



Earl D. Radmacher  
EDITOR

# CAN WE TRUST THE ible?

Leading  
theologians  
speak out  
on biblical  
inerrancy

# CAN WE TRUST THE BIBLE?

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**SCRIPTURE:  
GOD'S WORD  
AND GOD'S POWER  
2 TIMOTHY 3:14-17  
ROBERT C. PREUS**

I'd like to begin with a hymn which is the form of a prayer.

*Thus, O Jesus, my endeavor is to be forever Thine.  
Let no mortal love whatever binding now my heart entwine.  
Though great be the host that refuses to heed Thee,  
I'll faithfully follow where e'er Thou wilt lead me.  
For Thy Word is Spirit and life to my soul,  
And through it, O Jesus, my conduct control.*

I want to comment on 2 Timothy 3:14-17. In our day of virtual worldwide revolution and insecurity, the most abiding thing that you and I can possess, and certainly the greatest legacy we can leave our children, is knowledge. By excessive taxation or by simple confiscation, everything we have can be taken from us—our income, our capital, our wealth, even our property. And this is actually happening in various places in the world.

The last thing that can be taken from a person is what he has in his head. If we know something, we can usually make a way for ourselves even under very difficult circumstances and can at least exist. And the more we know, the better our lives will be. It was a man wise in the ways of this world who once said, "With all thy getting, get understanding." But knowledge not only prepares us for our brief life here on earth. There is a higher knowledge that opens doors of eternal life to us, and this is the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. "This is life eternal," he says, "that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent."

Now what does it mean to know Jesus Christ? It means not merely that I have a few facts at hand concerning his life and his death. It means not merely that I regard him as a great teacher, a martyr, an example, or even one who by his death and life has revealed God's love to me. To know Jesus Christ means to know his benefits—to know what he has done for me. To know him means to say to him, "My Lord, my God, my Savior."

And where do we gain this knowledge that leads to eternal life—the knowledge that Paul is talking about in these words? How do we learn to know Jesus Christ? How may we learn to recognize that communion with God, the forgiveness of sins, the sure hope of eternal life which we have when we know him? The answer is simple and clear: through his Word. Just as Christ himself is Life and Light, the words he has spoken are Spirit and Life. Just as he is the foundation of our life with God, so his Word is the foundation of our knowledge of that life which is to be had in God. And this Word through which we believe is, as he himself has said, "The Word of the apostles and the prophets," the Word of Holy Scripture.

As you know, Scripture makes many statements and

claims about itself—its power, authority, and divine origin. But most of these statements are brief; they are said only in passing. Of all the statements about itself, our text is by far the longest, the clearest, and the most complete. And it offers, I believe, three reasons why the Bible ought to be a most precious treasure to the church and to every Christian: First, because it is a powerful Word. Second, because it is a divine Word. Third, because it is an authoritative and practical Word.

In the opening words of this text, Paul is urging Timothy, his younger co-worker, to hold fast and to continue in everything that he has been taught by Paul and the other apostles. And the apostle reminds Timothy that everything he has taught him, Timothy has already learned or was supposed to have learned from the Scriptures, the same Scriptures which he learned as a child from his pious mother and grandmother. And why is it so important, so paramount that Timothy continue faithfully in the doctrine of Scripture? Is it simply so that he may remain loyal to a heritage, a culture? Is it to remain merely well-informed concerning God and his people and their history? Not that. No, Paul says there is an infinitely more important reason. Scripture, he says, is power. "It is able to make wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus." Now just what is meant by this power of Scripture? What kind of a power does Scripture possess?

In the Middle Ages certain monks would strap a Bible to their backs thinking that it would aid them wherever they went and ward off evil spirits. Ironically, many of these monks were not even able to read the Bible. Certainly this is not the power of Scripture. The power of Scripture is not a fetish; it is not something magical.

Today many scholars who have a high respect for the Bible tell us that it is unique in this respect: it is the first authentic, original witness to Christ and therein is its power. But certainly, there is more to be said about the



power of Scripture, God's Word, than merely that. We don't venerate the Bible simply because it's old. No, the power of Scripture is in its message. And its message is Christ. He is the essence, the soul, and the center of all the Scriptures.

