

2 TIMOTHY 3:16, 17

THE GOD-BREATHED BOOK

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.”¹

For the past several weeks, the distinctive doctrines defining a Baptist congregation have been the focus of our studies in the Word. What are the beliefs that have historically defined Baptists as a people of God? In a sense, if we are true to the Baptist Faith, each time we worship, the message presented and the hymns of praise offered up will be an affirmation of Baptist doctrine.

At the outset, I should confess that the text before us today has become most precious for me. It has provided stability in the midst of a volatile and unpredictable world. The text speaks of the revelation of God through His Word, the Bible. The Bible, which is declared to be the Word of God, is the focus of this day’s message. The source of Scripture and the value of the Word and the purpose of God’s communication are considered. As Christians, we need to know what God says concerning His Word so that we will be able to understand His will and so that we will know the truths He considers to be important, even vital, for our well-being.

Peter attests of those who wrote the Scriptures and especially of what they wrote, “no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” [2 PETER 1:21]. As Baptists, we accept the Bible to be God’s Word, divinely communicated for our benefit and for God’s glory. We believe that the Bible was given by God, communicating through men who were superintended by the Holy Spirit in order to reveal God’s Person and His will to all mankind. In saying this, we acknowledge that we are obligated both to know God as He has revealed Himself, and to make Him known.

I invite you to open your Bible to this familiar and vital statement from the pen of the Apostle Paul. Together, let’s discover God’s purpose in delivering His Word to us. Learning this crucial truth, we will perhaps have a clearer understanding of the purpose for which the Bible has been given and we will learn to esteem this Word.

THE SOURCE OF THE WORD OF GOD — “All Scripture is breathed out by God”—*theopneustos*, God-breathed. According to the Word, “Every word of God proves true” [PROVERBS 30:5]. One popular translation commonly used by evangelicals, translates that verse, “Every word of God is flawless” [PROVERBS 30:5, NIV]. The text pointedly teaches that every word of Scripture as originally written is the very word God intended to be written. To put the matter another way, the doctrine of “verbal inspiration” of Scripture is that the very words of Scripture—the words themselves and not just the general ideas—are “God breathed.” Therefore, when you read the Bible, you are reading the very words of God. We do not worship the Bible as though it was a god, but we do receive its words as the very words of God breathed out for our benefit.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Wheaton: Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

I realise that every religion claims divine origin for the words they hold sacred. Mormons claim that Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon from golden plates he found buried in New York State. Smith claimed that he was guided to the plates by the angel Maroni. He would place a “peep stone” in the crown of a hat, and covering his face with the hat he would spell out the words that were in turn written down by Hiram Page. He “translated” these plates without even having the plates in front of him because he claimed they remained buried! That would certainly qualify as a claim for divine origin.

Muslims claim that an illiterate Arab named Muhammad received a series of revelations from the angel Gabriel that were in turn written down on “ribs of palm leaves and tablets of white stone” to become the Quran. It is not a problem for Islamic “scholars” that the palm leaves and tablets of white stone are not found and that the first written efforts at what would become the Quran were not produced for hundreds of years. Buddhists and Hindus make similar claims of divine origin for their sacred writings.

Christians make a claim that proponents of any religion would make. How can we know that the Bible is the Word of God? Why can we be so confident of this claim? First, understand that the Bible was written by over forty different writers. Each claimed to have been guided by the Spirit of God, just as Peter asserted in the verse we saw earlier [see **2 PETER 1:21**]. The prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Daniel and the various Minor Prophets repeatedly claim that the Lord spoke to them, and that they were writing down the very words that God spoke.² The Apostles likewise claimed that God spoke through the prophets [see **ACTS 3:21**].

If this is true, then there should be an internal consistency from beginning to end. Whether it was Moses that was writing in the Pentateuch or whether it was John writing while in exile on Patmos, since the Spirit of God superintended the writer there should be an internal consistency of doctrinal matters. Peter makes this very claim in **2 PETER 1:20**, “no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation.”

Despite having been written by individuals representing a variety of backgrounds, including shepherds, scholars, fishermen, courtiers, physicians, the Bible presents a **doctrinal unity**. The consistent message of the Word is that man was ruined by the Fall and is thus incapable of pleasing God through his own strength. God alone provides the way for man to approach Him. Spurgeon summarised the issue precisely when he wrote that “the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.”³ And man glorifies God through coming to Him through accepting the sacrifice of God’s own Son.

