

Don't Call It a
COMEBACK

THE OLD FAITH *for a* NEW DAY

EDITED BY KEVIN DEYOUNG

FOREWORD BY D. A. CARSON

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Chapter 4

Scripture

How the Bible Is a Book Like No Other

ANDY NASELLI

I grew up Mormon—sort of. Most of my mom’s relatives are faithful members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but my family left Mormonism when I was six years old. I’ve studied Mormonism a fair bit to try to understand what I might have embraced, and I’ve found that the most fundamental issue that divides Mormons from evangelicals is what they believe about the Bible.

This dividing line is not unique to Mormons and evangelicals. It’s the dividing line between just about all other religious people and evangelicals. That’s because evangelicals hold uncommon beliefs about this holy book.

Is the Bible merely a human book with its share of errors? Is it irrelevant and insufficient for life’s most pressing problems? Is it too difficult for ordinary people to understand? If the answers to those questions are yes, then evangelicals are fools. If you want to discredit evangelicals, discredit the Bible.

What's the Big Deal?

The Bible is a God-breathed book, completely trustworthy and authoritative. Few things matter more than believing that last sentence.

1. It matters because what you think about the Bible directly affects what you believe and how you live. Is the Bible like an all-you-can-eat buffet where you pick and choose what to believe and obey? Is it merely another moral book, no more historical and inspired than Aesop's Fables?

2. It matters because some people who claim the term *evangelical* have a novel view of the Bible's authority. It is historically recent, for example, for those in the evangelical tradition to claim that the Bible contains historical and scientific errors.

3. It matters because views of the Bible set individuals and institutions on very different trajectories. Institutions that have rejected the Bible's entire trustworthiness have often gone on to embrace beliefs incompatible with the gospel. This controversial issue is a theological line in the sand.¹

A Book That Is God-Breathed: Inspiration

God has revealed himself to his creatures in two ways. His general revelation includes nature and the human conscience, and his special revelation includes the Bible. Our focus in this chapter is on the Bible. Amazingly, God has chosen to reveal himself using written human language. The process is called inspiration. Inspiration is how God breathed out his words through human authors.² "All Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16, NIV).³

But that doesn't mean that the human authors were not actively involved. God didn't dictate the whole Bible the way an executive mechanically dictates letters to his secretary. The human authors' personalities are like musical instruments. If I play the same tune on a

¹For a summary of some recent "battles for the Bible," see Stephen J. Nichols and Eric T. Brandt, *Ancient Word, Changing Worlds: The Doctrine of Scripture in a Modern Age* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 63–85.

²B. B. Warfield's classic definition is more precise: "Inspiration is . . . a supernatural influence exerted on the sacred writers by the Spirit of God, by virtue of which their writings are given Divine trustworthiness." *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, vol. 1, *Revelation and Inspiration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1927), 77–78.

³*Spiration* is an archaic word that means "breathing." The *in* prefix on *inspiration* is misleading because 2 Tim. 3:16 refers to a written product that God breathed *out*, not an existing product that God breathed *into* and animated. The prefix *ex* is more accurate, but calling all Scripture expired isn't exactly an improvement. We're stuck with the traditional word *inspired*.

number of wind instruments, each will sound different even if I play the exact melody in the same key and even though it's all coming from the same breath—mine. If I play “Amazing Grace” on a tuba, baritone, trombone, French horn, trumpet, oboe, clarinet, and flute, it is all “Andy-breathed” or “Andy-produced,” but it goes through the “personality” of the instrument. In one sense that’s how God produced the Bible through human authors. But even further, God worked through their backgrounds—including their skills and training—and research (e.g., Luke 1:1–3).

So who wrote the Bible: God or humans? That’s a trick question. The answer is *yes*.

If 2 Timothy 3:16 presents the nature of inspiration, then 2 Peter 1:20–21 presents its method: “No prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” The Bible is not the product of human invention. The writers did not think up what they wrote on their own. Rather, the human authors “spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” Luke uses the same word for “carried along” in Acts 27:15 and 17 to describe the way a ship was “driven along” by the wind and waves. Like the wind and waves carry along ships in a storm, God carried along the Bible’s human authors.

So God breathed out the Scriptures. But how much of it did he breath out? All of it (2 Tim. 3:16). Every single word.

The above summary explains the nature, method, and extent of inspiration, and it lines up exactly with how the Bible refers to itself. The human authors everywhere affirm this view of inspiration. For example, in the Old Testament, the Lord repeatedly speaks to Moses in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers; Isaiah quotes the word of the Lord over a dozen times; Jeremiah and Ezekiel say that “the word of the Lord came” to them over one hundred times; Daniel recounts visions from God; Hosea, Joel, Jonah, Micah, Zephaniah, Haggai, and Zechariah each open by announcing that “the word of the Lord came” to them; Malachi writes “says the Lord” twenty-five times.

