

Brief Reflections on the Reliability & Authority of God's Word

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Dear Grace Church Family,

It was the Apostle Paul, who wrote to an early church of Christ's followers this appreciation, "¹³ *And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.*" (1 Thessalonians 2:13). The Scriptures were opened and received as an actual Word from God.... isn't that just so simple to imitate? Let's pause, however and be honest about how and when our doubts have crept in.

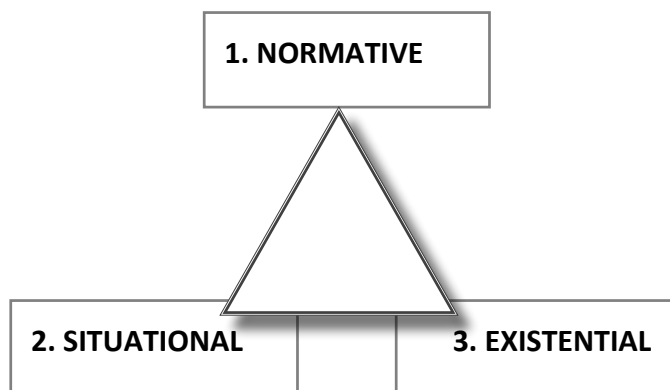
Why would, should or could someone trust in the Scriptures of the Bible as true? How can it be God's revealed Word to us? What persuades someone to believe in this historic text? These are questions I've personally grappled with and walked alongside many others in such weighty inquiries and doubts.

There are volumes of remarkable stories and substantial scholarship that support the reliability and the authority of the Scriptures. In some detail I've both researched and directed people to do the same over the years on this matter. I thought for the sake of my flock at Grace, I would offer some brief reflection to help begin the process of considering (or re-considering) these teachings about the Bible. This is by no means a comprehensive or thorough treatment of the subject, but hopefully a fruitful starting point. If and when you (or others you know) have further questions or objections to what I outline here, please let me know so we can openly converse over coffee and/or I can provide additional resources.

So, to the question: How can we view and trust the Bible as a truthful authority? I will launch into **three perspectives/reasons** we embrace God's Word as reliable and authoritative. Then, I plan to conclude with some thoughts on the **faith and assumptions** that everyone brings to the Bible. This last section will hopefully provide some explanation as to why, even in the face of persuasive arguments and evidences, people remain dismissive and overly critical of the Bible.

THREE PERSPECTIVES/REASONS – On Trusting the Bible

We seldom approach matters or decisions from a single vantage point; we inevitably take into consideration multiple perspectives. Such an approach is responsible and I will seek to briefly capture part of the case from each, beginning with the normative (authoritative) perspective.



1. NORMATIVE Perspective – The Scripture’s Self-Authentication

Our foundational and authoritative perspective begins with what the Bible says about itself. We don’t begin with a personal feeling or sense; rather, we begin with a text that declares itself to be *the* Word of God. If the Bible was the ultimate authority, then this is what you’d expect to happen. To what other source would the Scripture appeal for its own authority? In other words, what book would have the authority to tell us what book is the Word of God?

God chose a particular medium as His primary means of self-revelation through inspiring and guiding authors to compose a written text. Throughout time God has not only preserved His Word, He has accompanied it with the power of His presence (Psalm 33:6).

In addition to the clear testimony of our Lord Jesus in the Gospels referring to the Old Testament Scriptures as historic, reliable and useful; we have further clarifying passages like:

2 Peter 1:19-21:

“And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”

2 Timothy 3:16:

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,”

1 John 5:9:

“We accept man’s testimony, but God’s testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son.”

We also believe the Bible objectively bears the marks of divinely authored books. As French theologian John Calvin wrote in the 16th century, "Indeed, Scripture exhibits fully as clear evidence of its own truth as white and black things do of their color, or sweet and bitter things do of their taste. (*Institutes* 1.7.2)" And later the Westminster Confession speaks to the evident divine authorship in Chapter 1.5:

“...Scripture itself shows in so many ways that it is God’s word; for example, in its spiritual subject matter, in the effectiveness of its teaching, the majesty of its style, the agreement of all its parts, its unified aim from beginning to end (to give all glory to God), the full revelation it makes of the only way of man’s salvation, its many other incomparably outstanding features, and its complete perfection. However, we are completely persuaded and assured of the infallible truth and divine authority of the Bible only by the inward working of the Holy Spirit, who testifies by and with the word in our hearts