If the Bible is truly the Word of God, we should have confidence that it has been **divinely preserved** so that man can know the mind of God. There are over five thousand New Testament manuscripts and Scripture portions, in addition to multiple ancient translations of the New Testament. Some of the manuscripts were being circulated among the churches even in the days of the Apostles. The books of the New Testament were immediately circulated following their writing. Those same copies of letters and accounts of Jesus’ life were widely circulated as churches shared the writings they received. That this was the early practise is evident from a statement in the Colossian letter. “When this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea” [**COLOSSIANS 4:16**].

² e.g. **ISAIAH 8:1-11; 16:13; 20:2; 21:6; JEREMIAH 1:4-19; 11:1, 6, 9; 30:4; 46:13; HOSEA 3:1; AMOS 7:8, 15; ZECHARIAH 11:13-15**

³ C. H. Spurgeon, **A Catechism, With Proofs** (Logos Research Systems, Inc., Bellingham, WA 2009) 3

If you study a critical copy of the Koine Greek New Testament you will notice that part of each page provides an apparatus so the reader can be made aware of variant readings of biblical manuscripts. The student will discover that for the most part, the discrepancies amount to questions of the spelling of proper nouns, whether a definite article should be used or not, word order, or other such minor issues. Except for a handful of questionable verses, the text of the New Testament is 99.9% settled!

The Old Testament has even fewer questions concerning what was written down. This certainty is due in great measure because of the care with which Masoretic scribes copied the manuscripts. Generally, the Old Testament Scriptures were written on velum—animal skins that assured durability for the scriptural writings. On occasion, the Old Testament Scriptures appear to have been transcribed onto copper scrolls.

The copyist would pronounce the word he was about to copy. Then, he would say aloud each letter as he copied that letter. If he came to the Name of God—Yahweh—he would stop, bathe, and then return to his work. He would use a new pen and write the tetragrammaton—YHWH. At the end of each line, he would count the number of letters to ensure that no extraneous letters were inadvertently introduced, which would, of course, ruin the copy and possibly change the meaning of Scripture. If a count revealed the inclusion of an extra letter, or the omission of a letter, the entire copy was destroyed. Even if it was the final line of the copy, the entire copy was destroyed. Consequently, even the Isaiah scroll, an ancient copper scroll containing the prophecy of Isaiah, agrees with copies made by the Masoretes as late as the New Testament era. Again, copies of the Old Testament Scriptures were circulated widely, so that ample access was provided for any seeking to know the Word of God.

In addition to the aforementioned issues that give us confidence in the divine origin of our Bible—doctrinal consistency and manuscript dissemination—there is also the issue of *prophetic fulfillment*. At the time it was written, over two-thirds of the Bible was prophecy. Most of the prophecies of the Bible have already been fulfilled. For instance, at His birth, Jesus fulfilled multiple prophecies; and in His death, our Lord fulfilled over seventy prophecies. Many of the prophecies relate to Israel because they rejected the reign of the Living God and pursued their own desires. Of course, this high degree of accuracy gives us confidence that the prophecies that relate to the future will likewise find fulfillment just as have those prophecies that dealt with past matters.

The Bible sets a rather high standard for prophets—they must bat one thousand. So the people of God could discern whether a prophet spoke the words of God, Moses wrote, “If you say in your heart, ‘How may we know the word that the LORD has not spoken?’—when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him” [DEUTERONOMY 18:21, 22]. All one need do is check the fulfillment of the prophecy to determine if the origin is divine.

Even more important, the prophet must maintain doctrinal integrity with what has already been written! Moses warned the people of Israel, “If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, ‘Let us go after other gods,’ which you have not known, ‘and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul [DEUTERONOMY 13:1-3].

When Paul wrote that “all Scripture is breathed out by God,” it becomes obvious to the unbiased observer that he communicated a truth that is abundantly verified by fact. Certainly, one may refuse to believe this, but there are consequences for such refusal. Assuredly, one may substitute human reason or the latest scholarly opinion in the place of biblical authority for one’s attitudes and actions, but the individual who seeks to do so fabricates authority from a will ‘o the wisp.

