

CHAPTER TWO

The Authority and Inerrancy of the Bible

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- + *How do we know that the Bible is God's Word?*
 - + *Are there any errors in the Bible?*
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Since we affirmed in chapter 1 that systematic theology attempts to summarize the teaching of the whole Bible on various subjects, we next turn to questions concerning the nature of the Bible from which we draw our data for the discipline of systematic theology. What does the whole Bible teach us about itself?

The major teachings of the Bible about itself can be classified into four characteristics: (1) the authority of Scripture, (2) the clarity of Scripture, (3) the necessity of Scripture, and (4) the sufficiency of Scripture.

With regard to the first characteristic, most Christians would agree that the Bible is our authority in some sense. But in exactly what sense does the Bible claim to be our authority? And how do we become persuaded that the claims of Scripture to be God's Word are true? These are the questions addressed in this chapter.

I. EXPLANATION AND SCRIPTURAL BASIS

The authority of Scripture means that all the words in Scripture are God's words in such a way that to disbelieve or disobey any word of Scripture is to disbelieve or disobey God. This definition may now be examined in its various parts.

A. All the Words in Scripture Are God's Words

1. *This is what the Bible claims for itself.* There are frequent claims in the Bible that all the words of Scripture are God's words (as well as words that were written down by men). In the Old Testament, this is often seen in the introductory phrase, "Thus says the LORD," which appears hundreds of times. In the world of the Old Testament, this phrase would have been recognized as identical in form to the phrase, "Thus says King . . .," which was used to preface the edict of a king to his subjects, an edict that could not be challenged or questioned, but that simply had to be obeyed.¹ Therefore, when the prophets say, "Thus says the LORD," they are claiming to be messengers from the sovereign King of Israel, namely, God himself, and

¹See Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1982), pp. 12-13; also Wayne Grudem, "Scripture's Self-Attestation," in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and J. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1983), pp. 21-22.

they are claiming that their words are the absolutely authoritative words of God. When a prophet spoke in God's name in this way, every word he spoke had to come from God, or he would be a false prophet (cf. Num. 22:38; Deut. 18:18–20; Jer. 1:9; 14:14; 23:16–22; 29:31–32; Ezek. 2:7; 13:1–16).

Furthermore, God is often said to speak "through" the prophet (1 Kings 14:18; 16:12, 34; 2 Kings 9:36; 14:25; Jer. 37:2; Zech. 7:7, 12). Thus, what the prophet says in God's name, God says (1 Kings 13:26 with v. 21; 1 Kings 21:19 with 2 Kings 9:25–26; Hag. 1:12; cf. 1 Sam. 15:3, 18). In these and other instances in the Old Testament, words which the prophets spoke can also be referred to as words God himself spoke. Therefore, to disbelieve or disobey anything a prophet says is to disbelieve or disobey God himself (Deut. 18:19; 1 Sam. 10:8; 13:13–14; 15:3, 19, 23; 1 Kings 20:35, 36).

These verses by themselves do not claim that *all* the words in the Old Testament are God's words, for these verses themselves are referring only to specific sections of spoken or written words in the Old Testament. But the cumulative force of these passages, including the hundreds of passages that begin "Thus says the LORD," is to demonstrate that within the Old Testament we have written records of words that are said to be God's own words. These words constitute large sections of the Old Testament. When we realize that all of the words that were part of the "law of God" or the "book of the covenant" were considered God's words, we see that the whole Old Testament claims that kind of authority (see Ex. 24:7; Deut. 29:21; 31:24–26; Josh. 24:26; 1 Sam. 10:25; 2 Kings 23:2–3).

In the New Testament, a number of passages indicate that all of the Old Testament writings are thought of as God's words. Second Timothy 3:16 says, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (NIV). Here "scripture" (Gk. *graphē*) must refer to the Old Testament written Scripture, for that is what the word *graphē* refers to in every one of its fifty-one occurrences in the New Testament. Furthermore, the "sacred writings" of the Old Testament are what Paul has just referred to in verse 15.

Paul here affirms that all of the Old Testament writings are *theopneustos*, "breathed out by God." Since it is *writings* that are said to be "breathed out," this breathing must be understood as a metaphor for speaking the words of Scripture. This verse thus states in brief form what was evident in many Old Testament passages: The Old Testament writings are regarded as God's Word in written form. For every word of the Old Testament, God is the one who spoke (and still speaks) it, although God used human agents to write down these words.²

A similar indication of the character of all Old Testament writings as God's words is found in 2 Peter 1:21. Speaking of the prophecies of Scripture (v. 20), which means at least the Old Testament Scriptures to which Peter encourages his readers to give careful attention (v. 19), Peter says that none of these prophecies ever came "by the impulse of man," but that "men moved along by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." It is not Peter's intention to deny completely the role of human volition or personality in the writing of Scripture (he says that the men "spoke"), but rather to say that the ultimate source of every prophecy was never a man's decision about

²Older systematic theologies used the words *inspired* and *inspiration* to speak of the fact that the words of Scripture are spoken by God. I have preferred the NIV rendering of 2 Tim. 3:16, "God-breathed," and have used other expressions to say that the words of Scripture are God's very words. This is because the word *inspired* has a weakened sense in ordinary usage today (e.g., a poet was "inspired" to write, or a basketball player gave an "inspired" performance).

what he wanted to write, but rather the Holy Spirit's action in the prophet's life, carried out in ways unspecified here (or, in fact, elsewhere in Scripture). This indicates a belief that all of the Old Testament prophecies (and, in light of vv. 19–20, this probably includes all of the written Scripture of the Old Testament) are spoken "from God": that is, they are God's own words.

Many other passages could be cited (see Matt. 19:5; Luke 1:70; 24:25; John 5:45–47; Acts 3:18, 21; 4:25; 13:47; 28:25; Rom. 1:2; 3:2; 9:17; 1 Cor. 9:8–10; Heb. 1:1–2, 6–7), but the pattern of attributing to God the words of Old Testament Scripture should be very clear. Moreover, in several places it is all of the words of the prophets or the words of the Old Testament Scriptures that are said to compel belief or to be from God (see Luke 24:25, 27, 44; Acts 3:18; 24:14; Rom. 15:4).

But if Paul meant only the Old Testament writings when he spoke of all "scripture" as God-breathed in 2 Timothy 3:16, how can this verse apply to the New Testament writings as well? Does it say anything about the character of the New Testament writings? To answer that question, we must realize that the Greek word *graphē* ("scripture") was a technical term for the New Testament writers and had a very specialized meaning. Even though it is used fifty-one times in the New Testament, in every one of those instances it refers to the Old Testament writings, not to any other words or writings outside the canon of Scripture. Thus, everything that belonged in the category "scripture" had the character of being "God-breathed": its words were God's very words.

But at two places in the New Testament we see New Testament writings also being called "scripture" along with the Old Testament writings. In 2 Peter 3:15–16, Peter says, "Our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in *all his letters*. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do *the other scriptures*."

Here Peter shows not only an awareness of the existence of written epistles from Paul, but also a clear willingness to classify "all of his [Paul's] letters" with "the other scriptures." This is an indication that very early in the history of the church all of Paul's epistles were considered to be God's written words in the same sense as the Old Testament texts were. Similarly, in 1 Timothy 5:18, Paul writes, "For the scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain,' and, 'The laborer deserves his wages.'" The first quotation is from Deuteronomy 25:4, but the second occurs nowhere in the Old Testament. It is rather a quotation from Luke 10:7. Paul here quotes Jesus' words as found in Luke's gospel and calls them "scripture."

These two passages taken together indicate that during the time of the writing of the New Testament documents there was an awareness that *additions* were being made to this special category of writings called "scripture," writings that had the character of being God's very words. Thus, once we establish that a New Testament writing belongs to the special category "scripture," we are correct in applying 2 Timothy 3:16 to that writing as well, and saying that that writing also has the characteristic Paul attributes to "all scripture": It is "God-breathed," and all its words are the very words of God.

Is there further evidence that the New Testament writers thought of their own writings (not just the Old Testament) as the words of God? In some cases, there is. In 1 Corinthians 14:37, Paul says, "If any one thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that *what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord*."

Paul has here instituted a number of rules for church worship at Corinth and has claimed for them the status of "commands of the Lord."

One might think that Paul felt his own commands were inferior to those of Jesus and therefore did not need to be obeyed as carefully. For example, in 1 Corinthians 7:12 he distinguishes his own words from those of Jesus: "To the rest I say, not the Lord. . . ." This, however, simply means that he had possession of *no earthly word that Jesus had spoken on this subject*. We can see that this is the case, because in verses 10–11 he simply repeated Jesus' earthly teaching "that the wife should not separate from her husband" and "that the husband should not divorce his wife." In verses 12–15, however, he gives his own instructions on a subject Jesus apparently did not address. What gave him the right to do this? Paul says that he spoke as one "who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy" (1 Cor. 7:25). He seems to imply here that his own judgments were to be considered as authoritative as the commands of Jesus!

Indications of a similar view of the New Testament writings are found in John 14:26 and 16:13, where Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would bring all that he had said to the disciples' remembrance, and would guide them into all the truth. This points to the Holy Spirit's work of enabling the disciples to remember and record without error all that Jesus had said. Similar indications are also found in 2 Peter 3:2; 1 Corinthians 2:13; 1 Thessalonians 4:15; and Revelation 22:18–19.

2. *We are convinced of the Bible's claims to be God's words as we read the Bible.*

It is one thing to affirm that the Bible claims to be the words of God. It is another thing to be convinced that those claims are true. Our ultimate conviction that the words of the Bible are God's words comes only when the Holy Spirit speaks *in and through* the words of the Bible to our hearts and gives us an inner assurance that these are the words of our Creator speaking to us. Apart from the work of the Spirit of God, a person will not receive or accept the truth that the words of Scripture are in fact the words of God.

