

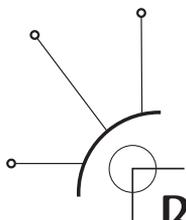


TIM CHESTER

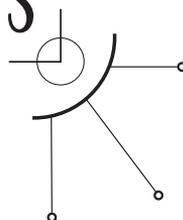
BIBLE +  
MATTERS

MAKING SENSE  
*of* SCRIPTURE

TIM CHESTER



BIBLE  
MATTERS



MAKING SENSE

*of* SCRIPTURE



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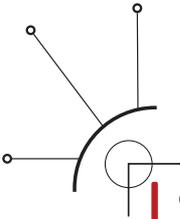
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# CONTENTS

Introduction	1
<b>1</b> The God Who Speaks	3
<b>2</b> God Spoke in the Bible	16
<b>3</b> God Speaks in the Bible	28
<b>4</b> God Speaks Jesus in the Bible	42
<b>5</b> The Bible Is Relational	51
<b>6</b> The Bible Is Intentional	64
<b>7</b> The Bible Is Enough	76
<b>8</b> The Bible Is Reliable	87
<b>9</b> The Bible Is Accessible	102
<b>10</b> Dying to Read the Bible	115
Conclusion: Why I Love the Bible	130
O Lord Our Rock	133
Study Guide	135
Notes for Leaders	169
Further Reading	185
Notes	187
Praise for <i>Bible Matters</i>	193
About the Author	195
More Titles from InterVarsity Press	196

# INTRODUCTION



Let me tell you about an amazing experience I had just this morning. Actually “amazing” doesn’t really do it justice. It was out of this world.

This morning God spoke to me. I know that sounds weird, but I’m sure that’s what happened. The living God actually spoke to me. I could hear what he was saying just as clearly as you can understand what you’re reading now.

The words he spoke felt like words of life to me. They resounded deep in my heart. There were words of instruction that helped me know him more and understand his ways. There were words of challenge that called me to follow him better and love him more. There were words of comfort that spoke to my needs and gave me hope. It was like medicine to my soul. It was like a rousing speech before battle. It was like a love song sung to my heart.

What’s more, what happened to me this morning was not a freaky one-off experience. It’s what happens most mornings.

What I did this morning was read my Bible.

At this point you might be feeling like I’ve just pulled a fast one on you (unless, of course, you saw it coming a mile off). You were hoping for a dramatic story, and what you got instead was daily Bible reading. “Boring!”

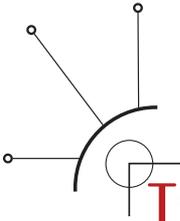
My number one aim for this book is this: I want you to realize that every time you read the Bible, you’re hearing the voice of God—just

as surely, more surely, than if you have some kind of dramatic experience. I want you to come to the Bible, whether you're hearing it preached on a Sunday morning or reading it on the bus on a Monday morning, with a sense of anticipation and expectancy. Reading the Bible is a dramatic Spirit-filled experience. The God who spoke and brought the universe into existence speaks to you. The God whose voice thundered from Mount Sinai speaks to you. The God in Christ whose words healed the sick speaks to you.

I've read lots of things about the Bible that I've agreed with. But very few have captured how I feel about the Bible and why. That's what I've tried to do in this book. Its central premise is that the Bible is an intentional book. God gave it to us with a purpose in mind, and that purpose is to enter into, and live in, a relationship with his people. So the Bible is also a relational book. As we read it, we don't merely learn information about God—though that's certainly true. We hear God's voice and encounter his presence. This is a book about meeting God in his word.

I read my Bible regularly because I have to. Not "have to" in the sense that someone might tell me off if I don't or that God will get miffed with me. But "have to" in the same way that I have to eat food every day. This is how I live. Without God's word in my life, I too readily get preoccupied with myself, my fears, my insecurities, my reputation. Without God's word, I'm much more vulnerable to temptation. I need God's word to realign my heart day by day toward Jesus. I need that medicine for the soul, that battle speech, that love song.

# THE GOD WHO SPEAKS



**T**ell me about the book you're reading.

You're only a few words in, but you already know a fair bit about it. You know it's about the Bible—the title is a bit of a giveaway. You might remember the author and publisher. You probably read the blurb on the back cover. Maybe you ran your eyes over the contents page. At some point you examined it—perhaps in the store when you bought it or when someone gave it to you. If you ordered it online, then maybe you read some customer reviews. You can see it and feel it. Some people like the smell of new books, so you may even have sniffed it . . . now most of you have. After you've read a couple of chapters you'll have an idea whether you like it or not. And if you make it to the end, you'll be able to tell other people about it in an informed way.

It's easy to examine a book and find out about it. You can investigate it and interrogate it.

Now, I don't want to alarm you, but there are almost certainly some bacteria on your book. If it's any comfort, they were probably transferred onto the book (or e-reader) from your hands. Can you tell me about the bacteria on your book? That's not so straightforward. You can't see, hear, or feel them. Hopefully you can't smell them either, and I don't recommend trying to taste them. Nevertheless, with a powerful microscope or some chemical tests, you could find out something about them. Like a book, they're susceptible to scrutiny.