But the most important example is Jesus.⁴ Jesus repeatedly quotes the Old Testament as his final authority. He says, “It is written” (Matt.

⁴See John Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

21:13); “Have you never read in the Scriptures . . . ?” (Matt. 21:42; cf. 21:16); “You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God” (Matt. 22:29); and “Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35). He also believes that the miracles recorded in it actually happened. He refers, for example, to Jonah in the belly of a huge fish for three days and nights, Noah’s flood, Lot’s wife, Moses and the burning bush, and manna in the wilderness (Matt. 12:40–41; Luke 17:26–32; 20:37; John 6:49).

The New Testament authors also refer to the Old Testament as God’s word (Rom. 3:2). They regard the writings of other New Testament authors as equally authoritative as the Old Testament and the words of Christ (1 Tim. 5:18; 2 Pet. 3:2, 15–16). They recognize that their writings reveal God’s plan more fully than the Old Testament (Eph. 3:2–3; Heb. 1:1–2; 2:2–3).

If the Bible really is this God-breathed book, then two other qualities follow: it’s without error and it’s authoritative.

A Book That Is Entirely True: Inerrancy

God is entirely truthful—without error (i.e., inerrant) and incapable of error (i.e., infallible) (Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; 2 Sam. 7:28; John 3:33; 14:6; Rom. 3:4; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18; 1 John 5:6). The Bible is God-breathed (i.e., inspired). Therefore, the Bible is entirely truthful—without error and incapable of error. “Inerrancy means that when all the facts are known, the Scriptures in their original autographs and properly interpreted will be shown to be wholly true in everything that they affirm, whether that has to do with doctrine or morality or with the social, physical, or life sciences.”⁵

Since the Bible is God-breathed, God is a liar if it contains errors. The Bible itself asserts that it is true (Ps. 12:6; Prov. 30:5). But it does not merely conform to a higher standard of truth; the Bible itself is the standard of truthfulness, for Jesus said to God the Father, “Your word is truth” (John 17:17). The inerrancy of the Bible is a by-product of the unfailing truthfulness of God.

Some clarifications are in order:

⁵Paul Feinberg, “The Meaning of Inerrancy,” in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 294.

1. The Bible's inerrancy does not mean that it is truthful only with reference to theology. While it's not a textbook for social, physical, or life science, it is fully trustworthy about whatever it says about any subject. A view that has become common in the last one hundred years says that the Bible is without error when it discusses religion but contains some errors in science and history. But theology and facts are not two separable categories. The gospel itself is irreducibly historical (1 Corinthians 15). A prophet is accredited by the *complete* truthfulness of his words (Deut. 13:1–5; 18:20–22); so is the Bible.

If you can't fully trust the Bible when it discusses science and history (secondary matters that can be verified), how can you trust it when it talks about God and salvation (supremely important matters that we can't verify in the same way)? If you can't trust the Bible, then you can't trust God. If you don't trust God, then you've exalted yourself as the ultimate authority instead of God.

2. The Bible's inerrancy does not mean that it is always precise. The Bible's origin is both fully divine *and fully human*. Though it never affirms what is false, the Bible has the marks of a human book. It is written by human authors with human personalities in human languages in the context of human cultures. For example, you don't question the accuracy of Weather.com when it lists the times of a day's *sunrise* and *sunset* even though the sun technically neither rises nor sets. Nor do you balk if someone tells you that she lives five miles away from your home when in fact she lives 4.857 miles away or that she is twenty-two years old when in fact she was born twenty-two years, 307 days, 4 hours, 37 minutes, and 8.3 seconds ago. Nor is it unusual if two people with very different personalities and backgrounds write about a subject on which they agree—such as their views on politics or sports—and yet sound distinctive in the way they write, the words they use, and the themes they emphasize. We should give the Bible's human authors the same freedom that we routinely give others to use ordinary language.

