

Lesson #1

WHICH BIBLE IS THE WORD OF GOD?

Introduction

“Pastor, why are they changing God’s Word?” Have you heard this question? Have you asked it as you’ve heard about the new 2011 revision of the NIV Bible? Have you wondered it as you’ve seen more new translations hit the shelves at your local bookstore than

you can keep track of? How can all these translations be so different and still be God’s Word? Can we even be sure we know what God’s Word says anymore?

On the other hand, it has also been stated: The KJV is the Word of God! Can a translation claim to be God’s Word? Is one translation God’s Word to the exclusion of others? Do you have to be able to read Greek or Hebrew or Aramaic to be able to know what God’s Word really says?

Activity

Let’s try something: Form groups of four people. Have one person in the group write a sentence on a blank piece of paper. Now read what you have written to someone else in your group. Now have someone else in your group write down what you said on the blank below:

Now have another person in your group tear up the piece of paper on which your original sentence had been written down.

Evaluate as a group: Do you still have the word of the original person? Did the person who heard the sentence read to them hear the word of the person who made up the original sentence? Is the word written on the blank on this sheet still the word of the original person even though the original was destroyed?

Leader’s Note: The point of the activity is to see that the word of a person isn’t just the letters and words that were originally written down. Even though those are gone, the group will still know what the person wrote. Letters and words convey meaning and it is the meaning that is the word of a person. The meaning is most important.

Study

This little exercise helps us to wrestle with some of the issues involved when we ask the question, “What is the Word of God?”

We believe that the Bible is the verbally inspired Word of God. That means that we believe that the words themselves, not just general ideas are the true Word of God. Look up these passages and explain why we would say this.

2 Timothy 3:16 - All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,

Note that all Scripture is God-breathed. This indicates that no portion can be excluded and also indicates that not just the ideas, but the very words and word forms and grammar were given by the Holy Spirit.

2 Peter 1:20-21 - Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. 21 For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Peter reminds us that the men who wrote the Scriptures did not think up the things they wrote on their own even though they were allowed by the Holy Spirit to use their own vocabulary and their own writing style. Yet they were “carried along,” they were guided, to write down the exact words and to use the precise style that would convey the exact meaning God the Holy Spirit wanted them to convey.

John 10:35 - If he called them ‘gods,’ to whom the word of God came—and the Scripture cannot be broken—

Jesus’ reference to a particular form of the word “gods” and then his comment that the “Scripture cannot be broken” indicates to us that Jesus considered the specific words chosen important and unchangeable. God intended specific words to convey his message properly.

Galatians 3:16 - The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say “and to seeds,” meaning many people, but “and to your seed,” meaning one person, who is Christ.

Here Paul points to a difference in a word form to make a theological point. Even the form God chose conveys an important truth. So the Word of God cannot be changed even in its word forms.

This leads us to the teaching we call the doctrine of Verbal Inspiration. It means we have a very high regard for the Scriptures—every word. It is right and proper that we treat the Bible with respect, as the very Word of God. The question is, “Which Bible?”

If only the original words and syllables which the prophets, psalmists, kings, and apostles wrote comprise the Bible, then we are in trouble. We have none of these originals. They are all either lost or destroyed.

Consider even this account of Scripture which tells us what happened to some of the “Bible” which Jeremiah had written at the Lord’s command. What was destroyed? What was not?

Jer 36:20-32 After they put the scroll in the room of Elishama the secretary, they went to the king in the courtyard and reported everything to him. 21 The king sent Jehudi to get the scroll, and Jehudi brought it from the room of Elishama the secretary and read it to the king and all the officials standing beside him. 22 It was the ninth month and the king was sitting in the winter apartment, with a fire burning in the firepot in front of him. 23 Whenever Jehudi had read three or four columns of the scroll, the king cut them off with a scribe’s knife and threw them into the firepot, until the entire scroll was burned in the fire. 24 The king and all his attendants who heard all these words showed no fear, nor did they tear their clothes. 25 Even though Elnathan, Delaiah and Gemariah urged the king not to burn the scroll, he would not listen to them. 26 Instead, the king commanded Jerahmeel, a son of the king, Seraiah son of Azriel and Shelemiah son of Abdeel to arrest Baruch the scribe and Jeremiah the prophet. But the Lord had hidden them. 27 After the king burned the scroll containing the words that Baruch had written at Jeremiah’s dictation, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: 28 “Take another scroll and write on it all the words that were on the first scroll, which Jehoiakim king of Judah burned up. 29 Also tell Jehoiakim king of Judah, ‘This is what the Lord says: You burned that scroll and said, “Why did you write on it that the king of Babylon would certainly come and destroy this land and cut off both men and animals from it?”’ 30 Therefore, this is what the Lord says about Jehoiakim king of Judah: He will have no one to sit on the throne of David; his body will be thrown out and exposed to the heat by day and the frost by night. 31 I will punish him and his children and his attendants for their wickedness; I will bring on them and those living in Jerusalem and the people of Judah every disaster I pronounced against them, because they have not listened.’ ” 32 So Jeremiah took another scroll and gave it to the scribe Baruch son of Neriah, and as Jeremiah dictated, Baruch wrote on it all the words of the scroll that Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned in the fire. And many similar words were added to them.