What about God? Tell me about God.

You might have all sorts of ideas about God. But what are they based on? You can't see God through a telescope or under a microscope. You can't go and knock on his door to ask him some questions. You can't discover him in the jungle or on the ocean floor. He's not like other subjects of study. He's not susceptible to scrutiny.

For one thing, he's a spirit. He has no body and therefore no physical presence. Even more significantly, he's outside our universe. The Large Hadron Collider in Switzerland is the world's largest machine and largest experiment feeding results into the largest network of computers. The irony of all these superlatives is that it's designed to detect the smallest things we know about—subatomic particles. It's detecting the aftereffects of particle collisions. But no apparatus could be constructed to “find” God, because God doesn't exist within our material world. What would our experiment look for? In 2012 the Hadron Collider found evidence for the Higgs boson, a particle that had previously only been postulated. It was nicknamed “the God particle.” But it wasn't a “piece” of God or evidence of his existence.

God is beyond our comprehension and outside our field of study. We might postulate his existence as the most likely explanation of effects we can see—things like the complexity of creation or answers to prayer. But we could never prove our hypothesis. We can't stick God under a microscope or in a test tube.

So left to ourselves, we would remain totally in the dark when it comes to God. We have no way of bridging the gap between us and God.

So my request that you tell me about God should be an impossible task. The only way we can ever know anything about him is if he communicates to us. God himself must bridge the gap. We can't study him. But maybe he can talk to us.

And God is not silent.

Knowing God is not completely without parallel in our world. Suppose I said, “Tell me about yourself.” Here's a subject you do know something about. In fact, arguably you're better informed on this topic

than anyone else. The more you tell me about yourself, the more I'll know about you.

But wait a moment. Do you really want to spill the beans to me? After all, we've only just met. It's up to you what you tell me. How much I discover about your dreams, hopes, ideas, beliefs, desires, and plans all depends on how much you tell me. I can't control what information comes my way. Only torturers can force information from people, and even then the reliability of that information is doubtful. In this sense the speaker is sovereign when we communicate.

It's the same with God. We can know about him because he speaks to us. But God remains in control of the process. We talk about "grasping" an idea. But we don't "grasp" God—not even when he reveals himself.

How does God talk to us?

### **GOD TALKS TO US IN CREATION**

We can't see God. But we can see what he's done. We can see the impact he's made. And we don't have to look very far. Everything that exists points to God. Psalm 19 begins:

The heavens declare the glory of God;  
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.  
Day after day they pour forth speech;  
night after night they reveal knowledge.  
They have no speech, they use no words;  
no sound is heard from them.  
Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,  
their words to the ends of the world. (Psalm 19:1-4)

The skies pour forth speech. They're like an excited friend who you can't shut up. From subatomic particles to vast galaxies, from intricate petals to stunning landscapes, the world is constantly declaring God's glory.

Creation doesn't tell us all we need to know about God. But it tells us some important things. Romans 1:20 says, "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine

nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.” God speaks through creation of his “eternal power and divine nature.”

For skeptics, it still doesn’t add up. Atheists and agnostics have seen a sunset and still they doubt God’s existence.

Maybe you’ve looked out at a beautiful scene or watched some astonishing nature footage on television and said something like, “How can people not believe in God when they see this?” But skeptics are not blind or stupid. The problem is not that they’re looking in the other direction. They’re not standing at a viewpoint focused on overflowing rubbish bins while you look at the beautiful scenery. It’s not that they think flowers and sunsets and birdsong are ugly. The problem is a moral one. People “suppress the truth by their wickedness” (Romans 1:18). We’ll meet this theme a number of times in our exploration of the Bible and come back to it in the final chapter. We find reasons for discounting the evidence before our eyes because we don’t want to live with the implications of being accountable to God or dependent on him.

But just because we’re not listening doesn’t mean God’s not talking. The psalmist says,

Day after day they pour forth speech;  
night after night they reveal knowledge. (Psalm 19:2)

All the time, day and night, everywhere we go, the world speaks of God’s power and goodness.

Sometimes small children cover their eyes to “make it go away.” It’s as if what they can’t see can’t be seen. Humanity is like this. We cover our ears to God’s voice in creation as if what we can’t hear can’t be there:

Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,  
their words to the ends of the world. (Psalm 19:4)

When we become a Christian, God removes our hands from our ears. Suddenly everything speaks of God. Now we’re able to see his

glory in the world. We hear God speaking through creation loud and clear. And what we see and hear is marvelous. The hymnwriter George Robinson put it like this:

Heav'n above is softer blue,  
Earth around is sweeter green!  
Something lives in every hue  
Christless eyes have never seen;  
Birds with gladder songs o'erflow,  
Flowers with deeper beauties shine,  
Since I know, as now I know,  
I am his, and he is mine.

The world comes alive to us in this way because now we see it as a gift from the Creator. We hear his voice speaking of his glory.

### **GOD TALKS TO US IN HISTORY**

If you'd asked an ancient Israelite to tell you about God, they would have told you a story—the story of the exodus.

