

## **The Word of God and the God of the Word**

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Christians are born of God, and the new life always shows itself by a close relationship to His word. This is because scripture is the instrument of our new birth: “Being born again ... by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever” (1 Peter 1:23). In our regeneration, God imparted spiritual life to us through the Word. It brought us into saving union with Christ and made us alive in Him. We entered a new world of grace. Not only the Lord, but also the Bible became our treasure. We feel a debt of love to the Book that conveyed life and Christ to our souls.

### **Divine nature**

The new birth also made us “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). We have a nature that is akin to God: holy, spiritual, and heavenly. This shows itself by sympathy with God in everything — including all He has revealed in His word. It has made the Bible a new book to us. Before, it was closed, because “the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God” Flesh and blood cannot relate to the divine and spiritual (Matthew 16:17). But for us now, these things are “spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14,15). By the miracle of regeneration, God’s book is open to us and we are open to it.

### **Expression**

David in Psalm 119 expresses his relationship with Scripture in words that almost fall over each other. He longs to “keep thy statutes,” has “hid” God’s Word in his heart,” has “rejoiced in the way of thy testimonies,” will “meditate upon thy precepts,” will “delight myself in thy statutes,” prays to “behold wondrous things out of thy law,” makes “Thy testimonies ... my counsellors,” and that is only 24 verses into a total of 176! All the utterances of Psalm 119 about prayer, profession, and practice can only be understood by the new birth and the resultant love for God’s Word.

Considering our relationship to God’s Word like this is important. Such supernatural appreciation is one of the clearest evidences of the new birth. What a marvel of mercy that we esteem it like this, when countless others care nothing for these precious oracles! Moreover, no Christian can thrive apart from his Bible, any more than a plant can thrive without moisture and sunshine. Our sanctification and comfort will be in direct proportion to our reading, hearing and obeying all that God will say to us through His written word.

### **God Himself**

The title of this article suggests another relationship with the Bible: that which God Himself has. This is not an area that is considered very much. However, Scripture teaches that God stands very close indeed to the Word He has given. So close, that He and His word are almost interchangeable. We must therefore have the highest view of Scripture, and consider the implications of this relationship for ourselves. Let us follow these through: we shall find them challenging, and yet deeply comforting.

### **Metaphors**

The metaphors for God in Scripture show this remarkable identification of God with His Word. Take one of the commonest ones, that of “fire.” He is called “a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:29) – yet, His Word is likened to fire also: “Is not my

word like as a fire? saith the LORD” (Jeremiah 23:29). This equates God with the Word He speaks. God and His written word are seen as one. Another common metaphor is “light.” “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). And this is precisely what His Word is likened to as well: “O send out thy light and thy truth: let them lead me” (Psalm 43:3).

### **Extravagant**

David seems almost extravagant in his inspired description of God’s Word in Psalm 138:2: “thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name.” He means this: great as the sum of God’s attributes are (His name), yet greater still is His word because it reveals them. In the Holy Scriptures, we see the Holy God manifested and glorified. Therefore, that which alone can show us God can be said to be greater and “above” the name of God.

“To my mind,” wrote J.C. Philpot, “it is one of the most remarkable expressions in the whole book of God. The name of God includes all the perfections of God; everything that God is, and which God has revealed Himself as having—His justice, majesty, holiness, greatness, and glory, and whatever He is in Himself, that is God’s name. And yet He has ‘magnified’ something ‘above his name’—His word—His truth.” This notable verse allies the written word so closely with God’s name that they are inseparable. We know what solemn warnings guard that sacred name (for example, the 3rd Commandment: “Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain”). No less reverence is due to the Word that God Himself has placed above His own name.

### **Other verses**

Some other verses, too, show the closest possible identification of God with His word. For instance: Psa. 119:89 “For ever, O LORD, thy word is settled in heaven” — but that is true also of God on His throne above (2 Chronicles 20:6). In 2 Thessalonians 3:1 Paul wants the “word of the Lord to ...be glorified,” (cf Acts 13:48) — something that we can only say of God, who will not give His glory to another (Isaiah 42:8). “The Word of God” in 1 Peter 1:23 “liveth and abideth for ever” — just like the everlasting God (Isaiah 40:28). Three times in Psalm 56 David says he will praise God’s Word (verses 4 and 10) — just like in many other psalms he says he will praise the LORD.

We find another striking example in the tragic end of King Saul: “So Saul died for his transgression which he committed against the LORD, even against the word of the LORD, which he kept not” (1 Chronicles 10:13). The two parts of this sentence in italics remind us that to defy the Word of God is to defy the God of the Word. What a solemn thought!

Again, in Acts 13:27 Paul preaches Christ to the congregation at Antioch Pisidia. He mentions the ignorance of the Jerusalem Jews, who should have known the promises in the prophets concerning the Messiah. Paul brings the Person of Christ and these written prophecies together: “they knew him not, nor yet the voices of the prophets which are read every sabbath day.” In other words, they could have known Christ through the prophetic words concerning Him, because the Spirit of Christ (the Spirit who reveals Christ) was speaking in them (1 Peter 1:11). Not to know Christ is not to know the divine word concerning Him, and vice versa. This equates the Lord with the Word so closely that they appear as equivalent.