But for those in whom God's Spirit is working there is a recognition that the words of the Bible are the words of God. This process is closely analogous to that by which people who believed in Jesus knew that his words were true. He said, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27). Those who are Christ's sheep hear the words of their great Shepherd as they read the words of Scripture, and they are convinced that these words are in fact the words of their Lord.

It is important to remember that this conviction that the words of Scripture are the words of God does not come *apart from* the words of Scripture or *in addition* to the words of Scripture. It is not as if the Holy Spirit one day whispers in our ear, "Do you see that Bible sitting on your desk? I want you to know that the words of that Bible are God's words." It is rather as people read Scripture that they hear their Creator's voice speaking to them in the words of Scripture and realize that the book they are reading is unlike any other book, that it is indeed a book of God's own words speaking to their hearts.

One influential theological movement in the twentieth century was called *neoorthodoxy*. The most prominent representative of this movement was Swiss theologian Karl Barth (pronounced *bart*) (1886–1968).³ Although much of his writing provided a welcome reaffirmation of the teachings of the Bible in distinction from the unbelief of liberal German theology, Barth still did not affirm that all the

³For an introduction to Barth's thought, see David L. Mueller, *Karl Barth* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1972).

words of the Bible are the words of God in the sense that we have argued here. Rather, he said that the words of Scripture *become the words of God to us* as we encounter them. This was the primary reason why evangelicals could not wholeheartedly support the neoorthodoxy of Barth, though they did appreciate many of the individual things he taught.

3. *Other evidence is useful but not finally convincing.* The previous section is not meant to deny the validity of other kinds of arguments that may be used to support the claim that the Bible is God's words. It is helpful for us to learn that the Bible is historically accurate, that it is internally consistent, that it contains prophecies that have been fulfilled hundreds of years later, that it has influenced the course of human history more than any other book, that it has continued changing the lives of millions of individuals throughout its history, that through it people come to find salvation, that it has a majestic beauty and a profound depth of teaching unmatched by any other book, and that it claims hundreds of times over to be God's very words. All of these arguments are useful to us and remove obstacles that might otherwise come in the way of our believing Scripture. But all of these arguments taken individually or together cannot finally be convincing. As the Westminster Confession of Faith said in 1643–46,

We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture. And the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God: yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts. (chap. 1, para. 5)

4. *The words of Scripture are self-attesting.* Since the words of Scripture are "self-attesting," they cannot be "proved" to be God's words by appeal to any higher authority. If we make our ultimate appeal, for example, to human logic or to scientific truth to prove that the Bible is God's Word, then we assume the thing to which we appeal to be a higher authority than God's words and one that is more true or more reliable. Therefore, the ultimate authority by which Scripture is shown to be God's words must be Scripture itself.

5. *Objection: This is a circular argument.* Someone may object that to say Scripture proves itself to be God's words is to use a circular argument: We believe that Scripture is God's Word because it claims to be that. And we believe its claims because Scripture is God's Word. And we believe that it is God's Word because it claims to be that, and so forth.

It should be admitted that this is a kind of circular argument. However, that does not make its use invalid, for all arguments for an absolute authority must ultimately appeal to that authority for proof; otherwise the authority would not be an absolute or highest authority. This problem is not unique to the Christian who is arguing for the authority of the Bible. Everyone either implicitly or explicitly uses some kind of circular argument when defending his or her ultimate authority for belief.

A few simple examples will illustrate the types of circular arguments people use to support the basis for their beliefs:

"My reason is my ultimate authority because it seems reasonable to me to make it so."

"Logical consistency is my ultimate authority because it is logical to make it so."

"The findings of human sensory experiences are the ultimate authority for discovering what is real and what is not, because our human senses have never discovered anything else: Thus, human sense experience tells me that my principle is true."

Each of these arguments utilizes circular reasoning to establish its ultimate standard for truth.

How then does a Christian, or anyone else, choose among the various claims for absolute authorities? Ultimately, the truthfulness of the Bible will commend itself as being far more persuasive than other religious books (such as the *Book of Mormon* or the *Qur'an*) or than any other intellectual constructions of the human mind (such as logic, human reason, sense experience, scientific methodology, etc.). It will be more persuasive because, in the actual experience of life, all of these other candidates for ultimate authority are seen to be inconsistent or to have shortcomings that disqualify them, while the Bible will be seen to be fully in accord with all that we know about the world around us, about ourselves, and about God.

The Bible will commend itself as being persuasive in this way, that is, if we are thinking rightly about the nature of reality, our perception of it and of ourselves, and our perception of God. The trouble is that because of sin our perception and analysis of God and creation are faulty. Therefore, it requires the work of the Holy Spirit, overcoming the effects of sin, to enable us to be persuaded that the Bible is indeed the Word of God and that the claims it makes for itself are true.

In another sense, then, the argument for the Bible as God's Word and our ultimate authority is not a typical circular argument. The process of persuasion is perhaps better likened to a spiral in which increasing knowledge of Scripture and increasingly correct understanding of God and creation tend to supplement one another in a harmonious way, each tending to confirm the accuracy of the other. This is not to say that our knowledge of the world around us serves as a higher authority than Scripture, but rather that such knowledge, if it is correct knowledge, continues to give greater and greater assurance and deeper conviction that the Bible is the only truly ultimate authority and that other competing claims for ultimate authority are false.

6. *This does not imply dictation from God as the sole means of communication.*

At this point a word of caution is necessary. The fact that all the words of Scripture are God's words should not lead us to think that God dictated every word of Scripture to the human authors.

When we say that all the words of the Bible are God's words, we are talking about the *result* of the process of bringing Scripture into existence. The question of dictation addresses the process that led to that result, or the manner by which God acted in order to ensure the result that he intended. It must be emphasized that the Bible does not speak of only one type of process or one manner by which God communicated to the biblical authors what he wanted to be said. In fact, there is indication of a *wide variety of processes* God used to bring about the desired result.

A few scattered instances of dictation are explicitly mentioned in Scripture. When the apostle John saw the risen Lord in a vision on the island of Patmos, Jesus spoke to him as follows: "To the angel of the church in Ephesus *write* ..." (Rev. 2:1); "And

to the angel of the church in Smyrna *write* ..." (Rev. 2:8); "And to the angel of the church in Pergamum *write* ..." (Rev. 2:12). These are examples of dictation pure and simple. The risen Lord tells John what to write, and John writes the words he hears from Jesus.

But in many other sections of Scripture, such direct dictation from God is certainly not the manner by which the words of Scripture were caused to come into being. The author of Hebrews says that God spoke to our fathers by the prophets "in many and various ways" (Heb. 1:1). On the other end of the spectrum from dictation we have, for instance, Luke's ordinary historical research for writing his gospel. He says, "Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus ..." (Luke 1:1-3).

This is clearly not a process of dictation. Luke used ordinary processes of speaking to eyewitnesses and gathering historical data so that he might write an accurate account of the life and teachings of Jesus. He did his historical research thoroughly, listening to the reports of many eyewitnesses and evaluating his evidence carefully. The gospel he wrote emphasizes what he thought important to emphasize and reflects his own characteristic style of writing.

In between these two extremes of dictation on the one hand and ordinary historical research on the other hand, we have many indications of various ways by which God communicated with the human authors of Scripture. In some cases, Scripture speaks of dreams, visions, or of hearing the Lord's voice. In other cases, it speaks of men who were with Jesus and observed his life and listened to his teaching, men whose memory of these words and deeds was made completely accurate by the working of the Holy Spirit as he brought things to their remembrance (John 14:26). Apparently many different methods were used, but it is not important that we discover precisely what these were in each case.

In instances where the human personality and writing style of the author were prominently involved, as seems the case with the major part of Scripture, all that we are able to say is that God's providential oversight and direction of the life of each author was such that their personalities and skills were just what God wanted them to be for the task of writing Scripture. Their backgrounds and training (such as Paul's rabbinic training or Moses' training in Pharaoh's household or David's work as a shepherd), their abilities to evaluate events in the world around them, their access to historical data, their judgment with regard to the accuracy of information, and their individual circumstances when they wrote were all exactly what God wanted them to be, so that when they actually came to the point of putting pen to paper, the words were fully their own words but also fully the words God wanted them to write, words God would also claim as his own.

B. *Therefore, to Disbelieve or Disobey Any Word of Scripture Is to Disbelieve or Disobey God*

The preceding section has argued that all the words in Scripture are God's words. Consequently, to disbelieve or disobey any word of Scripture is to disbelieve or disobey God himself. Thus, Jesus can rebuke his disciples for not believing the Old Testament Scriptures (Luke 24:25: "O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all

that the prophets have spoken!"). Believers are to keep or obey the disciples' words (John 15:20: "If they kept my word, they will keep yours also"). Christians are encouraged to remember "the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles" (2 Peter 3:2). To disobey Paul's writings was to make oneself liable to church discipline, such as excommunication (2 Thess. 3:14) and spiritual punishment (2 Cor. 13:2-3), including punishment from God (this is the apparent sense of the passive verb "he is not recognized" in 1 Cor. 14:38). By contrast, God delights in everyone who "trembles" at his word (Isa. 66:2).

Throughout the history of the church the greatest preachers have been those who have recognized that they have no authority in themselves, and have seen their task as being to explain the words of Scripture and apply them clearly to the lives of their hearers. Their preaching has drawn its power not from the proclamation of their own Christian experiences or the experiences of others, nor from their own opinions, creative ideas, or rhetorical skills, but from God's powerful words. Essentially, they stood in the pulpit, pointed to the biblical text, and said in effect to the congregation, "This is what this verse means. Do you see that meaning here as well? Then you must believe it and obey it with all your heart, for God himself, your Creator and your Lord, is saying this to you today!" Only the written words of Scripture can give this kind of authority to preaching.