At the beginning of the exodus story, Moses encounters God in the burning bush at Mount Horeb. There God reveals his name to Moses: “I AM WHO I AM.” But it's the rest of the story that gives this declaration content. Moses imagines the Israelites asking him who has sent him to liberate them. “What is his name?” they will ask. Who is this God who claims to be our God? In response, God not only declares I AM WHO I AM; he also promises to perform wonders among the Egyptians (Exodus 3:13–22). In other words, the ultimate answer to the question of God's identity is the exodus itself. God speaks through the exodus:

To his people: “I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians” (Exodus 6:7).

To the Egyptians: “Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and with mighty acts of judgment I will bring out my divisions, my people the Israelites. And the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it” (Exodus 7:4–5).

To all nations: “For by now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with a plague that would have wiped you off the earth. But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth” (Exodus 9:15-16).

Through the exodus God spoke to all people of his grace, power, and judgment. Again and again in the Bible, God speaks through the way he intervenes in history.

But it’s not just events recorded in the Bible through which God speaks. The events of all human history reveal God. The events of your life reveal God. If you’re a child of God, they’re signs of God’s provision for you. If you’re not a Christian, then they’re God’s invitations and warnings to you.

Romans 1:18 says, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness.” Right now God is communicating his wrath to the world. How? Three times in Romans 1 it says God hands people over to sin:

God gave them over in the sinful desires. (Romans 1:24)

God gave them over to shameful lusts. (Romans 1:26)

God gave them over to a depraved mind. (Romans 1:28)

Often God in his mercy restrains the effects of sin. But sometimes he lets sin take its course. He allows it to follow its natural downward bent toward death. He does this to expose the ugly reality of sin and reveal his coming judgment. As a result, we see unnatural sex, wickedness, evil, greed, depravity, envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice, and so on (Romans 1:26-31). Our instinctive sense that these things are wrong and don’t belong in our world points to a higher moral standard set by a higher moral Being (Romans 2:15).

Revelation 8–9 describes the chaos of history—environmental catastrophe, natural disasters, war. They’re described as “plagues” (Revelation 9:18). It’s an echo of the exodus story. The plagues on Egypt

revealed God to the Egyptians. The calamities of history are intended to reveal God to humanity. But like the beauty of creation, humanity refuses to listen. Revelation 9:20 says, “The rest of mankind who were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands.” But again, the fact that we’re not listening doesn’t mean God isn’t talking.

### **GOD TALKS TO US IN HIS SON**

This is one example of God speaking in history. He speaks in the historical event of the incarnation. But this is an event that eclipses all others. That’s because in Jesus the triune God reveals himself not just in an event, but in a person. And not just in a person, but a person who is God: God revealed in God.

Hebrews 1:1-2 says, “In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.” It’s literally: “He has spoken to us in a Son.” He’s spoken in the language of Son. There are lots of jokes about the language of heaven. But here’s the reality: the language in which God speaks is Jesus. God’s fullest revelation of himself is Jesus. When God opens his mouth to speak, as it were, Jesus is what comes out.

Hebrews continues, “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (1:3). The Son is the revelation of God not just in history, but eternally. He is the eternal Word of God who was with God in the beginning (John 1:1-3). Eternally, the Son has been the image of God, the perfect mirror of the Father’s glory.

Suppose I write to you and say, “Tell me about yourself.” You could write a letter describing your appearance and your character. But a much better option would be to come to see me. That’s why employers want to interview prospective job applicants and not just read a résumé. You only really know a person by seeing them, hearing them, spending time with them. God has sent us a letter or a résumé. That’s what the Bible is. But he did so much more. He turned up in person—in the

person of his Son, Jesus. Do you want to know what God is like? Look at Jesus because Jesus is God. Jesus is the definition of who God is that God himself has given us.

### **GOD TALKS TO US IN THE BIBLE**

It must have been great to see Jesus walk on water, heal the sick, preach to the crowds, rise again—God’s ultimate revelation standing before your very eyes with his words ringing in your ears.

But what about us today? Jesus has ascended into heaven. So we can no longer see him or hear him. How does God speak to people now? Think about how that question was answered in the generation following the ascension of Jesus. How did the first Christians know about Jesus? The answer, of course, is that there were people around who had seen and heard Jesus. They could give a firsthand eyewitness account of God’s revelation in Jesus. The apostle John’s first letter begins:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:1-3)

John basically says the same thing three times:

- ◆ Verse 1: We proclaim what we have seen.
- ◆ Verse 2: We proclaim what we have seen.
- ◆ Verse 3: We proclaim what we have seen.

What is it that has been seen and is proclaimed? It’s “the Word of life.” He’s talking about Jesus. John is echoing the language at the beginning of his Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word. . . . The Word became flesh. . . . We have seen his glory” (John 1:1, 14). But John is also

echoing the end of his Gospel. When Thomas hears that Jesus has risen, he says, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” And then Jesus meets Thomas and says, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe” (John 20:25-27). Jesus said, “See my hands,” and now John says, “We have seen.”

Jesus said, “Reach out your hand,” and now John says, “Our hands have touched.” That’s why John calls the Word “the Word of life.” The Word he saw, heard, and touched had risen from the dead.

