

## **God's Word Alone: The Authority of Scripture**

Matthew Barrett

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### **A Brief Book Summary from Books At a Glance**

#### **About the Author**

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#### **Introduction**

In this contribution to the Five Solas Series, Barrett examines the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*. He looks at the teaching of the Reformers and the difference between their views and the view of the Roman Catholic Church on the matters of Scripture and Tradition. Barrett carefully expounds what *sola Scriptura* is and also what it is not. He unfolds the attributes of Scripture and makes a cogent case for the authority, necessity, clarity, sufficiency, and inerrancy of Scripture, grounded in the fact that all Scripture is God-breathed and is God's Word. This is a very accessible historical, exegetical, and theological treatment.

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## Summary

### Chapter One

#### The Road to Reformation: Biblical Authority in the Sixteenth Century

As the sale of indulgences grew more corrupt and confusing, Luther posted his 95 Theses for academic debate. The underlying issue was one of authority: did the pope and the church have final authority, or was it the Word of God alone? Luther held that church councils and popes might err, but Scripture was infallible and the final authority. The pope was not an infallible interpreter of Scripture. Only Scripture was without error since it was God-breathed; popes and councils had all erred and contradicted one another. Despite being publicly censured and condemned, Luther refused to recant. Although the early church fathers believed that tradition was an important handmaid to interpreting Scripture, the Roman Catholic Church of Luther's day had made Tradition and Scripture equal in authority. In practical terms this made Tradition the final authority, since Tradition interpreted the Scriptures. One of the many problems with this position was that the Great Schism saw three popes existing at the same time, all excommunicating one another and their followers. There simply was no one "Tradition." One of the reasons Luther labored so diligently in Bible translation was that he truly believed the Scriptures would defeat the claims of his opponents.

Huldrych Zwingli also came to hold to *sola Scriptura*. He centered his teaching and preaching ministry on the successive exposition of biblical books. His opponents accused him of rejecting all tradition and thinking that tradition was irrelevant. Neither Zwingli nor Luther held this extreme position. They believed that tradition was important, but not of equal value and authority with Scripture. The radical reformers rejected tradition, but the mainstream reformers did not. Tyndale, like Luther, saw the need for translating the Scriptures into the vernacular of the people. They believed that Scripture interprets Scripture and that the Bible is a living book that transforms lives and changes minds.

John Calvin also contended for *sola Scriptura*. He meticulously pointed out corruptions, distortions, and contradictions in Catholic Tradition. In the *Institutes* Calvin clearly articulated a doctrine of Scripture. He argued that Scripture *is* the Word of God and therefore it receives its authority from God, not the church. As black and white attest to their own color, so Scripture attests to its own truth. Only the Holy Spirit—not human ability or reason—can convince us that Scripture is true, since we must hear God's voice in Scripture to know that God is the author of

it. All Scripture is infallible and inerrant and fully authoritative. Despite the arguments of the Reformers, the Roman Catholic Church persisted in holding to Tradition as an equal authority to Scripture, with the Church's Tradition being the infallible interpreter of Scripture. This is still the position the Catholic Church holds today.

## **Chapter Two**

### **The Modern Shift in Authority: The Enlightenment, Liberalism, and Liberalism's Nemeses**

The Enlightenment postulated that human reason alone was sufficient to throw off the shackles of religious tradition. Autonomous reason would allow people to have unbiased, objective knowledge. Human nature was good, not depraved, so special revelation was not required as a corrective. Descartes' methodological doubt severed human knowledge and certainty from God's revelation. At first, many thinkers thought that the Bible passed all tests of reason. Then some began to argue that if the Bible was reasonable, its truths could be known by reason alone. This led to the exaltation of reason over the Bible, with reason standing over Scripture as a judge. Deism precluded God's intervention in the world, which eliminated special revelation and left reason supreme. Rationalist biblical criticism (RBC) was not only a methodological approach to studying Scripture, it was based on a worldview of anti-supernaturalism. Proponents of RBC stripped away the supernatural and miracles, leaving behind only a small amount of moral content. The human interpreter was the autonomous authority over the text.