As Luther used to say, "Christ is involved in the Scriptures as a body in its clothes." Scripture teaches us, Paul says; it makes us wise by teaching Christ: his atoning life, his suffering, his death—and placarding him before our eyes. And for every penitent sinner, this is a message of greatest comfort. It can fill the most despondent, wretched, miserable heart with peace and joy and hope, because it tells every sinner of the Savior, a Savior from sin, crucified and slain and risen. He is a Savior God who thrusts himself into our world, our misery, our death, our sin, our hell, taking our place, and then offers us forgiveness and reconciliation and righteousness and salvation—eternal rescue.

When we embrace this message of Scripture, as Paul says, "We become wise." Not just because we have acquired a little more factual knowledge. No, Paul tells us that this message of Scripture comes, "Not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1 Thess. 1:5, RSV). It is God's power unto salvation. It not only informs; it seizes us; it changes us; it makes us new creations, children of God. Therefore, you must never forget these words of our text, the clearest words of all Scripture that talk about its power, and you must never minimize them.

"The Scriptures," Paul says here, "the *Scriptures*." He is not speaking about some other kind of Word of God. The Scriptures are able; they have the intrinsic, inherent power, the power of very God to make you or me or any man wise unto salvation by bringing us to faith in Christ. And we must understand the full implication of what Paul is saying here. Scripture does this. Scripture is not merely a billboard or a sign that points to Christ the

way some sign in Fort Wayne may point to Chicago. No, it brings Christ to me, and me to Christ; me, a poor, lost, dead sinner to Christ. That's the power of Scripture, what the living Word of Scripture does. Whether it is read or preached it does no less than what the living Word of Christ accomplished in dead Lazarus. It has given us life.

And so there is a good reason for singing as we do in another of our old hymns:

*Speak, O Lord, thy servant heareth.  
To Thy Word I now give heed.  
Life and spirit Thy Word beareth.  
All Thy Word is truth, indeed.  
Death's dread power in me is rife.  
Jesus, may Thy Word of life  
Fill my soul with love's song's fervor,  
That I cling to Thee forever.*

Now, perhaps you are asking: How can Scripture, a book, be so powerful? And Paul in our text seems to anticipate just such a question. In giving an answer, he gives us an important second reason why the Scriptures should be such a great treasure to you and me and the entire Christian church. He says simply, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God"—all Scripture is God-breathed; it is the product of God's breath. Here Paul tells us that Scripture is not the product of men. It's not the result of human ingenuity or thought or decision, even though, obviously, men wrote it, consciously and willingly. No, he says, Scripture is God's breath, the product of God's mouth, God's utterance. It came from his mouth, his heart, his will.

It's not a hodgepodge that reflects the theology of Isaiah or Paul or James or John or others. It teaches one theology, the theology that comes from God and reflects his mind and his will toward us. This is a very difficult

concept for many people to accept today—even many theologians, as you know. Many are telling us that God is not the author of the Bible at all, but rather in some sense the author of the lives of the men who wrote the Bible and that is all that inspiration really means.

Paul says “no” to this. He does not even mention the human authors of the Scriptures, even though he was one of them. He was conscious of it as he was writing this. But he simply tells us that the Scriptures, as such—those Scriptures that we have at hand—are God-breathed. And so Luther is perfectly right when in his entire exegetical enterprise throughout his life, he simply said, “You are so to deal with Scripture that you bear in mind that God himself is speaking to you there.”

The Bible is powerful to work faith in us—to make us wise unto salvation simply because it is God’s Word. What a tragedy then, what a stupid, utter tragedy ever to toss that Book of books in the corner and just let it gather dust. Or in our theological studies to relegate that Book and what it says to some lower priority in all of our work. On the other hand, what a joy and what a comfort to know that whenever you take that Book up and read it, whenever you hear it expounded or preached, whenever you meditate on it, God himself is present, speaking to you.

The church fathers used to call the Scriptures *Deos loquam*, “God speaking.” Not merely something God has said, but rather *God speaking now*, mediating to you his Son, his Holy Spirit, his forgiveness, all the riches of his grace. And why shouldn’t that be a joy and a comfort to us? You and I, living in this fallen, cursed, perishing world can understand the psalmist when he said, “All men are liars.” You and I can have the confidence that even though we never see God, he nevertheless speaks to us in the Bible, as directly and personally and with the same truth and power that he spoke to Adam in the Garden of Eden, or to Abraham

on the field of Mamre. Moses, who spoke with God face to face; the disciples who sat at the feet of the Son of God and learned his message for three years have no advantage over you and me. You see now what it means, what the implications are when we say, "The Scriptures are God's Word."

