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Christian Beliefs

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1 What Is the Bible?

Any responsible look at a single Christian belief should be based on what God says about that subject. Therefore, as we begin to look at a series of basic Christian beliefs, it makes sense to start with the basis for these beliefs—God’s words, or the Bible. One topic the Bible thoroughly covers is itself; that is, the Bible tells us what God thinks about his very words. God’s opinion of his words can be broken down into four general categories: authority, clarity, necessity, and sufficiency.

The Authority of the Bible

All the words in the Bible are God’s words. Therefore, to disbelieve or disobey them is to disbelieve or disobey God himself. Oftentimes, passages in the Old Testament are introduced with the phrase, “Thus says the LORD” (see Ex. 4:22; Josh. 24:2; 1 Sam. 10:18; Isa. 10:24; also Deut. 18:18–20; Jer. 1:9). This phrase, understood to be like the command of a king, indicated that what followed was to be obeyed without challenge or question. Even the words in the Old Testament not attributed as direct quotes from God are considered to be God’s words. Paul, in 2 Timothy 3:16, makes this clear when he writes that “all Scripture is breathed out by God.”

The New Testament also affirms that its words are the very words of God. In 2 Peter 3:16, Peter refers to all of Paul’s letters as one part of the “Scriptures.” This means that Peter, and the early church, considered Paul’s writings to be in the same category as the Old Testament writings. Therefore, they considered Paul’s writings to be the very words of God.

In addition, Paul, in 1 Timothy 5:18, writes that “the Scripture says” two things: “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain” and “The laborer deserves his wages.” The first quote regarding an ox comes from the Old Testament; it is found in Deuteronomy 25:4. The second comes from the New Testament; it is found in Luke 10:7. Paul, without any hesitation, quotes from both the Old and New Testaments, calling them both “Scripture.” Therefore, again, the words of the New Testament are considered to be the very words of God. That is why Paul could write, “the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord” (1 Cor. 14:37).

Since the Old and New Testament writings are both considered Scripture, it is right to say they are both, in the words of 2 Timothy 3:16, “breathed out by God.” This makes sense when we consider Jesus’ promise that the Holy Spirit would “bring to” the disciples’ “remembrance” all that Jesus said to them (John 14:26). It was as the disciples wrote the Spirit-enabled words, that books such as Matthew, John, and 1 and 2 Peter were written.

The Bible says there are “many ways” (Heb. 1:1) in which the actual words of the Bible were written. Sometimes God spoke directly to the author, who simply recorded what he heard (Rev. 2:1, 8, 12). At other times the author based much of his writings on interviews and research (Luke 1:1–3). And at other times, the Holy Spirit brought to mind things that Jesus taught (John 14:26). Regardless of the way the words came to the authors, the words they put down were an extension of them—their personalities, skills, backgrounds, and training. But they were also exactly the words God wanted them to write—the very words that God claims as his own.

If God claims that the words of Scripture are his own, then there is ultimately no higher authority one can appeal to for proof of this claim than Scripture itself. For what authority could be higher than God? So, Scripture ultimately gains its authority from itself. But the claims of Scripture only become our personal convictions through the work of the Holy Spirit in an individual’s heart.

The Holy Spirit doesn't change the words of Scripture in any way; he doesn't supernaturally make them become the words of God (for they always have been). He does, however, change the reader of Scripture. The Holy Spirit makes readers realize the Bible is unlike any book they have ever read. Through reading, they believe that the words of Scripture are the very words of God himself. It is as Jesus said in John 10:27: "My sheep hear my voice ... and they follow me." Other kinds of arguments (such as historical reliability, internal consistency, fulfilled prophecies, influence on others, and the majestic beauty and wisdom of the content) can be useful in helping us see the reasonableness of the claims of the Bible.

As God's very words, the words of Scripture are more than simply true; they are truth itself (John 17:17). They are the final measure by which all supposed truth is to be gauged. Therefore, that which conforms to Scripture is true; that which doesn't conform to Scripture is not true. New scientific or historical facts may cause us to reexamine our interpretation of Scripture, but they will never directly contradict Scripture.

The truth of the Scriptures does not demand that the Bible report events with exact, scientific detail (though all the details it does report are true). Nor does it demand that the Bible tell us everything we need to know or ever could know about a subject. It never makes either of these claims. In addition, because it was written by ordinary men in an ordinary language with an ordinary style, it does contain loose or free quotations and some uncommon and unusual forms of grammar or spelling. But these are not matters of truthfulness. The Bible does not, in its original form, affirm anything contrary to fact.

If the Bible does affirm something contrary to fact, then it cannot be trusted. And if the Bible cannot be trusted, then God himself cannot be trusted. To believe that the Bible affirms something false would be to disbelieve God himself. To disbelieve God himself is to place yourself as a higher authority with a deeper, more developed understanding on a topic or topics than God himself.

Therefore, since the Bible affirms that it is the very words of God, we are to seek to understand those words, for in doing so, we are seeking to understand God himself. We are to seek to trust the words of Scripture, for in doing so, we are seeking to trust God himself. And we are to seek to obey the words of Scripture, for in doing so, we are seeking to obey God himself.

The Clarity of Scripture

As we read Scripture and seek to understand it, we discover that some passages are easier to understand than others. Although some passages may at first seem difficult to grasp, the Bible is written in such a way that all things necessary to become a Christian, live as a Christian, and grow as a Christian are clear.

There are some mysteries in Scripture, but they should not overwhelm us in our reading. For “the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple” (Ps. 19:7). And “the unfolding” of God’s “words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple” (Ps. 119:130). God’s Word is so understandable and clear that even the simple (people who lack sound judgment) can be made wise by it.

Since the things of God are “spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14), a proper understanding of Scripture is often more the result of an individual’s spiritual condition than his or her intellectual ability. Often the truth of Scripture will appear to be “folly” to those who have rejected the claims of Jesus (v. 14).

This does not mean, however, that every Bible-related misunderstanding is due to a person’s spiritual condition. There are many people—many godly, Christian people—who have greatly misunderstood some part of Scripture. Often the disciples misunderstood what Jesus was talking about (see Matt. 15:16, for example). Sometimes this was due to their hardened hearts (Luke 24:25); at other times it was because they needed to wait for further events and understanding (John 12:16). In addition, members of the early church did not always agree on the meaning of what was written in Scripture (see Acts 15 and Gal. 2:11–15 for examples of this).