C. The Truthfulness of Scripture

1. God cannot lie or speak falsely. The essence of the authority of Scripture is its ability to compel us to believe and to obey it and to make such belief and obedience equivalent to believing and obeying God himself. Because this is so, it is needful to consider the truthfulness of Scripture, because if we do not think some parts of Scripture are true, we of course will not be able to believe them.

Since the biblical writers repeatedly affirm that the words of the Bible, though human, are God's own words, it is appropriate to look at biblical texts that talk about the character of God's words and to apply these to the character of the words of Scripture. Specifically, there are a number of biblical passages that talk about the truthfulness of God's speech. Titus 1:2 speaks of "God, who never lies," or (more literally translated), "the unlying God." Because God is a God who cannot speak a "lie," his words can always be trusted. Since all of Scripture is spoken by God, all of Scripture must be "unlying," just as God himself is. There can be no untruthfulness in Scripture.

Hebrews 6:18 mentions two unchangeable things (God's oath and his promise) "in which it is impossible for God to lie" (author's translation). Here the author says not merely that God does not lie, but that it is not possible for him to lie. Although the immediate reference is only to oaths and promises, if it is impossible for God to lie in these utterances, then certainly it is impossible for him ever to lie.

2. Therefore, all the words in Scripture are completely true and without error in any part. Since the words of the Bible are God's words, and since God cannot lie or speak falsely, it is correct to conclude that there is no untruthfulness or error in any part of the words of Scripture. We find this affirmed several places in the Bible. "The words of the LORD are words that are pure, silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times" (Ps. 12:6, author's translation). Here the psalmist uses vivid imagery to speak of the undiluted purity of God's words; there is no imperfection in them. Also in Proverbs 30:5 we read, "Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him." It is not just some of the words of Scripture that are

true, but every word. In fact, God's Word is fixed in heaven for all eternity: "For ever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens" (Ps. 119:89). Jesus can speak of the eternal nature of his own words: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (Matt. 24:35). These verses affirm explicitly what was implicit in the requirement that we believe all the words of Scripture, namely, that there is no untruthfulness or falsehood affirmed in any of the statements of the Bible.

3. God's words are the ultimate standard of truth. In John 17, Jesus prays to the Father, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17). This verse is interesting because Jesus does not use an adjective, *alethinos* or *alethes* ("true"), which we might have expected, to say, "Your word is true." Rather, he uses a noun, *aletheia* ("truth"), to say that God's Word is not simply "true," but it is truth itself.

The difference is significant, for this statement encourages us to think of the Bible not simply as being "true" in the sense that it conforms to some higher standard of truth, but rather to think of the Bible as itself the final standard of truth. The Bible is God's Word, and God's Word is the ultimate definition of what is true and what is not true: God's Word is itself *truth*. Thus, we are to think of the Bible as the ultimate standard of truth, the reference point by which every other claim to truthfulness is to be measured. Those assertions that conform with Scripture are "true" while those that do not conform with Scripture are not true.

What then is truth? Truth is what God says, and we have what God says (accurately but not exhaustively) in the Bible.

This doctrine of the absolute truthfulness of Scripture stands in clear contrast to a common viewpoint in modern society that is often called *pluralism*. Pluralism is the view that every person has a perspective on truth that is just as valid as everyone else's perspective—therefore, we should not say that anyone else's religion or ethical standard is wrong. According to pluralism, we cannot know any absolute truth; we can only have our own views and perspectives. Of course, if pluralism is true, the Bible cannot be what it claims to be: the words the only true God, the creator and judge of all the world, has spoken to us.⁴

Pluralism is one aspect of an entire contemporary view of the world called *post-modernism*. Postmodernism would not simply hold that we can never find absolute truth; it would say that there is no such thing as absolute truth. All attempts to claim truth for one idea or another are just the result of our own background, culture, biases, and personal agendas (especially our desire for power). Such a view of the world is of course directly opposed to a biblical view, which sees the Bible as truth that has been given to us from God.

4. Might some new fact ever contradict the Bible? Will any new scientific or historical fact ever be discovered that will contradict the Bible? Here we can say with confidence that this will never happen—it is in fact impossible. If any supposed "fact" is ever discovered that is said to contradict Scripture, then (if we have understood Scripture rightly) that "fact" must be false, because God, the author of Scripture, knows all true facts (past, present, and future). No fact will ever turn up that God did not know about ages ago and take into account when he caused Scripture to be written. Every true fact is something that God has known already from all eternity and is something that therefore cannot contradict God's speech in Scripture.

⁴For a detailed survey of modern forms of pluralism and a Christian response, see D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

Nevertheless, it must be remembered that scientific or historical study (as well as other kinds of study of creation) can cause us to reexamine Scripture to see if it really teaches what we thought it taught. For example, the Bible does not teach that the sun goes around the earth, for it only uses descriptions of phenomena as we see them from our vantage point and does not purport to be describing the workings of the universe from some arbitrary "fixed" point somewhere out in space. Yet until the study of astronomy advanced enough to demonstrate the rotation of the earth on its axis, people assumed that the Bible taught that the sun goes around the earth. Then the study of scientific data prompted a reexamination of the appropriate biblical texts. Thus, whenever confronted with some "fact" that is said to contradict Scripture, we must not only examine the data adduced to demonstrate the fact in question; we must also reexamine the appropriate biblical texts to see if the Bible really teaches what we thought it to teach. We can do so with confidence, for no true fact will ever contradict the words of the God who knows all facts and who never lies.

D. The Inerrancy of Scripture

1. *The meaning of inerrancy.* The previous section addressed the truthfulness of Scripture. A key component of this topic is Scripture's inerrancy. This issue is of great concern in the evangelical world today, because on many fronts the truthfulness of Scripture has been brought into question or even abandoned.

With the evidence given above concerning the truthfulness of Scripture, we are now in a position to define biblical inerrancy: *The inerrancy of Scripture means that Scripture in the original manuscripts does not affirm anything which is contrary to fact.*

This definition focuses on the question of truthfulness and falsehood in the language of Scripture. The definition in simple terms just means that the Bible always tells the truth and that it always tells the truth concerning everything it talks about. This definition does not mean that the Bible tells us every fact there is to know about any one subject, but it affirms that what it does say about any subject is true.

It is important to realize at the outset of this discussion that the focus of this controversy is on the question of truthfulness in speech. It must be recognized that absolute truthfulness in speech is consistent with some other types of statements, such as the following:

a. *The Bible can be inerrant and still speak in the ordinary language of everyday speech.* This is especially true in "scientific" or "historical" descriptions of facts or events. The Bible can speak of the sun rising and the rain falling because from the perspective of the speaker this is exactly what happens. From the standpoint of the speaker, the sun does rise and the rain does fall, and these are perfectly true descriptions of the natural phenomena the speaker observes.

A similar consideration applies to numbers when used in counting or in measuring. A reporter can say that 8,000 men were killed in a certain battle without thereby implying that he has counted everyone and that there are not 7,999 or 8,001 dead soldiers. This is also true for measurements. Whether I say, "I don't live far from the library," or "I live a little over a mile from the library," or "I live 1¼ miles from the library," or "I live 1.287 miles from the library," all four statements are still approximations to some degree of accuracy. In both of these examples, and in many others that could be drawn from daily life, the limits of truthfulness would depend on the degree of precision implied by the speaker and expected by his or her original hearers. It should not trouble us, then, to affirm both that the Bible is

absolutely truthful in everything it says and that it uses ordinary language to describe natural phenomena or to give approximations or round numbers when those are appropriate in the context.

b. *The Bible can be inerrant and still include loose or free quotations.* The method by which one person quotes the words of another person is a procedure that in large part varies from culture to culture. While in contemporary American and British culture we are used to quoting a person's exact words when we enclose the statement in quotation marks, written Greek at the time of the New Testament had no quotation marks or equivalent kinds of punctuation, and an accurate citation of another person needed to include only a correct representation of the content of what the person said (rather like our use of indirect quotations); it was not expected to cite each word exactly. Thus, inerrancy is consistent with loose or free quotations of the Old Testament or of the words of Jesus, for example, so long as the content is not false to what was originally stated. The original writer did not ordinarily imply that he was using the exact words of the speaker and only those, nor did the original hearers expect verbatim quotation in such reporting.

c. *It is consistent with inerrancy to have unusual or uncommon grammatical constructions in the Bible.* Some of the language of Scripture is elegant and stylistically excellent. Other scriptural writings contain the rough-hewn language of ordinary people. At times this includes a failure to follow the commonly accepted "rules" of grammatical expression (such as the use of a plural verb where grammatical rules would require a singular verb). These stylistically incorrect grammatical statements (several of which are found in the book of Revelation) should not trouble us, for they do not affect the truthfulness of the statements under consideration; a statement can be ungrammatical but still entirely true. For example, an uneducated backwoodsman in some rural area may be the most trusted man in the county even though his grammar is poor, because he has earned a reputation for never telling a lie. Similarly, there are some statements in Scripture (in the original languages) that are ungrammatical (according to current standards of proper grammar at that time) but still inerrant because they are completely true. God used ordinary people who used their own ordinary language. The issue is not elegance in style but truthfulness in speech.

