

## WEEK 2: WHY TRUST THE BIBLE?

### Opening Questions:

- Do word association: what is the first thing that pops into your mind when you hear “the Bible?”
- Do you have hesitations or trouble with biblical texts? Which ones? Why?
- Is your difficulty with biblical texts ever about its authority? Its probability? Or is it more about you disagreeing with some teachings?
- Do you ever think about the original audience of scripture? Does that make a difference in how you read it?
- What biblical events do you have trouble understanding or believing?
- How have you experienced the Bible as “living and active?”<sup>1</sup>

Christians profess faith in the Bible as the revelation of God for salvation. As 2 Timothy 3:16 says, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.” Reformed Christians believe that the Bible tells the story of God’s creation, God’s people Israel, God’s Son Jesus Christ, his life, death, and resurrection, and of the church, the new community of believers called to be God’s people, and the coming new creation when Christ returns to usher in his kingdom in its fullness. The Bible teaches that what is written in it is trustworthy as the word of God.<sup>2</sup> You might be thinking “That is circular reasoning—trust the Bible because the Bible says to trust it?” Yes, it is, but let’s consider what the Bible is.

Reformed Christians believe that God reveals God’s self to human beings through two means of revelation: general revelation and special revelation.

**General revelation** is creation—think of the world as the stage or theater for God’s handiwork,<sup>3</sup> pointing back to God. Have you ever stood on a cliff looking out at the ocean, or on a mountaintop, or on a seashore, and you feel a sense of awe? Perhaps you think or feel,

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<sup>1</sup>Hebrews 4:12

<sup>2</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16-17

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, Commentary on Psalms, Volume 5.

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“Thank you,” or “Somebody made all this.” Creation is pointing you somewhere, to someone—a creative being with agency. That is what John Calvin and other theologians would say is general revelation pointing us to God.

That is an instance of the psalmist’s words, “The heavens declare the glory of God,”<sup>4</sup> being experienced. That’s what the apostle Paul meant when he wrote in Romans 1 “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood from his workmanship, so that people are without excuse.”<sup>5</sup>

We can know something of God *through* creation because creation breathes God and creation is God’s. We read in Revelation of how the earth protects the woman (representing the Church) when the dragon (Satan) pursues her—“the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth.”<sup>6</sup> The earth and creation, are not neutral; they are God’s, and they are on God’s side.

Through **special revelation**, God reveals God’s self in the Bible through the person of Jesus Christ, and the Bible tells us about Jesus.<sup>7</sup> So, the Bible tells us about salvation through Jesus Christ. We cannot come to knowledge of Jesus Christ by being out in creation; that’s why we need the Bible.

Christian belief is that God the Holy Spirit inspired the human writers of the Old and New Testaments to write and record what they did. Christians do not believe that the Spirit took over control or possession of the biblical writers’ minds or bodies as they wrote; but instead, through their human qualities, with their experiences and personalities and use of language, the Spirit *inspired* the recordings of what came to be gathered together as the Bible. So, the Bible is holy because it is inspired by God, but it is also human because human authors in their humanness wrote what was inspired by God—the Bible is “both human and divine in nature.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Psalm 19:1

<sup>5</sup> Romans 1:20

<sup>6</sup> Revelation 12:13-16, esp. verse 16

<sup>7</sup> James E. Taylor, *Christian Apologetics: Cultivating Christian Commitment*, 275. Also, the gospels are the accounts of Jesus’ ministry, death, and resurrection.

<sup>8</sup> Taylor, *Handbook*, 275

In reading and interpreting Scripture, there are extremes: two of those are a Fundamentalist view and a Skeptical or Modernist view.

A **fundamentalist view** interprets the Bible literally, always, even when the genre and context require not doing so (e.g. a literal beast whose number is 666 in the book of Revelation<sup>9</sup>).

A **skeptical view** interprets the Bible, especially the miraculous or supernatural, always nonliterally,<sup>10</sup> even when the genre and context require doing so (e.g. taking Jesus' miracles to be non-literal, not-actual).

If we approach passages and books of the Bible on their own terms—interpreting them according to their own genre, literary and theological tradition, history, and cultural context in light of the canon of scripture<sup>11</sup>—then we can come away with understanding of what that text or book is communicating. However, if we impose our interpretive scheme of Scriptural texts (e.g. fundamentalist or modernist views), and read them in ways they weren't written to be read, then we run into all kinds of interpretive difficulties and inconsistencies.

With the Bible, do what you would do with another text—ask: what genre is this? How does it relate to the other books in the Old/New Testaments? What do we know about the author? What is the context it is set in? Who is the audience? Approximately when was it written? What are the themes?<sup>12</sup> Then with these things in mind, read.

In response to skeptical views of the books of the Bible's reliability, consider:

If the biblical narratives did not contain accounts of miraculous events or have reference to God, angels, etc., biblical history would probably be regarded as much more firmly established than most of the history of, say, classical Greece and Rome. But because the biblical accounts do

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<sup>9</sup> Revelation 13

<sup>10</sup> Taylor, Handbook, 205

<sup>11</sup> All 66 books of the Old and New Testaments as the revelation of God.

<sup>12</sup> Study Bibles have good introductions and footnotes that answer these contextual questions.

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mention miracles and do involve reference to God, angels and demons, etc., considerations other than purely historical ones come into the picture.<sup>13</sup>

You can find the texts in the Bible to be historically reliable (not meaning it is all historical) and credible, but you may still not take it as the Word of God. If you are having trouble *trusting* that it is the word of God, and would like to come to trust that, you can simply pray, “Holy Spirit, I’m having trouble believing. Will you help me?”<sup>14</sup>

**Concluding Questions:**

- How does this impact the way you approach the Bible?
- What is sitting well with you? What isn’t?

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<sup>13</sup> Peter Kreeft & Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, 205 (quoting Peter Purtill, *Thinking about Religions*). Also refer to Timothy Keller’s *Reason for God*, chapter 7. For more reading on historicity of biblical texts, refer to: *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart and *How to Read the bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour* by Gordon D. Fee, Douglas Stuart.

<sup>14</sup> Mark 9:23-25

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**Resources Used:**

James E. Taylor, *Christian Apologetics: Cultivating Christian Commitment*, Baker Academic, 2006.

John Calvin, *Commentary on Psalms*, Volume 5.

Timothy Keller, *Reason for God*, Penguin Group, 2008.