The nineteenth century saw the rise of a liberal theology that tried to construct a theology "from below" using human experience and knowledge. Schleiermacher is the single best representative of this school of thought. He placed the human experience of God-consciousness above the Bible, and instead of seeing the Bible as being from God, he taught that it was a record of people's feelings about God and their experiences. Critical biblical scholars in Germany began to search for the kernel of truth amidst the myths and errors in the Scriptures. The quests for the historical Jesus threw away his miracles and deity. Karl Barth was massively influential in his insistence that we need revelation from above. He did not equate the Bible with the Word of God, and he believed there were errors in Scripture, but he taught that the Bible becomes the word of God when God uses it as a tool to reveal himself and Christ. As many evangelicals have noted, however, Barth's view of Scripture is inadequate if all Scripture is God-breathed. Theologians like Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield at Old Princeton were bulwarks for the defense of the inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures. J. Gresham Machen published *Christianity and Liberalism*, a classic critique of liberalism and defense of Reformed orthodoxy. He argued that liberalism was actually another religion altogether, and he defended the Scriptures in a way which set the path for future generations of evangelicals.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Today's Crisis over Biblical Authority: Evangelicalism's Apologetic and the Postmodern Turn**

Conservatives broke into two main camps: the fundamentalists separated from culture, whereas the evangelicals tried to engage culture. Both groups upheld inspiration and inerrancy. But many conservatives drifted from this position. At Fuller Seminary, the school moved from a strongly inerrantist position to a limited inerrancy, where the Bible was inerrant when it spoke of spiritual matters, but not when it spoke about history or science. In 1978 a group of evangelical leaders from different denominations convened a council and produced the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. This statement was a strongly articulated defense of *sola Scriptura* and full biblical inspiration and inerrancy. It maintains that all of Scripture is God-breathed and therefore must be true in all that it says.

Postmodernism has insisted that there is no objective reality, only a myriad of differing and clashing perspectives and views. Texts cannot communicate objective truth and therefore cannot be authoritative. There are no transcendent centers that provide truth and meaning for the world. Our structures may be “useful” but they are not “true.” Meaning is not found in a text; we bring subjective meaning to texts in our interpretation of them. When applied to the Bible, of course, this destroys meaning and authority. Evangelicals can recognize that there is some truth in postmodernism’s criticism of Enlightenment views of human rationality and objectivity, but they must not accept the postmodern paradigm. Postmodernism is antithetical to *sola Scriptura*. If God has created the world—including human beings—and if he has given language as a gift for communication, there is no reason to think that God cannot be successful in revealing truth about himself and the created order. We do not need to start with man as an autonomous subject and knower, because we start with a God who creates a world with which he communicates. Still, there are many today who want to identify as evangelicals while rejecting *sola Scriptura* and Scripture’s full inerrancy, authority, necessity, sufficiency, and clarity. What we need to do is recognize that Scripture—because it is God’s word—is the highest authority there is (more so than our interpretation of historical evidence, our community’s traditions, our private views, etc.). There can be no higher standard than what God says. Due to our sin, we will only see what Scripture is and hear God’s voice if the Holy Spirit works in our hearts.

## **Chapter 4**

### **God’s Word in the Economy of the Gospel: Covenant, Trinity, and the Necessity of a Saving Word**

Without a word from the Lord, we would not know the way of salvation. We are not left to find our own way to God—he has revealed himself to us. In general revelation God reveals his attributes to us. He has placed a sense of the divine in us and has given us his moral law in conscience. The general knowledge of God that we gain from general revelation is not sufficient for us to have a personal relationship with God—even in Eden, God spoke. This side of the fall into sin, God’s word is essential for knowing salvation. In our sin, we suppress the truth we find in general revelation. God has revealed himself through a variety of means (theophanies, visions, dreams, miracles, in Christ, in Scripture, etc.). The highest revelation of God is in the incarnation, but the Bible is the permanent record of God’s self-disclosure. God’s verbal revelation is covenantal. God declares what he will do in covenant promises, he acts to fulfill his

promises, and he provides us with the proper, authoritative interpretation of his acts. Only God's verbal interpretation has lasting authority, and the Bible as the covenant document is essential for relating properly to God. This covenantal revelation is Trinitarian and centered on Christ.

