



CHAPTER 3

RECEIVE THE WORD

A Church Bible

The Church receives her identity from the Word of God. The Church is gathered around the Word of God, and in accordance with the Word of God. How the Church understands the Bible is therefore a matter of great importance. The problem is straightforward. The Church is under the authority of the Scriptures, and yet, at first glance it seems that the Church created the Bible, determining which books were canonical. So how can the Church be in true submission to something which it fashioned?

The Bible did not “just appear.” In the words of the Westminster Confession, the Bible was inspired by God at the initial writing, and since that time has been preserved by His “singular care and providence.” Although this supernatural book has come down to us by very natural means, as Christians we know that God is Governor of all things, and this necessarily includes those natural means and historical processes which placed His Word in our hands.

The Church of the Old Testament—that is, Israel—had the initial care of those books corresponding to them. The apostle Paul plainly says that the oracles of God were entrusted to the Jews. “What advantage then hath the Jew? Or what profit is there of circumcision? Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God” (Rom. 3:1–2). With regard to that trust, they did their duty well. The canonical books of the Old Testament are thirty-nine in number. Our Lord referred to this canonical range when He spoke of the death of certain martyrs from the Old Testament. “That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar” (Mt. 23:35). Abel was killed toward the beginning of the book of Genesis, the first book of the Jewish canon, and Zechariah was killed in

2 Chronicles, which was the last book as they arranged the canon. Christ is referring to all the martyrs throughout Scripture, from A to Z.

Thus our Lord excludes the books commonly called the Apocrypha. Although valuable for history and background, they had no part of the authoritative Hebrew canon. The more liberal Hellenistic Jews of Alexandria allowed those books into the Greek Old Testament, but this was not the view of the Jews who sat in Moses' seat, those to whom Christ bade us listen.

When the time of Messianic reformation came, the apostles of the Lord began to finalize the Scriptures. As they wrote, they fully expected that their words would be received and acknowledged by the Church to be the Word of God. "For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, *but as it is in truth, the word of God*, which effectually worketh also in you that believe" (1 Thes. 2:13). Peter acknowledges that Paul's letters are Scripture (2 Pet. 3:16), and in this assumes a knowledge of the limits of Scripture with New Testament writings included. Paul does the same with the writing of Luke (1 Tim. 5:18). Now the word "Scripture" is canonically defined, i.e., without a canon, the term is meaningless. Both 2 Peter and 1 Timothy were written late, when the canon was basically complete.

This common reception of the New Testament was not challenged until the middle of the second century when a heretic named Marcion began teaching that the Old Testament was not the Word of God. According to Marcion, with the exception of Paul's letters, the New Testament was generally to be rejected as well. Now the Church had received the books of the New Testament from the first, since the first century, but had made no authoritative list, or canon, of accepted books—at least that we know of. Marcion's heresy made that necessary, so the discussions began, and in 393 at Hippo and 397 at Carthage, the Church formally testified that the twenty-seven books which we have in the New Testament are to be received as apostolic.

We receive these Scriptures on their own authority. They are the Word of *God*, and they speak to us as such. Nevertheless, God has given us a secondary earthly testimony concerning them. Martin Luther used the apt picture of Christ and John the Baptist. In no way did John bestow any authority upon Christ when he said, "Behold, the Lamb of God." At the same time, even though John's witness did not create "the Christ," his witness was still important.

In a similar way, submissively and authoritatively, the Church points to the sixty-six books of the Bible. During the Christian aeon, the Church is responsible to keep and preserve the same kind of testimony concerning the entire Bible that the Church gave in her younger years, when Israel had been entrusted with the Old Testament books.

When modern groups and sects point to other books than what God has given (e.g., Mormons and the Book of Mormon, Roman Catholics and the Apocrypha, etc.), they are exhibiting more than just their unbelief. They are also showing their radical detachment from the ancient and historical Church.

This witness is not offered by the Church as “something to think about” or as a mere “suggestion.” The testimony of the Church on this point is submissive to Scripture but authoritative for the saints. For example, if a minister in a Christian church took it upon himself to add a book to the canon of Scripture, or sought to take away a book, the duty of his church would be to try him for heresy and remove him immediately. This disciplinary action is authoritative, taken in defense of an authoritative canonical settlement. This does not mean the Church is defending the Word of God; the Church is defending her witness to the Word. As the necessity of discipline makes plain, this witness is dogmatic and authoritative. It is not open for discussion. God does not intend for us to debate the canon of Scripture afresh every generation. We have already given our testimony; our duty now is to remain faithful to it.

