

The Bible, the Preacher, and the Spirit

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God has given the Bible a most prominent place in both the history of mankind in general, and in the history of redemption in particular. In fact, if we will think about it, this is just another way of saying that he has given himself this prominence. This is because, since the Bible is his own Word, or a revealed portion of his divine mind, and to separate a person's mind from the person makes nonsense of the whole idea of what it means to be a person, we can never separate the Bible from God himself as if it is possible to deal with one without also dealing with the other.

When we speak this way, we are not mainly referring to the Bible as a physical book, of which there are many printed copies, but we are referring to the incorporeal "Word" of God. We are referring to that portion of his divine mind that he has disclosed to us, which is in itself not physical. However, in what follows I will refer to the "Bible" instead of the "Word" in order to emphasize that God has disclosed his mind to us and recorded its contents in the form of a verbal and written revelation.

God rules by the Bible. By this book, he declares that he is the creator and that man is the creature. As the potter has the right to mold anything that he pleases out of clay, God has the right as creator to make any creature his wishes, and to make the creature for any purpose he wishes. By this book, God tells man his place as creature in the universe and in history. He tells man the standard by which he must conduct himself in this world, and he demands man to obey it.

By this book, he defines for man truth and error, and right and wrong. A false religion like the Baha'i Faith claims to encourage the "independent investigation for truth," that is, until your investigation suggests that the Baha'i Faith is false. You can investigate as much as you like – yes, even "independently" – as long as you finally agree with the Baha'i Faith.

Members of the scientific community are not above this hypocrisy. They encourage you to think for yourself, but when you in fact do so, breaking free from the irrationality of empiricism and scientism, they are outraged. They call religion irrational, and it is irrational because it is unscientific. However, what is it to practice the scientific method, but to first assume without justification the reliability of sensation and induction, and then to commit the logical fallacy of asserting the consequent over and over again? The method amounts to nothing more than a systematic irrationalism. Logic has never been the forte of science. It has its uses, but to discover the truth about reality is not one of them.¹

God, the Bible, and thus Christianity, are free from the hypocrisy of science and false religions. This book comes right out and tell you that if you attempt an independent investigation for truth, independent from divine revelation, then you will be misled and arrive at a false conclusion. The reason for this is that one can never conduct an

¹ See Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions and Presuppositional Confrontations*.

investigation for truth independently from any principles. Since Christianity is the truth, to perform an investigation for truth independently of it necessarily means that the investigation must adopt a false starting point. In other words, if you attempt an investigation *for truth* that is independent *from truth*, then your investigation departs from truth at the very beginning, and there is no way that you will arrive at truth when you start out by running away from it. In bringing them to faith in Christ, God saves his elect from their initial intellectual waywardness.

The Bible is bold and honest. It tells you that if you disagree with anything in it, then you are wrong, and God will hold you accountable for your false belief and the false conduct that follows from it. It does not pretend to grant you the right to oppose or debate it. You must agree with it, believe it, and obey it. It does not respect private values and private opinions, as if we are each our own god. It ignores those things that we would consider our rights when we are dealing with our fellow human beings. This is because when we are dealing with the Bible, we are not dealing with other human beings, but with God himself. Even the rights that we have when dealing with other human beings must come from the Bible itself, since God is the ruler of us all, and he is the one who defines the proper relationship between his creatures.

By this book, God dictates to every aspect of human life. It tells us about earning, saving, and spending our money. It tells us how and what to teach our children. It tells us what kind of people we may befriend, trust, and marry. It assigns social roles, including those that pertain to age, rank, gender, and spiritual knowledge and maturity. It regulates what some consider the most private matters, such as human sexuality. Many people think that sexuality is their own business, but the Bible prescribes exact instructions and precepts on the subject, now exhorting and commanding, now forbidding and condemning. It announces principles concerning alcohol consumption, and it makes a sin out of gluttony. Then, it contains commandments even regarding our thoughts and motives, so that not only is it sinful to steal, but it is also sinful to covet. Because this book contains the whole will of God for mankind, it also represents everything that spiritual rebels hate.

Human government must also bow to the Bible's authority. Although I agree with those who affirm that the United States Constitution is meant to protect the church from the state, rather than to require the state to isolate and discriminate against the church, this is not our present concern. In discussing the proper function and authority of government, we must remember that what is American is not necessarily Christian, and that there are many other countries in the world and throughout history whose laws are different from those of the United States.