2. *Some current challenges to inerrancy.* In this section we examine some of the major objections that are commonly made against the concept of inerrancy.

a. *The Bible is only authoritative for "faith and practice."* One of the most frequent objections to inerrancy is raised by those who say that the purpose of Scripture is to teach us in areas that concern "faith and practice" only; that is, in areas that directly relate to our religious faith or to our ethical conduct. This position would allow for the possibility of false statements in Scripture, for example, in other areas such as in minor historical details or scientific facts—these areas, it is said, do not concern the purpose of the Bible, which is to instruct us in what we should believe and how we are to live. Advocates of this position often prefer to say that the Bible is *infallible*, but they hesitate to use the word *inerrant*.⁵

⁵Until about 1960 or 1965, the word *infallible* was used interchangeably with the word *inerrant*. But in more recent years, at least in the United States, the word *infallible* has been used in a weaker sense to mean that the Bible will not lead us astray in matters of faith and practice.

The response to this objection can be stated as follows: The Bible repeatedly affirms that *all* of Scripture is profitable for us and that *all* of it is "God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16). Thus, it is completely pure (Ps. 12:6), perfect (Ps. 119:96), and true (Prov. 30:5). The Bible itself does not make any restriction on the kinds of subjects to which it speaks truthfully.

The New Testament contains further affirmations of the reliability of all parts of Scripture. In Acts 24:14, Paul says that he worships God, "*believing everything* laid down by the law or written in the prophets." In Luke 24:25, Jesus says that the disciples are "foolish men" because they are "slow of heart to believe *all* that the prophets have spoken." In Romans 15:4, Paul says that "*whatever* was written" in the Old Testament was "written for our instruction." These texts give no indication that there is any part of Scripture that is not to be trusted or relied on completely.

A quick perusal of the historical details of the Old Testament that are cited in the New Testament indicates that the New Testament writers were willing to rely on the truthfulness of any part of the historical narratives of the Old Testament. No detail is too insignificant to be used for the instruction of New Testament Christians (see, for example, Matt. 12:3-4, 41; Luke 4:25-26; John 4:5; 1 Cor. 10:11; Heb. 11; Heb. 12:16-17; James 2:25; 2 Peter 2:16; et al.). There is no indication that they thought of a certain category of scriptural statements as unreliable and untrustworthy (such as "historical and scientific" statements as opposed to doctrinal and moral passages). It seems clear that the Bible itself does not support any restriction on the kinds of subjects to which it speaks with absolute authority and truth; indeed, many passages in Scripture actually exclude the validity of this kind of restriction.

A second response to those who limit the necessary truthfulness of Scripture to matters of "faith and practice" is to note that this position mistakes the *major* purpose of Scripture for the *total* purpose of Scripture. To say that the major purpose of Scripture is to teach us in matters of "faith and practice" is to make a useful and correct summary of God's purpose in giving us the Bible. But as a *summary* it includes only the most prominent purpose of God in giving us Scripture. It is not, however, legitimate to use this summary to deny that it is *part* of the purpose of Scripture to tell us about minor historical details, or about some aspects of astronomy or geography, and so forth. A summary cannot properly be used to deny one of the things it is summarizing! It is better to say that the *whole purpose* of Scripture is to say everything it does say, on whatever subject. Every one of God's words in Scripture was deemed by him to be important for us. Thus, God issues severe warnings to anyone who would take away even one word from what he has said to us (Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Rev. 22:18-19). We cannot add to God's words or take from them, for all are part of his larger purpose in speaking to us. Everything stated in Scripture is there because God intended it to be there. God does not say anything unintentionally!

b. *The term inerrancy is a poor term.* People who make this second objection say that the term *inerrancy* is too precise and that in ordinary usage it denotes a kind of absolute scientific precision that we do not want to claim for Scripture. Furthermore, those who make this objection note that the term *inerrancy* is not used in the Bible itself. Therefore, they say, it is probably an inappropriate term for us to insist upon.

The response to this objection may be stated as follows: First, the word has been used by scholars for more than a hundred years, and they have always allowed for the

"limitations" that attach to speech in ordinary language. Furthermore, it must be noted that we often use nonbiblical terms to summarize a biblical teaching. The word *Trinity* does not occur in Scripture, nor does the word *incarnation*. Yet both of these terms are very helpful because they allow us to summarize in one word a true biblical concept, and they are therefore helpful in enabling us to discuss a biblical teaching more easily. Finally, in the church today we seem to be unable to carry on the discussion around this topic without the use of the term. People may object to this term if they wish, but, like it or not, this is the term about which the discussion has focused and almost certainly will continue to focus in the next several decades. It therefore seems appropriate to maintain its usage in the discussion over Scripture's complete truthfulness.

c. *We have no inerrant manuscripts; therefore, talk about an inerrant Bible is misleading.* Those who make this objection point to the fact that inerrancy has always been claimed for the first or original copies of the biblical documents. Yet none of these survive; we have only copies of copies of what Moses or Paul or Peter wrote. What is the use, then, of placing so great importance on a doctrine that applies only to manuscripts that no one has?

In reply to this objection, we can first think of an analogy from American history. The original copy of the United States Constitution is housed in a building called the National Archives in Washington, D.C. If through some terrible event that building were destroyed and the original copy of the Constitution lost, could we ever find out what the Constitution said? Of course—we would compare hundreds of copies, and where they all agreed, we would have reason for confidence that we had the exact words of the original document.

A similar process has occurred in determining the original words of the Bible. For over 99 percent of the words of the Bible, we *know* what the original manuscript said. Even for many of the verses where there are textual variants (that is, different words in different ancient copies of the same verse), the correct decision is often quite clear (there may be an obvious copying error, for example), and there are really very few places where the textual variant is both difficult to evaluate and significant in determining the meaning. In the small percentage of cases where there is significant uncertainty about what the original text said, the general sense of the sentence is usually quite clear from the context.

This is not to say that the study of textual variants is unimportant, but it is to say that the study of textual variants has not left us in confusion about what the original manuscripts said.⁶ It has rather brought us extremely close to the content of those original manuscripts. For most practical purposes, then, *the current published scholarly texts* of the Hebrew Old Testament and Greek New Testament *are the same as the original manuscripts*. Therefore, the doctrine of inerrancy affects how we think not only about the original manuscripts but also about our present manuscripts as well.

d. *The biblical writers "accommodated" their messages in minor details to the false ideas current in their day and affirmed or taught those ideas in an incidental way.* Those who hold this position argue that it would have been very difficult for the biblical writers to communicate with the people of their time if they had tried to

⁶An excellent survey of the work of studying textual variants in the extant manuscripts of the New Testament is Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).

correct all the false historical and scientific information believed by their contemporaries (such as a three-storied universe or a flat earth, and so on). Therefore, they say, when the authors of Scripture were attempting to make a larger point, they sometimes *incidentally affirmed some falsehood* believed by the people of their time.

To this objection to inerrancy we can reply that God is Lord of human language who can use human language to communicate perfectly without having to affirm any false ideas that may have been held by people during the time of the writing of Scripture. Furthermore, such "accommodation" by God to our misunderstandings would imply that God had acted contrary to his character as an "unlying God" (Num. 23:19; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18). Although God does condescend to speak the language of human beings, no passage of Scripture teaches that he "condescends" so as to act contrary to his moral character. This objection thus at root misunderstands the purity and unity of God as they affect all of his words and deeds.

e. *There are some clear errors in the Bible.* For many who deny inerrancy, the conviction that there are some actual errors in Scripture is a major factor in persuading them to challenge the doctrine of inerrancy. In every case, however, the first answer that should be made to this objection is to ask where such errors are. In which specific verse or verses do these "errors" occur? It is surprising how frequently one finds that this objection is made by people who have little or no idea where the specific errors are, but who believe there are errors because others have told them so.

In other cases, however, people will mention one or more specific passages where, they claim, there is a false statement in Scripture.⁷ In many instances, a close examination of the biblical text itself will bring to light one or more possible solutions to the difficulty. In a few passages, no solution to the difficulty may be immediately apparent from reading the English text. At that point it is helpful to consult some commentaries on the text. There are a few texts where a knowledge of Hebrew or Greek may be necessary in order to find a solution, and those who do not have firsthand access to these languages may have to find answers either from a more technical commentary or by asking someone who does have this training.

Of course, our understanding of Scripture is never perfect, and this means that there may be cases where we will be unable to find a solution to a difficult passage at the present time. This may be because the linguistic, historical, or contextual evidence that we need to understand the passage correctly is presently unknown to us. This should not trouble us in a small number of passages so long as the overall pattern of our investigation of these passages has shown that there is, in fact, no error where one has been alleged.

Finally, a historical perspective on this question is helpful. There are no really "new" problems in Scripture. The Bible in its entirety is over nineteen hundred years old, and the alleged "problem texts" have been there all along. Yet throughout the history of the church there has been a firm belief in the inerrancy of Scripture in the sense in which it is defined in this chapter. Moreover, for these hundreds of years, highly competent biblical scholars have read and studied those problem texts and still have found no difficulty in holding to inerrancy. This should give us confidence

⁷Some commonly mentioned "problem texts" are texts such as Matt. 1:1-17 with Luke 3:23-38; Matt. 4:1-11 with Luke 4:1-13; Matt. 20:29-30 with Mark 10:46; and Matt. 21:18-21 with Mark 11:12-14, 20-24; Matt. 27:5 with Acts 1:16-25. There are reasonable solutions for all of these in commentaries, but students may find it profitable first to examine the texts for themselves to see if they can discover reasonable ways to reconcile them.

that the solutions to these problems are available and that belief in inerrancy is entirely consistent with a lifetime of detailed attention to the text of Scripture.