Not surprisingly, this relates to the much-vexed question of Bible translations. When a young Christian walks into a Christian bookstore to buy a Bible, he is probably unaware of the debate which surrounds his search for a translation. To the extent he is aware of some controversy on the subject, he is likely to interpret it as a collision between a small tribe of mindless traditionalists (“If the King James Version was good enough for Paul, it’s good enough for me!”) and those intelligent enough to see that the Word of God must be presented in the language of the people.¹

This is most unfortunate, because the real debate concerns the nature of God’s Word and our consequent approach to it.² In seeking to understand this, the best place to start is at the beginning. Until the invention

¹ At the same time, the anti-intellectualism of many of the KJV’s defenders is completely out of step with its glorious literary heritage. See C.S. Lewis, *Literary Impact of Authorized Version* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963).

² Theodore Letis, ed. *The Majority Text* (n.l.: Institute for Biblical Textual Studies, 1987) and Letis, *The Ecclesiastical Text* (Philadelphia: Institute for Renaissance and Reformation Biblical Studies, 1997). A brief glance will reveal my debts to Letis.

of the printing press in the 15th century, copies of the Bible were all made by hand. Consequently, all the ancient copies of the New Testament are called *manuscripts*. Most of these manuscripts are very similar, but a handful contain considerable variations.

Now when the Reformers first rejected the abuses of the Roman Catholic church, they did so on the basis of *sola Scriptura*—Scripture alone. The Catholic response to this was to begin assembling collections of all the variant textual readings of the manuscripts in what were called “polyglots.” What was their point? The Reformers might want to say they believed in Scripture alone, but in which textual family was it to be found? Without an infallible church, without experts of some kind, there was no way to tell.³

The Reformers answered this question, not as neutral scientists, but as confessing Christians. The Word of God, they said, was basically found in the received text, which was representative of the manuscript family containing the overwhelming number of manuscripts. The Reformers asserted this, not on the basis of some neutral science, but on the basis of faith in God’s preservation of His own Word. They looked at the history of manuscript transmission *to see what God had done*; they did not look at the manuscripts to see what man had to do. For the Reformers, and for all consistent Christians, the doctrines of the Bible’s inspiration and the Bible’s preservation are twins. What good is an inspired Bible which no one of us has ever seen?⁴

This answer was accepted generally by evangelical scholars until the last century. At that time, those who believed in the divine inspiration of the Bible came under attack from liberal theologians and textual critics. Unfortunately, the response of evangelical scholars was similar to their response to the theory of evolution—an anemic attempt to have it both ways, i.e., continuing to believe in the Bible while accepting (to a limited extent) the new critical approach to textual studies.

As a consequence, evangelical scholars gradually came to the conviction that the science of textual criticism was in fact “a neutral science.” In other words, the worldview of the textual critic and translator does not necessarily matter. The foundation stone of all the modern versions is that textual criticism is a neutral science, and that Christians and non-Christians alike can be good practitioners of this science. The difference

³ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, Vol. XVI (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1968), 296–421.

⁴ Edward Hills, *Believing Bible Study* (Des Moines: The Christian Research Press, 1967).

between evangelical and liberal textual critics is that the evangelicals have sought to fight off the principles of higher criticism by using the principles of lower criticism, little realizing that the fundamental principles are the same in each case.⁵

So we must understand there are two different approaches to textual work. One expresses confidence that God has protected His Word down through history. This is a faith position—faith in God. The other presupposition says that it is up to man, through neutral, scholarly, and scientific means, to determine what the original text of the Bible was. This is a faith position too—faith in man.

The practical result of all this is that the modern versions are based upon a handful of texts from the third, fourth and fifth centuries, discovered (for the most part) in this century and the last. In contrast, the Authorized Version is based upon the overwhelming majority of available manuscripts, dating from as early as the fifth century and in continual use since that time. It is a choice between the eighty percent of ancient manuscripts, which are internally consistent, and the twenty percent of slightly older manuscripts, which differ considerably with one another.

