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If the Bible Is God Speaking . . .

Then How Should We Listen?

Truth №1: The Bible is God speaking.

Implications for study:

1. The nature of Bible study
 2. The goal of Bible study
 3. Our attitude in study
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IT'S THE WORLD'S NUMBER-ONE BEST-SELLING BOOK. It's been translated into well over 2,000 languages, and that number is increasing all the time. It's the foundational text of Western civilization. Many Americans have dozens of copies in their homes. Yet in spite of the dramatic proliferation of this book and in spite of all the books written by all the experts about this

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book, we may be in general less acquainted with its contents than many in the centuries preceding us. What is this book?

Perhaps the most basic element in the cluster of characteristics essential for Bible study is a clear understanding and communication of what Scripture is. What are we studying? The truths about Scripture in these next chapters appear increasingly radical in the world in which we live. New participants in Bible studies often include those who have only the vaguest sense of the nature of this book. Actually, we should hope that is true, in the sense that we hope our churches and our Bible studies will attract many who do not yet know either the Scriptures or the Lord of the Scriptures.

A new generation is emerging, one not steeped in the old Bible stories most people used to know. British author Vaughan Roberts tells an amazing story of a visiting instructor in a primary school who asked the children to name the person who knocked down the wall of Jericho. Nervous silence ensued, broken by one child's response: "Please sir, my name is Bruce Jones. I don't know who did it but it wasn't me."¹ The incident (admittedly unverified!) progresses through several more layers of ignorance, culminating in a letter from the Department of Education regretting the reported damage to the walls of Jericho and offering to cover the cost upon receiving an estimate.

In the midst of growing oblivion, the truths of just what the Bible is stand out as exceedingly precious, to be cherished and mused on and enthusiastically communicated. Not every Bible study should begin with a treatise on the nature of Scripture. However, if these truths are true, then the light of their truth must emerge, in one way or another, as the Bible is studied. Standing on these truths offers us a clear perspective on the Bible and what it means to study

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it. Let's begin with perhaps the most basic truth: the Bible is God speaking.

"Many people consider the Bible inspiring but not inspired . . . a book to be respected, but not read . . . a book for the clergy but not the laity . . . a book for good, religious people but not for sinners. For many, its religious stories are irrelevant to everyday people in everyday life. We must teach that God speaks through the Bible, and that he speaks into our everyday lives, with truth and power to change us."

—Debbie Seward, Bible study leader,
College Church in Wheaton, Illinois

The Bible Is God Speaking

In his helpful basic introduction to the Scriptures, *I Believe in the Bible*, David Jackman makes it clear right at the start: "The Bible is not a book about God; it is God speaking to us."² I love this starting point, one that straightens out right away a whole host of common misconceptions, such as that the Bible is a set of propositions to be learned, or that the Bible is an old dead book we have to keep resurrecting for new times and places. Such misconceptions separate the words on the page from the speaker whose breath breathed them to his creation.

I love this starting point also because Jackman dares to say simply what theologians are continually debating in complex detail. We need professional scholars and theologians, and we must learn from them. We should look into a classic

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like Carl Henry's *God, Revelation, and Authority*.³ We should read the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, which is included in volume 4 of Henry's work. We should study the doctrines of the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture and search Scripture for its truths in these matters. If the Bible is actually anything like what it claims, then it deserves careful attention—as careful as we are capable of. Such care will enable laypeople to glean and communicate these truths in a simple but not simplistic way that makes sense to many fellow students of the Bible.

We begin, then, with the simple but huge truth of God speaking. In Scripture itself God appears as a word-speaker from the very beginning, from the moment he said, "Let there be light," and there was light. Psalm 33:6 puts it this way:

By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,
and by the breath of his mouth all their host.

As the Bible consistently celebrates this powerful creative word, we begin to sense that God's word appears not as a disconnected thing that logically causes something else to happen; rather, in the very breath of his word being uttered, the creation happens! When we learn that the Hebrew word for *breath* (*ruach*) is also the word for *spirit* (as in the *Spirit of God* in Gen. 1:2), and when we go on to learn, for example in Colossians 1:16, that by Jesus Christ the Son all things were created, we begin to grasp the working of the triune God through his word from the beginning.

God pours out his three-personed self through his word. When we land in John 1 and read about the Word who in the beginning was with God, and was God, and through whom all things were made, we see even more deeply into the personal

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meaning of God’s word—even to the point of its being made flesh to dwell among us. God’s being a word-speaker is the most personal extension of his very self into his creation.

All this helps clarify “the inspiration of Scripture,” a crucial doctrinal tenet. In the context of Bible study groups, it is helpful to see this tenet in the most personal sense, as we understand that the Creator God personally “breathed out” all Scripture, according to Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16. The process of God’s breathing it out is never explained in a technical way, but it is unfolded by Peter, who describes the writers of Scripture as men who “spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21).