This “inward working” is what we will take up with the final existential perspective, but moving on to the 2nd:

2. SITUATIONAL Perspective – Witnesses of History, Literature, Archeology, etc...

A) Bibliographical Test

B) External Test

C) Internal Test

(A) Bibliographical Test – an objective way to measure the probability of accuracy for any ancient text. In this respect, let’s consider how the New Testament manuscripts (copies and fragments of them) measure up in comparison to other literature of antiquity? Here are few, were could highlight: Homer’s *Iliad* (643 copies),

Julius Caesar's *Gallic Wars* (10 copies), Herodotus' *Historical Works* (8 copies), Thucydides' *Historical Works* (8 copies), and Pliny the Younger's *Historical Works* (7 copies).

By comparison, there are over 5,000 individual Greek manuscripts that contain all or part of the New Testament. These are augmented by more than 8,000 copies in Latin and 9,000 copies in other languages. Also, when someone takes into consideration the amount of time between actual authorship and the oldest manuscript bibliography can provide, the New Testament manuscripts are exponentially closer to composition.

The historical credibility of Scripture passes this test as Biblical Scholar F.F. Bruce states, "The evidence for our New Testament writings is ever so much greater than the evidence for many writings of classical authors, the authenticity of which no-one dreams of questioning. And if the New Testament were a collection of secular writings, their authenticity would generally be regarded as beyond all doubt."

(B) External Test – Is the Bible set in real history, real places, real cultures and customs? Archeology and other historic research have yet to prove any inaccuracy in this respect. Notable archaeologist William Albright reflects on this matter:

"The excessive skepticism shown toward the Bible by important historical schools of the 18th and 19th centuries, certain phases of which still appear periodically, has been progressively discredited. Discovery after discovery has established the accuracy of innumerable details, and has brought increased recognition to the value of the Bible as a source of history."

(C) Internal Test - This includes questions of authorship and consistency. For instance, were the people who composed the New Testament eyewitnesses or what was their relationship? As the Apostle Luke writes: *Luke: "Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word."* (Luke 1:1-3)

In the instances where the author was not a direct witness, we must bear in mind that many eyewitnesses were still alive when the books were written to confirm or deny their reports. We have no indication that these men were reporting these things for personal gain; instead many suffered persecution and death as martyrs of the faith.

Under this test, one must also ask, do the stories exhibit traits of historical reports? Why would Biblical authors include unnecessary detail: personal names, descriptions of places, names of rulers, geographical markers. If you are going to make something up, you have to be vague. In addition, if the authors were fabricating a story they would've likely omitted the embarrassing failures of the early disciples and avoided noting woman as the first witnesses to the resurrection (for their testimony was not credible in the court system of that cultural context).

Finally, is the book consistent, does it agree with itself? Consider the fact that the Bible includes 66 different books, spanning 1500 years, 3 continents, 3 different languages, and 40 different authors (including kings, fishermen, shepherds, statesmen, prophets, etc....). In the end, what are we left with, but a book with tremendous unity and cohesiveness regarding God's plan of redemption and our redeemer Jesus Christ.

3. EXISTENTIAL Perspective – The transformation of life and internal testimony of the Holy Spirit.

God brings illumination and transformation to people's personal lives through His Word. It was Jesus himself who stated, *"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me."* (John 10:27; cf. 2 Cor. 2:2,3 1 Thess. 1:4,5). In numerous places, we discover clarification of how God's Spirit and His Word work together (in the hearts, minds and lives of those who have an opened heart); for example:

1 Corinthians 2:7–13

⁷ But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. ⁸ None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹ But, as it is written, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him”— ¹⁰ these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ¹¹ For who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. ¹² Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. ¹³ And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

Another way to capture this subjective, but nevertheless existential reality is seen with C.S. Lewis (1945): “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen. Not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else...” After living in critical opposition to the Scripture for so many years, this literary scholar could not escape the piercing warmth of God’s Spirit bring life an illumination (an experience many of us can testify to at different points).