Almost all modern translations are taken from an eclectic Critical Text (CT). One common form of this text for the New Testament is that published by the United Bible Societies. The text is accompanied with an apparatus which enables the student to compare all the variant readings of the manuscripts. Another popular form of the CT is the Nestle/Aland text. Virtually all modern translations of the Bible come from some form of the CT. There is no set form of this text, by definition, and so each translation will accept now this manuscript as reliable, and now another. The cornerstone of the CT, called by the NIV translators the “two most reliable manuscripts,” are Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus. These two manuscripts are Alexandrian in origin, and when compared to the thousands of later Greek manuscripts (belonging to the Byzantine family), are in a distinct minority.

Sinaiticus and Vaticanus are held up as the closest exemplars of what the New Testament autographs supposedly contained. But they differ between themselves in the Gospels alone over 3,000 times. To applaud them therefore as the “most reliable” really means that reliability must now be an elastic term. This means scholars are not really submitting to the authority of these Alexandrian texts, but are actually using them to overthrow any idea of a settled textual authority. The problem for the

⁵For a hilarious application of modern textual criticism to the stories of Sherlock Holmes, see Dorothy Sayers, *Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969).

scientist is not the *textus receptus*, but is really the idea of *any* received text.

At the same time, it is important to remember that antiquity of manuscripts is not really the issue here. It is like two rivers; one is hundreds of yards wide, and you are able to walk upstream for ten miles. The other is a creek ten yards wide, and you are able to go upstream for eleven miles. Nevertheless, you know that the broad river, given its breadth, must begin a lot farther upstream than you are able to go. In other words, the breadth of the received manuscript tradition shows that it is at least as old as the supposedly more ancient written tradition.

Another option is the result of scholars who have accepted the task of a scholarly reconstruction of the text but believe that the widespread acceptance of the minority readings is misguided. They have produced what is called the Majority Text (MT). A modern translation which refers to the MT in its marginal notes is the New King James Version (NKJV). In other words, they have come up with a traditional answer but with a suspect, modern method.⁶

The third textual option is to use what is called the *textus receptus* or Received Text (TR). The TR is a collation of readings taken from the majority Byzantine texts, which readings were gathered in the transition between manuscripts and printing. The early collators were men like Erasmus, Beza, Stephens, and in the last century, Scrivener. Variations exist between these texts, but they are a mere handful compared to the thousands of variants in the CT. The Authorized Version is based upon the TR, and consequently the TR remains the true “majority” text—although the plethora of modern translations has challenged that position within the last generation.

So the earliest complete manuscripts belong to a different manuscript family than do the thousands of later manuscripts which are scattered around the ancient world in multitudes, and which were in common use down to the invention of the printing press. But when we consider the facts carefully, nothing is more apparent than that this is actually a battle of the paradigms. In some respects, this is very much like the reconstruction of the evolutionary fossil tree, 98 percent of which is missing. When we consider all the manuscripts we possess, we must still compare them to the number of all the manuscripts ever written—which we do not have. The reconstruction of the autographic text is a task

⁶Hodges and Farstaad, *Majority Text?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994). See also Pickering, *The Identity of the New Testament Text* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Pub., 1977, 1980).

outside the competence of science, and any attempt to submit the task to scientific canons will only result in increasing confusion. A process of scholarly reconstruction here makes sense only when undergirded with faith in the living God who controls the flow of all historical events. If, in order to be “scientific,” we eliminate this God from our considerations, the end of the road will be no text at all, or radical confusion about the text. The autonomous text critic is someone who believes that this problem of the original text is one which admits of a scientific solution, or worse, that there is no solution. But the real solution to this problem is faith in God, and in His providential care for His Word.

Of course, we should not be surprised that this ongoing confusion and debate about the original text has resulted in a less than scrupulous approach to translation. After all, the acceptance of lower criticism means that the *details* of the text are up for discussion. For the most part, modern translations, in the name of getting the “idea” across, are notoriously sloppy about getting what God actually said across. In contrast, in the Authorized Version the translators were very strict about translating every word. And where, for the sake of sense, it is necessary to add a word not in the original, that word was put in italics so that the reader could see that it was added. Because it is a strict translation, such italicized words are kept at a minimum.

So this brings us to translation issues.⁷ The phrases we use today to discuss our differences over translation philosophy are *formal equivalence* and *dynamic equivalence*. The way we cast the debate, the formal equivalence school wants to reflect the original languages in English as closely as can be done. The dynamic equivalence school is content to render the idea of the passage in the contemporary idiom. In short, the difference is between a strict approach to translation, and a loose one. Obviously these two phrases represent two poles, between which we find a continuum, with a distinct translation possible at every point. A paraphrase is on the far end of dynamic equivalence. A strict translation sticks as close to the original as it can, and when forced to insert words in order to make good English sense, those words are italicized to mark them for the English reader.

