliest of the church fathers affirmed the sufficiency of Scripture. However, throughout the medieval period belief in the doctrine diminished sharply. Over time the church progressed through a number of succeeding stages in its rejection of Scriptural sufficiency:

- First was a growth of non-Scriptural church traditions (e.g. the sign of the cross at baptism)
- Then, Church tradition was cited to reinforce the Bible's teaching
- Then, Church tradition cited to interpret the Bible's teaching
- Then grew the belief that the Spirit spoke not through Scripture, but through the Roman church.

Thus, by the late medieval period the Roman Catholic church had effectively replaced Scripture as the Word of God. It was against this that the Protestant Reformers reacted.

However, among early Protestants were numbers of groups which – oddly – had much more in common with the Roman Catholic church than they would have realised. These were the radicals, including the Anabaptists. Among other heretical doctrines, they held that certain individuals were especially endowed with the Spirit such that they could both speak words from God and supply definitive interpretations of Scripture.

The Roman church, the Protestant radicals, later rationalists (like Spinoza), and philosophers like Schleiermacher would all seek for the Spirit *apart from the Word* – claiming to find his voice either in special individuals or in the whole of humanity.

The best of the Reformers found themselves having to react against both Catholic and Radical error. (Calvin lumped both Pope and Anabaptists together. He accused both of seeking the Spirit in such a way that tended “to sink and bury the word of God” ).

In the Reformers' doctrinal statements we find some of the clearest and most beautiful affirmations of the powerful sufficiency of Scripture.

#### **Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation (39 Articles of Religion, Article 6)**

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation. In the name of the Holy Scripture we do understand those canonical Books of the Old and New Testament, of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church.

#### **Westminster Confession of Faith (1.6)**

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.

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<sup>9</sup> See Timothy Ward, *Words of life: scripture as the living and active word of God*, pp108-107