THE VALUE OF THE WORD OF GOD — “All Scripture is ... profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” If we will know God, then we must be cautious not to recast God in our image. Unfortunately, many recent translations of the Word of God attempt to force God into the mould of contemporary thought. One example of this effort to dress God in modern garb is demonstrated by recent efforts to make the Bible “gender neutral.” For instance, in “**TODAY’S NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION**” Scripture becomes “gender neutral.” Apparently, the “Committee on Bible Translation” no longer believe that “every word of God is flawless,” because they find it necessary to make His words “gender neutral” so that they will be more acceptable to modern people. Apparently, God is incapable of saying what He means and meaning what He says.

This introduces us to consideration of the value of the Word that we received from God. Pastor Warren Wiersbe has wisely observed that the Bible is “profitable for teaching (what is right), for reproof (what is not right), for correction (how to get right), and for training in righteousness (how to stay right). A Christian who studies the Bible and applies what he learns will grow in holiness.”⁴

We need to thoroughly understand what was intended to be communicated when Paul chose these particular words. When he says Scripture is “profitable for teaching,” Paul used a Greek term that was translated in earlier translations as *doctrine*.⁵ However, translations that employ the word “teaching” convey the Apostle’s intention more accurately than does use of the word “doctrine.” What we believe must be determined by the Bible, and not by any other authority. For this reason, we should permit the Bible to speak to us, letting it shape our beliefs, and we should avoid imposing our beliefs on the Bible, trying to make it say what we think it should say.

As one example of making the Bible say what we think it should say consider the contemporary rush to appoint homosexuals as elders, deacons and church leaders. The Bible opposes all such reckless actions. Elders are to be above reproach [**1 TIMOTHY 3:2**], and homosexuality is not above reproach. Those who practise homosexuality are identified among sinners excluded from the Kingdom of God [e.g. **1 CORINTHIANS 6:9, 10**]. Nevertheless, demonstrating how broad-minded modern church leadership can be, many denominations ignore the revealed will of God and exalt tolerance of sinful behaviour.

Actually, this attempt by modern churches to poke a finger in God’s eye is not surprising since many churches long ago reinterpreted the Word of God to permit appointment of women as elders in the church, an action clearly proscribed by the Bible [see **1 TIMOTHY 2:11, 12**; **1 CORINTHIANS 14:34**]. Interestingly, one of the strongest and most persistent arguments made by homosexuals seeking appointment as church leaders is that since the churches have already reinterpreted the Bible to permit appointment of women to eldership, the churches cannot keep “the third sex” from appointment to eldership.

⁴ Warren W. Wiersbe, **The Bible Exposition Commentary, Vol. 2** (Victor Books, Wheaton, IL 1989) 253

⁵ Cf. **The Holy Bible, New King James Version** (Thomas Nelson, Inc., Nashville, TN 1982)

In pointing out these egregious deviations from the teaching of the Word I have said nothing about the efforts of modern churches to impose on Scripture a relaxed view of marriage, or of approval of breaking the marriage vow out of convenience; I have said nothing of the contemporary ignorance of discipline that ignores rebellion against God and His Word. Nevertheless, reading the Word of God will prove instructive. The bent of modern man to ignore the teaching of the Word is indicative of contemporary ignorance of the Word. Since we fail to read the Word, we are at the mercy of our own opinion; we no longer know what is right—we are incapable of doing what is right.

When Paul speaks of “reproof,” he speaks of the Spirit’s work that convicts us of sin. Reading the Bible, we are made aware of our failings and we are made willing to do what is right. This raises a point that is easy to overlook in our modern environment. Individuals who have no desire to do what is right—whether they claim to be Christians or not—are deceived. People who insist on rights without acceptance of responsibilities demonstrate an appalling ignorance of the Word of God. The individual who is unwilling to do what God teaches, and who deliberately tries to promote his or her own will reveals that he or she has no vital relationship to the God of the Word. Consequently, such people dismiss any rebuke when they read the Word; but those who belong to Christ cannot read the Word without finding their sin rebuked by what is taught in the Word.

Just as the Bible teaches what is right and what is not right, it also teaches how to get right. This is what is meant by the term “correction.” At its heart, the word presents the thought of restoration to a spiritually balanced condition. “Correction” implies the improvement of life and character as the one corrected is brought into a joyful and vital relationship with the true and living God. What I would have you carry away is that the great value of reading the Bible is that you will be improved; you will see ever more clearly the image of God’s Son reflected through the way in which you conduct your life.

