

From the Mouth of God

Trusting, Reading, and Applying the Bible

Sinclair B. Ferguson

JESUS SAID:

*“It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”*

(MATTHEW 4:4)



THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

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Introduction

FROM *the Mouth of God* is about trusting, reading, and applying the Bible. Its title is drawn from the *English Standard Version* translation of Jesus' words in Matthew 4:4, which in turn are a quotation from Deuteronomy 8:3.

My own first encounter with these precise words was not in the English Bible itself (earlier translations had a different rendering), but as a teenager reading *The Scots Confession*, composed in 1560 by the Scottish reformer John Knox and five companions, all memorably sharing the Christian name 'John'.

In their Preface to the *Confession* they gave a striking assurance to their readers:

If any man will note in our Confession any chapter or sentence contrary to God's Holy Word, that it would please him of his gentleness and for Christian charity's sake to inform us of it in writing; and we, upon our honour, do promise him that by God's grace we shall give him satisfaction *from the mouth of God*, that is, from Holy Scripture, or else we shall alter whatever he can prove to be wrong.

Even although familiar with the words of Matthew 4:4 in the *Authorized Version* (King James) and the *Revised Standard Version*, I remember being struck by this bold description of the Bible. Somehow it seemed much more arresting than the vocabulary more commonly used in the New Testament ('Scripture', 'it is written', 'inspired by God'). In some respects it presented an even more vivid picture than the modern 'God-breathed'—and all the more so because this was the description our Saviour chose to use. This was how he viewed

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the Scriptures. They were the very mouth of his heavenly Father, and so ‘every word’ they contain must be important. It was them he had in view when he applied to himself the beautiful words of Isaiah’s third ‘Servant Song’:

The Lord GOD has given me
the tongue of those who are taught,
that I may know how to sustain with a word
him who is weary.
Morning by morning he awakens;
he awakens my ear
to hear as those who are taught.
The Lord GOD has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious.¹

From the Mouth of God is essentially an expanded study of this powerful description of the Bible. It sets out to explore three questions:

First, why it is that Christians throughout the ages have believed, with Jesus, that the Bible is God’s mouth, from which his word is heard.

Second, how should we approach reading the Bible in order to gain a better understanding and appreciation of its message?

Third, how can we do this in a way that is well-grounded in Scripture and that actually helps us get to know the message of the Bible better?

These pages do not have specialists in view, but ordinary Christians who want to think through what we should believe about the Bible, and how we can go about understanding and applying its life-transforming message.

Since it is not a technical or academic treatise it may be helpful to explain why it has so many footnotes! Most of them have been included to help readers locate the biblical basis for what is being said. Some readers will want to look them up, take them in, and reflect on their teaching. Others may simply want to note their presence and read on. If so they can do that comfortably by simply ignoring the superscript numbers. But I hope they will perhaps return again to certain sections for closer and deeper study.

¹ Isa. 50:4-5.

Introduction

From the Mouth of God is a book with a pre-history. Some thirty plus years ago, I hurriedly wrote a little book on the Bible called *Handle with Care* which Hodder and Stoughton graciously published¹ in place of the book on the Trinity I had—in a moment of over-ambitious enthusiasm—contracted to write for them but failed to complete. Over the years I have had requests to reprint *Handle with Care*. But a book written half a lifetime ago, by a young man with a somewhat guilty conscience and in a hurry, needed re-read and re-written. Even had there been the desire to do that, other responsibilities demanded priority. But no one has been more persevering in asking for the book than Jonathan Watson, General Editor of *The Banner of Truth* and I am grateful now for his dogged encouragement to, and patience with, a procrastinating author!

The conviction that lay behind writing about the Bible in the first place was that God's word is itself the worker in the life of the individual Christian and in the fellowship and outreach of the church. In the intervening decades this conviction has only been strengthened through the privileges of seminary teaching, preaching and pastoring. I am deeply grateful for the privilege of witnessing the transforming impact of Scripture on so many men and women, students and children as God's word has done its own work.

The dedication of these pages is an expression of gratitude for four decades and more of friendship with Ian and Joan Hamilton, and marks the fifteenth anniversary of their ministry in Cambridge Presbyterian Church.

My deepest human debt, as always, is to those who know me best, and have loved me most, my wife Dorothy and our family, who provide the context that makes possible the solitary discipline of writing. And beyond that, my great debt beyond payment, is to the God who has spoken in his word, and has made himself known to us as a loving Father, a gracious Saviour, and an indwelling Spirit.

SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

June 2014

¹ First published by Hodder and Stoughton in 1982.

Part One – Trusting the Bible

It Is Written

THE words ‘it is written’, or a similar phrase, appear around ninety times in the New Testament. These three words¹ settled matters for Jesus and the apostles. If Scripture said it, then God said it.² They regarded the Bible as God’s own word. Through it he speaks.³ To it Christians listen. Its teaching Christians believe. Its commands Christians obey. Its pages Christians love.

Christianity has always been a Bible-based religion. Our beliefs, lifestyle, and day-to-day experience as Christians are profoundly shaped by this composite volume of sixty-six books, containing some sixteen hundred pages of closely printed information. Yet we are so used to the existence of what we call ‘The Bible’ that we rarely ask: Why do we have a Bible at all?