But the important question to ask about these verses is who are the “we” that John keeps talking about? In these first four verses John refers to “we,” “our,” or “us” sixteen times. He’s not talking about “we Christians.” He’s not including you and me. For one thing, you and I didn’t see, hear, and touch the risen Jesus. Plus John talks about “we” in contrast to “you,” his readers. “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us” (1 John 1:3). The “we” are the first apostles, those who were there.

How do we have contact with God’s revelation in Jesus? We have the testimony of the apostles—the people on the spot who heard, saw, and touched Jesus. This is what Paul means when he says in Ephesians 2:20 that the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Christ himself left no written record, so, says B. B. Warfield, “We have no Christ except the one whom the apostles have given us.”

“Well, that’s great for you, John,” you might be tempted to say. “But I’m never going to touch Jesus.” But John continues in 1 John 1:4, “We write this to make our joy complete.” We have the apostolic testimony because they wrote it down.

We have their testimony about the Word of life in the Bible—along with the promises of the prophets in the Old Testament.

Imagine there’s no Bible. The first apostles know about the message of salvation and they start telling people. And people tell people who tell people. That, after all, is essentially how the message of Christianity has spread. But without the Bible, the telephone game effect might

kick in. The telephone game is when you whisper a sentence to someone who whispers it to someone else and so on round the room. Inevitably, it gets distorted—usually to comic effect. But what if the gospel got twisted and distorted as it made its way around the globe and across the centuries? That would not be to comic effect. Memories fade. Stories get distorted in retelling. Interpretations of history differ. So God has ensured an accurate record of his actions in history and an authoritative interpretation of those events. The Bible means there's a fixed point to which the proclamation of the gospel always returns. No one can distort it very much before people start to spot the difference.

The seventeenth-century theologian Francis Turretin gives three reasons why God's revelation was written down. First, to protect it against "the weakness of memory." If the gospel had relied on oral transmission, then mistakes might have crept in. Second, so it might be "defended from the frauds and corruptions of Satan." False claims can readily be tested against Scripture. Third, so it could "more conveniently . . . be sent to the absent and . . . transmitted to posterity." Without the Bible, we would be reliant on hearsay. With the Bible, we all have access to the voice of God.

### **GOD TALKS TO US IN PREACHING**

Have you ever said, "God really spoke to me through Sunday's sermon"? I'm sure you have. Is that simply a metaphorical way of saying you found the sermon challenging or encouraging? I think not. God really does continue to speak to his people through other human beings. This revelation, however, is not on the same level as the Bible. The Bible, as we shall see, is entirely trustworthy. Human beings are not. We often speak the truth. But we also often get that truth muddled up with the lies of this world and our own self-justifications. So the Bible is always the final standard of truth. Nevertheless, God uses other people to speak to our hearts.

Talking about his preaching among the Thessalonians, Paul says, "When you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God,

which is indeed at work in you who believe” (1 Thessalonians 2:13). Paul isn’t talking about a time when the Thessalonians read the Bible. He’s talking about how they heard his preaching. It looked like a human word. But actually it was God’s word being spoken by a human being.

The apostle Peter speaks of “those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven” (1 Peter 1:12). The Holy Spirit is sent from heaven to enable preachers. Of course, some preachers can distort the message and give people merely what they want to hear (2 Timothy 4:3). That’s why the Bible is always the touchstone of truth. But it’s also true that God can speak through preachers “by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven.” Peter says the Spirit has given some people in the church the gift of speaking the truth we find in the Bible into the contexts of their hearers. He says, “If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God” (1 Peter 4:11). It’s a bold statement. If preachers are being true to the Bible, then they’re speaking “the very words of God.” If friends are encouraging you with truth from the Bible, then they’re speaking “the very words of God.”

When the Bible is taught or preached or read or explained or sung, or when people exhort us or encourage us using the Bible, then God’s voice can be heard. It’s not heard infallibly—only the Bible is infallible. Every word of the Bible is inspired. Uniquely so. But to the extent that people correctly communicate the message of the Bible, God uses them to speak to us.

The New Testament speaks of the gift of prophecy and words of knowledge. Some Christians believe the Holy Spirit continues to give these gifts to people in the church. Other Christians believe these gifts have ceased because we no longer need prophecy now that the New Testament is complete.

Whatever we think about this issue, we need to be clear that this gift of prophecy is not like Old Testament prophecy. Paul says the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (Ephesians 2:20). The contemporary equivalent of Old Testament prophecy is the apostolic testimony recorded in the New Testament.

Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles brought God's authoritative word to his people. In contrast, prophecy in the New Testament was to be weighed (1 Thessalonians 5:19-22).

I believe prophecy involves bringing God's word to bear in a particular situation. So it's intimately tied to God's word in the Bible and involves applying that word to specific situations. I think the primary way that happens is in the preaching of the church. Indeed, the Puritans often spoke of preaching as prophesying. In the sixteenth century the Puritan William Perkins wrote a preaching manual that he called *The Art of Prophesying*. Maybe you've had moments when it felt like the preacher was speaking just to you. Sometimes people jokingly accuse me of preparing a sermon with them in mind. (I'm always tempted to say that, surprising as it might seem, I don't think about them all the time.) Sometimes in pastoral situations someone has a "hunch" about what the real issue may be. I don't really mind whether you call this prophecy or not. But I do think we should expect God to speak through human beings, always remembering that the truth will be an application of the truth we find in the Bible.