We witness an astonishing number of churches that were once noted for their fidelity to Christ and to His Word that seem to have lost their bearing. How does this happen? It happens when churches begin to insist on relevance, and neglect the teaching of the Word. Does it matter what Professor Sneezedust thinks about economic theory? Does it make a difference what the Reverend Doctor Blearyeye says we should feel? What actually matters is what God has said. We are indeed to worship God; but when worship loses its doctrinal mooring, it quickly degenerates into a mere emotional salve that soothes the conscience even as error is wounding the soul. We are to be socially involved with our world, but when we become socially involved without a sound doctrinal foundation we will soon find ourselves wandering in the swamp of relativity.

Could this happen to us? The tragedy is that the most of our fellow professing Christians who have stumbled into the slough of relativity are unaware of their plight. They think they are honouring God and doing what is right, even as they neglect the will of God. If we invest all our energies in political action, neglecting time with God and our walk with Him, will we actually honour Him? If we should defeat the social evil du jour without addressing the darkness of the human heart, what will we actually accomplish? If we neglect the Word, we will succumb to the same spiritual demise that has infected other once great denominations and churches. The signs of abysmal ignorance among the professed people of God are readily apparent. Whereas our fathers were once conversant with the Word of God and knowledgeable of the great teachings of the Word, we are uncertain what we believe and unclear as to why we believe what we claim to believe.

Paul also says the Word of God is profitable for “training in righteousness.” “Training” is a descriptive word used of the education of children [see **EPHESIANS 6:4**]. When referring to children, this word relates to the cultivation of mind and morals; but in this particular instance the word speaks of cultivation of the soul through correcting mistakes and curbing passions, thus creating goodness in the one disciplined or trained. This is discipline in the truest sense; this is discipline in the sense of making one godly. It is important to state that there is no punitive connotation in this word.

One commentator has observed, “The real meaning of [correction] is that all theories, all theologies, all ethics, are to be tested against the Bible. If they contradict the teaching of the Bible, they are to be refused. It is our duty to use our minds and set them adventuring; but the test must ever be agreement with the teaching of Jesus Christ as the Scriptures present it to us.”⁶

Faith and practise for us as Baptists must be guided by Scripture. We are careful to discover what attitudes are pleasing to God through noting the attitudes that He commends in His Word; and then we are to adopt those attitudes. For instance, Islam, guided by the mishmash of unethical and immoral demands known as the Quran, is a religion that exalts death. Therefore, suicide bombers are promised that if they will make a sacrifice of their life while killing “infidels” they will receive rewards from Allah.

Christians, on the other hand, seek life, both for themselves and for others. This is why conscientious believers were appalled at the decision of various courts in the United States to sentence Terri Schiavo to death through dehydration. It is not solely the manner of death that was horrifying, but it was that the courts would refuse to protect the helpless against the selfish insistence of a presumed protector. God is the Author of life, and we respect and value life. That even professing evangelicals were confused, thinking that perhaps her husband had a “right” to kill her through withholding water and food, reveals the dreadful and appalling state of contemporary Christianity.

THE PURPOSE OF THE WORD OF GOD — “All Scripture [is given so] that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.” God’s purpose for all who have been born into His Family is that each one will become mature. “Competent” implies being equipped to do a designated task. The task that I am assigned is to model godliness and to teach righteousness as a man of God. The man of God is responsible to be taught so that he can teach others—and he will be taught through resorting to the Word. He is responsible to have been reprovved so that he will be able to reprove others when such is necessary; he must have been corrected so that he will be able to correct others for their good and for God’s glory; and he is to have been trained in righteousness so that he will be able to train others in righteousness.

The man of God is expected to be “competent and equipped for every good work.” Paul is writing especially to the preacher, to the elder, the overseer of the church. However, everything that he writes applies to each leader within the Body. Each believer is responsible to grow “in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” [see **2 PETER 3:18**]. Each professing Christian is to be morally and ethically competent to so live that the True and Living God is glorified through the choices made, through the words spoken and through the actions performed.

⁶ William Barclay, **The Daily Study Bible: The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon** (Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA 1975) 201

The people of God are to be committed to the Word's authority so that they will be competent. The adjective Paul used (*ártios*) implies being in "fit shape or condition."⁷ The participial clause suggests the idea of one who is thoroughly trained, and thus fully prepared for the task assigned. Bear in mind that the task assigned to all believers is to "make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that [Christ has] commanded" [MATTHEW 28:19, 20]. This task is dependent upon skilful use of the Word.