CONCLUSION – On Faith and Assumptions

Whether a person receives the Bible as God’s Word is tied to the object(s) of their faith. Embracing God’s Word as such is at end of the day an act of faith. This however doesn’t make the Bible differ from most any other matter we embrace as true or authoritative. We have faith in something to lead us to truth be it science, popular opinion, reason, or even our own personal feelings.

As Dr. Tim Keller points out in the excellent resource *Reason for God*, “Skeptics must learn to look for a type of faith hidden within their reasoning. All doubts, however skeptical and cynical they may seem, are really a set of alternate beliefs....The reason you doubt Christianity’s Belief A is because you hold unprovable Belief B. Every doubt, therefore, is based on a leap of faith.”

Behind everyone’s thinking is a set of foundational assumptions (we’ll call them “presuppositions”). These presuppositions form a person’s criterion for determining truth and evaluating all other beliefs. If it is faith in material science, their presuppositions lead them to reject the supernatural. If one holds presuppositions of tolerant relativity, then they reject Jesus’ teachings on exclusivity or judgment. If it simple selfish hedonism, one’s presupposition’s guide them to reject the ethical demands of God’s Law.

These presuppositions are perhaps hidden, but never absent and they pop up regarding views of Scripture when people utter things like, “well, I could never believe in a God that does _____” or “I just cannot accept stories that make me feel _____”

What am I trying to affirm or highlight here? There are times when people reject the Bible, not for a lack of evidence, but because they don’t like the way it challenges their presuppositions. It undermines perhaps their faith in something else or confronts their comfortable long-held personal beliefs for practices. So when they say “I can’t believe the Bible” they are in essence saying “I won’t believe in the Bible” as their unbelief concerning God’s authority is established.

Again, Keller helps bring this into focus about unbelief: “To stay away from Christianity because part of the Bible’s teaching is offensive to you assumes that if there is a God he wouldn’t have any views that upset you. Does that belief make sense?” Of course, we would never insist of any friendship or relationship around us “this is going to work as long as you never contradict or challenge me on anything.” If that is our posture, even subtly, then our friends (and subsequently) our God will only be imaginary and fabricated.

British writer and philosopher G.K. Chesterton put it this way “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.” What is said here of the faith can also be held with regard to the Bible, people perceive it to be difficult (for any number of reasons) and they don’t genuinely try to understand it.

So, where is our starting point for establishing truth and authority? The choices boil down to two:

The Unbelievers Presuppositions: HUMAN WISDOM

The unbeliever holds entirely different and opposing presuppositions to that of the true believer. The unbeliever clearly does not acknowledge the Lordship of Christ and authority of God’s Word. This is not to say that they believe in nothing, rather they believe in themselves and their own ability to judge what is right, true and good. Ultimately the unbeliever, living in rebellion to God, establishes himself as the authority and Lord apart from God and His Word. For instance, take an atheist (whose presupposition is that there cannot be a God) and he is walking around Washington DC and he has a vision of God and he thinks to himself I must be hallucinating but if he walks by the White House lawn and sees someone looking like the President he says, “ah yes, there is the President’ – it all fits in his paradigm/worldview.

The Believers Presuppositions: GOD’S WORD

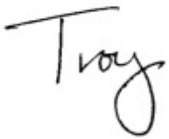
The Bible should form the foundational criterion for the true believer. While every human authority may lie (Rom. 3:4), God’s Word is true, authoritative and dependable and should be adopted as our ultimate commitment, our ultimate standard, and our ultimate criterion of truth and falsity. An example:

“Noah had no empirical evidence that the world would be destroyed by a flood, only the evidence of the Word of God; but by grace he believed God (Gen. 6:8,22; Heb. 11:7). Others heard that Word, but rejected it (2 Pet. 2:5), doubtless often with laughter” – Prof. John Frame

Over time, the believer is increasingly to be more shaped in their thinking and living by the authoritative Word of God and not our own imaginations.

Our struggle to read, study, understand and apply God’s Word is a life-long journey. I feel as though I have barely scratched the surface and though I keep digging for the nuggets of wisdom and life, I do from time to time hit stones that leave me sore and scratching my head. All the more may we press on as we are encouraged by the prayer of Psalmist, *“Deal bountifully with your servant, that I may live and keep your word. Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law. I am a sojourner on the earth; hide not your commandments from me!”* (Psalm 119:17-19).

All for Jesus,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Troy".