The Second Helvetic Confession of the Swiss Reformed Church says,

Wherefore when this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is proclaimed, and received by the faithful; and that neither any other Word of God is to be invented nor is to be expected from heaven: and that now the Word itself which is preached is to be regarded, not the minister that preaches; for even if he be evil and a sinner, nevertheless the Word of God remains still true and good.

The Reformer Martin Luther says, "People generally think: 'If I had an opportunity to hear God speak in person, I would run my feet bloody.' . . . But you now have the Word of God in church . . . and this is God's Word as surely as if God Himself were speaking to you." And John Calvin says, "Christ acts by [his ministers] in such a manner that he wishes their mouth to be reckoned as his mouth, and their

lips as his lips; that is, when they speak from his mouth, and faithfully declare his word.”

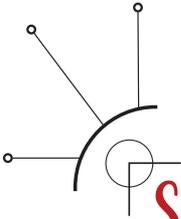
So let me encourage you to treasure the preaching of God’s word by preparing for it and following it up. The Puritan William Perkins advised, “To the profitable hearing of God’s Word three things are required: Preparation before we hear, a right disposition in hearing, and duties to be practised afterward.” By preparation, he meant three things. First, repenting of sin so that our hearts are unclouded by selfish thoughts. Second, praying that God would give us “the Hearing ear” to understand and submit to God’s word. Third, “the hearer must set himself in the presence of God . . . because God is always in the congregation where the Word is preached.” By a right disposition, he meant hearing with discernment and humility. He added that “we must labour to be affected with the word.” In other words, the word must shape our hopes, desires, fears, and emotions. Finally, by duties practiced afterwards, Perkins meant meditating on the sermon and applying it to our lives. “The doctrine must be treasured up in our hearts, and practised in our lives.”

## **CONCLUSION**

Let’s come back to the bacteria on your book. What would it take to ask them to get off? You could try saying, “Please get off my book.” Presumably the sound waves would reach them. But bacteria don’t have ears. Can they even sense sound waves? And even if they could, what language do they speak? Even if you could find a common language, do they know what a book is? In so many ways the gulf between you and your bacteria is too big to bridge. It’s a picture of the problem facing any attempt at communication between God and humanity.

And yet God in his greatness and grace does speak to us. In fact, he speaks in many different ways: in creation, in history, in the Bible, through preaching, and supremely through the person of his Son. People sometimes ask, “If God exists, why doesn’t he reveal himself more clearly?” But God is revealing himself all the time. The real question is, “Will you listen?”

## GOD SPOKE IN THE BIBLE



Sometimes I cowrite books with other people, and it's usually me who does the final edit. My ambition as I edit such books is to make it impossible for people to tell who wrote which chapter. I want the book to have a common feel so that readers are not distracted by changes of tone. But you couldn't claim that of the Bible. Obviously we expect poetry to feel different from history. But it's not just that the Bible is made up of different types of literature. Mark's Gospel feels very different from John's Gospel. The personality of the writers shines through.

For example, you may have been taught at school not to start a sentence with the word "and." But turn to Mark 1 and, if you're reading from the NIV, you'll notice that verses 4, 7, 11, 13, and 34 all begin with the word "and." But that's nothing compared to the original Greek that Mark wrote. In Greek nearly every verse begins with "and." In fact, it's easier to list which verses don't begin with "and" (verses 1-3, 8, 14, 24, 30, 32, and 45). Mark's also keen on the word "immediately," which he uses in verses 10, 12, 18, 20, 21, 23, 29, 30, and 42 (ESV). It makes his prose breathless and relentless as he piles up the evidence for the authority of Jesus ("And when . . . immediately . . . And . . . immediately . . . And . . ."). It's all action.

When you turn to John's Gospel, the feel is very different. Much of the Gospel involves people talking to Jesus, with not a lot going on.

Interestingly, the young John was a bit of a hothead (Mark 3:17; Luke 9:49-55). But by the time he writes his Gospel, the impulse for immediate action seems to have been replaced by a more reflective temperament.

The Bible is a very human book. Think about the pain and confusion expressed in the book of Lamentations. Compare that to the joy of the psalms of thanksgiving. Jeremiah appears at times to be suffering from depression. Meanwhile the book of Proverbs is full of tongue-in-cheek humor.

But the Bible is also a divine book. It's God's word.

Look on the cover of your Bible and it almost certainly says, "Holy Bible." The phrase "Holy Scriptures" is used in Romans 1:2 and 2 Timothy 3:15, meaning "sacred" or even "divine." God has sanctified the Bible. There are many ways in which the Bible is like any other book. It's made up of words in sentences and paragraphs. It makes sense through the same grammatical rules as any other book. It contains stories, poetry, and laws that follow the conventions of their genre. But there are also important ways in which the Bible is unlike any other book. Other books can reflect or contain God's word (if they accurately summarize biblical truth). But only the Bible is God's sacred word. Only the Scriptures are the infallible record of his revelation.