A similar meaning is conveyed by the phrase "equipped for every good work." The man of God is expected to meet every demand required by righteousness. Whatever the situation, the Word of God is given to prepare the Christian to meet that need. Regardless of conditions, the people of God are expected to be godly first of all.

Let me remind you that Christians are at war. This is not a war fought with weapons such as the world uses [see 2 CORINTHIANS 10:4]; rather, this is spiritual warfare. This truth serves as the basis for the apostolic admonition: "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication" [EPHESIANS 6:10-18].

Too often, we appeal to political solutions to accomplish what can only be accomplished through spiritual warfare. We win a few skirmishes at the local level even as we lose battle after battle at the national level. We have some fine tacticians within the Faith; but there are few strategists who have the ear of God's people. I fear that too often we have unconsciously elevated to positions of leadership individuals who are incapable of directing the response of God's people to the conflict surrounding us. We have convinced ourselves that noisy rallies and marches or letter campaigns will accomplish what God has pledged to do only in answer to prayer and through obedience to His Word.

I am not suggesting that we should not be good citizens of the community and of the nation; but we must never forget that "our citizenship is in heaven" [PHILIPPIANS 3:20]. While we are indeed to act wisely here, we are not to rely solely on political solutions for issues of righteousness. God's holy people—and especially those who serve as leaders—are to be "competent" and "equipped for every good work."

As a man of God, my energies are not to be expended on "getting out the vote," on "marshalling the saints" to react to every unconscionable act of a Parliament that has grown arrogant and dictatorial, or in reacting to every cultural assault against godliness. My energies are to be invested in doing what is right, in obeying the command of the Lord Christ, and in building the people of God so that they will honour the sovereign head of the Body, Jesus Christ the Son of God!

⁷ R. C. H. Lenski, **The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon** (Augsburg, Minneapolis, MN 1937, 1946) 847

Righteousness is clearly in retreat in the western world, wickedness is in ascendency. Courts have embraced the culture of death by permitting a brain-injured woman to starve and ultimately sentencing her to be executed through dehydration. Governments systematically destroy the righteous protections of society erected during the past centuries and wickedness is exalted. How are we to respond? Shall I urge you to write your MP and your MLA? Shall I urge you to engage in yet another noisy rally?

These actions may be good, and I do hope that you are a good citizen; however I am compelled by truth to remind you that **good is enemy of the best**. God's best is accomplished through making yourself "competent" and through ensuring that you are "equipped for every good work." Preparation for every good work begins with resort to the Word of God. This Word is "able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" [2 TIMOTHY 3:15]. If you have never been born from above, you have no hope of being competent, much less being equipped for every good work. In fact, you will have difficulty distinguishing what is good. If that is you, you must hear this plea from the Word of God! "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved." Know that, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13].

To you who name the Name of Christ, know that if you will honour the Lord you must focus on matters of fundamental importance—on first things. As a young man, I played football; I played offensive centre, chosen more for my squat stature than for my great athletic abilities. Our teams were generally winners in our league. One reason for our success was the demands of the coaches to focus on football fundamentals—running, blocking, playing the ball. My brother also played football, somewhat more successfully than me. He later became a successful football coach in the football-mad state of Nebraska. He was good enough to be courted by both CFL and NFL teams that appreciated his coaching abilities. His emphasis on fundamentals—not fancy plays—ensured that he coached successful teams and drew the attention of the pros.

When I joined the United States Marine Corp, it was because they do one thing well. The emphasis on fundamentals is a point of pride for Marines: when ambushed, turn into the fire and advance; never leave a Marine behind; every Marine a rifleman.

Something similar to that attitude must again be emphasised among God's people. We Christians must return to the fundamentals of our Faith. We who are the people of God are to know God and they are to serve Him with all our energies. As the people of God we are to know God through His Word, making ourselves familiar with all that He has taught. As God's holy people we are to rely upon the Spirit of God by praying for Christ to supply us power as He has promised. As those who belong to God we are to love one another deeply from the heart, and we are to love those living in this dying world enough to reach out to them with the message of life.

This message serves as nothing less than a call for commitment to first things. Each Christian listening to the message this day must commit himself or herself to becoming a student of the Word. Each Christian must commit herself or himself to prayerfully reading this Word, permitting the Spirit of God to teach her or him until Christ is clearly seen through each life. Then, and only then, will we have hope of winning more than a few skirmishes in this great war that now confronts us. May God make us students of His Word and may it be witnessed through righteous lives. Amen.