

our beliefs - the Bible

Giles Cattermole considers the importance of God's revelation through Scripture

'The Bible, as originally given, is the inspired and infallible word of God. It is the supreme authority in all matters of belief and behaviour.'

In the first two articles in this series, we looked at the nature of God: especially his love and sovereignty. Now we will turn to his revelation of himself to us.

As medics, we're taught empirical science. We learn from what we observe and measure; we make hypotheses and test them in experiments. For some scientists, this is the only knowledge that matters:

'Whatever knowledge is attainable, must be attained by scientific methods; and what science cannot discover, mankind cannot know.'¹ (Bertrand Russell, mathematician and philosopher)

This sort of knowledge becomes a supreme authority:

'Scientists, with their implicit trust in reductionism, are privileged to be at the summit of knowledge...There is no reason to expect that science cannot deal with any aspect of existence... Science, in contrast to religion, opens up the great questions of being to rational discussion... reductionist science is omniscient ...I do not consider that there is any corner of the real universe or the mental universe that is shielded from its glare.'² (Peter Atkins, chemist)

But this faith in the supremacy of scientific knowledge has an inherent problem: what reason do we have to trust the knowledge that our brains acquire? Darwin expressed this

'horrid doubt' about his theories:

'But then with me the horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man's mind, which has been developed from the mind of lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy.'³

And with great honesty, atheist biologist JBS Haldane said:

'For if my mental processes are determined wholly by the motions of atoms in my brain I have no reason to suppose that my beliefs are true. They may be sound chemically, but that does not make them sound logically. And hence I have no reason for supposing my brain to be composed of atoms.'⁴

It's ironic that those who claim that we can only gain knowledge from observing the world, ultimately have no real assurance that this knowledge is really true. On the other hand, Christians have good reason to believe that we can learn real truth from science. We believe in a God of order and truth, who wants to communicate with people. So we can expect that the creation he made is both amenable to our understanding and behaves in a predictable way: belief in God makes sense of science. But more than that, we can also learn something about the creator himself. We can see the eternal power and divine majesty of God in his creation (Romans 1:20). We can see his kindness in his provision of rain and food and joy (Acts 14:17).

But what we can learn of God from his creation, from this 'general revelation', is limited. If I find a watch, I can learn something of the maker: his delight in intricacy or time-keeping, perhaps. But nothing about his family, or his love of crime novels. And I couldn't really conclude from the presence of a Velcro strap, that the maker was sticky. If I want to learn



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more about the maker, or have my mistaken ideas corrected, he'd need to tell me.

When you study anatomy and physiology, your mind should be blown away by the amazing design in God's creation. You should praise and thank the awesome God who made and sustains DNA and mitochondria, livers and spleens.

But then you study pathology and see the damage of disease and death, intruding on that good creation. Or you do a shift in the Emergency Department on a Saturday night, and you see the mess and brokenness of human lives.

We should see that the world is not as intended, the good design is spoiled, and that people are often responsible for spoiling it. Romans 1:18-23 goes on to tell us that we are without excuse, because we have rejected what we can learn of God from creation. In short, what we should learn from science, from observing our world, is that God is great, and we are not. God deserves worship, and we deserve judgment. The problem is that without God opening our eyes, we suppress the truth that should be obvious.

So God doesn't leave us there, with this incomplete revelation in the world, unable to rescue ourselves from death. He is a God who loves and communicates, and so he gives us his Word. He speaks to us. And he does so because he wants us to be saved, to return to him in repentance and faith, to know him perfectly, to enjoy eternal life.

This special revelation of God is seen throughout the Bible as God acted in history to call his people. He spoke to them through the prophets in many ways, but ultimately and supremely he has spoken by his Son Jesus, the living Word of God (Hebrews 1:1-2). And the Bible is God's written Word, all of which points us to Jesus (Luke 24:27).

The Bible doesn't just contain God's Word, doesn't just witness to it: it *is* God's Word.

The statement of faith tells us that the Bible is inspired and infallible. What does this mean?

The word 'inspired' was used in some translations of 2 Timothy 3:16; all Scripture is inspired by God. So it means more than just amazing intuition or giftedness on the part of the human authors, but it also means more than God just giving the writers some good ideas. The word used in that verse is literally 'God-breathed'. All Scripture is breathed out by God - New and Old Testaments (eg 2 Peter 3:16). This divine-human fusion of God's words and human writing is a miracle, as deep a mystery

as the coming together of God and man in the living Word, Jesus! God hasn't dictated the Bible to a secretary; each writer writes in his own style and vocabulary, with his own idiosyncrasies and occasionally poor grammar... but at the same time, each statement comes with the authority of God. Jesus certainly treated verses from Scripture as though they were God's Word as well as human writing, eg John 10:34-35.

If it's true that the words are really God's, then it follows that those words are also true, for God doesn't lie

(Titus 1:2). And that's what 'infallible' means: entirely trustworthy. What the Bible teaches, we can be assured is true, is not in error, because God is not fallible and neither is his Word.

There are a couple of caveats here. Firstly, we're not saying that any particular translation is infallible. No, what the writer wrote, that was what God breathed out. So the task for the translator is to go back to the best and most reliable manuscripts, closest to what the author wrote. It's reassuring that in his sovereignty, God has ensured that there are many more surviving early New Testament manuscripts than other ancient sources we deem reliable. So although there might have been small errors in copying and translating, we can be more sure that the Bible is as originally written than we can for any other ancient book.

Secondly, the Bible doesn't tell us how to do an appendectomy. It doesn't tell me the correct dose of gentamicin. The Bible is infallible in *what it says*. We don't claim infallibility for ideas not taught in the Bible. So we need to handle the Bible correctly (2 Timothy 2:15), ensuring that we read it and teach it in context, according to the intention of the author, not trying to read into it our own ideas, but seeking to discern what God is actually teaching us.

What the Bible is overwhelmingly concerned with, is God's plan to bring all creation under the rule of Christ (Ephesians 1:10). The Bible is God's revelation of his plan to bring his people to him through the death of his Son. Without this written word, we would have little knowledge of the living word, Jesus. We would know nothing of salvation. The Bible is therefore a necessary authority. And the Bible teaches us *all* we need to know to live in relationship with God (2 Timothy 3:16). The Bible, living and active (Hebrews 4:12), the sword of the Spirit (Ephesians 6:17), in the power of the Spirit,

is therefore a *sufficient* authority. There are other sources from which we learn about God and what he's doing - from our pastors, from good books, from the traditions of the church, from our own experience. But all these are secondary to the Bible. The Bible is our *supreme* authority.

Haldane was right; I can't rely on the atoms bouncing around in my brain to teach me real truth. But the God who made the universe is a God who speaks; personally and truly in every word of Scripture. And what he says is of absolute importance. The Bible doesn't tell me how DNA replicates, but it does tell me how to live: how to gain new life in Christ, and how to live that life to his glory.

'There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, mine!'⁵ So because all of life is under Christ's Lordship, all our belief and behaviour must submit to his Word. The Bible might not tell me which anti-hypertensive to prescribe, but it has a lot to tell me about how I should care for my patient, seeking their good, communicating risk and benefit clearly and honestly. It does tell me that my patient is, like me, in need of God's grace.

So when we read the Bible, we need to believe it. Obey it. And teach others! And above all, we need to pray that God would make it clear to us, enable us to understand it and live it, through the power of the Holy Spirit. ■

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