The divine person who makes the Bible "holy" is the Holy Spirit. The prophets who spoke in the Old Testament did so because the Spirit of God came on them. But the Spirit was not only at work when the prophets first spoke. The Spirit also ensured that the record of their revelation was reported accurately.

It's the same with the New Testament. We've already seen how we have access to God's revelation in Christ through the "apostolic testimony." But how can we trust their testimony? After all, it's easy for people to forget things. People often fill in the gaps in their knowledge and use their imagination. Or perhaps the first disciples exaggerated for effect.

In response, we need to remember that the apostles weren't the only eyewitnesses during the period in which the New Testament was

being written. Plenty of people saw Jesus in action, and at least five hundred saw him after his resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:6). If the apostles had made mistakes or started making things up, then there were people around who would have corrected them. Indeed, much of Jesus' ministry had been witnessed by his enemies. If the apostles had started spreading propaganda or spinning the story, then his enemies would have been quick to put the record straight. This was an oral culture in which people were used to remembering stories and passing on eyewitness testimony. So from a human perspective, we have good reason to trust the New Testament accounts.

But God goes a step further to ensure that the Bible is reliable. In John 16:13-14, Jesus makes this promise to his disciples.

When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you.

This is not a promise that the Spirit will help you and me understand the truth. It was given to the first apostles on the night before Jesus died. These were the people Jesus had specially chosen to be eyewitnesses of his words and actions. Now he was promising that the Spirit would enable them to present an accurate account and a true interpretation of his work.

We see this interplay between the Holy Spirit and human authors whenever the Bible talks about how it was written.

### **MARK 12:35-37**

While Jesus was teaching in the temple courts, he asked, "Why do the teachers of the law say that the Messiah is the son of David? David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared:

'The Lord said to my Lord:

"Sit at my right hand

until I put your enemies  
under your feet.”

David himself calls him ‘Lord.’ How then can he be his son?”

We don’t need to concern ourselves with the bigger point Jesus is making. Simply notice how he introduces this quote from Psalm 110: “David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared . . .” David declares these words. There was a human author. But David was “speaking by the Holy Spirit.”

### **1 PETER 1:10-11**

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow.

The prophets “searched intently and with the greatest care.” There was, as it were, a human process of research and investigation. But at the same time “the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing” to the suffering and glory of the Messiah.

### **2 PETER 1:20-21**

You must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit ensured that the writers of the Bible not only recorded what they saw and heard accurately, but also that they interpreted it accurately. The Bible is an annotated account of God’s revelation in history. It provides its own explanation of the story it tells. Here Peter tells us that this explanation is divinely inspired. It was written down by

human authors, and there's no doubt that they were human authors. But it didn't originate with those authors. They didn't make it up. They received it from God. They speak, but they speak from God. The words they say are words from God. They are the word of God.

## **2 TIMOTHY 3:16-17**

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Some translations say, "All Scripture is inspired." But this isn't quite strong enough. You might say Beethoven was inspired when he wrote his Ninth Symphony or that a particular biography is an inspiring book. But Paul is saying more than this about the Bible. "Spirit" and "breath" are the same word in Greek. So "God-breathed" is "God-Spirited" or "Spirited out by God." If I speak to you, then my words come out of my body on my breath. In a similar way, the words of God come through the breath of God. So it's not that God inspired the human authors who then went away and wrote the Bible. The words came out from God through his Spirit. So when we speak of the "inspiration" of the Bible, we mean something quite specific: the fact that it's God-breathed.

Different authors wrote different books over a period of centuries in different cultures and at different times. The result ought to be a variety of competing perspectives. But instead, the Bible tells one big central story—the story of salvation in Jesus. How is that possible? Because the Spirit of truth was speaking through each author. So the Bible manages to speak both with many voices and with one voice. The work of the Spirit does not eradicate the personality of the different authors. Yet at the same time the work of the Spirit unifies their message.

How does this work? Evangelical Christians believe in "plenary," "verbal," and "confluent" inspiration. We'd better find out what those words mean.

## **PLENARY—EVERYTHING YOU READ**

Our modern world is the product of the Enlightenment—the movement of thought in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe that emphasized human reason. Enlightenment thinkers focused on the human side of the creation of Scripture. Some tried to identify the background sources that might have been used to compile the Bible in the form in which we have it today. Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677), for example, questioned whether Moses was the author of the first five books of the Bible.

Exploring the possible sources in this way was not in itself a problem (although it has not generally proved a very useful exercise). The problem was that bigger things were going on. Enlightenment thinkers were emphasizing the human author to the exclusion of the divine author. So Spinoza also questioned the inspiration of the Scriptures. The prophets were inspired when they said, “Thus says the Lord.” But the ordinary speech of the apostles or the historical accounts, he said, were not inspired. He pointed to the way Paul used arguments rather than simply made divine pronouncements.

In response to Spinoza, orthodox Christians affirmed plenary inspiration. The word “plenary” means “entire” or “complete.” Paul said, “All Scripture is God-breathed.” In other words, plenary inspiration is a way of saying that it’s not just the direct speech of prophets that is inspired. Everything you read in the Bible is divinely inspired.