3. The Bible's inerrancy does not mean that copies of the original writings or translations of those copies are inerrant. Copies and translations are inerrant only to the extent that they accurately reproduce the original writings. God breathed out the original writings, and humans transmitted and translated the copies. This is not sidestepping the issue; this distinction is both accurate and necessary because errors in a copy

or translation are not God's fault but instead reflect the fallible humans who copied or translated them.⁶

So what good is it if only the original writings are God-breathed when we don't possess any of the original writings? A lot of good, actually. It overstates the case to make it sound as if we don't really know what the original writings say because the quality of the Bible's existing manuscripts is so good—far better than any other ancient document. Consequently, existing manuscripts and translations faithfully reproduce over 99 percent of the Bible's original writings. Most of the less than 1 percent that is questionable is about trivial matters like spelling differences, synonyms, and obviously impossible readings. Only about 1 percent of that less than 1 percent that is questionable affects the text's meaning to some degree, and it affects no major doctrines.⁷

4. The Bible's inerrancy does not mean that there are no remaining difficulties or apparent discrepancies. We can't perfectly interpret the Bible for two reasons: we don't have all the data relevant to understanding the Bible (e.g., archeology continually discovers new facts), and we are finite and sinful and thus misinterpret the data we already have. We can't demonstrate inerrancy to everyone's satisfaction until all the facts are available and perfect interpretation is possible. But when that time comes, the Bible's inerrancy will be vindicated. Until then, the only proper response is to trust that what the all-knowing, all-good God has spoken is completely true.

A Book That Is the Boss of Me: Authority

Jesus himself appeals to the Bible as the final authority, affirming that it cannot be shown to be in error: "Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35; cf. Matt. 5:17–20). God has supreme authority since he created and controls the universe. If the Bible is God-breathed, then it carries the authority of God himself. It's the final authority. And it's not the final authority merely for "faith and practice" (as doctrinal statements often put it); it is the final authority for every domain of knowledge it addresses. It's supremely authoritative. It's like no other book. So if you

⁶See James R. White, *The King James Only Controversy: Can You Trust Modern Translations?*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2009).

⁷For an accessible introduction to how certain the New Testament text is, see J. Ed Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer, and Daniel B. Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus: How Contemporary Skeptics Miss the Real Jesus and Mislead Popular Culture* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006), 51–117, 272–95.

don't believe or obey the Bible, you are distrusting or disobeying God. It's that serious.

This is what the Protestant Reformers called *sola Scriptura*, that is, Scripture alone. This doesn't mean that Scripture is the only source of any truth in the world, but that it is the only inerrant and infallible authority. It is the final, ultimate, supreme authority.

A Book That Is All You Need: Sufficiency

The Bible is entirely sufficient for its purpose. In the Bible God has given us all we need in order to know, trust, and obey him. "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16–17, NIV). The Bible does not directly answer every question that people can ask. That's not its purpose. Its primary purpose is to reveal the God of the gospel so that we can know and honor him.

The Bible *alone* is sufficient. Its supreme authority is exclusive. No other book is God's word—not the Apocrypha or the Book of Mormon or the Qur'an. Giving such books equal status with the Bible marginalizes and demeans it. It marginalizes the Bible by not adequately emphasizing it, and it demeans the Bible by contradicting it. For example, Roman Catholicism gives the Apocrypha, some church tradition, and some papal pronouncements equal status with the Bible; the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints gives the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, the Pearl of Great Price, and statements by its prophets equal status with the Bible; and Islam gives the Qur'an superior status to the Bible. Consequently, they do not adequately emphasize the Bible. They don't think that it's all the special revelation you need to know, trust, and obey him. They think that it needs to be supplemented or supplanted by additional revelation. Their additional revelation is not God-breathed and thus is neither inerrant nor authoritative like the Bible. So it's not surprising that their additional revelation contradicts the Bible in many ways.

Some evangelicals believe that God continues to reveal himself with special words and special guidance. Whether we agree that God still speaks like this or not, we must agree that these special words do not carry the authority of Scripture. We can't be absolutely certain that they actually come from God, so we should never treat these forms of

communication the same way we treat God's communication to us in the Bible. Otherwise we would be adding to the Bible, which is already sufficient as it stands.

A Book That Is Actually Understandable: Clarity

It has been said that the Bible is like a deep, broad body of water, shallow enough for a lamb to wade in but deep enough for an elephant to swim in. Not everything in the Bible is equally clear. Peter himself remarked, "There are some things in [Paul's letters] that are hard to understand" (2 Pet. 3:16). But the Bible's central message about God's saving work throughout history is unmistakably clear and easily understood. Its basic storyline—creation, fall, redemption, and consummation—is so simple that a young child can easily grasp it. God's communication in the Bible as a whole is accessible.

This assumes two debated premises. First, the Bible means what God and the human authors intended it to mean. Second, we can understand that meaning. But that doesn't mean that we can understand everything to the fullest possible degree. Case in point: Can a young child understand Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth"? Sure, that's not hard for a child to grasp. But that same child's understanding of Genesis 1:1 may continually increase as she learns more and more about the Bible and God's world. We can't know anything absolutely (exhaustively or omnisciently) like God, but we can know some things truly (substantially or for real).