I’ll never forget a certain training session for various teaching leaders at College Church in Wheaton. The young pastor leading the session spent considerable time talking about these writers’ being “carried along” by the Spirit as they wrote down the words of Scripture. I knew this basic doctrine, and I remember thinking that this instruction would be helpful for newer leaders. My pastor, however, proceeded to talk about how Luke used the same word we translate “carried along” to describe Paul’s ship, which in Acts 27:13–17 was “driven along” by a tempestuous wind, a northeaster so strong that they simply had to give way to it. He vividly described that wind filling up the sails of Paul’s boat and driving it along the coast of Crete. Then he asked us to keep that picture in mind as we considered the powerful wind of the Spirit that *carried along* these writers.

These writers did “speak”; they did indeed actively author the words. And yet they authored them as their hearts and minds were filled, blown full, driven along by the wind of the Holy Spirit’s breath, God’s breath, so that every word they wrote was exactly the one the divine Author intended to speak

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to us. This is why we can say that Scripture is inerrant in the original manuscripts—because the perfect, sovereign God breathed it out and carried those writers along. That day, in that class at church, I began not just to understand better this doctrine of inspiration but to love it more—to love more the God who would so powerfully and perfectly speak himself to us in words. This was crucial training for Bible study.

How amazing that God has not turned away and withdrawn his word to a human race that has been made up of rebels against that word since Adam and Eve disobeyed his command in the garden of Eden. But God did not stop speaking. He came to Adam and Eve and spoke a promise—a promise that one day the seed of the woman would bruise the head of the evil serpent who introduced sin into the world. The entire remainder of the Bible reveals the working out of that promise, ultimately fulfilled in the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ the Son of God. God overflows with words for us. He doesn't hide; he reveals himself and pours himself out through his word as he speaks to us, by his Spirit, ultimately through Christ.

“Some have told me that the Bible is outdated and can't meet all our needs in today's world. I deal with these kinds of issues by focusing in on what the Bible says about itself, and emphasizing that if it is in error about what it says about itself, then it can't be trusted to speak in any area because it isn't the Word of God. But if it is the Word of God, we must submit ourselves to all of it, not just the parts we like.”

—Carol Ruvolo, author, Bible study leader, Heritage Christian Fellowship, Albuquerque, New Mexico

Implications

The Nature of Bible Study

Three important implications arise from this foundational truth about the inspiration of Scripture. The first implication concerns the nature of Bible study: it is personal. Bible study is not primarily a matter of learning propositions or getting facts straight; it is a matter of hearing God speak to us. I am not saying that Bible study does not involve rigorous work and much learning. It does, as we will discuss. But the point is that the work and learning happen in relationship—first with the Lord God to whom we’re listening, and also with those around us who are related to us (or perhaps being drawn into relationship with us) through him, as we listen to his words together.

Many Bible studies these days emphasize this aspect of personal relationship, but too often the relational elements are separated from the elements of textual study, with the assumption that it is more sensitive and fulfilling to talk, pray, and encourage each other than to engage in intellectual analysis of words on a page. Such a false dichotomy thrusts aside a love letter from the one being whose words can pierce and fully satisfy a soul needy for loving relationship. Indeed, the context of loving interaction with others is beautiful and essential. But how amazing, in that context, to be privileged to hear from the Lord our Maker. How far away from sterile intellectual analysis is the process of deeply studying God’s Word. As we lean together over a biblical text to study it, we are in effect leaning in closer to the breath of God.

We were made to receive God’s words. And we were made to receive them not just individually but together, as his people. Taking in God’s words is not simply a mental exercise that we

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then have to make personal; it is itself a relational activity—based on the primary relationship with the God who is there and who speaks to us. Perhaps sometimes we just don't believe he's there, and we're left to acknowledge only ourselves.

In a Bible study group, the actual study of the Bible is the foundation of the personal, relational aspect of the gathering. In a Bible study we come together to take in the words of our God who is there and who made us, loves us, and speaks to us—and who binds us together in a unity of the Spirit, which is stronger than the ties we can create ourselves.

The Goal of Bible Study

If the first implication of the fact that the Bible is God speaking concerns the nature of Bible study, the second implication concerns its goal—for people to know God through listening to him speak. This makes logical sense: if a Bible study is personal at its core, then the primary goal must be for each person and all the people together to develop this personal relationship with God and through him with each other. This goal must encompass both unbelievers' coming to know God initially as well as believers' coming to know God better. When Jesus prayed for his disciples just before his death, he prayed for all those who would believe in him, that they might be one in him “so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:20–23).