And of course, when we say the Scriptures are God's Word we mean also that this powerful, saving Word is truthful, inerrant. This is obviously Paul's understanding in our text. The power of Scripture which Paul alludes to resides in its message and in the fact that it is God's Word. This message is the truth. It's a message which makes us wise unto salvation and free. It is quite impossible that this powerful, divine Word which Paul talks about here, which alone, as he says later, "is profitable for doctrine" in the church—that this Word could mislead us or contain errors of any kind. It is quite impossible that the cognitive message of the Scripture-word, which teaches us everything that God would have us believe and do, would mislead us at any point. If Paul doesn't say this explicitly, it is built right into his thinking as he makes these statements about Scripture. If not, how then could Paul possibly go on in this same text and say that Scripture is profitable and useful for so many things? Yet that is exactly what he does.

This is the third reason why the Scriptures should be so precious to us: because they are so imminently practical. Practical for everything that pertains to the Christian faith and life. Because the Bible is produced by the breath of God, Paul says, because it is his word, it is useful, profitable for the four things he lists. I am sure he could have listed many more, and there is a great deal of overlap among these four things.

First for doctrine, teaching. The Bible teaches a person the Christian faith. It teaches him what he's to believe, teach, and confess as a Christian. And certainly

we Christians are not going to pooh-pooh doctrine, even in a subjectivistic age like ours.

Second, the Bible is profitable for reproof. What this means is that the Scriptures convince a person of their message. It is like Jerome's translation. The Bible, he says, "is profitable for arguing" in the positive sense. The Scriptures authenticate their own message. They prove themselves; this is what Paul is saying here.

Third, they are profitable for correction. This is a Greek word which comes from the same root as our word "orthodox." If you deviate in your morals, life, or doctrine, Scripture is there always to help you revise and amend your wrong ideas and life. It straightens you up.

Fourth, instruction in righteousness. Righteousness: the way in which we are to live. Scripture trains us, educates us in the way we are to walk as children of God, whether we are a Timothy or a layperson. In short, Paul tells us, in the Bible God teaches us all that we are to believe and do. And notice that Paul says that Scriptures make the man of God perfect; that is an old English word which really means totally equipped. It makes every man of God equipped in every direction, fully prepared for every exigency, fully informed for every emergency of life or death. Notice that nothing else is mentioned; *sola Scriptura*, Scripture alone. When you are instructed by Scripture, Paul tells you, you are instructed completely. Completely fitted for the Christian life. Just think of that. Paul uses the strongest possible words. He uses what we call "pleonasm," redundancy for the sake of emphasis. He says, "Timothy, you will be perfectly equipped. Yes, totally and perfectly equipped for every good work."

What the apostle is obviously trying to tell us here is simply that the Bible is the most practical book in the world. God has made it one book for all ages and all nations. It commends itself to every intellectual capacity, to every cultural setting, to every human necessity. It

sets forth the spiritual truth and saving doctrine to all men, great and small, learned and simple, good and bad. And all men can understand it; by the gift of the Holy Spirit, they can embrace it and love it and live in it. One of the most moving testimonies concerning the Scriptures and their usefulness which I ever read was written years ago by Daniel Marsh, the well-known New England preacher and hymn writer. He says:

*The Bible is the oldest and newest of books. It surveys the whole field of time and it looks furthest into the infinite depths of eternity. It lends the most vivid and absorbing interest to the scenes and events of the past and it keeps us in the most active sympathy in the time in which we live. It gives us the most reliable record of what has been and it affords us our only means of what is yet to be. It is so conservative as to make it the solemn duty to study and revere the past and it is so progressive as to be in advance of the most enlightened age. It is strict enough to denounce the very shadow and semblance of sin and it is liberal enough to save the chiefest of sinners. It is full of God and must, therefore, be read with a pure heart or its true glory will not be seen. It is full of man, and therefore must always be interesting and instructive to all who would know themselves. The Bible is the plainest of books and yet it has depths of wisdom which no created mind can sound. It is set up as a beacon to show all wanderers the safe way, and yet its light shines forth from thick clouds of mystery and from abysses of infinite darkness. It describes all conditions of life. And it gives utterance to all desires and emotions of the soul. It has a song of triumph for the victor and a wail of defeat for the vanquished. It sparkles with the fervor and gladness of youth; it celebrates the strength and glory of manhood. It bewails the sorrows and infirmities of age. It exalts the mighty deeds of kings and conquerors. It sympathizes with the poor and lowly. It lifts up the fallen. It delivers the oppressed and it breathes the blessing of peace upon the quiet homes of domestic life. It describes with startling clearness the seductions, the temptations,*

*the conflicts of doubt and the miseries of scepticism. It searches the secret chambers of the heart and brings to light its purest love, its darkest hate, its highest joy and its deepest grief. It compasses the utmost range of thought and feeling and desire and it sounds the utmost depths of motive of character and passion.*

I think Marsh catches in part what Paul is driving at when he says, "All Scripture is useful." God's Word is our great heritage.

