

The Sufficiency of Scripture?

Clear conviction concerning the Word of God is paramount in the life of the church. Many today believe just the opposite. Such beliefs are partially responsible for the sharp decline in the twenty-first century church. On the contrary, the convictions that God's Word is sufficient and powerful will directly affect the stability and usefulness of a local church. If we lose our conviction that the Bible is trustworthy, authoritative, and dynamic, why bother going to church. One's convictions about biblical inspiration, authority, benefit, and purpose are crucial in matters of the spiritual life of the church.

God's Word is inspired

An effective church will have a high view of Scripture, beginning with a clear conviction about biblical "inspiration." Many people regard the Bible as just one good book among many. More tragically, many pastors have failed to embrace one's view of biblical inspiration and a successful church.

Widespread rejection of the doctrine of verbal plenary inspiration of Scripture has permeated many ministries. Some critics have insisted that the Bible is subject to error and human limitation. Others think the whole debate about biblical inspiration is merely a matter of semantics, a quibbling over words. On the contrary, the outcome of such arguments is eternally important to people who sit in churches every week.

Verbal plenary inspiration suggests that "in the composition of the original manuscripts, the Holy Spirit guided the authors even in their choice expressions without effacing the personalities of the different men. Inspiration is verbal because the words are inseparable from the message. Inspiration is "plenary" because it is entire and without restriction. Frank Gaebelein said, "The doctrine of plenary inspiration holds that the original documents of the Bible were written by men, who, though permitted the exercise of their own personalities and literary talents, yet wrote under the control and guidance of the Spirit of God, the result being in every word of the original documents a perfect and errorless recording of the exact message which God desired to give to men." Therefore, the Bible is exactly and completely what God said.

The apostle Peter wrote in 2 Pet. 1:21 that "prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit." This picture is of men being carried along by the Holy Spirit much as a sailboat would be carried along by the wind. The passage indicates that those men, chosen to pen the inspired Word, did so superintended by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, Scripture has a dual authorship, the Holy Spirit is the divine author, and various men are the human authors as indicated in Peter's sermon at Pentecost "This Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke before by the mouth of David concerning Judas" (Acts 1:16). Paul reminded Timothy that "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God (2 Tim. 3:16). This verse clearly speaks of plenary inspiration. All Scripture is totally breathed out by God. Underscoring the inspiration of even the smallest part of letters of God's words, our Lord said, "For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass away from the law till all is fulfilled" (Matt. 5:18).

God's Word is authoritative

A high view of biblical inspiration also speaks of a clear conviction regarding the Bible's authority. The authority of the church lies solely in the authority of the Scriptures. Paul told the Thessalonians, "Our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance" (1 Thess. 1:5). Rather than submitting to men and traditions, we must rest in the authority of God's inspired Word.

The Word has survived through all the centuries. In A.D. 303, Diocletian commanded that all the copies of the Bible be burned, yet the Bible still lives. The inscription on the monument of the Huguenots of Paris succinctly and accurately expresses the Bible's miraculous longevity, "Hammer away ye hostile hands; your hammers break; God's anvil stands." The transmission of the Bible through thousands of copies into modern print has not tainted its purity. No other book in history has been exposed to similar processes to protect and maintain such accuracy of transmission. Only the sovereign control of God through the centuries can account for such an act. Careful study of the Bible and its history will convince the reader that it is a miracle book, one that man could not have written if he would have written if he could.

The benefits of God's Word

An effective church will have a clear conviction about the benefit of Scripture. If church leaders do not embrace the conviction that the Bible makes any difference in the lives of those who listen, they will become a church without power and light. A high view of the inspiration of Scripture and an unshakeable dependence upon its authority will give one confidence in its ability to transform lives. If in fact the Bible is the inspired Word of God, then it can be trusted to provide and accomplish that which it claims.