3. *Problems with denying inerrancy.* The problems that come with a denial of biblical inerrancy are not insignificant, and when we understand the magnitude of these problems, it gives us further encouragement not only to affirm inerrancy but also to affirm its importance for the church. Some of the more serious problems are listed here.

a. *If we deny inerrancy a serious moral problem confronts us: May we imitate God and intentionally lie in small matters also?* Ephesians 5:1 tells us to be imitators of God. But a denial of inerrancy that still claims that the words of Scripture are God-breathed words necessarily implies that God intentionally spoke falsely to us in some of the less central affirmations of Scripture. But if this is right for God to do, how can it be wrong for us? Such a line of reasoning would, if we believed it, exert strong pressure on us to begin to speak untruthfully in situations where that might seem to help us communicate better, and so forth. This position would be a slippery slope with ever-increasing negative results in our own lives.

b. *Second, if inerrancy is denied, we begin to wonder if we can really trust God in anything he says.* Once we become convinced that God has spoken falsely to us in some minor matters in Scripture, then we realize that God is capable of speaking falsely to us. This will have a serious detrimental effect on our ability to take God at his word and trust him completely or obey him fully in the rest of Scripture. We may begin to disobey initially those sections of Scripture that we least wish to obey, and to distrust initially those sections that we are least inclined to trust. But such a procedure will eventually increase, to the great detriment of our spiritual lives.

c. *Third, if we deny inerrancy we essentially make our own human minds a higher standard of truth than God's Word itself.* We use our minds to pass judgment on some sections of God's Word and pronounce them to be in error. But this is in effect to say that we know truth more certainly and more accurately than God's Word does (or than God does), at least in these areas. Such a procedure, making our own minds to be a higher standard of truth than God's Word, is the root of all intellectual sin.

d. *Fourth, if we deny inerrancy, we must also say that the Bible is wrong not only in minor details but in some of its doctrines as well.* A denial of inerrancy means that we say that the Bible's teaching about the *nature of Scripture* and about the *truthfulness and reliability of God's words* is also false. These are not minor details but are major doctrinal concerns in Scripture.⁸

E. Written Scripture Is Our Final Authority

It is important to realize that the final form in which Scripture is authoritative is its *written* form. It was the words of God *written* on the tablets of stone that Moses deposited in the ark of the covenant. Later, God commanded Moses and subsequent prophets to *write* their words in a book. And it was *written* Scripture (Gk. *graphē*)

⁸Although the undesirable positions listed above are logically related to a denial of inerrancy, a word of caution is in order: Not all who deny inerrancy will also adopt the undesirable conclusions just listed. Some people (probably inconsistently) will deny inerrancy but not take these next logical steps. In debates over inerrancy, as in other theological discussions, it is important that we criticize people on the basis of views they actually hold and that we distinguish those views clearly from positions we think they would hold if they were consistent with their stated views.

that Paul said was "God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16). This is important because people sometimes (intentionally or unintentionally) attempt to substitute some other final standard than the written words of Scripture. For example, people will sometimes refer to "what Jesus really said" and claim that when we translate the Greek words of the Gospels back into the Aramaic language Jesus spoke, we can gain a better understanding of Jesus' words than was given by the writers of the Gospels. In other cases, people claim to know "what Paul really thought" even when that is different from the meaning of the words he wrote. Or they speak of "what Paul would have said if he had been consistent with the rest of his theology." Similarly, others speak of "the church situation to which Matthew was writing" and attempt to give normative force either to that situation or to the solution they think Matthew was attempting to bring about in that situation.

In all of these instances, we must admit that asking about the words or situations that lie behind the text of Scripture may at times be helpful to us in understanding what the text means. Nevertheless, our hypothetical reconstructions of these words or situations can never replace or compete with Scripture itself as the final authority, nor should we ever allow them to contradict or call into question the accuracy of any of the words of Scripture. We must continually remember that we have in the Bible God's very words, and we must not try to "improve" on them in some way, for this cannot be done. Rather, we should seek to understand them and then trust them and obey them with our whole heart.

II. REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Defend the following statement: "All the words in Scripture are God's words."
2. What is meant by the idea that the words of Scripture are "self-attesting"?
3. How can we know that God's words are truthful?
4. Define the term *inerrancy* and discuss how this idea can be consistent with the Bible's use of the language of ordinary, everyday speech.
5. List and respond to three objections to the concept of the inerrancy of Scripture.
6. Name four possible problems that may result from a denial of biblical inerrancy.

III. QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. Who would try to make people want to disbelieve something in Scripture? To disobey something in Scripture? Is there anything in the Bible that you do not want to believe? To obey? If your answers to either of the preceding two questions were positive, what is the best way to approach and to deal with the desires that you have in this area?
2. Do you know of any proven fact in all of history that has shown something in the Bible to be false? Can the same be said about other religious writings such as the *Book of Mormon* or the *Qur'an*? If you have read in other books such as these, can you describe the spiritual effect they had on you? Compare that with the spiritual effect that reading the Bible has on you.

3. Do you ever find yourself believing something, not because you have external evidence for it, but simply because it is written in Scripture? Is that proper faith according to Hebrews 11:1? Do you think that trusting and obeying everything that Scripture affirms will ever lead you into sin or away from God's blessing in your life?
4. If you thought there were some small errors affirmed by Scripture, how do you think that would affect the way you read Scripture? Would it affect your concern for truthfulness in everyday conversation?

IV. SPECIAL TERMS

absolute authority	infallible
authority of Scripture	inspiration
circular argument	neoorthodoxy
dictation	Scripture
faith and practice	self-attesting
God-breathed	textual variant
inerrant	

V. SCRIPTURE MEMORY PASSAGE

2 TIMOTHY 3:16

All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.

CHAPTER THREE

The Clarity, Necessity, and Sufficiency of the Bible

- + *Can only Bible scholars understand the Bible rightly?*
- + *For what purposes is the Bible necessary?*
- + *Is the Bible enough for knowing what God wants us to think or do?*

Having discussed in chapter 2 the Bible's claim to authority, we now turn to the other three characteristics of Scripture to complete our discussion concerning what the Bible teaches about itself.

I. EXPLANATION AND SCRIPTURAL BASIS

Anyone who has begun to read the Bible seriously will realize that some parts can be understood very easily while other parts seem puzzling. While we must admit that not all parts of Scripture are easily understood, it would be a mistake to think that most of Scripture or Scripture in general is difficult to understand. In fact, the Old Testament and New Testament frequently affirm that Scripture is written in such a way that its teachings are understandable by ordinary believers. We will therefore examine first the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture.

Beyond the issue of our ability to understand Scripture is the question of its necessity: Do we need to know what the Bible says to know that God exists? Or that we are sinners in need of salvation? These are the kinds of questions an investigation of the necessity of Scripture is intended to answer.

Finally, we will look at Scripture's sufficiency. Are we to look for other words from God in addition to those we have in Scripture? Is the Bible enough for knowing what God requires us to believe or to do? The doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture addresses these questions.

A. The Clarity of Scripture

1. *The Bible frequently affirms its own clarity.* The Bible often speaks of its own clarity and of the responsibility of believers to read and understand it. In a very familiar passage, Moses tells the people of Israel: "These words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and *you shall teach them diligently to your chil-*

dren, and shall *talk of them* when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise" (Deut. 6:6-7). All the people of Israel were expected to be able to understand the words of Scripture well enough to be able to "teach them diligently" to their children. This teaching would not have consisted merely of rote memorization devoid of understanding, for the people of Israel were to *discuss* the words of Scripture during their activities of sitting in the house or walking or going to bed or getting up in the morning. God expected that *all* of his people would know and be able to talk about his Word with proper application to ordinary life situations.

The character of Scripture is said to be such that even the "simple" can understand it rightly and be made wise by it. "The testimony of the LORD is sure, *making wise the simple*" (Ps. 19:7). Again we read, "The unfolding of your words gives light; *it imparts understanding to the simple*" (Ps. 119:130). Here the "simple" person is not merely one who lacks intellectual ability, but one who lacks sound judgment, who is prone to making mistakes, and who is easily led astray. God's Word is so understandable, so clear, that even this kind of person is made wise by it. This should be a great encouragement to all believers; no believer should think himself or herself too foolish to read Scripture and understand it sufficiently to be made wise by it.

There is a similar emphasis in the New Testament. Jesus himself, in his teachings, his conversations, and his disputes, never responds to any questions with a hint of blaming the Old Testament Scriptures for being unclear. Instead, whether he is speaking to scholars or untrained common people, his responses always assume that the blame for misunderstanding any teaching of Scripture is not to be placed on the Scriptures themselves, but on those who misunderstand or fail to accept what is written. Again and again he answers questions with statements like, "Have you not read . . . ?" (Matt. 12:3, 5; 19:14; 22:31), "Have you never read in the Scriptures . . . ?" (Matt. 21:42), or even, "You are wrong because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God" (Matt. 22:29; see also Matt. 9:13; 12:7; 15:3; 21:13; John 3:10; et al.).

Lest we think that understanding the Bible was somehow easier for first-century Christians than for us, it is important to realize that in many instances the New Testament epistles were written to churches that had large proportions of Gentile Christians. They were relatively new Christians who had no previous background in any kind of Christian society, and who had little or no prior understanding of the history and culture of Israel. The events of Abraham's life (around 2000 B.C.) were as far in the past for them as the events of the New Testament are for us! Nevertheless, the New Testament authors show no hesitancy in expecting even these Gentile Christians to be able to read a translation of the Old Testament in their own language and to understand it rightly (see Rom. 4:1-25; 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:1-11; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; et al.).

2. *The moral and spiritual qualities needed for right understanding.* The New Testament writers frequently state that the ability to understand Scripture rightly is more a moral and spiritual than intellectual ability: "The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts (literally '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" (1 Cor. 2:14; cf. 1:18-3:4; 2 Cor. 3:14-16; 4:3-4, 6; Heb. 5:14; James 1:5-6; 2 Peter 3:5; cf. Mark 4:11-12; John 7:17; 8:43). Thus, although the New Testament authors affirm that the Bible *in itself* is written clearly, they also affirm that it will not be

understood rightly by those who are unwilling to receive its teachings. Scripture is able to be understood by all unbelievers who will read it sincerely seeking salvation, and by believers who will read it while seeking God's help in understanding it. This is because in both cases the Holy Spirit is at work overcoming the effects of sin, which otherwise will make the truth appear to be foolish (1 Cor. 1:18–25; 2:14; James 1:5–6, 22–25).