So our first concern should not be the proper interpretation of American law, or even the views of the nation's founders, as if we should follow them even if they had been atheists, deists, or even Muslims and Buddhists! No, when it comes to thinking about human government, our first concern should be the proper understanding of Scripture on the topic. What we come up with from this perspective would apply to every country in every period of human history.

To begin, any human government should be established "by God's authority, for God's glory," and not "by the people, for the people." This is not to overturn the foundation of American government or the philosophy of democracy. Let me say two things about this to clarify.

First, the ideal human government is not democracy, but divine dictatorship – that is, to have Jesus Christ as the king of all. Dictatorship is in principle the most efficient form of government, but its success depends on the worth, ability, and character of the dictator. Only Jesus Christ deserves this level of exaltation, and only he can wield such power justly and wisely. His government would require no advisors, no inefficient political procedures, and no balance of power. And there would be no corruption, no injustice, no mistakes, and no failure.

Of course, God has always ruled the universe, and all things proceed according to his will. But our present discussion relates not to the ultimate reference point, but to a subordinate one, for we are considering *human* government only. And on this level, God has not given us divine dictatorship as a system of human government. Until heaven, there will be no government in which those who hold power are completely sinless and selfless, and in which all the precepts of God are perfectly followed. So to admit that ours is not an ideal system of government does not necessarily mean that it deserves to be overturned, and still less does it mean that we should adopt another form of government, such as *human* dictatorship.

Second, the principle of "by the people, for the people" is indeed acceptable and perhaps even preferable, but only when considered in a relative sense, that is, not relative to divine rule, but to a subordinate reference point. In other words, here we temporarily exclude the creator-creature relationship from our thinking, and instead consider only the relationships between men.

But what is relative is subordinate, so that it cannot be the *ultimate* foundation for government. Rather, since God is the ultimate reference point for all of reality, we cannot truly and finally exclude him from any aspect of our thinking, and thus he must also be the ultimate reference point for human government. Therefore, "by God's authority, for God's glory" must be the Christian philosophy of human government. Temporary compromises aside, divine authority and revealed precepts must make up the starting point of our thinking.

In the United States, the argument is often over the so-called "separation of church and state." The legitimacy of the phrase itself is in question, as the Constitution does not in fact include or assert it. But as mentioned, the Constitution is not the Bible. It has no necessary place in a discussion on the Bible's teaching on the government, unless the discussion has to do with whether the Constitution is biblical. Right now we are thinking about human government – *all* human government, and not just the United States.

We do need to consider the right relationship between the church and the state, and whether there should be a "separation" between them in any sense. On this we can say

that the church and the state are two distinct institutions established by God to serve different functions. They are "separate" in the sense that the authority given to one is not to be exercised by the other. For example, the church is not to perform executions, and the state is not to excommunicate people from the church.

Here is the point where some people's thinking become confused. They seem to think that just because the state is "separate" from the church in the sense specified above, it is therefore to set itself up as altogether secular, but this is incorrect. Although the state is to be distinguished from the church, we must remember that the church is not God, and the church is not the Bible. The proper view is that even in situations where the church is not under the state, and where the state is not under the church, both institutions remain under God and the Bible.

God is the ruler over every person and every institution, not just the believer and the church. And since the Bible is his revelation, it carries the same authority over every person and every institution. Therefore, every human government must submit and operate under the Bible, and any deviation from it constitutes sinful rebellion against divine authority. The state is not the church, but it is not morally permitted to be secular, either. We must remember that the government is not an empty or impersonal entity, but it is made up of people, whether they are kings, judges, law enforcement officers, or elected representatives. And as people, each one of them are required to believe the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and to obey all his teachings *at all times*, including the times when they are enacting laws and performing their public functions.

This is the only rational and defensible foundation for formulating and enforcing the laws that regulate society. On this foundation, for example, we can affirm that the state is permitted to condemn and execute murderers. On the other hand, if the state is not under the Bible's immediate authority, then there is no final argument forbidding it to ignore murderers, or even to pass laws that *encourage* murder. The same applies to things like rape, theft, perjury, and so on.

But if the Bible is the immediate authority directly governing the state's laws and decisions, then the state must also condemn things like blasphemy, adultery, and homosexuality, rather than to pride itself in granting its citizens the freedom to commit these abominations. However, because human society has not been operating under this principle, it has passed laws that open the floodgate to mass murder (as in abortion), that endorse rampant sodomy, that consider adultery as a private affair between consenting adults, and that grant divorce as a right to be freely exercised.