We are not the first to discuss these issues, and the more refined terminology coming out of the Reformation era can be a great help. On this question, we have to distinguish material and verbal authority. A phrase to remember here is *authoritas divina duplex*, which means “twofold divine authority.” We must come to see the authority of Scripture in two

⁷ Robert Martin, *Accuracy of Translation* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1989).

senses. The first is *authoritas rerum*—the authority of the “things” of Scripture, the substance of the text. This authority pertains to the text of Scripture in the original languages, and also to accurate translations of that original.⁸

As Christians, we also believe in verbal inspiration, which means we must hold to *authoritas verborum*, the authority of the words of Scripture. But this authority belongs only to the text in its original form, in the original languages. The *authoritas verborum* is an external and “accidental” authority which always falls away necessarily in the process of translation. No translation, however good, is capable of preserving this authority. The historic Protestant position is that a good translation of the Scripture preserved the authority of Scripture with regard to the substance of the text (*quoad res*). The same cannot be said with regard to the words of the text itself (*quoad verba*).

This means that the words of an English translation, even a good one, do not carry inspired *verbal* authority. But if the English translation is poorly done, it does begin to adversely affect the material authority. For example, the English word *world* in Jn. 3:16 has material authority, but not verbal authority. In order to grasp the verbal authority, we have to see and understand the Greek word *kosmos*. If the word *kosmos* were translated into English poorly, say, as *shopping mall*, the translation would lose its material authority as well.

All these distinctions are necessary in order to remember that a strict formal equivalence translation is not an attempt to acquire strict verbal authority for a translation (which cannot be done), but rather to preserve material authority for that translation. This is because material authority can be forfeited or greatly diminished whenever the translation is done poorly. Given the nature of language, material authority could be lost in one fell swoop (e.g., translating *kosmos* as *toaster oven*), or it could be lost by gradations (e.g., translating *kosmos* as *land*).

Our acceptance of English translations does not mean that verbal authority is unimportant to us. On the contrary, this is why the historic Protestant position held that the ministers of churches were to be skilled in the original languages. No church should be without access to the full verbal authority of the Word of God.

When we take this criterion and apply it to various translations, we get a mixed bag. Versions like the Living Bible and the NIV have not lost material authority, but have significantly damaged it. But because of

⁸ Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985).

“dynamic equivalence,” the popular NIV feels very free to insert many words to convey what the translators believed to be the “sense,” and the inserted words are not marked in any way. They have also felt free to omit, without any indication, many words in the original. At the very least, we can say that the NIV approach to the Bible’s inspiration (as indicated by how it is handled) is a little fuzzy around the edges.

So through a series of complicated circumstances, we have come to the last point, which concerns the handlers or marketers of the text. We see that text of Scripture is now established by the neutral Academy, and is afterwards packaged, copyrighted, marketed and sold by hustling and enterprising entrepreneurs. The Church today has no authoritative role in the process whatever. When it comes to the Word of God, the modern Christian Church fancies herself as a shopper only—a consumer. Our collective interest in these spiritual things is simply one more itch for Adam Smith’s invisible hand to scratch. We think the Church’s duty is to send parishioners off to find the Bible section in the Christian gift center, right next to the case of small glass figurines, and there to make a dutiful purchase.

A more biblical vision would see the Church as guardian or custodian of the sacred text. Just as the Jews, the Church of the Old Testament, discharged their obligations with regard to the Scriptures, so should the Church under the New Covenant. What God had spoken through His prophets was entrusted to His covenant people. They had received, as part of their covenantal inheritance, the covenants, the law, and the promises (Rom. 9:4), all of which were contained for them in the Scriptures. As we saw earlier, they had been given the oracles of God (Rom. 3:2). This is in sharp distinction from the view held by many in the modern Church, which says that the oracles of God should be committed to the scholarly unbelievers down at the University of Whatzit, and marketed by the very important suits and ties down at Zondervan and Thomas Nelson.

Contrary to what many conservatives may think, the recent dust-up over the ongoing move of the popular NIV to gender-neutrality is not really the problem. This current silliness simply illustrates one small snippet of the problem. The problem is that the Church no longer has anything to do with the administration of the oracles of God. But the *Church*, Paul says, is the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15), not the pillar and ground of a greater market share. Entrusted with something precious, we were foolish enough to set it down somewhere and have now lost track of it.