3. Definition of the clarity of Scripture. In order to summarize this biblical material, we can affirm that the Bible is written in such a way that all things necessary for our salvation and for our Christian life and growth are very clearly set forth in Scripture. Although theologians have sometimes defined the clarity of Scripture more narrowly (by saying, for example, only that Scripture is clear in teaching the way of salvation), the texts cited above apply to many different aspects of biblical teaching and do not seem to support any such limitation on the areas to which Scripture can be said to speak clearly. It seems more faithful to those biblical texts to define the clarity of Scripture as follows: *The clarity of Scripture means that the Bible is written in such a way that its teachings are able to be understood by all who will read it seeking God's help and being willing to follow it.* Once we have stated this, however, we must also recognize that many people, even God's people, do in fact misunderstand Scripture.

4. Why do people misunderstand Scripture? During Jesus' lifetime, his own disciples at times failed to understand the Old Testament and Jesus' own teachings (see Matt. 15:16; Mark 4:10–13; 6:52; 8:14–21; 9:32; Luke 18:34; John 8:27; 10:6). Although sometimes this was due to the fact that they simply needed to wait for further events in the history of redemption, and especially in the life of Christ himself (see John 12:16; 13:7; cf. John 2:22), there were also times when this was due to their own lack of faith or hardness of heart (Luke 24:25). Furthermore, there were times in the early church when Christians did not understand or agree on the teachings of the Old Testament or about the letters written by the apostles: note the process of growth in understanding concerning the implications of Gentile inclusion in the church (culminating in "much debate" [Acts 15:7] in the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15), and note Peter's misunderstanding of this issue in Galatians 2:11–15. In fact, throughout the history of the church, doctrinal disagreements have been many, and progress in resolving doctrinal differences has often been slow.

To help people avoid making mistakes in interpreting Scripture, many Bible teachers have developed "principles of interpretation," or guidelines to encourage growth in the skill of proper interpretation. The word *hermeneutics* (from the Greek word *hermeneuō*, "to interpret") is the more technical term for this field of study: *Hermeneutics is the study of correct methods of interpretation* (especially interpretation of Scripture).

Another technical term often used in discussions of biblical interpretation is *exegesis*, a term that refers more to the actual practice of interpreting Scripture, not to theories and principles about how it should be done: *Exegesis is the process of interpreting a text of Scripture.* Consequently, when one studies principles of interpretation, that is called "hermeneutics," but when one applies those principles and begins actually explaining a biblical text, he or she is doing "exegesis."

The existence of many disagreements about the meaning of Scripture throughout history reminds us that the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture does not imply or

suggest that all believers will agree on all the teachings of Scripture. Nevertheless, it does tell us something very important—that the problem always lies not with Scripture but with ourselves. We affirm that all the teachings of Scripture are clear and able to be understood, but we also recognize that people often (through their own shortcomings) misunderstand what is clearly written in Scripture.

Therefore, as people grow in the Christian life, gaining more knowledge of Scripture as they spend time studying it, they will understand Scripture better. The doctrine of the clarity of Scripture says that Scripture is *able to be understood*, not that all understand it equally well.

5. Practical encouragement from this doctrine. The doctrine of the clarity of Scripture has a very important, and ultimately very encouraging, practical implication. It tells us that where there are areas of doctrinal or ethical disagreement (for example, over baptism or predestination or church government), there are only two possible causes for these disagreements: (1) On the one hand, it may be that we are *seeking to make affirmations where Scripture itself is silent*. In such cases, we should be more ready to admit that God has not given us the answer to our quest, and to allow for differences of viewpoint within the church. (This will often be the case with very practical questions, such as methods of evangelism or styles of Bible teaching or appropriate church size.) (2) On the other hand, it is possible that we have made *mistakes in our interpretation* of Scripture. This could have happened because the data we used to decide a question of interpretation were inaccurate or incomplete. Or it could be because there is some personal inadequacy on our part, whether it be, for example, personal pride, greed, lack of faith, selfishness, or even failure to devote enough time to prayerfully reading and studying Scripture.

But in no case are we free to say that the teaching of the Bible on any subject is confusing or incapable of being understood correctly. In no case should we think that persistent disagreements on some subject through the history of the church mean that we will be unable to come to a correct conclusion on that subject ourselves. Rather, if a genuine concern about some such subject arises in our lives, we should sincerely ask God's help and then go to Scripture, searching it with all our ability, believing that God will enable us to understand rightly.

6. The role of scholars. Is there any role then for Bible scholars or for those with specialized knowledge of Hebrew (for the Old Testament) and Greek (for the New Testament)? Certainly there is a role for them in at least four areas.

For one thing, they can *teach* Scripture clearly, communicating its content to others, and thus fulfilling the office of "teacher," which is mentioned in the New Testament (1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11).

Second, they can *explore* new areas of understanding the teachings of Scripture. This exploration will seldom (if ever) involve denial of the main teachings the church has held throughout its centuries, but it will often involve the application of Scripture to new areas of life, the answering of difficult questions that have been raised by both believers and unbelievers at each new period in history, and the continual activity of refining and making more precise the church's understanding of detailed points of interpretation of individual verses or matters of doctrine or ethics.

Third, they can *defend* the teachings of the Bible against attacks by other scholars or those with specialized technical training. The role of teaching God's Word also at times involves correcting false teachings. One must be able not only "to give

instruction in sound doctrine," but also "to confute those who contradict it" (Titus 1:9; cf. 2 Tim. 2:25, "correcting his opponents with gentleness"; and Titus 2:7-8). Sometimes those who attack biblical teachings have specialized training and technical knowledge in historical, linguistic, or philosophical study, and they use that training to mount rather sophisticated attacks against the teaching of Scripture. In such cases, believers with similar specialized skills can use their training to understand and respond to such attacks.

Finally, they can *supplement* the study of Scripture for the benefit of the church. Bible scholars often have training that will enable them to relate the teachings of Scripture to the rich history of the church, and to make the interpretation of Scripture more precise and its meaning more vivid with a greater knowledge of the languages and cultures in which the Bible was written.

These four functions benefit the church as a whole, and all believers should be thankful for those who perform them. However, these functions do not include the right to decide for the church as a whole what is true and false doctrine or what is proper conduct in a difficult situation. If such a right were the preserve of formally trained Bible scholars, then they would become a governing elite in the church, and the ordinary functioning of the government of the church as described in the New Testament would cease. The process of decision making for the church must be left to the officers of the church, whether they are scholars or not (and, in churches where there is a congregational form of church government, not only to the officers, but also to the people of the church as a whole).

B. The Necessity of Scripture

The necessity of Scripture may be defined as follows: *The necessity of Scripture means that the Bible is necessary for knowledge of the gospel, for maintaining spiritual life, and for certain knowledge of God's will, but is not necessary for knowing that God exists or for knowing something about God's character and moral laws.*

This definition may now be explained in its various parts.

1. *The Bible is necessary for knowledge of the gospel.* In Romans 10:13-17, Paul says: "For, 'everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.' But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And *how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?* And how are they to hear without a preacher? . . . So *faith comes from what is heard*, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ."

This statement indicates the following line of reasoning: (1) It first assumes that one must call upon the name of the Lord in order to be saved. (In Pauline usage generally as well as in this specific context [see v. 9], "the Lord" refers to the Lord Jesus Christ.) (2) People can only call upon the name of Christ if they believe in him (that is, that he is a Savior worthy of calling upon, and one who will answer those who call). (3) People cannot believe in Christ unless they have heard of him. (4) They cannot hear of Christ unless there is someone to tell them about Christ (a "preacher"). (5) The conclusion is that saving faith comes by hearing—that is, by hearing the gospel message—and this hearing of the gospel message comes about through the preaching of Christ. The implication seems to be that without hearing the preaching of the gospel of Christ, no one can be saved.

This passage is one of several that shows that eternal salvation comes only through belief in Jesus Christ, and no other way. Speaking of Christ, John 3:18 says,

"He who believes in him is not condemned; *he who does not believe is condemned already*, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God." Similarly, in John 14:6, Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; *no one comes to the Father, but by me.*"¹

But if people can only be saved through faith in Christ, someone might ask how believers under the old covenant could have been saved. The answer must be that those who were saved under the old covenant were also saved through trusting in Christ, even though their faith was a forward-looking faith based on God's word of promise that a Messiah or a Redeemer would come. Speaking of Old Testament believers such as Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Sarah, the author of Hebrews says, "*These all died in faith*, not having received what was promised, but *having seen it and greeted it from afar*" (Heb. 11:13). And Jesus can say of Abraham, "Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; *he saw it and was glad*" (John 8:56). This again apparently refers to Abraham's joy in looking forward to the day of the promised Messiah. Thus, even Old Testament believers had saving faith in Christ, to whom they looked forward, not with exact knowledge of the historical details of Christ's life, but with great faith in the absolute reliability of God's word of promise.

The Bible is necessary for salvation, then, in this sense: One must either read the gospel message in the Bible for oneself or hear it from another person. Even those believers who came to salvation in the old covenant did so by trusting in the words of God that promised a Savior to come.