The Living and written word

In the prologue of John's Gospel, Christ is called "the Word" — meaning the One who speaks from God and reveals God to us (John 1:1). The Son, now incarnate, is all that God wants to say to us. He is His supreme communication: God "hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son" (Hebrews 1:2). In Jesus Christ, we have God's living and personal Word.

This expression "the Word," of course, is also used of the Scriptures (Deuteronomy 4:2; Isaiah 1:10). Readers of our magazine will not need reminding that the closest possible identification exists between Christ and the Scriptures: the Living and the written Word of God. While we must be careful to maintain the distinction between the two, nonetheless, Scripture uses the same expression for our Lord and our Bible. Joseph Hart's lines are pertinent here:

Say, Christian, wouldst thou thrive  
In knowledge of thy Lord?  
Against no Scripture ever strive,  
But tremble at His word.

The Scriptures and the Lord  
Bear one tremendous name;  
The written and the incarnate Word  
In all things are the same.

In passing, here is a precious lesson. We long for more of Christ (the living Word) — how is this satisfied? Through the written word. Our Lord will come to us in our Bibles, "the word of Christ" (Colossians 3:16). We do not know our Lord by mysticism but by Spirit-taught reading and hearing. He told the Jews to "Search the scriptures; for ... they ... testify of me" (John 5:39). "Rabbi" Duncan once said: "All the communion we have with God on earth is maintained by means of the written Word." [1] This is equally true of our communion with His beloved Son.

### **Consequences**

From what we have said so far, certain consequences follow. If God and His Word are one, then ...

1. Divine inspiration is more than God just guiding men to write the Scriptures "Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter 1:21). That inward prompting of the mind to write God's words resulted in revealed truth, without any falsehood or even mistake. Divinely inspired men produced divinely inerrant writings. Of this we are in no doubt.

However, we can be just as sure of something at a deeper level too. In divine inspiration, God has imparted to Scripture the same qualities that belong to Himself. This is why, as we noted earlier, the things that the Bible predicates of God it predicates of the Scriptures also. Like God, they are holy (2 Timothy 3:15), perfect (Psalm 19:7), eternal (1 Peter 1:23), truth (James 1:18), and so on. His glory, immutability, wisdom, grace, and beauty belong to His word as well. Therefore, the Bible can be said to be the product of God, bearing all the properties of its Author.

Paul's words in 2 Timothy 3:16 confirm this: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God," literally "God-breathed" (the Greek is *theopneustos* — from two words: "God" and "breathe or blow"). The thought here is that Scripture emanates from God, it is an extension of God. Like a man who speaks – his words flow out of him, on his breath – so we cannot separate God from what he says. The Puritans used to say that the two testaments are the two lips of God's mouth, and that is not going too far.

## 2. This must settle for us the question of the Bible's transmission

The distance between the original manuscripts of the Old and New Testaments and our own day is very great. Moses, the prophets, and the apostles were inspired to write these autographs, but they have perished long ago. Centuries of copies and translations separate these originals and us. The question is: What about this distance? How "intact" is the Bible? Do we have God's authentic Word now?

We could answer this question satisfactorily in terms of textual scholarship, and the historical transmission of the text. Abundant evidence exists to support our belief that we have the same Word today that the Church has always had. Under God, we are indebted to godly and erudite men for their researches in this area, men like Dean Burgon, Edward Miller, Bishop Thompson, Edward F. Hills, David Otis Fuller, Dr. D.A. Waite, and others. [2]

However, a more straightforward and believing answer is this: God and His Word are one. Therefore, He is not going to overlook this question of the transmission of the scripture. It belongs too much to Himself, to His honour and glory for that. [3] We believe He has providentially preserved His Word in the Massoretic Text of the Old Testament and the Received Text of the New Testament. He has sovereignly ensured that a pure stream of copies have come down to us, and are faithfully translated in our Authorised Version. We can hold in our hands this English translation and say with the utmost confidence: "Here is the Word of God: inerrant, full, perfect, authoritative, sufficient"

## 3] We owe to the Bible all that we owe to God

We cannot separate God and His word. Modernists have customarily evaded this high doctrine of scripture by accusing us of "bibliolatry" (superstitious reverence, worship of the Bible) or, that we venerate "a paper pope." More subtly, their slogan is: "God is bigger than the Bible." This clever attempt to divorce God from His word proved effective in the nineteenth century Downgrade, when many evangelicals let go of inerrancy and still thought they could walk with God. Spurgeon, with his usual perception, denounced this:

"Let us see to it that we set forth our Lord Jesus Christ as the infallible Teacher through His inspired Word. I do not understand that loyalty to Christ which is accompanied by indifference to His words. How can we reverence His Person if His own words and the words of His apostles are treated with disrespect? Unless we receive Christ's words we cannot receive Christ; and unless we receive His apostles' words we do not receive Christ; for John says 'He that knoweth God, heareth us: he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.'" [4]

The human casualties of succumbing to “the assured results of modern scholarship” were numerous. An example is Hebert Edward Ryle (1856-1925). Brought up in the staunchly evangelical home of J.C. Ryle, he at first professed saving faith and had an evangelical outlook. After a brilliant career at Cambridge, however, he won distinction as “a moderate and cautious Old Testament critic.” His gospel sermons were called “wonderfully simple and simply wonderful.” Yet this man supported moves to legalise Romish vestments in the Established Church, and during his last illness, when he was Dean of Westminster, he “never spoke either to Mrs. Ryle or to his son about the future or about religion.” [5] Any departure from a supernatural Bible is a departure from the living God. Modernists and liberals are guilty, tragic people who have yet to face the full consequences of their unbelief.