We are distressed at the trendy foolishness which swirls around the Bible, but given the current custodians of the Word, what did we expect? We still do not have the confessional backbone to suggest a biblical solution. Sober-minded Christians have always objected to the way the Bible is handled by her current hawkers. “How can we get people to buy the same old thing, over and over?” wonder the suits. “I know,” says one up-and-comer. “Let’s keep changing it—just like Nike does with their sneakers.” This is the origin of more translations than one can shake a stick at, along with ever-new and exciting packaging, like a Study Bible for Husbands with Menopausal Wives, and the Nasturtiums Who Love Them. We object, but objecting and repenting are two different things. I made the title of that particular Study Bible up, but it is getting harder and harder to satirize anything. As I write this, I am (really) looking at a full page ad for a conflation of the Gospels, marketed as *The Story of My Life as told by Jesus Christ*. The four Gospels are combined, and then put into the first person singular. “Reads like a Diary,” the copywriter breathlessly informs us.

We should all be realists by now and not expect the solution to come from those who are profiteering off the problem. If a serious reform of this particular publishing travesty ever got large enough for anyone to notice it, the caterwauling of Textual Critic and Businessman, in close harmony with one another, would lead any dispassionate observer to conclude that someone had undertaken the skinning of cats with a butter knife.

But reformation always begins with the Word of God. In our case, this means a recovery of the ecclesiastical text from within the Church. Our situation is a difficult one, and the suggestions given below are therefore not necessarily ranked in any particular order.

First, the historic Protestant Church must reassert her prerogatives with regard to the keeping of the oracles of God. The rights to market the Bible were not sold by the Holy Spirit to Rupert Murdoch, the current owner of Zondervan. How in blue blazes did Mammon get the publishing rights to the Word of God? Who was involved in the transaction, and why hasn’t he been publicly flogged?

Second, the Church needs to encourage the saints to discontinue their patronage of those who perpetuate this \$49.95 leather-bound trumpery. Any copyrighted-for-profit version of the Bible (with obligatory threats for excessive storage and retrieval) should be rejected out of hand.

Third, we should pray and labor for a new ecclesiastical translation (or revision) of the Bible. This translation and work should begin with

the last true ecclesiastical version we had, which was the Authorized Version (popularly known as the King James). At one stroke this would set right the three principle issues involved: the ecclesiastical (the Church distributing Scripture, as opposed to, say, the devil), the textual (the *textus receptus* as opposed to the tossed salad “who’s-to-say?” variant readings we get now), and the translational (formal equivalence vs. dynamic equivalence).

Now it is acknowledged that a good translation also has to go successfully into the receiving language. This is one place where the AV does require some continued revision. The AV was revised regularly up until 1769, and that process should continue. *He speaketh* does not represent the original any more successfully than *he speaks*, and for many contemporary readers, it does take away from its accessibility—accessibility which is faithful to the original is the point of translation. In a good translation no good reason exists for keeping that language. The much reviled *thees* and *thous*, however, do reflect the original better. Greek has a distinction between the singular and plural forms of *you*, which contemporary English does not have. *Thee* is not a special form for talking to God; *thou* and *thee* are the singular form, and *you* and *ye* are the plural. Readers of the AV have access to the original at this point which readers of other translations do not have.

Fourth, the portion of the Church involved with the recovery of the Bible should repudiate, in the strongest possible terms, the Glassy-Eyed Defenders of the King James Version, who are very popular in certain fundamentalist circles. Such know-nothingism has been one of the principle reasons why the Bible-mongers have been able to get away with rejecting the ecclesiastical text without any serious argument.

Fifth, the Church should approach the task of recovery and reformation with considerable cheerfulness. After all, the whole thing is kind of obvious, once you think about it.

Tradition and the Word

As soon as we maintain that our trust in the Word has as its foundation a belief that God has providentially protected the manuscript tradition, this leads us to directly consider the role of tradition in our faith. After all, the Table of Contents in our Bibles is one of the Church’s first and most important confessional traditions.

So what is the relationship between the Scriptures and the various traditions of the Christian Church since the time of Jesus Christ? Anyone

who has spent any time in church knows the force of inertia in all aspects of decision-making. “We’ve never done it that way before” has considerable persuasive power for many believers. When this process can even be seen in young churches, how much greater force does it have when older churches contemplate the change of patterns, traditions, confessions, etc., which are centuries old?