There are other views that differ with this biblical teaching. *Inclusivism* is the view that people can be saved by Christ's work without knowing about him or trusting in him, but simply by sincerely following the religion that they know. Inclusivists often talk about "many different ways to God" even if they emphasize that they personally believe in Christ. *Universalism* is the view that all people will ultimately be saved.² The view maintained in this chapter, that people cannot be saved without knowing about Christ and trusting in him, is sometimes called *exclusivism* (though the word itself is unfortunate because it suggests a desire to exclude others, and it thereby fails to convey the outward-reaching missionary theme that is so strong in the New Testament).

2. *The Bible is necessary for maintaining spiritual life.* Jesus says in Matthew 4:4 (quoting Deut. 8:3), "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" (NASB). Here Jesus indicates that our spiritual life is maintained by daily nourishment with the Word of God, just as our physical lives are maintained by daily nourishment with physical food. To neglect regular reading of God's Word is as detrimental to the health of our souls as the neglect of physical food is detrimental to the health of our bodies.

3. *The Bible is necessary for certain knowledge of God's will.* It will be argued below that all people ever born have *some* knowledge of God's will through their consciences. But this knowledge is often indistinct and cannot give certainty. In fact, if there were no written Word of God, we could not gain certainty about God's will through other means such as advice from others, an internal witness of the Holy Spirit, changed circumstances, and the use of sanctified reasoning and common

¹On the question of whether it is fair of God to condemn people who have never heard of Christ, see the discussion in ch. 10, pp. 170-71, and ch. 18, pp. 289-90.

²See ch. 10, pp. 170-71, and ch. 18, pp. 291-92, on the fact that not all people will be saved.

sense. These all might give an approximation of God's will in more or less reliable ways, but from these means alone no certainty about God's will could ever be attained, at least in a fallen world where sin distorts our perception of right and wrong, brings faulty reasoning into our thinking processes, and causes us to suppress from time to time the testimony of our consciences (cf. Jer. 17:9; Rom. 2:14-15; 1 Cor. 8:10; Heb. 5:14; 10:22; also 1 Tim. 4:2; Titus 1:15).

In the Bible, however, we have clear and definite statements about God's will. God has not revealed all things to us, but he has revealed enough for us to know his will: "The secret things belong to the LORD our God; but *the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children for ever*, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29). As it was in the time of Moses, so it is now with us: God has revealed his words to us in order that we might obey his laws and thereby do his will. To be "blameless" in God's sight is to "walk in the law of the LORD" (Ps. 119:1). The "blessed" man is one who does not follow the will of wicked people (Ps. 1:1), but delights "*in the law of the LORD*," and meditates on God's law "day and night" (Ps. 1:2). To love God (and thereby to act in a way that is pleasing to him) is to "keep his commandments" (1 John 5:3). If we are to have a certain knowledge of God's will, then, we must attain it through the study of Scripture.

In fact, in one sense it can be argued that the Bible is necessary for certain knowledge about anything. A philosopher might argue as follows: The fact that we do not know everything requires us to be uncertain about everything we do claim to know. This is because some fact unknown to us may yet turn out to prove that what we thought to be true was actually false. However, God knows all facts that ever have been or ever will be. And this God, who never lies, has spoken to us in Scripture, in which he has told us many true things about himself, about ourselves, and about the universe he has made. No fact can ever turn up to contradict the truth spoken by this One who is omniscient.

Thus, it is appropriate for us to be *more certain* about the truths we read in Scripture than about any other knowledge we have. If we are to talk about degrees of certainty of knowledge we have, then the knowledge we attain from Scripture would have the highest degree of certainty. If the word *certain* can be applied to any kind of human knowledge, it can be applied to this knowledge. Christians who take the Bible as God's Word escape philosophical skepticism about the possibility of attaining certain knowledge with our finite minds. In this sense, then, it is correct to say that for people who are not omniscient, the Bible is necessary for certain knowledge about anything.

4. But the Bible is not necessary for knowing that God exists or for knowing something about God's character and moral laws. What about people who do not read the Bible? Can they obtain any knowledge of God? Can they know anything about his laws? Yes, without the Bible some knowledge of God is possible, even if it is not absolutely certain knowledge.

a. *General revelation and special revelation.* People can obtain a knowledge that God exists and a knowledge of some of his attributes simply from observation of themselves and the world around them. David says, "*The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork*" (Ps. 19:1). To look at the sky is to see evidence of the infinite power, wisdom, and even beauty of God; it is to observe a majestic witness to the glory of God.

Even those who by their wickedness suppress the truth cannot avoid the evidences of God's existence and nature in the created order:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world *his invisible nature*, namely, his eternal power and deity, *has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made*. So they are without excuse; 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 senseless minds were darkened. (Rom. 1:19-21)

Here Paul says not only that creation gives evidence of God's existence and character, but also that even wicked men recognize that evidence. What can be known about God is "plain to them" and in fact "they knew God" (apparently, they knew who he was), but "they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him." This passage allows us to say that all persons, even the most wicked, have some internal knowledge or perception that God exists and that he is a powerful Creator. This knowledge is seen "in the things that have been made," a phrase that refers to all creation, including mankind.

Paul goes on in Romans 1 to show that even unbelievers who have no written record of God's laws still have in their consciences some understanding of God's moral demands. Speaking of a long list of sins ("envy, murder, strife, deceit . . ."), Paul says of wicked people who practice them, "Though *they know God's decree that those who do such things deserve to die*, they not only do them but approve those who practice them" (Rom. 1:32). Wicked people know that their sin is wrong, at least in large measure.

Paul then talks about the activity of conscience in Gentiles who do not have the written law: "When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that *what the law requires is written on their hearts*, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them" (Rom. 2:14-15).

The consciences of unbelievers bear witness to God's moral standards, but at times this evidence of God's law on the hearts of unbelievers is distorted or suppressed. Sometimes their thoughts "accuse" them and sometimes their thoughts "excuse" them, Paul says. The knowledge of God's laws derived from such sources is never perfect, but it is enough to give an awareness of God's moral demands to all mankind. (And it is on this basis that Paul argues that all humanity is held guilty before God for sin, even those who do not have the written laws of God in Scripture.)

The knowledge of God's existence, character, and moral law, which comes through creation to all humanity, is often called "general revelation" (because it comes to all people generally). General revelation comes through observing nature, through seeing God's directing influence in history, and through an inner sense of God's existence and his laws that he has placed inside every person. General revelation is distinct from *special revelation*, which refers to God's words addressed to specific people, such as the words of the Bible, the words of the Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles, and the words of God spoken in personal address, such as at Mount Sinai or at Jesus' baptism.

The fact that all people know something of God's moral laws is a great blessing for society, for unless they did there would be no societal restraint on the evil that

people would do and no restraint coming from their consciences. Because there is some common knowledge of right and wrong, Christians can often find much consensus with non-Christians in matters of civil law, community standards, basic ethics for business and professional activity, and acceptable patterns of conduct in ordinary life. The knowledge of God's existence and character also provides a basis of information that enables the gospel to make sense to a non-Christian's heart and mind; unbelievers know that God exists and that they have broken his standards, so the news that Christ died to pay for their sins should truly come as *good news* to them.

b. *Special revelation necessary for salvation.* However, it must be emphasized that Scripture nowhere indicates that people can know the gospel, or the way of salvation, through such general revelation. They may know that God exists, that he is their Creator, that they owe him obedience, and that they have sinned against him. But how the *holiness and justice* of God can ever be reconciled with his *willingness to forgive sins* is a mystery that has never been solved by any religion apart from the Bible. Nor does the Bible give us any hope that it ever can be discovered apart from specific revelation from God. It is the great wonder of our redemption that God himself has provided the way of salvation by sending his own Son, who is both God and man, to be our representative and bear the penalty for our sins, thus combining the justice and love of God in one infinitely wise and amazingly gracious act. This fact, which seems commonplace to the Christian ear, should not lose its wonder for us: It never could have been conceived by man alone apart from God's special, verbal revelation.

C. The Sufficiency of Scripture

We can define the sufficiency of Scripture as follows: *The sufficiency of Scripture means that Scripture contained all the words of God he intended his people to have at each stage of redemptive history, and that it now contains everything we need God to tell us for salvation, for trusting him perfectly, and for obeying him perfectly.*

This definition emphasizes the fact that it is in Scripture alone that we are to search for God's words to us. It also reminds us that God considers what he has told us in the Bible to be enough for us, and that we should rejoice in the great revelation that he has given us and be content with it.

Significant scriptural support and explanation of this doctrine is found in Paul's words to Timothy, "From childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are *able to instruct you for salvation* through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15). The context shows that "sacred writings" here means the written words of Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16). This is an indication that the words of God which we have in Scripture are all the words of God we need in order to be saved; these words are able to make us wise "for salvation."

Other passages indicate that the Bible is sufficient to equip us for living the Christian life. Psalm 119:1 says, "Blessed are those whose way is *blameless* who *walk in the law of the LORD*!" This verse shows an equivalence between being "blameless" and "walking in the law of the LORD"; those who are blameless are those who walk in the law of the Lord. Here we have an indication that all that God requires of us is recorded in his written Word. Simply to do all that the Bible commands us is to be blameless in God's sight. Later we read that a young man can "keep his way pure" by "guarding it according to your word" (Ps. 119:9). Paul says that God gave Scripture in order that we may be "complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:17).

1. *We can find all that God has said on particular topics, and we can find answers to our questions.* Of course, we realize that we will never perfectly obey all of Scripture in this life (see James 3:2; 1 John 1:8-10; and ch. 13 of this volume). Thus, it may not at first seem very significant to say that all we have to do is what God commands us in the Bible, since we will never be able to obey it all in this life anyway. But the truth of the sufficiency of Scripture is of great significance for our Christian lives, for it enables us to *focus* our search for God's words to us on the Bible alone and saves us from the endless task of searching through all the writings of Christians throughout history, or through all the teachings of the church, or through all the subjective feelings and impressions that come to our minds from day to day, in order to find what God requires of us. In a very practical sense, it means that we are able to come to clear conclusions on many teachings of Scripture.