## **Chapter 5**

### **God Speaks Covenantal Words: Creation, Fall, and the Longing for a Better World**

The Bible begins by revealing that God created the world by his speech. He continues to speak to Adam and Eve, with covenantal words that are clear and authoritative. Satan also speaks, but he lies and casts doubt on God's word. Adam and Eve listen to Satan and reject God's personal, relational revelation. God, in mercy, gives them the covenant promise of the *protoevangelium*. The subsequent history of the human race shows that the righteous listened to the word of God, whereas the wicked rejected it. The human race united in rebellion against God at Babel, and God scattered them in judgment. God then chose to reveal himself to one man, Abram, and bless the world through him. God cuts a covenant with Abraham, and it is God who takes the responsibility for paying the penalty if the covenant is broken. God continued to reveal himself to the patriarchs and uphold his covenant promises.

At the time of Moses, God revealed himself in a fresh way, but in continuity with the Abrahamic covenant. He redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt. At Sinai, God gave Moses a covenant law that was written by God's own finger! Israel's rebellion clearly revealed that they could not keep God's law. What was required was for a perfect representative to keep the law of God in their place. The history of Israel showed the overall failure of the people to hear and obey the word of the Lord, but it also showed the blessing that came to those who did listen. God raised up prophets who spoke his words to the people. The word of God was so identified with the words of the prophets that to disobey the prophetic message was to disobey God himself. It was God's very word that was delivered through the prophets. Psalms and Proverbs are full of verses that extol the wonder, authority, purity, perfection, etc. of God's word, including in its written form. God gave David covenantal promises for an everlasting dynasty that find their fulfillment in David's greater son, Jesus Christ. The faithful kings in Judah were characterized by listening to the word of the Lord. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God promised that he would make a new covenant with his people. This covenant would include God's word being written on the heart and mind, rather than on tablets of stone. The Old Testament Scriptures are not merely historical writings, they are the living word of God.

## **Chapter 6**

### **God's Covenantal Word Proves True: Christ, the Word Made Flesh**

God's covenant, redemptive promises—both oral and written—are fulfilled in the Messiah, the one who John calls “the Word.” The Son is the revelation of the Father. He is God's Word, and he can fully reveal God because he shares God's nature. Christ the Word fulfilled the promises of God in the Old Testament, and he affirmed the Old Testament to be the Word of God. Jesus taught that he didn't come to destroy the law, but rather to bring to fulfillment all that they

pointed forward towards. Jesus is the fulfillment of the verbal prophecies and the prophetic types. Christ cut the new covenant in his own body and blood. The OT Scriptures foretold the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus clearly believed in and taught that the Scriptures were the inspired and authoritative Word of God: he trusted every detail and every word, believing that it was entirely true, since it came from God.

As the Son, Jesus is the climactic revelation of God, and Jesus' word is true because it comes from the Father. The Son reveals the Father, does what the Father does, and speaks what the Father gives him to say. The children of God are marked by hearing Christ's voice and listening to God's word. Rejecting the words of Jesus is to reject the Father and life. Those who love him and have eternal life are those who hear and obey. The Father and Son together send the Holy Spirit with the word of truth. Jesus calls the Spirit the "Spirit of truth." He guides the disciples to remember and understand the words of Jesus. After Pentecost, the apostles spoke the word of God by the Holy Spirit and showed how Jesus was the fulfillment of the OT Scriptures. God provided for the permanent, written record of his new covenant word in the New Testament. Now the canon of God's written word is completed.