The unthinking fundamentalist wants to reduce the whole problem to a very simple equation—“just stick to the Bible.” His belief is that fooling around with traditions in the first place is what caused the problem. We may call this the “tradition as demon” position.

“We don’t believe in tradition. We have never believed in tradition. The founders of our denomination didn’t believe in tradition. We can’t start following tradition now. We have always not followed tradition.” As the statements above amply demonstrate, the only consistent way to follow the “no tradition” school of thought is to abandon it. We needn’t spend any time refuting a church whose tradition is that traditions are bad and evil. As the fellow once said, “We don’t believe in tradition. It’s contrary to our historic position.”

On the other side of things, we have the “exalted tradition” contingent. The traditions of men are frankly acclaimed as the requirements of God. This may be held with doctrinal consistency, as the Roman Catholics do, or furtively, as inconsistent “strict subscriptionists” within the Reformed tradition do. This is the “tradition as monarch” school. The theory may mouth a high view of Scripture, but practically, whenever the traditions, creeds, and practices of a church cannot be brought before the bar of Scripture, then that tradition has assumed the place of Scripture. Now a church does have authority to point to the Word of God *as* the Word of God. But it has no authority to elevate the word of men to the same position.

The biblical stance may be described as “tradition as servant.” The Protestant doctrine of *sola Scriptura* does not mean that Scripture is the only religious authority in the lives of Christians. Rather, *sola Scriptura* means that Scripture exhibits two characteristics which define its unique place in the rule of the Church. The Bible, and only the Bible, is the ultimate authority in the teaching and practice of the Church, and the Bible, and only the Bible, is the only infallible authority in the teaching and practice of the church. These two elements—ultimacy and infallibility—are unique to Scripture.⁹

⁹ Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, 224

But notice how this leaves us with room for a necessary doctrine of subordinate spiritual authorities. The elders of a local church, Christian parents bringing up children in the fear of the Lord, and convocations of theologians three centuries ago are all lawful authorities, deputized as such in Scripture. They have the authority to teach and make decisions. They do not do so infallibly, and they are not ultimate. God's deacons, God's ministers, are never God's replacements, but they are in fact His servants. Appeal can and should be made beyond them when necessary. But the fact that a case may be appealed beyond them to an ultimate infallible authority does not mean that the initial authority is no authority.

Still less does it mean that these subordinate authorities can get nothing right. A fallible authority is not defined as one that is wrong all the time. This is a good thing, as it turns out, for it is the fallible teaching authority of the historic Church which pointed us to the canon of Scripture. A fallible Church made an infallible (true) judgment when it determined the boundaries of the canon. In the same way, John the Baptist, a sinful man, pointed accurately to Christ, the sinless One. The Church, a fallible authority, has accurately pointed to the infallible and ultimate canon of Scripture.

If there is no room for this tradition, the tradition of the Church pointing away from herself to a final Word, then the modern fundamentalist is not left alone with his Bible. He has no Bible.

One of the reasons why the practical authority of Scripture has declined in the Protestant church is that we have not really understood the nature of that authority. The cry of "Scripture alone," misunderstood as it is, does not eliminate our traditions. It just makes them hard for us to see. A modern church cannot base everything it does on "Scriptures solitaire" without any reference to the testimonies of the historic Church. For one of the central testimonies which the Church has given, and which the historic Protestants continue to give, is that the sixty six books of the Bible are the only ultimate and infallible Word of God. Take that testimony away, and you are left with various lone individuals clutching at a leather-bound book for some mysterious reason. Better not ask them why—that would be asking for their private tradition, and traditions are bad.

Tradition is what the church necessarily hands down to subsequent generations. An essential part of that tradition must be a definition of the ultimate and infallible standard which will serve as the only criterion for judging the rest of the traditions. And the only tradition which gives that place of honor to *sola Scriptura* is that of the historic Protestant faith.

The Final Word

But ancient traditions of the Church are not the only possible threat to the purity of the Word of God. Another danger is that of new revelation, hot off the press. The men of the Westminster Assembly were certainly alive to this danger when they declared the ultimacy of Scripture. Not only was the Bible senior to “all decrees of councils” and “opinions of ancient writers” but it was also senior to “private spirits.” We are to accept the Bible as it is, they said, not adding anything at any time, whether by “new revelations of the Spirit” or “traditions of men.” Renegade traditions provide one temptation, but in modern evangelical circles, a pressing problem is created by those who claim that God continues to give revelation. The concern here is not really about worship styles, but rather about the integrity of the Scriptures.