The goal for the time between Jesus' first coming and his second coming is for the world to come to know him as his disciples reproduce themselves. The Great Commission in Matthew 28 is received by Jesus' first disciples and then, by its very nature, passed on to every subsequent follower of Jesus, so that the process of new disciples' being baptized and taught

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should continue to expand even to the end of this age when Jesus will come again. The first disciples participated in the crucial work of completing God's inspired Word, as the promised Holy Spirit brought the truth of Jesus' life and teaching perfectly to their minds, filling their sails as they wrote down the New Testament books. We later followers of Christ continue to press on with God's Word as our primary tool. The activity of Bible study must be seen in the context of this goal: that the world would come to know God through his Son.

"I've never experienced anyone who did not open the Bible without respect. They seem to perceive it as being God's book. However, the Bible is often a totally unknown book to a person attending a Bible study for the first time. It may only be a 'table book,' or this person may not even own a Bible. It's important to offer a Bible to anyone who wants one. In the first small-group session, I never assume that everyone knows how to find a biblical text reference."

—Nancy Hawley, Bible study teacher,
College Church in Wheaton, Illinois

Has the focus of many Bible studies become ingrown? How often do we Christians actually view ourselves as being in training to make other disciples, even through our Bible study? One wonderful way to expand our focus is to participate in a Bible study that includes nonbelievers or new believers or to change our current studies by including new people, perhaps even our own friends and neighbors.

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People new to the Scriptures ask questions that longtime believers would never ask and lead a group to notice things about what God says that those of us in our established ruts might never notice. To witness someone else hearing God speak personally to him or her for the first time strengthens our own faith in God's Word and the personal God who speaks it. From the perspective of one being drawn to faith, it is powerful and compelling to witness believers in the act of loving God and loving to hear his Word. In the end, taking to heart this large goal of seeing the world around us come to know God is a step of obedience to the Word itself, and that obedience brings both joy to us and ultimately glory to God. Bible studies do feed Christians, but that feeding is part of a larger picture, of a world full of disciples being fed to feed others.

"I just heard this story from a woman who leads a small group. . . . One member of her group has not yet committed her life to Christ, but she keeps coming to the study and participating in the small group. She loves the relationships of love, clearly. Last week, after one Sunday of attending church with this small-group leader, the young woman had the courage to go to church on her own. She's growing in the graces, being showered with God's love and Word on a regular basis."

—Kari Stainback, Director of Women's Ministries,
Park Cities Presbyterian Church, Dallas, Texas

I have seen this goal in action, along with the joy it brings, most often in churches where the leaders have established a

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vision for the world, and often in places in the world where gospel outreach is growing in spite of governments that do not approve. In some such countries, for example, where international Christian churches are allowed to meet, people from all over the world gather, drawn to these churches by their vibrant fellowship, their strong preaching, and often their welcoming Bible study groups. Many people receive the gospel and carry it back to their various places of origin. There is an excitement to see new converts—an excitement that inevitably spills into the immediate community, whether it's allowed to do so or not.

Our Attitude during Study

The third implication concerns the attitude with which we approach Bible study. We need an attitude of humility. If the Bible is God speaking, then we should not be too quick to speak ourselves, before we have listened well to him. Humpty Dumpty got it right: the question is which is to be master. If there is a God and he speaks, then his word is authoritative, a master's word, calling for reverence and submission. If there is a God and he speaks, then we will be full of prayer and supplication for his help as we take in his Word. "Your hands have made and fashioned me," humbly prays the psalmist; "give me understanding that I may learn your commandments" (Ps. 119:73).

We have to keep acknowledging the fact that each person brings unique contexts and experiences to Scripture's words, all of which will affect the process of understanding them. An attitude of humility will lead us to examine rather than simply acknowledge this state of affairs. After such acknowledgment, should we not go on to ask how we can keep our contexts and experiences from turning into hard interpretive grids? How

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can we more and more fully open ourselves, each with our marvelous uniqueness, to become those in whom the Word can dwell richly? How can we learn to receive these words in ways that will please the God who spoke them? We will discuss various approaches and questions that can help. But perhaps most fundamental is the attitude of our hearts—humility that fears God and knows the weight of his Word.

Connecting the words of Scripture to the God who speaks them with his very breath restores in us that attitude toward the Word found in the Word: one of fear and trembling. It's also an attitude of delight and joy and wonder, as we will discuss, but it's consistently an attitude of humble fear. After rehearsing the works of God proclaimed in his Word, the prophet Habakkuk stops and says:

I hear, and my body trembles;
my lips quiver at the sound;
rottenness enters into my bones;
my legs tremble beneath me. (Hab. 3:16)

The apostle Peter, even as he wrote inspired words explaining the inspiration of Scripture, took on a solemn tone as he affirmed the surety of the prophetic word, “to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (2 Peter 1:19). That beautiful admonishment should rouse in us not only wonder that God should speak through his Word, but also a humble fear that compels us to pay attention and listen prayerfully.

To start with the truth that the Bible is God speaking gives us the most important perspective when we gather to study the Bible. The next truth encourages us as we begin to handle the words.