(cf. Jeremiah’s scroll and King Jehoiakim son of Josiah) Jehoiakim burned the scroll on which the sounds and syllables were written. But he did not destroy God’s Word. In fact, Jeremiah wrote God’s Word again on a new scroll after this.

Still, look at what Scripture says about God’s Word:

Isaiah 40:8 (1 Peter 1:23-25) - The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.”

Isaiah points out that unlike people who are mortal and perishable, God’s Word is not perishable. It does not come to an end and go out of style or become meaningless or even fail to be fulfilled or completed. Its truths do not change. So also Peter quotes this passage to make the same point to God’s New Testament believers.

Psalms 119:89 - Your word, O Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens.

Verse 90 helps to shed light on what it means that God's Word stands firm when it says that his "faithfulness continues through all generations." God's Word is unchangeable, especially his promises. He will do what he says and what he says is true and firm and cannot be changed.

Matthew 24:35 - Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

Jesus himself indicated that the prophecies that he had given would come true; they would not fail. The reason is because the Word of the Lord stands forever, even when heaven and earth have passed away (and assumedly the scrolls and books that are on the earth). The point is that the truth conveyed is imperishable.

So are the words and syllables on the paper the Word of God? What is it that lasts forever? Not as such. Not in the strictest and barest sense. As far as they are words and syllables on paper, they are not the Word of God. What lasts, what is enduring, what cannot be destroyed, is the thought, the meaning, the truth which is conveyed by those words and syllables. This is the living and the enduring Word of God.

Leader's Note: Gerhard: By the term *Scripture* we have in mind not so much the outer form or the signs, that is, the particular letters, the act of writing, and the words with which the divine revelation has been written down, but the subject matter itself and the thing signified, namely, that which is meant and designated by the writing, the Word of God, which teaches us of his nature and will. Some have expressed it this way: The Word of God may be viewed essentially as the very thoughts God expresses, or non-essentially and accidentally as preaching and writing. In other words, as in any other writing done by an intelligent and rationale agent, so also in the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures two things should be borne in mind: first, the letters, syllables, and words that are written and are outer symbols indicating and expressing the ideas of the mind; and second, the thoughts themselves, which are the things signified, expressed with the symbols of letters, syllables, and words. Accordingly, in the term *Scripture* we include both of these, **but especially the latter** (*Loci Theologici*, I, 14). (WLS Sr Dogmatics Notes, p. 65) (bold emphasis added)

Quenstedt: The name "Holy Scripture" is used either *essentially* [in its real essential meaning] as a name for the divine sense expressed in the spoken words or the writing or in so far as it is a divine Word (in this sense, eternity is ascribed to Scripture Is 40:8; 1 Pe 1:23,25), or it is used *materially* [with reference to the stuff of which Scripture is made], as a name for the spoken words themselves, the letters and characters, or the writing itself, insofar as it [*sic* – perhaps delete "it"] the meaning God intends to convey, the divine sense is recorded in letters. Note VIII: The *formale* (essence) of Scripture is the divine message revealed in it; the *materiale* (the stuff of which it is made) is the letters, the words, the

writing. — Thesis V: The essence of Scripture is, on the one hand, internal, on the other, external. The *internal essence*, or that which makes Scripture be what it is, namely, to be the word of God, i.e., that which makes it be the Word of God and distinguishes it from any other writing is the inspired meaning of Scripture, which in general is the concept existing in God's mind concerning the mysteries of God and our salvation, a concept that was formed in eternity and revealed in time and communicated to us in writing, or the *Theopneustia* itself, i.e., the divine inspiration, 2 Tm 3:16, as that by which the Word is made divine and distinguished from a human word. The *external essence* is the character of the speech, or style and idiom, in the Old Testament the idiom of the Hebrew language and in part, the Aramaic, in the New Testament of the Greek language (*TDP*, pars I, cap. IV sec.I, thes. I, nota VII, p 54). (WLS Sr Dogmatics Notes, p. 65-66)

If this were not true, then we could not translate the Bible and everyone would have to learn Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek in order to hear the Word of God so that they could believe (Romans 10:17). But consider this passage from Scripture:

Acts 2:4-11 - All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. 5 Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. 6 When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. 7 Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? 8 Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? 9 Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome 11 (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!"



What was being spoken by the disciples? (See v. 11) With what word forms and grammar was it being spoken? Were the people hearing God's Word?