More than a few pastors have wondered whether they are being theologically dishonest in saying that the “sign gifts” are no longer operative in the church today. True, the charismatic movement gives us great reason to be suspicious, and it is a pleasure to be prejudiced and bigoted sometimes, especially when Benny Hinn is involved, but do we not have to admit that such charismatic goings-on were present in the Church of the New Testament? Well, no.¹⁰

The question goes far beyond the fact of charismatic excesses. The central issue in all of this is the preservation of the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*. The only ultimate and infallible authority in all matters of faith and practice is contained in the sixty-six books of the Bible. If the miraculous gifts are in any way acknowledged, then the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* must necessarily be abandoned. This does not mean that everyone does abandon it who should, only that logical consistency demands it.

The easiest way to illustrate this is to consider the office of prophet, and the nature of prophecy. What happens when someone stands up in a church service and prophesies? He says, in effect, “Thus says the Lord,” and then a message follows. A man who hears these words and believes them is obligated to treat the words he heard *as the Word of God*. The only way for him to contradict this is by saying that he believes them to *be* words from God but for some reason he does not really have to treat them *as* words from God. But this is contradictory.

When I have offered this objection in the past, the answer has frequently been an appeal to the lost prophecies of Philip’s daughters, or

¹⁰ See B.B. Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1972 [1918]). See also John MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1993).

something else in a similar category. In other words, the Bible tells us that some prophecies from God did not make it into Scripture, and so therefore not all prophecies from God have to be considered Scripture. But this misses the point of the objection.

Of course, the words of God can be disposed of by God. If He gave a word through one of Philip's daughters which He did not want to be included in Scripture, then He may obviously do what He pleases with His own words. The point being made here is that we may not do as we please with His words. A man who has received these words as from God has no basis for treating them differently from other words from God (contained in Scripture) unless God sovereignly intervenes.

As long as a man has in his possession words which he believes are inspired by God, then he has a moral responsibility to treat them as though they are words inspired by God. This means he has no consistent basis for treating them any differently from the words of Scripture. Furthermore, on a practical level, he has certain clear inducements to pay closer attention to them than to the words of Scripture. Jeremiah lived a long time ago, he spoke a different language, his culture was very different from what we have to deal with. And now here, in this church service, God has given us a word in English, in our time, and in our surroundings. Which is the more relevant of the two?

Charismatic believers can be divided into two groups, corresponding to two responses to this objection. The first group agrees with the *reductio* posed here, and runs with it. These are the groups which have a prophecy of the week posted on the bulletin board, and every so often they publish the Bible II, and then the Bible III. These groups are cultic, and we need not concern ourselves with them, except for purposes of evangelism.

But the other group does not like this dilemma when it is presented to them. Because they are genuine Christians, they know that the Bible is unique. However, because of this false and destructive doctrine of continuing revelation, they have no way of consistently maintaining that the Bible is unique. Fortunately, they are better Christians than logicians, and so they just live with the contradiction. This is not hard, because it is rarely pointed out to them. But the fact that they are sincere Christians does not remove the danger they have created. A man should fear when his convictions, faithfully followed out to their conclusion, might lead him to abandon the Christian faith.

But a dilemma for the charismatics is insufficient for those who want to ground their theology and practice in the plain teaching of Scripture.

Can the cessation of the sign gifts, the gifts bearing or authenticating revelation, be found in the pages of the Bible?¹¹ In brief, the case for the cessation of sign gifts can be made in a summary fashion. In the former days, God spoke to us in various ways through the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken to us through His Son (Heb. 1:1). This Son was laid as the cornerstone, and alongside Him were the foundation stones of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20–21). No other foundation can be laid other than the one which was laid, namely the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:11). The indicators of this foundational and apostolic authority were signs, wonders, and various miracles, all done according to the Spirit's desire and will (2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:4).¹²

So the issue is not whether we like this gift or that one, or whether we are to duplicate the phenomena of the first-century church. Rather, the issue is whether we understand the nature of blueprints. No real need for doing concrete work while building the attic.

¹¹ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Final Word* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1990).

¹² Jim West, *The Glorious Foundation* (Sacramento: Covenant Reformed Books, 1999).