Some people accept Jesus but refuse to accept the authority of the whole Bible. They use the words of Jesus to judge which bits of the Bible they’ll accept. But this isn’t how Jesus himself treats the Bible. Let’s take one example. In Matthew 19:4-5, Jesus quotes from Genesis 2:24: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” These are not words spoken directly by God. They’re an editorial comment on the story. Yet Jesus introduces them by saying, “Haven’t you read . . . that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said . . .” Jesus identifies the editorial comment of the human author as the words of the Creator. And he equates the words we “read” with

words spoken by God. If we take seriously the words of Jesus recorded in the Gospels, then we need to take seriously the rest of the Bible as well!

Plenary or total inspiration doesn't mean all Scripture is equally relevant or important. No one is suggesting you should write out 2 Timothy 4:13 and stick it on your fridge: "When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas." But even verses like this are inspired by God. And they might have some lessons for us on the frailty of Christian leaders and the need to care for one another.

### **VERBAL—EVERY WORD COUNTS**

In response to Spinoza, a Dutch theologian named Jean Leclerc said that the words were not inspired but the doctrines were. This got round the "ordinary speech" of the apostles that Spinoza had highlighted, along with other similar "problems" like grammatical errors and differing descriptions of the same event.

More recently, Karl Barth has spoken of the Bible as a witness to revelation. Barth was perhaps the greatest theologian of the twentieth century and a fierce opponent of liberal theology. But his view of the Bible is deficient. According to Barth, the Bible is the window through which we see God's revelation in Jesus. In this analogy, the window may be dirty (Scripture may contain errors), but it still gives us a genuine view of what's beyond (Scripture still reveals Christ). This is the view of the Bible I was taught in my first year at university.

At first sight, this approach appears to offer a way around some of the apparent contradictions while retaining a commitment to divine revelation. But there are two problems with this view. First, it's hard to know where to stop. When does revelation end and error begin? In the end we're left uncertain about the truth.

Second, this is not how the Bible describes itself. As we've seen, Paul says, "All Scripture is God-breathed." And that means individual words as well as big ideas. Quoting Deuteronomy, Jesus said, "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). Every word of the Bible comes from God.

So in response to people like Leclerc, evangelicals have affirmed verbal inspiration. The adjective “verbal” means “to do with words.” So verbal inspiration affirms that the words themselves are inspired—not just the thoughts.

### **CONFLUENT—EVERY AUTHOR MATTERS**

Muslims believe that the Qur’an was dictated to the Prophet Muhammad. Muhammad played no part in its creation other than to write down what he was told. And many opponents of the inspiration of the Bible assumed it involved a similar process of dictation. And if the Bible was dictated, then it’s hard to account for those parts that clearly reflect the personality of the human authors.

But this is not what Christians believe about the Bible. In a few cases there was dictation. Moses, for example, is told to write down what God has told him (Exodus 34:27). But at other times the human authors wrote down their own thoughts or drew on their own existing knowledge. Nevertheless, God so worked in them that their thoughts were God’s thoughts. Luke, for example, was not sitting in quiet contemplation until the Spirit came upon him. He was busy researching his sources (Luke 1:1-4). Paul was not hanging around for the Spirit to give him an inspirational thought. He was writing letters off in a hurry to address some crisis or other that had blown up in one of the churches. They spoke, says Peter, “as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:20-21).

The critique of divine inspiration is based on a false choice. It assumes either that God wrote the Bible, in which case the human authors were mere scribes, or that people wrote the Bible, in which case God did not write it. Since the Bible is clearly written by people, the assumption is that God was at best indirectly involved. J. I. Packer says of this argument,

It assumes that God and man stand in such a relation to each other that they cannot both be free agents in the same action . . . But the Bible teaches rather that the freedom of God, who

works in and through His creatures, leading them to act according to their nature, is itself the foundation and guarantee of the freedom of their action.

There was a fusing of the human and divine elements. That's why we speak of confluent inspiration. The word "confluent" means "flowing together." In geography a "confluence" is a place where two rivers meet. In the Bible the "rivers" of human and divine authorship meet together. Both the divine and human authors matter.

So in response to the Enlightenment, evangelicals developed the doctrine of the plenary, verbal, confluent inspiration of the Bible. It is sometimes suggested that this is a new doctrine—and maybe even an evangelical obsession not shared by previous generations of Christians. But in fact the church fathers and Reformers unanimously affirmed Scripture to be divinely authored. It may not have been developed as a doctrine, but this was because it was everywhere assumed. It wasn't affirmed in early creeds because no one disputed it. So the doctrine of verbal inspiration is recent in form because it was attacked in the Enlightenment. But the early church fathers introduced quotations by saying, "The Holy Spirit says . . ." They used the picture of the human author as a musical instrument through which the Holy Spirit breathed. They spoke of the Bible being without error. In the fourth century AD Jerome talked of divine authorship extending to every word and syllable, while Augustine said the Bible was uniquely authoritative and completely without error.