The people heard the disciples in their own (and varied) languages. This means first that they "heard" the Word, and it is the meaning and message that they heard and not the written words and symbols/letters which they saw. Second, it was in other languages, not their own, which means that if the Word was essentially the Greek and Hebrew words/letters then they would not have been receiving the Word of God. But the Word of God is first and foremost the meaning of the words.

If this were not the case, then translating from the Greek and Hebrew would be impossible, for instead we would have to teach everyone the Greek and Hebrew so that they could hear the

Word in the sounds of those languages and read it in the letters and grammar of that language in order to be saved by the Word of the gospel.

Carrying out the Great Commission (Mt 28:19, Mark 16:15) would be impossible if the letters and syllables of the Greek or Hebrew or Aramaic were essentially the Word of God. Why?

Yet, the language and the letters and characters of the original Greek and Hebrew/Aramaic are extremely important. (Note that we have already seen that even the very words and forms were important to Jesus and Paul as they conveyed Scripture truth.) Consider also the following passages. What do they say about the forms and words of the original Scriptures?

Matthew 5:18 - I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

Jesus considered every little letter and feature of the letters of the Greek and Hebrew important.

Deuteronomy 4:2 (12:32) - Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I give you.

The people were warned not to add to or subtract from what Moses commanded the people.

Revelation 22:18 - I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book.

John says pretty much the same thing as Moses about the words written in the book which he has penned—warning about adding to them or taking away from them.

Those words carry to us the proper meaning of God's message to us. Also the words and letters of the language into which we translate are important for they now become the way that we convey the message of the originals into another language that cannot use the same words and letters as the original.

Luther: *Let us be clear on this: we are not likely to retain the gospel without the languages. The languages are the scabbards in which the sword of the Spirit is held. They are the keg in which the drink is kept. They are the pantry in which this food is stored. ... Therefore it is certain that where the languages do not remain, the gospel itself will ultimately perish (To the Councilmen of Germany, LW 45, p 360).*

Luther: *In the measure that we love the gospel, so let us place strong emphasis on the languages. For it is not without reason that God wrote the Scriptures in the two languages Hebrew and Greek. That language which God did not despise but rather chose above all others for the final revelation of his Word is the language which we also should honor above all others (To the Councilmen of Germany, LW 45, p 359).*

Therefore, we may say that a translation is *God's Word* to the degree that it carefully reproduces the meaning of the original words. Yet this is never on a par with the original languages (due to

the difficulty of translating and carrying a meaning into another language to the same degree as it is conveyed in the original). This will be the topic of our next study.

Leader's Note: But *forma* and *materia* need to be distinguished. See 2 Cor 3:14-15: ¹⁴ *But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away.* ¹⁵ *Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts.* Even though some hear the words and syllables, the meaning and understanding is hidden from them and so they do not believe. This is true also today. Some read the Bible and though they read the words and syllables, the meaning and truth is unknown to them. The Word of God is more than just the words and syllables. It is also the truth that they convey—a truth which must be grasped by the power of God's Holy Spirit.

Again, it is important to distinguish between the *forma* and the *materia* of Scripture. Note again as Gerhard does this, he does not discount the *materia* as if it is not important at all. However, he notes that principally, the *forma* must be the Word of God, Scripture, in the truest sense because it is the meaning, the truth, that truly is the Word of God. So we can say that our translations are the Word of God in so far as they convey this truth to us in our language.

Note again the quote above from Gerhard in a slightly different translation:

Leader's Note: Gerhard: By the name "Scripture" we must understand not so much the external form or the signs, i.e., the points of the letters, the act of writing, and the words with which the divine revelation is written down, but rather the material itself or that which is meant by the words, and therefore that very thing which is denoted and meant by the writing, namely, the Word of God itself which teaches us about the essence and will of God... In this prophetic and apostolic Scripture two things are to be kept in mind, namely, first the letters, syllables and words themselves, which are written and are the external symbols which signify and express the thoughts of the mind; secondly, the thoughts themselves, which are, as it were, indicated, being expressed in those external symbols consisting of letters, syllables and words. Therefore both of these are included in this name "Scripture," and the **latter indeed principally** (*Loci Theologici*, II, p14). (Sr Dogmatics Notes, p. 70) (emphasis added.)

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Leader's Note: It would be good to note here that this is why we consider it important for our pastors to continue to be taught the original languages of Scripture so that they can compare any and every translation to be sure that it is conveying the truth as accurately as possible and to seek out those nuances of the truth that simply cannot be conveyed from one language to another and which give insights into the meaning of God's Truth as it was heard in the original languages.

For further study: You may want to do further study on your own regarding the topics that are taken up in these four lessons. We suggest that you look up the Web site of the Translation Evaluation Committee (TEC) at the following address: www.wels.net/translation. There are links to articles and comparisons that can give you much more information located on this page.