And yet how we neglect and abuse this Word. And how we waste our time—yes, even as theologians—on other things. Already in his day King Solomon said that in the making of books there is no end. And sometimes I am inclined to think that he knew only the half of it. It is much worse today. But most of these books are no good. They are either inane or they cater to our baser instincts or they tend to lead us astray. Yes, even theological books. But out of this welter of tragic darkness and confusion, the Bible still shines bright and clear. It not only informs me how to be a good husband, a good father, a good citizen. It not only teaches me good business principles, good morals, good taste. It gives me a new outlook on life: the heavenly viewpoint which no other book in the world can give. And it sets me on that way toward eternal life, the way of faith in Christ Jesus. The Bible brings God to me; it brings heaven to earth; it brings hope to my confusion, and grace into my life of sin and sorrow. It tells me the thoughts of God himself, his thoughts of peace toward me and not of evil. It reveals to me the hidden deep things of God's glory and grace. It is the Lord's staff, as David says, that "comforts me" in trouble, in distresses. It is my spiritual meat and drink which nourishes and strengthens me every day of my life, and greatest of all it unites me with my Savior.

And so we sing in the doxology:

*Lord, Thy words are waters living,  
 Where I quench my thirsty need.  
 Lord, Thy words are breath, life-giving;  
 On Thy words my soul doth feed.  
 Lord, Thy words shall be my life  
 Through death's veil and dreary night.  
 Yea, they are my sword prevailing  
 And my cup of joy unfailing.*

I would like to touch on the question of hermeneutics, the principles or rules for biblical interpretation found in our text.

Back in the third and fourth centuries the church was faced with a certain crisis, a centering in Christology, theology, the trinity, and so forth. In the fifth and sixth centuries the church faced the crisis of salvation by grace in opposition to all kinds of syncretism and Pelagianism and things like that, that practically denied the work of the Holy Spirit.

In the sixteenth century, as you know, it was the way of salvation that was the great crisis facing the church. And a sinner was justified by faith in Christ alone without the deeds of the law. This was the great discovery of the Reformation. In the last two centuries I think the crisis has really centered around the Bible, its authority, its inerrancy, its inspiration. But closely connected in the last generation has been this vexing problem of hermeneutics, because, as you know, a person in principle at least could hold to the inerrancy and authority of the Bible and still by the way he reads it reject some of its most cardinal truth. So we are facing a hermeneutical crisis today which I think we are going to have to consider in our ten years of activity as we deal with inerrancy and authority. I believe that our text gives us a great deal of insight as to the correct approach.

There are two kinds of hermeneutical principles, as



you know. The first kind deals with the Bible insofar as it is like all other literature. And thus you learn how, according to these rules, to parse sentences, analyze linguistic statements, detect figures of speech, genre types, and so forth just as you would in other literature.

There is another kind of hermeneutics common at least to some books, certainly peculiar to the Bible. Namely, that kind of hermeneutics in which the book itself gives you certain information about how you are to read it. It involves the kind of attitude and mindset you bring with you when you read the Scriptures. Our text, I believe, mentions these things. Let me list just six of them.

The first one is what I might call the "unity principle." This is brought out in the very first two verses of our text, where Paul begins by telling Timothy to remain steadfast in the things which he has learned and been assured of, knowing from whom he has learned them. Now whether the Greek text is plural or singular there, I don't think it makes any difference. It means that Timothy is being reminded once again by Paul to stand fast in what Paul has taught him. It is at least the third time he has urged this in this very Epistle. No sooner does he complete that thought than he immediately goes to the Scriptures and says, "Now, Timothy, from a child you have known the Scriptures."

In other words, what Paul has taught him, Timothy already understood, at least in part, from the Scriptures, which had been taught him from childhood by his mother and grandmother. What does that mean? The unity of the testaments. The unity between the prophetic Word and the apostolic Word. Paul alludes to this elsewhere in his writings. In Romans 1, you remember, he says that he was called and set apart to preach the gospel, which God himself had foretold or spoken about ahead of time through the prophets in the Old Testament. The same gospel, the same message. The unity of Scripture.