The Qur'an is always recited in Arabic. But because God intends to communicate through the Bible, there was a recognition from the beginning that it would be translated. The New Testament writers sometimes quote from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. Yet even though these quotes are translations, the New Testament treats them as God's word. Translation inevitably involves some interpretative choices because languages don't map on to one another word for word. Even more literal translations can mislead because sometimes there are not exact matches for words, and grammar

works differently in different languages. All Bible translations sit on a spectrum from more literal word-for-word translations like the English Standard Version (ESV) and the New American Standard Bible (NASB), to sense-for-sense translations like the New International Version (NIV) and the New Living Translation (NLT), using what's called "dynamic equivalence," to paraphrases like *The Message*. So the Greek and Hebrew originals remain our touchstone. They are the text of Scripture that is without error. But we can trust translations like the NIV and ESV, and we can treat them as God's word to us.

### **SUPREME AUTHORITY**

The Catholic Church claims that tradition goes hand in hand with the Bible as God's revelation. As a result, the church determines what the Bible means. Human tradition is supreme. Modernity uses reason to evaluate the Bible, discarding those elements it finds distasteful or incredible. Human reason is supreme. People in our postmodern world judge everything against their feelings. "This is who I feel I am" has become the criterion by which we decide what is true. Human experience is supreme.

The problem is not tradition, reason, or experience per se. Tradition is valuable, for we stand on the shoulders of giants. Reason matters—just think of all that humanity has invented and discovered. Experience clearly shapes our identity. The problem is the human component in human tradition, human reason, and human experience. Our understanding is limited because we're finite creatures and biased because we're sinful creatures. But revelation is from God. And that makes all the difference. This is what the Reformers meant by *sola Scriptura*, "Scripture alone." They didn't reject tradition, reason, or experience. But when push comes to shove, Scripture alone is always supreme.

If the words of the Bible are the words of God, then they have the authority of God. And that means they must be obeyed. They're not merely religious opinions, wise advice, or inspiring thoughts. They're divine declarations. And that means the measure of how biblical we are is not how much of the Bible we know, but how much of it we

live. James warns against people who hear the word but don't do it. They're like people who look at themselves in a mirror, notice that their hair is all over the place, but then do nothing about it (James 1:22-25). That's what we're like if we look into the Bible, see that our lives are not aligned to God's will, and then do nothing about it. Sometimes people talk about the need to look for a Bible-teaching church. That's important. But what we really want to be is Bible-doing churches.

There's a Woody Allen comedy routine from the 1960s in which he describes getting kidnapped. The kidnappers send a ransom note to his parents. "My father has bad reading habits," says Allen. "So he got into bed at night with the ransom note and he read half of it and got drowsy and fell asleep. Then he lent it out." It's funny because it's so ridiculous. A ransom note is too important to neglect. Or imagine an envelope drops onto your mat with the Buckingham Palace logo on the front. I received a letter recently from my accountants and I didn't open it for a couple of days. But what if you received a letter from the queen? You would hardly put it to one side to read later. You would be desperate to know what was inside.

If you really believe in the divine inspiration of the Holy Scripture, then you'll make reading the Bible and hearing it preached a top priority. That's because "divine inspiration" means this is a message from God. It's the most important news from the most important person. And that's a message you're not going to postpone.

### **ENDURING AUTHORITY**

The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman describes modern life as "liquid." Everything is fluid. Marriage, institutions, ideologies are all being emptied of content and authority. Along with this, words routinely exceed their meaning. Advertisers use big words to sell small things. Ghostwriting drains words of their authenticity. Politicians make promises or issue warnings in which their words exceed reality. So words are losing their value in our age. We suffer from what we might call "word inflation."

But the words of the Bible are “enduring” and “firm” because they’re God’s words (Psalm 19:9). The Word from which all the other words of God derive is Jesus, and Jesus is the eternal Word. The apostle Peter says,

“All people are like grass,  
and all their glory is like the flowers of the field;  
the grass withers and the flowers fall,  
but the word of the Lord endures forever.”

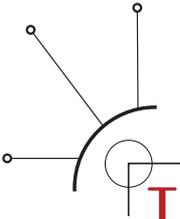
(1 Peter 1:24-25)

He is quoting from Isaiah 40:6-8. Isaiah’s words were already eight hundred years old when Peter quoted them. Now they’re twenty-eight hundred years old. Compare this to what you read on social media. How much of that will be read in twenty-eight hundred years’ time?

You can hold some very old things in your hands. The oldest thing I own is a Roman coin. It is nearly two thousand years old—a piece of history from the days of the apostle Paul. But the Bible is a word from the eternal God and it endures throughout history. What else can you hold in your hands and say that about?

Other books can have a big impact on your life. And sometimes their impact is more immediate than the Bible. But that impact will fade. One day they’ll be out of date. But the Bible is never out of date. It’s important to have a sense of this. Why do we love Christian books? Why do we sometimes prefer to read them rather than the Bible? Perhaps because they offer a quick fix. They’re like sugary cereals compared to oatmeal. Sugar gives us a quick high but soon leaves us feeling hungry again. If you want to develop as a person or acquire a new skill, then other books might produce more immediate effects. There’s nothing wrong with that. But if you want to develop character that endures, then read the book that endures. If you want to become a person of real substance, then read the book of real substance. Let the enduring word of God shape who you are.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

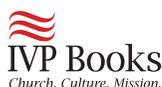


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