If we can understand the Bible truly, then why don't all humans completely agree with each other on what the Bible teaches? The problem is not with the Bible. The problem is with finite and sinful humans. Were it not for the effects of the fall on our heads and hearts we would interpret the Bible the same way. But the point to stress here is that the Bible's central message is clear.⁸

A Book That Is Essential to Know God: Necessity

The Bible is necessary for us to know, trust, and obey God. You must somehow hear the Bible's message—whether by reading it yourself or

⁸Cf. Wayne Grudem's seven sensible qualifications: "Scripture affirms that it is able to be understood but (1) not all at once, (2) not without effort, (3) not without ordinary means, (4) not without the reader's willingness to obey it, (5) not without the help of the Holy Spirit, (6) not without human misunderstanding, and (7) never completely." "The Perspicuity of Scripture," *Themelios* 34, no. 3 (2009): 288–309, accessed at <http://theGospelCoalition.org/publications>.

hearing someone else read or explain it—in order to become a Christian. “The sacred writings . . . are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15). “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17, NIV).

And you must keep hearing the Bible’s message to grow as a Christian. This means hearing it read and preached, reading it, studying it, memorizing it, meditating on it, and applying it.⁹ A Christian needs the Bible like a human needs food and water. The need never goes away. That’s why Peter writes, “Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation” (1 Pet. 2:2). That “pure spiritual milk” is “the living and abiding word of God,” “the good news” (1 Pet. 1:23–25). Can you say with Job, “I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my portion of food” (Job 23:12)?

The Bible is necessary for more than survival. It’s our only infallible guide to navigate life wisely because it reveals God’s will. “How can a young man keep his way pure?” the psalmist asked.

By guarding it according to your word.
With my whole heart I seek you;
let me not wander from your commandments!
I have stored up your word in my heart,
that I might not sin against you. (Ps. 119:9–11)

Three Popular Objections

The Bible is God’s word—God-breathed, inerrant, authoritative, sufficient, clear, and necessary. This is what evangelicals believe about the Bible because this is what the Bible teaches about itself. But when we talk this way about the Bible, we may have to deal with misguided objections.

1. “Evangelicals are guilty of bibliolatry.” No, we don’t worship the Bible. We worship God alone. But we esteem the Bible as a unique book because God actively communicates through it: “God has so *identified* himself with his words that whatever someone does to God’s words (whether it is to obey or to disobey) they do directly to God himself.”¹⁰

⁹See Donald S. Whitney’s two chapters on “Bible intake” in *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1997), 23–60.

¹⁰Timothy Ward, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 27 (his emphasis).

2. “Evangelicals derive their doctrine of the Bible from the Bible. Isn’t that circular reasoning?” Well, yes, but that doesn’t necessarily invalidate the reasoning. Our doctrine of the Bible is no more circular than scientific theories. Everyone uses circular reasoning to defend the ultimate authority for beliefs. While the ultimate standard of truth for evangelicals is God and his Word, for most others it is something else—usually themselves. The heated debates about whether the Bible is God-breathed and without error hinge on one issue: whether you accept what the Bible claims about itself. Many useful arguments show that the Bible’s claims about itself are reasonable (e.g., its historical reliability and fulfilled prophecies), but ultimately God’s Spirit must convince us that its claims are true because sin has distorted how we perceive reality. We can’t prove that the Bible is God’s word by appealing to any authority besides the Bible itself because such an authority must be superior to God—and there isn’t one.

3. “The Word (i.e., Jesus) is what matters, not the word (i.e., the Bible).” As pious as that sounds, it takes a different view of the word than the Word himself. Jesus repeatedly quotes the Bible as completely trustworthy and as his final authority.

How Should We Then Read?

Of course, our high view of Scripture won’t matter much if we don’t actually read the Bible. But, you may ask, how should we read this holy book? In one sense we should read the Bible like any other book. It consists of different styles of literature that express truth according to the intention of its authors. But we shouldn’t read the Bible merely like any other book because it is unique. There’s no other book like it.

Because the Bible stands over us, it requires reverence, submission, and obedience. Because it is completely truthful, it requires trust. Because its nature contrasts sharply with our finiteness and sinfulness, it requires humble reading that is always open to correction. And because it reveals God and his ways, it requires careful, prayerful reading that situates passages within its grand story of God’s creation, our fall, Christ’s redemption, and the universe’s consummation.

Open my eyes, that I may behold
wondrous things out of your law. (Ps. 119:18)

Rejoice with John Newton, author of “Amazing Grace,” that the Bible is a priceless book—a book like no other:

Precious Bible! What a treasure
Does the Word of God afford!
All I want for life or pleasure,
Food and med’cine, shield and sword:
Let the world account me poor,
Having this I need no more.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

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