## **Chapter 7 God Speaks with Authority: The Inspiration of Scripture**

Scripture's authority is grounded in the fact that it is inspired by God. The best way of understanding inspiration is that the Scriptures are God-breathed, so that there is full verbal, plenary inspiration. Every word in Scripture is breathed out by God: we must not reduce inspiration to human feelings and genius. Through the Holy Spirit, the human authors wrote exactly what God wanted said—their words and God's words were identical. Human authors were not irrelevant tools by which God delivered his word; they wrote out of their own intellects and backgrounds and styles, but what they wrote was exactly what God wanted to be written. God created and providentially formed each human author, and his word is perfectly expressed in their words. It is not merely the general concepts of Scripture that are inspired, but each and every word. Some have argued that humans all make mistakes so the Bible must contain errors, but making a mistake is not an intrinsic, necessary feature of human activity—a sovereign God can guarantee that human errors do not creep into Scripture.

The Bible itself clearly reveals a belief that it is God-breathed and that plenary, verbal inspiration is true. The Old Testament contains numerous examples of God speaking directly, God speaking through prophets, and God's words being written down. Jesus confirmed this high view of the inspiration and authority of the OT many times. Jesus fully equated what Scripture says with what God says. Christ saw the Scriptures as being about him and fulfilled by him. His enemies believed that the Scriptures were fully inspired and authoritative, and they never challenged Jesus' view of the nature of Scripture because they agreed with it. We cannot reject the inspiration and authority of Scripture without rejecting the teaching of Jesus. Jesus' apostles and their associates upheld the same view of Scripture that Jesus did. The OT was fully the word of God that was authoritative, and it was fulfilled by Christ. In a variety of ways the NT authors teach that what God says and what Scripture says are identical. Even during the time of Jesus and

the apostles, it was evident that they believed God was giving new, authoritative revelation. Jesus believed and taught that his words were God's words. The apostles also recognized that their words were from God and fully authoritative. Like the OT prophets, they knew their words were the words of God. Others recognized that this was true, too.

## **Chapter 8**

### **God Speaks Truthfully: The Inerrancy of Scripture**

Inerrancy is a logical entailment of Scripture being God-breathed. The Scriptures do not err in anything that they affirm; all that they affirm is true. There can be no "facts" that actually contradict the Scripture when it is properly interpreted. The interpreter may err, but the Bible is inerrant. This does not mean that the Bible must always speak with pedantic precision, or be completely exhaustive in its narrative detail, or that it can only record verbatim quotations. The doctrine of Scripture is organically tied to the doctrine of God. Every word the God of truth speaks must be true; an errant Scripture would reflect negatively on God's character. If we cannot trust God's revelation, what can we trust? Where would we begin and how would we have epistemological warrant to know what God is like and what he has done? The Triune God is often referred to as the truth; he cannot lie. God's Word is holy, pure, righteous, and true, because of the character of the God who breathes it out. Jesus affirmed the inerrancy of the OT. He assumed and taught its truth and accuracy, both in its overarching message and in its smallest details. The Gospel writers show how numerous OT details were fulfilled by Christ. One cannot accept Jesus as Lord without accepting his teaching, and this includes his teaching that Scripture cannot be broken. The rest of the NT authors likewise held this high view of the inspiration of the OT Scriptures. There is never one time in the NT when the OT Scriptures are not held as the very Word of God, with all that such a position entails. Jesus' words are bound-up with his identity—the inerrancy of Jesus' words cannot be divorced from Christology.

Inerrancy and *sola Scriptura* go together. The Roman Catholic Church never denied inerrancy, but they also placed Tradition on par with Scripture. This meant that Scripture was not the only inerrant source or authority. Inerrancy, authority, and sufficiency go together. Today, many have rejected all three. Others, however, are trying to find a middle road. They are advocating a limited inerrancy, where Scripture is inerrant and authoritative on spiritual matters, but not on other matters. This limited inerrancy view is not what the Reformers' held, nor is it compatible with *sola Scriptura*. The Bible alone is a flawless authority. If only part of the Bible is inerrant, then the rest is non-authoritative and the Scriptures need correction (and are not sufficient). It is also impossible to parse the Scriptures into errant and non-inerrant parts, since the Scriptures themselves do not separate issues of faith and practice from historical realities. If the human interpreter is the one who judges these issues, then human reason is placed as the ultimate authority over Scripture. In order to trust the promises of God we need to trust his character and his Word. If God's Word contains errors our trust and confidence is undermined in all of what he has said. If the Bible makes small errors, how do we know it doesn't make big errors? If the Bible errs, how can we trust what it says about itself?

