

Bibliology: The Bible

by Greg Herrick

Greg Herrick's sermon on Bibliology explores the nature, authority, and interpretation of the Bible as God's revelation to humanity.

Scripture: Romans 1:18

Topics: "Bible Study", "Divine Revelation"

Description

Greg Herrick delves into the term Bibliology, focusing on key aspects such as revelation, inspiration, inerrancy, canonicity, illumination, and interpretation. He explains how revelation is God making Himself known through various means like miracles, conscience, and Scripture. Inspiration involves God superintending human authors to write His Word, emphasizing the importance of divine guidance and wisdom. Inerrancy asserts that Scripture is without error in all it affirms, serving as the final authority in matters of faith and practice. Canonicity explores the recognition of the sixty-six books of the Bible as God's rule for faith and life, highlighting the church's role in acknowledging the divine origin of Scripture. Illumination and interpretation discuss the Spirit's work in helping believers understand and apply Scripture, emphasizing the need for sound methods of interpretation and the transformative power of God's Word.

Transcript

The term Bibliology (from Greek biblos meaning "book") refers to the study of the nature of the Bible as revelation. It often includes such topics as revelation, inspiration, inerrancy, canonicity, illumination, and interpretation.

Revelation

We use the term "revelation" to translate the Greek term *apokavlyi* "apokalupsis, which means to "unveil" or "uncover." Biblically speaking, revelation is the act and process whereby God makes Himself known to men and angels. This he has done through miracles, visions, dreams, theophanies, providential control of history, conscience, Jesus Christ, and Scripture. Theologians have spoken of general revelation through nature (i.e., the created order), conscience, and providentially orchestrated history and special or particular revelation primarily in Christ and Scripture (Ps 19:1-6; Rom 1:18-20; 2:14-16; Acts 17:24-34; John 1:14-18). Thus general revelation is equally available to all men at all times and while it alone cannot save, it is nonetheless both essential and preparatory to special revelation.²

Inspiration

"Inspiration" is the theological word, derived from the Latin term *spiro*, used to refer to the process whereby God superintended the human authors of scripture so that what they wrote was simultaneously their own words as well the Word of God himself; God "breathed out" his words through the words (using the minds and personalities) of his spokespeople. Thus, through Spirit-inspired writings God has preserved an historical/theological record of his words and deeds and has given it to his covenant people as a means of grace that they might trust him fully and obey him implicitly. As a result of our sinfulness and finiteness we stand in need of such divine guidance and wisdom; scripture was inspired to that end.

Inspiration, however, is not limited to mechanical dictation (indeed, very little of it can be said to be mechanical in any way), as we might have, say, in the receiving of the Ten Commandments (or the letters to the churches in Revelation 2-3), but rather occurred in a variety of situations involving the writers as whole people (their minds, emotions, wills, etc.) in their own particular life situations (linguistic, religious, political, economic, etc.). The end product, however, was always God's Word to man through man (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:20-21) and carries God's "full weight and authority." Technically speaking, inspiration applies to the autographa (not copies or translations).

Some theologians have referred to the verbal (extending to the actual words, not just concepts), plenary (the entire Bible, not only those parts that seem to speak directly to issues of faith and practice) inspiration of Scripture. In our opinion, this is the view that (1) best corresponds to the view of OT writers, the prophets, Christ himself and his apostles, and (2) best represents the historic position/understanding of the church on this issue. Since the Enlightenment in France and Germany (17th/18th centuries), however, it has been fashionable to deny the verbal, plenary inspiration of Scripture in light of apparent historical inaccuracies and philosophical objections, particularly with the existence and nature of God as well as the limitations of language. But, while we can learn much from these views, we may safely set aside their antisupernaturalistic prejudices as both unfounded and contrary to the teaching of Jesus who himself strongly upheld the complete trustworthiness of Scripture without reserve (e.g., Matt 5:17-20).³

Inerrancy

Inerrancy, although not always properly defined, is a logical corollary to inspiration and in no way diminishes the human authorship of scripture. If what the authors of Scripture penned was indeed under the supernatural influence and guidance of the Holy Spirit (as is properly affirmed), then since God is true, what they wrote and affirmed is in all ways true as well. Thus inerrancy applies to the autographa and Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic copies insofar as they faithfully reproduce the autographa. The doctrine rightly teaches that the scriptures are without error in all that they affirm (i.e., properly interpreted), whether they refer to geographical, historical, or theological issues. Thus the scriptures are the final authority in matters of faith and practice and take precedence over tradition, culture, and creed. This doctrine also allows for different literary styles, poor grammar, approximations in numbers, etc. (Psalm 119).⁴

Canonicity

The sixty-six books of scripture constitute the Protestant canon in that they provide God's rule for faith and life. The process of canonicity involves the church's recognition of the divine origin and authority of the sixty-six books of scripture. She, as the redeemed community, constituted of those who have genuine faith in Jesus Christ, is qualified for this task. It is important to note, however, that she did not determine which books were canonical, but only recognized those books which were canonical; scripture is

self-authenticating. In the case of the Old Testament, generally speaking, she received it as the authoritative Bible of her Lord and his apostles, i.e., the prophetic message of God which was now fulfilled in and through Christ. In the case of the New Testament, the church, by applying varying tests such as apostolicity (was it written by an apostle or authenticated by an apostle?), universality (was it widely read and accepted?), and character (sufficiently spiritual, directed at godliness, doctrinal content in agreement with other apostles) recognized which books were "from the Lord" and which were not, though the process was by no means finalized by the end of the first century. In AD 367, in the 39th Easter Letter of Athanasius, we find a list of the 27 books of the NT we have today. This list was accepted by the churches east of the Mediterranean while churches in the west came to accept the same list some 30 years later, in AD 397, at the Council of Carthage.⁵

