

What Kind of Book is the Bible?

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For nearly two thousand years people from all walks of life, from Kings to paupers, have turned to the Bible as a compass for their journey of Christian faith in the uncharted territory of daily life. Assembled over hundreds of years in various geographic locations, the Bible is a historical document, diverse in authorship, literary genre and human experience, yet unified in its overarching message. Woven inside the many books of the Bible is the common discernible thread of humanity's redemption by a loving and pursuing God. Christian believers regard the Bible as Scripture, an inspired written Revelation of God, providing an authoritative standard or "norm" for both individual and community.

Scripture comes to us as a literary product documenting the struggles of the community of faith in history.¹ God's chosen people, first Israel then the church, wrote about of its historic experiences of being the community of God. A great deal of what is regarded as Scripture is the written sedimentation of these historic experiences, describing the self-understanding of the faith community and meaning within God's plan.² Gordon Fee has quoted, "The Bible is the Word of God given in human words in history."³ Scripture as a historical document creates a combination of the human and the

¹ Paul J. Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority: Nature and Function of Christian Scripture* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 157.

² *Ibid.*, 100.

³ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2003), 21.

divine paralleling our understanding of the person of Jesus Christ.⁴ The consequence of the human element of Scripture (words) is considerable diversity and uncertainty. Daniel Migliore distills this effect best, “‘The Word became flesh’ (John 1:14) this means that the Word of God entered into the ambiguity and relativity of historical reality.”⁵

Issues of diversity in the Bible inevitably lead to discussions of the concept of “inerrancy.” At the heart of the issue of inerrancy is the belief in the internal formal consistency of all teachings within the Bible and facticity of all of Biblical statements.⁶ This rigid interpretation of inerrancy has resulted in fracturing inside the body of Christ, as well as forced interpretation of some passages of Scripture. Clark Pinnock provides a thoughtful insight of the psyche behind inerrancy when he says, “Inerrancy is a metaphor for the determination to trust in God’s Word completely.”⁷ From this understanding Pinnock proposes a reaffirmation and redefining of inerrancy in relation to the purpose of the Bible, highlighting the conviction that it speaks the truth.⁸ Paul Hanson concurring with Pinnock, points out that diversity in the Bible does not indicate it is a collection of disconnected statements. Hanson asserts the purpose and steadfastness of the one true God is apparent throughout Scripture.⁹ The common redemptive purpose of God evident in the Bible provides a unified message in spite of historical and literary diversity

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: an Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 50.

⁶ Paul D. Hanson, *The Diversity of Scripture: A Theological Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 2.

⁷ Clark H. Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 224-225.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Hanson, *The Diversity of Scripture*, 4.

resulting from human experience. It is this unified and inspired Revelation of God's of redemptive message that is to be considered inerrant.

The understanding of the Bible as being "inspired" by God generates a great deal of debate both within and outside the community of faith. Speaking only within the bounds of the community of faith, generally all who regard the Bible as having revelatory content also regard it as being "inspired." Debate inside the community of faith germinates from the multiple concepts of the meaning of "inspired."¹⁰ Irrespective of the position taken on the nature of "inspired," the concept of the inspiration of Scripture requires examination. The doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture is quintessential to whether the church experiences Scripture as "the Word of God." Understanding the Bible as inspired creates a unique relationship between it and the community of faith, resulting in the Bible becoming and continuing to be the "Word of God" to that community.¹¹ Scriptures must be understood as inspired in order to be recognized as being the written revelation of God.

As the community of faith and individuals within that community assent to the Bible being inspired by God, the text becomes a unique communication from God to the community and the individuals. This communication is the self-revealing of God and his purposes for his people. Revelation then is God speaking to us about himself and about his plans for our redemption. The inspired Bible then becomes the "literary location" of

¹⁰ For a concise discussion of the major views see, Gilbert W. Stafford, *Theology for Disciples* (Anderson, Ind.: Warner Press, 1996), 46-49.

¹¹ Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority*, 159. Achtemeier's interpretation of inspiration is best characterized as dynamic. He places heavy emphasis on the role of community, noting that inspiration must be located within the community of faith as well as within the individual author. As cited Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority*, 102.

God's written revelation regarding his redemptive purposes on our behalf.¹² The Bible is the witness to "the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us" (John 1:14). Scripture reveals that God is present with the community of faith, and the individual. The product of this revelation is a new understanding of God and a new identity for the individual, resulting in "a new way of life in communion with God and with others."¹³ This new way of life is the outcome of the corrective and creative power of the One that Scripture points to (reveals). The authority of Scripture is not located in the text itself but in the divine power it reveals. The same divine power that shaped (inspired) Scripture now shapes and transforms the believer. This divine power is the Holy Spirit.¹⁴

The Bible now understood as being the divinely inspired written revelation of God, and his redemptive purpose for humankind, acquires authority in the life of the individual believer and the community. No longer approached simply as historical literature, but as "Scripture," the Bible becomes an authoritative "norm" of faith.¹⁵ Possessing authority, the Biblical witness frees the Christian community from being held captive to the culture and its ruling norms.¹⁶ Both the individual believer and the community of faith utilize the Bible as a "measuring rod" in determining what is regarded as Christian faith.¹⁷ Scripture becomes the standard by which we live our lives as Christians, evaluating our attitudes, actions, and intentions by the inspired written

¹² Stafford, *Theology for Disciples*, 49.

¹³ Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 48.

¹⁴ Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority*, 147.

¹⁵ Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 45.

¹⁶ Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority*, 148.

¹⁷ Stafford, *Theology for Disciples*, 49.

revelation that God provides. The Bible has unique authority in the life of the community of faith and the individual believer; it has been inspired by the Spirit as both a record and a guide for the community of faith.¹⁸

The beginning assertion was that the Bible is a historical literary document. It certainly is this, but also much more. To lean on the historical nature of the Bible is to place it at some point in the past. Inside the community of faith we believe that the Bible is inspired Scripture revealing the nature and intent of God. With this understanding the Bible becomes a living document in the “now” of our personal experience. This living document we call the Bible then affects communication from God to us. Through this communication our lives are transformed and our future is shaped. It is evident that the Bible, by nature of Who it points to, is the kind of book that transcends and transforms history.

¹⁸ Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority*, 157.

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