However, professing Christians these days are nearly as guilty when they say such things as: “I love my Bible, but I love my God more.” Such a slogan is used by New Evangelicals, who are indifferent to whether the New Testament is preserved in the Received Text or whether it is still evolving in the modern critical texts. With their patronising air and detached scholarship, they do not commend themselves as those who, like our forefathers, would be prepared to die for the Word of God. Zeal for God (Numbers 25:11) must be matched by zeal for His word; otherwise it is a zeal without knowledge.

Other Christians say something like: “I know what the Bible says, but the Lord has told me...” Since the 1960s, the Charismatic Movement has made this a hallmark of spirituality. After all, direct guidance from the Lord seems more impressive than reading God’s will in the Bible. This is disobedience to God dressed as piety, for it drives a wedge between what God says and God Himself. It cannot, and must not, be done.

Christians generally fall for this too, when they make subjective experience, and not objective Scripture, their authority. It often takes the form of justifying what we want to do, in the face of the clear teaching of the Bible. Jonah was given a clear word of command (Jonah 1:1,2): his desire went in the opposite direction to God’s will (verse 3). Finding at Joppa the ship bound for Tarshish may have seemed providentially confirming — until the storm and the great fish brought him back to reality. How many Christians have stepped outside the will of God because, rather than submitting to clear biblical principle, they preferred to believe that the Lord had dealt with them in a different way. Marriage to unbelievers, going to questionable places to socialise, dubious decisions affecting the future are just some of the snares that await us if we, for a moment, cease to have our footsteps ordered in God’s Word (Psalm 119:133).

Yet others can know what God in His Word says on a range of issues, yet instead of bowing to divine authority, they follow courses that promise “results” or that will safeguard their reputation. Here, the end justifies the means (Romans 3:8). How many ministers have caved in to the pressure for contemporaneity in their churches! Whether it has been the music band, modern worship songs, the modern Bible translation (usually in the Sunday School at first), a relaxed and jovial leading of “worship,” barn dances on Saturday evenings — the appeal has not been to what God wants in His church but what the people (and outsiders) want.

This new Downgrade is gathering momentum at a frightening pace. A minister friend in one of the UK's major cities shared with me his concern about this and was organising a conference to tackle these issues. He could not count on the support of another church in that whole city of over half a million people! Yet, only twenty years ago numbers of those evangelical churches would have rallied to such a cause. "We are going downhill at an alarming rate," wrote Spurgeon of the Downgrade in his day. The same could be said of us.

The "poor and contrite heart" that trembles before God is the same that must "tremble at His Word" (Isaiah 66:2). We owe the same obedience to the Scriptures as we owe to God Himself. If we do not, by our obedience, esteem the Word as we esteem God we bow to an idol whose name is "Self-will." This is only a more sophisticated history of the Judges, Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, together with the prophets who came from God to reprove such arrogance and warn of judgment if the people did not repent. That judgment may well have overtaken us already. May God have mercy on us and open our eyes before it is too late!

The Bible is of God. Everything that is true of God is true of the Scriptures. The Word of God and the God of the Word are distinct, and yet one. As someone once stated: "We should almost worship the Bible." [6] We are not in danger of misunderstanding what he meant. We are persuaded that we love God no more than we love the Bible, and how we treat the Bible is how we treat God Himself.

[1] Just a Talker, Sayings of John ("Rabbi") Duncan, John M. Brentnall, Banner of Truth, page 10.

[2] A popular yet thorough treatment of this subject is The Lord Gave the Word: A Study in the History of the Biblical Text by Malcolm H. Watts. This 28-page booklet is published by the Trinitarian Bible Society and should be read by every Christian. It is available from TBS Headquarters: Tyndale House, Dorset Road, London SW19 3NN. Tel. 0181 543 7857.

[3] In Psalm 119:89,90 the poetic parallelism is important. It runs:  
"For ever, O LORD, thy word is settled in heaven.

Thy faithfulness is unto all generations."

This equates God's Word with His attribute of faithfulness, once again uniting God and His word in the closest manner. It also means that such "faithfulness unto all generations" will be seen in preserving His word to all generations. If His word is safe in heaven, can God's faithfulness fail to keep it safe for us on earth until the end of time?

[4] These words, and many others like them, came from his monthly magazine The Sword and the Trowel, and The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit from 1887 and onwards until his death in 1892.

[5] See The Forgotten Spurgeon, Iain Murray, Banner of Truth 1973, page 194, footnote.

[6] Rev. J. Alec Motyer, spoken at a meeting for students in Bristol, in the 1950s.