A cursory survey of just a few claims of God's Word regarding its benefit is quite astounding. In the Old Testament, Joshua 1:8 promises "prosperity" and "success" for the one who digests and obeys the Law. Psalm 19:7-11 says it converts (restores) the soul, makes wise the simple, gives joy to the heart, and "enlightens" the eyes. The same passage describes the Word as "everlasting, true and righteous, invaluable, sweet to the taste." The writer goes on to claim that the Law provides both "warning" and "reward." Psalm 119:9-11 states that the Word of God is the agent for "cleaning from" and "avoidance of sin." Verse 105 of the same chapter says the Word provides "guidance" and "direction" for the future.

In the New Testament, Jesus Himself is equated with the Word of God in John 1:1, 14 and therefore embodies all of its power and benefits. While praying for His disciples in John 17:17, He defined the Word of God as "truth" and implied that it was God's primary "sanctifying" agent. Romans 10:17 says that it results in "faith." Regarding the Holy Scriptures, 2 Timothy 3:14-17 claims they give wisdom for "salvation", "teaching" about what is right, "rebuke" when one is wrong, "correction" for getting back on the right track, and "instruction" for living righteously, all for the purpose of "maturation" and "preparation" for service. Hebrews 4:12 describes it as "alive" and "sharp, penetrating" human nature and "detecting" and "analyzing" a person's most intimate and personal thoughts and feelings. First Peter 2:2 describes the Word of God as the milk that is necessary for spiritual "nourishment". Therefore, Scripture testifies that God's Word is by nature relevant, dynamic, and effectual. It will take root and radically affect the lives of those who receive it if it is faithfully proclaimed.

The Purpose of Scripture

A biblical church must also have a clear conviction regarding the purpose of the Bible. Confusion at this point is a serious problem in the modern church. Even though the Bible is inspired by God, authoritative by nature, and effectual for life changes does not mean that it addresses every question that arises in life. If a ministry overlooks this reality, its theology may be right while its message makes the Bible do and say things that it was never intended to do or say. The apostle Peter greeted his readers with a revealing reminder "Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowl-

edge of God and of Jesus our Lord; seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, in order that by them you might become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust". These verses contain several truths that are relevant for a consideration of the purpose for which God has given His Word. First, He desires that we know Him through Jesus Christ. Second, God's revelation contains everything that we need for getting that knowledge. Third, such knowledge is possible because we have inherited the divine nature. Fourth, that knowledge is fleshed out through godly living. In other words, God has given us everything we need to know Him and be transformed into His image.

From the beginning to the end, the Bible has one overarching theme, the redemption of God's creation. Scripture opens in Genesis with the story of man's fall from the likeness of God. Scripture closes in Revelation with the ultimate restoration of that likeness in His eternal presence. Everything in between describes God's plan of re-creation through Jesus Christ, a relationship with Whom involves the process of transformation into His likeness.

The Bible reveals the salvation process as a three-phased journey involving justification, sanctification, and glorification. Therefore, God's Word was not given to answer every question under the sun or to provide specific direction for every circumstance that might be encountered in life. Such is the work of God's Spirit, who applies the wisdom and knowledge of the Word to everyday life experiences (Luke 11:9-13; James 1:2-8). Instead, the Bible was given to lead people to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and to transform them into His likeness through godly living.

God's Word is the truth that is revealed in the Bible as part of the salvation process. Though the truth may inform certain principles that might be categorized as good, its primary intent is to bring people to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and mold them into His likeness. A faithful church will rightly interpret, exegete, and expose the mind of the Holy Spirit in every test of Scripture so as to give people the information God deemed necessary for life and godliness.

Scripture is true and altogether righteous. Psalm 119:9 tells us that God's Word is all-sufficient. "The judgments of the Lord are true; they are righteous altogether." The word "judgments" in this context refers to ordinances or divine verdicts from the bench of the Supreme Judge of the earth. The Bible is God's standard for judging life and eternal destiny of every person. Because Scripture is true, it is "righteous altogether." The implication of that phrase is that truthfulness produces a comprehensive righteousness in those who accept it.

Contrary to what many are teaching today, there is no need for additional revelations, visions, words of prophecy, or insights from modern psychology. In contrast to the theories of men, God's word is absolutely comprehensive. Rather than seeking something more than God's glorious revelation, Christians need only to study and obey what they already have. Scripture is sufficient.