There are undoubtedly many reasons which prompted early Christians to preserve the writings of the apostles, but perhaps the passing away of the apostles as well as the development of heresies (e.g., Marcion) and doctrinal disputes, were two of the most significant, negatively viewed. Also, the Diocletian persecution (AD 303-11), in which Christians were tortured, their property taken, and their sacred books destroyed by fire, undoubtedly helped to move the church along in its recognition of which books were sacred (i.e., inspired) and which were not. That is, there arose the need to know which books to copy and preserve in light of the possibility that the state continue to try and destroy the faith.

The extent of the canon has been in some question among Protestants and Catholics since the addition of the Apocrypha at the Council of Trent (AD 1545-63). Anyone who has read these books will find them spiritually encouraging, much the same as reading great Christian literature, but they should not be regarded as on par with the 66 books, a fact which is recognized even by the Catholic church in its reference to them as deuterocanonical.

Illumination

Illumination refers to the work of the Spirit in the believer/believing community enabling him/her/them to understand, welcome, and apply inscripturated truth (cf. 1 Cor 2:9-14).⁶ For our part, we are to follow sound methods of interpretation in keeping with the nature of Scripture and generally accepted principles for understanding written communication. Further, we are, by faith in Christ, to put into practice that which the Scripture teaches us, lest we become blinded by our accumulated ignorance (James 1:21-22) and progressively blurred in our comprehension of spiritual realities. In this way illumination increases and our grip on the truth strengthens (or perhaps its grip on us!). See also the next section, entitled, "Interpretation."

Interpretation

If Illumination is the work of the Spirit to help believers understand and apply Scripture, interpretation, broadly conceived, is the thought-through method we should follow in this endeavor. Interpretation involves, then, three elements: (1) coming to scripture humbly with a knowledge of my presuppositions, traditions, and cultural influences so as not to blunt or skew the force of scripture (but rather to allow it to leave its mark on me); (2) understanding what an author meant when he said such and such, and (3) understanding what he means, that is, how it applies to our lives today. Thus, in the first step we are interested in gaining an awareness of how our culture, tradition, and past acquaintance with Scripture has affected us. In the second step we are interested in the grammatical-historical meaning of a passage of Scripture. In order to achieve this we study the words of a text in their historical context, the literary

structure of a passage, its mood, and the kind (genre) of literature it is. Combined with this is the comparing of scripture with scripture (e.g., interpreting the obscure by the clear) and ultimately the teaching of the Bible as a whole. In this way, and through the illuminating work of the Spirit, the church comes to grips with the meaning and abiding relevance of Scripture.

But this is only half the job. Moses did not write Deuteronomy and Paul did not pen Philippians simply to be understood (i.e., between one's ears). Rather, they wrote to save, guide, instruct, and orient other believers to God's will. In short, their writings call for a response and this involves first letting the Bible speak to me; convicting, educating, encouraging, and showing me where to go. I must bring my presuppositions and patterns of life to the passage and allow it to judge and straighten. Then I must allow the Scripture--as the very voice of God himself--to speak to my community and the larger world-context in which I live. The Lordship of Christ extends to the entire universe! And we must remember that his word is a primary way in which he expresses his grace oriented, kingly rule over us.⁷

2 The objective revelation of God through nature, history, and conscience (human nature) is not extinguished because of man's fall (see Psalm 19:1-6; Rom 2:14-15; Acts 17:26-27), but is seriously distorted through suppression and deliberate contempt (Rom 1:18-20).

3 For a discussion of this issue, see Ronald Nash, *The Word of God and the Mind of Man* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1982). For some philosophical reflections on the reasonableness of God speaking, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995).

4 For further discussion of this and related topics, consult the series of articles in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980).

5 For more information on the canon of Scripture, see Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985); F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988); Harry Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning*, *New Testament Series*, ed. Dan O. Via (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: University Press, 1987).

6 The entire passage from 2:6-16 has received no little attention in recent years. But even though there are disagreements regarding grammar, background, and theological emphases, there can be little doubt that the relevant thought for our purposes is quite clear: man in his unregenerate and carnal state cannot understand and accept the things of God (e.g., the cross-centered gospel), whereas the believer, who enjoys the enlightening ministry of the Spirit (cf. Eph 1:18), is able to welcome God's truth--now preserved for us in Scripture--in a deeply personal and transformative way. See Marion L. Soards, *1 Corinthians* NIBC, ed. W. Ward Gasque (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 62-63.

7 Some good introductory works on biblical interpretation include: Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993); Leland Ryken, *How To Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984); Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994); William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard (Dallas: Word, 1993); Moisés, Silva, ed., *Foundations*

of Contemporary Interpretation: Six Volumes in One (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Grant Osborne, The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Criticism (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991).

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