## **Chapter 9**

### **God Speaks to be Heard: The Clarity of Scripture**

As the truthfulness of the Word comes from the truthfulness of God, so the clarity of the Word comes from the effectiveness of God as a communicator. God's Word is clear whether it is spoken or written. It accomplishes his purposes. God's words communicate information and also effectuate change and transformation. If they are not clear, then either God does not want us to know him, or he is ineffective at communicating. God fully expected that his law would be understood and obeyed, even to the point where parents were expected to teach it to their children. Other religions around Israel may have been esoteric, but God's Word was for ordinary people in everyday life. Jesus' ministry was filled with references to the OT and he expected they would be understood. The NT writers, writing to people from every walk in life, used the OT frequently and also expected that their own words would be comprehensible to the church. This is astounding given the fact that many of the first Christians were gentiles who had no previous exposure to the OT.

The doctrine of the clarity of Scripture does not mean that there are no passages which are difficult to understand. Clarity and "easy to understand" are not the same thing: as students know, sometimes clarity comes after hard work and study, but when the light goes on, the concept is seen to be clear. Clarity is a property of the text, but interpreters may fail to discern it. Spiritual illumination is required to overcome our sinful darkness. It is not because of a lack of brightness in the sun that a blind person can't see the light! Even if we understand all the grammar and meaning of every text, without the Spirit we will not grasp the significance and truth of it all. Reason and faith must work together. Nevertheless, believers will not always agree on every interpretive issue. Since Scripture is a unity, we must use the whole to interpret the parts. Many philosophers today try to argue that there are intrinsic problems with language, but this is not the case. All misunderstanding takes place in a wider sphere of common understanding and communication. God invented language and gave it as a gift. The Bible is his written word, given to all believers to be understood and obeyed.

## **Chapter 10**

### **God's Speech is Enough: The Sufficiency of Scripture**

Only in Scripture does God give us the light that we need for salvation, so Scripture is both necessary and sufficient for faith and practice. Scripture contains all we need to know to understand the gospel and be saved, and it contains all that we need in order to live a life for the glory of God. This does not mean that general revelation is irrelevant, or that the Bible is an exhaustive source of all knowledge, but it does mean that Scripture contains all the information one needs in order to honor the Lord and know how to live in this world. Biblical writers assume and teach the sufficiency of Scripture. This does not mean that other sources cannot be helpful, but no other sources are on par with Scripture. Traditionalism wrongly places Tradition on par with Scripture. We can learn from tradition, but tradition is to function in a ministerial capacity. If we fail to listen to tradition, we only substitute our opinion for the opinions of the church



community through history. Nevertheless, church tradition and teaching need to be demonstrably rooted in Scripture. The church does not create the Word; the Word creates the church. God's people respond to his Word and recognize it, they do not exercise authority or control over it. Papal succession is nowhere taught in Scripture—even by implication—and there is no authoritative stream of oral teaching that runs with binding authority down through the centuries after the apostles. The written Word is sufficient and it alone is the perfect authority for the church.

Science is a very useful discipline, but the pronouncements of scientists are not more authoritative than the Word of God. Science is ministerial. In the end, there can be no conflict between proper scientific conclusions and the proper interpretation of the Scriptures. Many evangelicals today are in danger of elevating their own personal experience over the Bible. Others are allowing culture's values and ethics to override the teachings of Scripture. In some charismatic circles, more practical weight is assigned to words of prophecy than is assigned to Scripture. The doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture is wonderfully encouraging and practical. It is enough for pastors in their ministry, for missionaries, evangelists, and every believer in every area of life. We need to live in the humble confidence that comes from the truth of *sola Scriptura*.

**Note:** This interview first appeared on [Books At a Glance](#) and is used with permission.