It is, after all, only in the last four hundred years or so that ordinary people have owned their own copies of the Bible. Only the combination of the invention of the printing press and the events of the sixteenth-century Reformation eventually brought it into every Christian home. Thus, for the longer part of the history of the Christian church, daily Bible-reading was the luxury of the few rather than the privilege of the many.

¹ Only one word in Greek (*gegraptai*).

² A point underlined in great detail and at length by B. B. Warfield in: “‘It Says:’ ‘Scripture Says:’ ‘God Says:’” originally written in 1899 and republished in the influential first volume of his collected works, *Revelation and Inspiration* (OUP: New York, 1932), pp. 281-332.

³ The point powerfully illustrated by the way in which *Heb.* 12:5 introduces a quotation from *Prov.* 3:11-12 with the words ‘And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons.’ Notice the *present* tense (‘addresses’) and the second person plural pronoun (‘you’).

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Why the Bible?

The brief answer is that Christians believe God communicates through the Bible. He reveals himself in its pages, speaks in its sentences and does so in order to bring us to trust, know, and love him. Through the Bible God makes himself known to us, just as we make our thoughts and plans known to others through the words we speak. To change the metaphor, it acts as the lens through which we begin to see who he is, what he has done for us, and what his will is for our lives. As a result we come to know him for ourselves and to know ourselves better.

This is what the Bible is for. If it does not achieve this goal, then the failure cannot be laid at its door. It is we who have not yet begun to use it properly.

Yet there is more to the Bible than this. God's word comes to us in our spiritual sickness and blindness. We are ill spiritually—indeed fatally so—according to Scripture. By nature we are spiritually blind and dead.¹ Scripture therefore provides God's eyesight-restoring and life-giving prescription for our spiritual sickness.

Paul explains our need:

Men ... by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.²

God made man as his image (*Gen. 1:26-27*), in important respects like him, and capable of receiving communication from him and experiencing communion with him. We were made to know and to enjoy our Creator.

¹ See *Eph. 2:1, 5*.

² *Rom. 1:18-23*.

God also expressed his character in everything he made. He painted into the created order expressions of his being, his kindness, and indeed all the facets of his deity, 'his eternal power and divine nature'.

Sometimes when we watch a magnificent sunset, or look up at the vastness of a star-and-planet decorated night sky, or look down on a newborn sleeping baby, we feel our breath almost taken away with a sense of wonder. That is surely just a taste of what it must have been like to see with perfect vision the way God's hand shaped creation and to experience both adoration and joy in his presence.

Furthermore our first parents were created with a sense that they had been made by a loving God (they were made as his image and likeness). So they were not only surrounded by a world that expressed his character, but also invaded by a deep consciousness that they were made by him and for him. As Abraham Kuyper put it (echoing John Calvin's idea that the creation is a theatre of God's glory): 'If the cosmos is the theatre of revelation, in this theatre man is both actor and spectator.'²

But now woven into these moments of awe is also a homesickness for a lost past.

Genesis 3 tells us the sad story of how the first man and woman, made as God's image, created to enjoy fellowship with him, doubted his goodness, rejected his wisdom, rebelled against his authority, and were therefore banished from his presence.

Yet God's revelation of himself persists (note the present tenses in what follows):

The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours out speech,
and night to night reveals knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words,
whose voice is not heard.
Their measuring line goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.³

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. F. L. Battles; ed. J. T. McNeill, (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1960), I.vi.2; I.xiv.20 and elsewhere.

² Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopaedia of Sacred Theology*, tr. J. H. de Vries (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1900), p. 264.

³ *Psa.* 19:1-4.

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There is no 'where' to which we can go in order to escape from God's self revelation, or from the innate sense we have that he is God.

All this may still be true (and is, according to the Bible's testimony), but it is certainly not how people see things. Many question the goodness of God. Some angrily repudiate his very existence. They claim to see no evidence of his presence, and deny that there are any substantial reasons for belief that this world is a creation. In this respect, 'All around is in darkness' they say. 'There is no light in the universe which leads us to God' is their claim.

These reactions come as no surprise to Christians. Our Bibles have already provided an analysis of them.

But the Christian knows that the facts of the matter are very different. The darkness is not *outside*, but *inside*. We have become futile in our thinking, and our hearts have become darkened. God's wonderful power, and his nature as the living, loving God, can still be seen in everything which he has made. Even the marred creation still bears the marks of the Creator's loving hand. We are the ones who are blind.

This is the tragedy of the human condition. Creation sings its hymns of praise to God every day even while the melancholy strains of its fallen condition are heard. And through it all the Divine Composer continues to conduct his symphony of love for the world. We 'know God', says Paul, since we continue to be invaded (because we are his image) and surrounded (in creation) by his revelation. But we do not count this knowledge worth having. We suppress and repress its impact on our minds, wills and emotions. As a result we do not, indeed cannot by nature, know God as our God or trust him as our loving Heavenly Father.¹

John Calvin sums this up well:

It is therefore in vain that so many burning lamps shine for us in the workmanship of the universe to show forth the glory of its Author. Although they bathe us wholly in their radiance, yet they can of themselves in no way lead us into the right path. Surely they strike some sparks, but before their fuller light shines forth, these are smothered. For this reason, the apostle ... means ... that the invisible divinity is made manifest in such spectacles, but that we have not the

¹ See *Rom.* 1:18-25.