

Theology for Presbyterians

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The Bible for Presbyterians

Scripture

Hebrews 1:1–2 This passage points us to God’s speaking to the people of Israel and then most fully in Jesus Christ.

2 Timothy 3:14–17 This passage points us to the work of the Holy Spirit in inspiring the Scriptures and their practical use in our lives.

2 Peter 1:19–21 This passage speaks of the work of the Holy Spirit in inspiring humans to convey God’s Word.

Prayer

O God, your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. Thank you for speaking to us and revealing your divine will and desires for this world. We praise you for the Holy Scriptures, which enable us to know you and through which you reach out to love us in Jesus Christ. Open us to hear your Word, to obey, and to live lives of service to you in the church and in the world. Bless us by your Word. Help us to share your Word with others. Through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Introduction

A man went into a bookstore and asked the owner if the store sold Bibles. The owner replied, “No, but I have something just as good.”

Reformed and Presbyterian Christians join with other Christians in rejecting this assessment. There is nothing “just as good” as the Bible!

Holy Scripture holds a unique and authoritative place in the life of Christian churches. Our tradition has been especially concerned about grounding our theological understandings in Scripture and affirming the key place of the Bible in our lives of faith. We emphasize not only what the Bible is, but what the Bible does. This is not to say that we wish to practice “bibliolatry”—the “worship” of the Scriptures, in and of themselves. Sometimes, unfortunately, Reformed Christians may give that impression.

Rather, we see the Bible as central to Christian faith, not because it possesses special “powers” in a “Harry Potter” kind of way. Rather, Scripture is our primary source of knowing who God is and what God has done, especially in Jesus Christ. For this reason, we

recognize the Bible's unique status. The Bible is where we turn to learn about our Christian faith. In the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, the church hears the voice of God and sees the actions of God as in no other place.

Often, controversies in the church can be traced to different views about the nature of the Bible and its appropriate interpretation. So it is helpful to consider what kind of book we believe the Bible to be and what its important characteristics are.

If one believes the Bible is intended to convey information that is historically and scientifically verifiable to contemporary people, then one will interpret the Bible in that light. If the nature of the Bible is seen as a record of the religious experiences of ancient peoples whereby issues of historical or scientific "accuracy" are not important, then a different perspective on interpretation will emerge. Conflicting interpretations of texts follow from these different views of the nature of Scripture. These clashes can generate more "heat" than "light"!

Word of God

An important and familiar description of the Bible is "Word of God." This was an emphasis of the Protestant Reformation that was captured by the Reformed leader Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575), who wrote in *The Second Helvetic Confession*: "We believe and confess the canonical Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles of both Testaments to be the true Word of God, and to have sufficient authority of themselves, not of men. For God himself spoke to the fathers, prophets, apostles, and still speaks to us through the Holy Scriptures."¹

Several important ideas are here. The first is that we believe both the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God. Sometimes the Old Testament (Hebrew Scriptures) is slighted in the church. Some think the Old Testament is not as important as the New, or that the Old Testament is just a "prelude" to the New Testament and the coming of Jesus.

However, the Christian church early rejected the view that the two Testaments are not equal to each other. Reformed churches have always emphasized that both the Old and New Testaments convey to us who God is and what God has done. The Old Testament anticipates the New Testament; and the New Testament must be

1. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Confessions: Study Guide* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1999), 5.001.

understood in light of what God was doing in the Old Testament. Therefore, the Bible is “one book” with its two testaments. It is “one book” in the sense that there is continuity between the God of Israel, found in the Old Testament, and the God of the New Testament, who is known in Jesus Christ.

A second important thing to notice is that God speaks through the Scriptures, both in the past and in the present. The book of Hebrews begins by saying: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” (Hebrews 1:1). Throughout the Old Testament, we find God “speaking” and that “the word of the Lord came to . . .”²

God’s “speaking” of God’s “word” is active and powerful. It brings immediate results, as when “God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (Genesis 1:3). God’s speaking express God’s will and purposes. When God speaks, things happen! Things happen because it is God’s desire. “Word of God” is an expression of how God’s will is enacted.

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The church has called Scripture the “Word of God” because it is our source of knowing God’s will and purposes. We know what God wants because of what God has communicated. Scripture is the record or witness of people of faith who have passed along the writings and traditions of what they believe God has said and done. All this makes the Bible a very special and unique book. The Christian conviction is that Scripture can be called “Word of God.”

Revelation, Authority, Inspiration

To designate Scripture as “Word of God” does not answer every question. Far from it! Some further terms are needed to gain a fuller picture of what the church believes the nature of Scripture to be.

Revelation. One important term is “revelation.” This word may make you think of the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation.