This doctrine means, moreover, that it is possible to collect all the passages that directly relate to doctrinal issues such as the atonement, or the person of Christ, or the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life today. In these and hundreds of other moral and doctrinal questions, the biblical teaching about the sufficiency of Scripture gives us confidence that we *will be able to find* what God requires us to think or to do in these areas. In many of these areas we can attain confidence that we, together with the vast majority of the church throughout history, have found and correctly formulated what God wants us to think or to do. Simply stated, the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture tells us that it is possible to study systematic theology and ethics and find answers to our questions.

2. *The amount of Scripture given was sufficient at each stage of redemptive history.* The doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture does not imply that God cannot add any more words to those he has already spoken to his people. It rather implies that humans cannot add on their own initiative any words to those that God has already spoken. Furthermore, it implies that in fact *God has not spoken* to mankind any more words he requires us to believe or obey other than those we have now in the Bible.

This point is important, for it helps us to understand how God could tell his people that his words to them were sufficient at many different points in the history of redemption and how he could nevertheless add to those words later. For example, in Deuteronomy 29:29 Moses says, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law."

This verse reminds us that God has always taken the initiative in revealing things to us. He has decided what to reveal and what not to reveal. At each stage in redemptive history, the things that God had revealed were for his people for that time, and they were to study, believe, and obey those things. With further progress in the history of redemption, more of God's words were added, recording and interpreting that history.

3. *Practical applications of the sufficiency of Scripture.* The doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture has several practical applications to our Christian lives. The following list is intended to be helpful but not exhaustive.

a. *An encouragement to search the Bible for answers.* The sufficiency of Scripture should encourage us as we try to discover what God would have us to *think* (about a particular doctrinal issue) or to *do* (in a particular situation). We should be encour-

aged that *everything* God wants to tell us about that question is to be found in Scripture. This does not mean that the Bible answers all the questions that we might think up, for "the secret things belong to the LORD our God" (Deut. 29:29). But it does mean that when we are facing a problem of genuine importance to our Christian life, we can approach Scripture with the confidence that from it God will provide us with guidance for that problem.

There will of course be some times when the answer we find is that Scripture does not speak directly to our question. (This would be the case, for example, if we tried to find from Scripture what order of worship to follow on Sunday mornings, or whether it is better to kneel or perhaps to stand when we pray, or at what time we should eat our meals during the day, and so on.) In those cases, we may conclude that God has not required us to think or to act in any certain way with regard to that question (except, perhaps, in terms of more general principles regarding our attitudes and goals). But in many other cases, we will find direct and clear guidance from the Lord to equip us for "every good work" (2 Tim. 3:17).

b. *A warning not to add to Scripture.* The sufficiency of Scripture reminds us that *we are to add nothing to Scripture*, and that *we are to consider no other writings of equal value to Scripture*. This principle is violated by almost all cults and sects. Mormons, for example, claim to believe the Bible, but they also claim divine authority for the *Book of Mormon*. Christian Scientists similarly claim to believe the Bible, but in practice they hold the book *Science and Health with a Key to the Scriptures* by Mary Baker Eddy on a par with Scripture or above it in authority. Since these claims violate God's commands not to add to his words, we should not think that any additional words from God to us would be found in these writings. Even in Christian churches a similar error is sometimes made when people go beyond what Scripture says and assert with great confidence new ideas about God or heaven, basing their teachings not on Scripture but on their own speculation or even on claimed experiences of dying and coming back to life.

c. *A warning not to count any other guidance from God equal to Scripture.* The sufficiency of Scripture shows us that *no modern revelations from God are to be placed on a level equal to Scripture in authority*. At various times throughout the history of the church, and particularly in the modern charismatic movement, people have claimed that God has given revelations through them for the benefit of the church. Even people in noncharismatic churches often say that God "led" or "guided" them in a certain way. However we may evaluate such claims,³ we must be careful never to allow (in theory or in practice) the placing of such revelations on a level equal to Scripture. We must insist that God does not require us to believe anything about himself or his work in the world that is contained in these revelations but not in Scripture. And we must insist that God does not require us to obey any moral directives that come to us through such means but are not confirmed by Scripture. The Bible contains all the words of God we need for trusting and obeying him perfectly.⁴

³See ch. 29, pp. 402–6, on the possibility of some kinds of revelation from God continuing today when the canon is closed, and especially ch. 30, pp. 408–15, on the gift of prophecy.

⁴I do not wish to imply at this point that I am adopting a "cessationist" view of spiritual gifts (that is, a view that holds that certain gifts, such as prophecy and speaking in tongues, ceased when the apostles died). I only wish at this point to state that there is a danger in explicitly or even implicitly giving these gifts a status that in practice challenges the authority or the sufficiency of Scripture in Christians' lives.

d. *A warning not to add more sins or requirements to those named in Scripture.* With regard to living the Christian life, the sufficiency of Scripture reminds us that *nothing is sin that is not forbidden by Scripture either explicitly or by implication*. To walk in the law of the Lord is to be "blameless" (Ps. 119:1). Therefore, we are not to add prohibitions to those already stated in Scripture. From time to time there may be situations in which it would be wrong, for example, for an individual Christian to drink coffee or Coca-Cola, or to attend movie theaters, or to eat meat offered to idols (see 1 Cor. 8–10), but unless some specific teaching or some general principle of Scripture can be shown to prohibit these (or any other activities) for all believers for all time, we must insist that these activities are not in themselves sinful and they are not in all situations prohibited by God for his people.

The discovery of this great truth could bring tremendous joy and peace to the lives of thousands of Christians who, spending countless hours seeking God's will outside of Scripture are often uncertain about whether they have found it. Instead, Christians who are convinced of the sufficiency of Scripture should begin eagerly to seek and find God's will in Scripture. They should be enthusiastically and regularly growing in obedience to God, knowing great freedom and peace in the Christian life. Then they will be able to say with the psalmist:

I will keep your law continually,
for ever and ever;
and I shall walk at liberty,
for I have sought your precepts. . . .
Great peace have those who love your law;
nothing can make them stumble. (Ps. 119:44–45, 165)

e. *An encouragement to be content with Scripture.* The sufficiency of Scripture reminds us that in our doctrinal and ethical teaching we should *emphasize what Scripture emphasizes and be content with what God has told us in Scripture*. There are some subjects about which God has told us little or nothing in the Bible. We must remember that "the secret things belong to the LORD our God" (Deut. 29:29) and that God has revealed to us in Scripture exactly what he deemed right for us. We must accept this and not think that Scripture is something less than it should be, or begin to wish that God had given us much more information about subjects on which there are very few scriptural references.

The doctrinal matters that have divided evangelical Protestant denominations from one another have almost uniformly been matters on which the Bible places relatively little emphasis and matters in which our conclusions must be drawn from skillful inference much more than from direct biblical statements. For example, abiding denominational differences have occurred or have been maintained over the "proper" form of church government, the exact nature of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper, and the exact sequence of the events surrounding Christ's return.

We should not say that these issues are all unimportant, nor should we say that Scripture gives no solution to any of them (indeed, with respect to many of them, a specific solution will be defended in subsequent chapters of this book). However, since all of these topics receive *relatively little direct emphasis in Scripture*, it is ironic and tragic that denominational leaders will so often give much of their lives to defending precisely the minor doctrinal points that make their denominations different from others. Is such effort really motivated by a desire to bring unity of understanding to

the church, or might it stem in some measure from human pride, a desire to retain power over others, and an attempt at self-justification, which is displeasing to God and ultimately unedifying to the church?

II. REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Define "clarity of Scripture." Why can we say that Scripture is clear?
2. Given the above definition, why do people sometimes misunderstand Scripture?
3. Name and describe at least three things for which the Bible is necessary.
4. Can people know anything about God apart from the Bible? If so, what can they know about him?
5. Since God added to the words of Scripture over a long period of time, did the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture apply to people in the Old Testament who had only portions of what we now call the Bible? Why or why not?
6. Is there anything required of us by God or forbidden to us by God that is not commanded or forbidden in Scripture? Explain.

III. QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. If the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture is true, why does there seem to be so much disagreement among Christians about the teaching of the Bible? Observing the diversity of interpretations of Scripture, some conclude, "People can make the Bible say anything they want." How do you think Jesus would respond to this statement?
2. Do you think that there are right and wrong interpretations of most or all passages of Scripture? If you thought the Bible was generally unclear, how would your answer change? Will a conviction about the clarity of Scripture affect the care you use when studying a text of Scripture? Will it affect the way you approach Scripture when trying to gain a biblical answer to some difficult doctrinal or moral problem?
3. When you are witnessing to an unbeliever, what is the one thing above all others that you should want him or her to read? Do you know of anyone who ever became a Christian without either reading the Bible or hearing someone tell him what the Bible said? What, then, is the primary task of an evangelistic missionary?
4. When we are actively seeking to know God's will, where should we spend most of our time and effort? In practice, where do you? Do God's principles in Scripture and the apparent guidance we receive from feelings, conscience, advice, circumstances, human reasoning, or society ever seem to conflict? How should we seek to resolve the conflict?
5. Have you ever wished that the Bible would say more than it does about a certain subject? Or less? What do you think motivated that wish? After reading this chapter, how would you approach someone who expressed such a wish today?

IV. SPECIAL TERMS

blameless	natural revelation
clarity of Scripture	necessity of Scripture
exegesis	special revelation
general revelation	sufficiency of Scripture
hermeneutics	

V. SCRIPTURE MEMORY PASSAGE

DEUTERONOMY 6:6-7

These words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.