Now the very first biblical hermeneutical principle to go at the advent of the historical-critical method was the unity of Scripture. This is a historical fact. So it is of immense importance when you approach this Book that you understand that it is a unit and not some garbled hodgepodge of different theological opinions, spanning hundreds of years.

A second principle of hermeneutics which I believe can be derived from our text is *power*. We already talked about that a little bit. Scripture is able; it has power to do certain things. It's God's Word. It contains a saving message, and it has the power to convince people of that message. Certainly a person wants to know this about a book when he approaches it. This is something that we should bear in mind always, that it is the almighty, everlasting, gracious, working, acting God who speaks to us and that his Word has power in our lives, great power. I think here of the story of the centurion that came to Jesus and asked that his slave who was at the point of death be healed, and Jesus said, "I'll come." "No, don't come. Speak the Word and my slave will be healed," he said. And Jesus spoke the word and his slave was healed. The same power resides in the Scripture which we read. Paul is referring to that. To pick up this Book and to read it with any other idea in mind really would be a great and tragic mistake.

The third hermeneutical principle is that the Scriptures have a soteriological purpose: their purpose is to bring a person to the point of conversion and salvation. Scripture is able to make you wise unto salvation, Paul says. In the reading of any book it is good if we can understand the motivation, the purpose of the writing. If you read Michener, for instance, he probably wants to entertain you, inform you a little bit, and maybe get in a little anti-Christian propaganda once in a while. It's well that you understand that when you read one of his books. There is a purpose in a stock market report; there is a purpose in the telephone book; there is a

purpose in a sports story. Certainly nobody has to read these things without knowing ahead of time what their purpose is.

So also with the Bible. The Bible was written from beginning to end (remember that Paul here is talking primarily about the Old Testament—but we can include the New) in order that we might be saved. That's the word he uses here. That's the purpose of Scripture. If you miss this purpose as you read the Scriptures, obviously you are going to read them much to your detriment.

Fourth, I would use the word "Christocentricity." Maybe you don't think it is taught very clearly here, but I think it is. Scriptures are able to make us wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. This he says is the purpose of the Old Testament Scriptures as well as the New. It is obvious in the New to all of us. But this is also the purpose of the Old Testament, to witness to Christ. Christ, then, is the center of the Scriptures. That is the theme of all the Scriptures, and again when you approach a book you would like to know what the basic theme is. Of course you can get it inductively by reading the book. But it's helpful if you know this before you read it. And if you know that all of the book witnesses to Christ, then if you don't find him here or there you may search a little harder than ordinarily you would.

Fifth, the principle of divine origin: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God." Every Scripture is God-breathed. It is good to know who the author is if you are reading a book which purports to be authoritative in any sense of the word. To know that the author is competent and authoritative himself means a great deal to you, whether he has written a book on history or ballistics or chemistry or whatever.

Now the author of this Book which deals totally with God and Christ, is God himself. I think a word ought to

be said about the Greek words *pasa graphe*. The *pasa* is distributive. The *pasa*. It probably ought to be translated "every Scripture." It can't be collective; then it would be *pasa he graphe*.

Paul is not merely saying that Scripture as a whole is God-breathed in some sense, but that every Scripture is God-breathed. He is teaching verbal inspiration. That is not a conclusion drawn from anything; it is taught here. And that, of course, shows us that we must meticulously watch all the words and phrases of Scripture and read it in that sense; the way, of course, the Christian church has done historically through the ages.

And finally, authority or usefulness. Scripture has a usefulness that is always valuable to us because it is God's Word and bears with it his authority. And notice the connection. You could really translate verse 16 by saying, "All Scripture is God-breathed, or every Scripture is God-breathed and is therefore profitable because of its divine origin. Its authority guarantees its total usefulness for you and me and the entire Christian church." Authoritative so that we can trust it in every respect. And that too is something important as you take up a book to read. Is it authoritative? Can you count on it? Must you obey it and believe its message, or not?

The following hymn certainly typifies everything Paul is saying in this magnificent text. It was written by a Dane named Grundvig:

*God's Word is our great heritage,  
And shall be ours forever.  
To spread its light from age to age  
Shall be our chief endeavor.  
Through life it guides our way;  
In death it is our stay.  
Lord, grant while worlds endure  
We keep its teaching pure  
In every generation.*