2. See, among many references, the following: 1 Samuel 3:21—4:1a; Jeremiah 1:4; Ezekiel 7:1; Jonah 1:1; Hosea 4:1; etc.

The term itself means an “uncovering,” a “revealing.” What is hidden is now made known. The book of Revelation “unveils” God’s actions, although with all the strange images in that book, its interpretation is not easy!

Theologically, “revelation” means the God who is “hidden” has now been “made known.” The great God, the creator of all things, has communicated with humans and has become “known.” God has been “revealed.”

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The Bible is considered the “revelation of God” because it is through Scripture that God is known. Through Scripture God communicates God’s self to human beings. The Bible tells us of a God who is creator and redeemer of the world and of the humans within it.

God “makes the first move” to become known to us human beings. In the church, we receive the Scriptures as the “place” where we encounter the creator and redeemer God, and where the will and purposes of God are made known. The Bible is the source of our knowledge of God, the source of God’s revelation. The Bible is the means of God’s self-communication.

Authority. A second important term associated with the Bible is “authority.” This term can have many meanings. The church speaks of the authority of Scripture. However, “authority” refers to the way in which God’s revelation in Scripture becomes “real” for us, here and now. It is a way of recognizing who God is and what God has done and responding to these realities. God’s revelation in Scripture has an importance, a value, a normative influence—or “authority” for our lives.

Through the Scriptures, God speaks. We listen for God’s voice in Scripture. We affirm it is in the Scriptures that the church “hears the word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated.”³ The Bible has authority because it conveys to us the Word of God.

3. *The Confession of 1967*, in *The Book of Confessions*, Part I of *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*. Copyright © 2004 by the Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 9.27.

Inspiration. Christians have also confessed that Scripture is “inspired” by God. Two New Testament verses have been important in understanding what is involved here.

Second Timothy 3:16–17 indicates that the Holy Spirit inspires Scripture that it may be “useful” to equip “everyone who belongs to God” for “every good work.” The inspiration of Scripture is by the Holy Spirit, and Scripture is given to carry out very practical purposes.

Second Peter 1:21 indicates that the Holy Spirit inspires persons who “spoke from God.” The Spirit works in and through human persons, with all their varying personalities. Therefore, “inspiration” has a “divine” origin, but is also a very “human” activity.

Word and Spirit

The Bible is the source of it all, the place to which we turn to come to know God—who God is and what God has done, and to know what God wills and desires for the life and ministries of God’s people.

In the Reformed tradition, we believe people come to recognize Scripture as the Word of God or the revelation of God by the work of the Holy Spirit. John Calvin spoke of the “internal witness [testimony] of the Holy Spirit,” which brings us this conviction. Calvin wrote: “We ought to seek our conviction in a higher place than human reasons, judgments, or conjectures, that is, in the secret testimony of the Spirit.”⁴ For, the Word will not find acceptance in the human heart “before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit.”⁵ We do not need to try to produce reasons why Scripture is the Word of God. We can proclaim the Scriptures as they point to Jesus Christ and trust the inner work of the Holy Spirit to bring the conviction that Scripture is God’s Word, just as the Spirit witnesses to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

We believe “Word” and “Spirit” are inextricably bound up together. The Spirit inspired the Word. The Spirit illuminates our hearts to recognize Scripture as God’s Word. The Spirit also helps us interpret Scripture in the church. The Spirit makes Scripture “come alive” for us. This is why we say a Prayer for Illumination immediately before the reading of Scripture in our worship services.

4. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1.7.4. Cf. 3.11; 3.1.3f; 3.2.15, 33-36.

5. *Institutes*, 1.7.4.

The Word of God also helps us interpret the Holy Spirit. Often people think the Holy Spirit is calling them to pursue a certain direction or action. One “test” is to ask whether the decision or action is in accord with what we find in God’s revelation. The Holy Spirit will not lead us in directions contrary to what Scripture teaches. Word and Spirit work together to bring us to theological insights and understandings.

The Bible is vitally important for us as Reformed and Presbyterian Christians. We try to say what we believe about Scripture. However, Scripture is more than simply a “dead letter” or a theological idea. God speaks to us in the church and as individuals by the Holy Spirit through a “living document.” To know God and God’s will, we turn to the Bible. We listen, we hear, and we obey the voice of the God who is revealed to us in the Scriptures and most supremely in Jesus Christ.

Spiritual Practice

Offer prayers of thanksgiving for the experiences in which God has guided you by means of the reading of Scripture.

Think of areas in life where you need God’s direction. Ask God to help you interpret Scripture with the help of the Holy Spirit and to lead you in God’s ways.

Questions for Reflection

What are some other ways to describe the nature of Scripture besides “Word of God”?

What are the dangers of overemphasizing either “Word” or “Spirit” and not seeing ways the two work together?

In what ways does Scripture function in the church? in your own life?

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