And those places that have blasphemy laws now consider them archaic and no longer enforce them. But as Calvin writes, the office of the magistrates must attend to "both Tables of the Law," and it is "folly" to "neglect the concern for God and...give attention only to rendering justice among men. As if God appointed rulers in his name to decide earthly controversies but overlooked what was of far greater importance – that he himself should be purely worshiped according to the prescription of his law."²

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.20.9.

Some Christians have no problem thinking that a nation should be founded on the so-called second table of the Law, but somehow think that the first table should be left out. But the first table is the foundation for the second, that is to say, the fear of God is the only proper foundation for right relationships among men. To leave out the first is to destroy the second, or perhaps worse, it is to place the second table of divine commands on a humanistic foundation. Such a monster of a legal system cannot stand, and will inevitably slide into greater and greater injustice and moral laxity.

Some Christians separate the state from religion altogether, but at the same time attempt to argue that the state should adopt their biblical values. From what they have learned from Scripture, they realize what the law should be in order for it to be just and righteous, but then they try to argue for it after they have already detached the debate from the very reason why they knew what the law should be in the first place. So not only has their thinking become confused, their argument weak, and their task impossible, but they in fact end up with a position that is less than biblical.

Can you imagine Jesus Christ mandating that both creation and evolution should be taught in public schools? The fact that the Bible is not *the* textbook by which all others are judged, and that an explicit and exclusive Christianity is not taught in public schools is a crime against God, and that evolution is not outright refuted and condemned represents blatant national rebellion and apostasy. To urge that creation should be taught in public schools *in addition* to evolution is already a compromise.³ It might be a necessary one given our present situation, if we can even obtain this, but it would be wrong to affirm it in principle as well, for in principle, evolution should be banned altogether on the grounds that it constitutes a conspiracy to deceive the public.

Remember that I am not talking about what is actually possible and legitimate on the basis of American law, but I am talking about what things should be from the Bible's perspective, that is, the ideal situation. Meanwhile, we must work with the existing laws in each society to achieve results that are most in accord with biblical precepts, while praying that the laws will change for the better in time. This will come only as a result of a fundamental shift in the spiritual climate of the nation, as the Spirit makes our preaching effective and fruitful. In any case, in working with what is possible at the present, we must not forget the ideal, which is that, even if one does not come under the other's jurisdiction, both institutions should function directly under the Bible's divine authority.

This returns us to the point that I am making, as my focus is not in fact on political theory. Rather, our discussion concerns the Bible's relationship with mankind, and the point is that since the Bible is the revealed portion of God's mind, and no person is separate from his own mind, the Bible therefore carries God's very authority, so that when it comes to knowing the will of God, the two are to be identified. God has ordained this book to rule over mankind. It follows that no person and no institution can remain guiltless that deviates from the Bible's teachings.

³ I am referring to teaching creation directly from the Bible, not creation "science."

Indeed, every institution consists of *people* whom God holds accountable, so whether we are talking about individuals, the church, or the state, we are still talking about people who are required to believe and obey all of God's precepts all the time, and in whatever capacity they are functioning. You cannot preach like a Christian and then vote like an atheist. If you do, you are probably just an atheist. You cannot rally against abortion, and then support a law that grants unbiblical rights to homosexuals, regardless of whether you think it is the American thing to do. God will not hold you guiltless just because you are dealing with matters of the state. He might just "separate" you from the church altogether and send you to hell. There you can sort out your politics.

So God judges by the Bible. Because the Bible maintains the above relationship with mankind, and because it is the revelation of divine commands and precepts, it is the reference point by which God will judge every person. To think through this clearly, we must again emphasize that because the Bible (or the incorporeal Word of God) is the revelation of a portion of God's mind, and the mind of a person *is* the person, there is no difference between the authority of the Bible and the authority of God, and in our present context, there is no difference between the Bible as the reference point and God as the reference point.

It is God who sets the standard. To disbelieve and disobey God is sin, and to believe and obey him is righteousness. Since there is no difference between the Bible (the incorporeal Word of God) and God, it follows that a person's attitude and reaction toward the Bible is to be taken as his exact attitude and reaction toward God. This means that no one can obey God and disobey the Bible. And no one can claim to love God more than he loves the Bible. Anyone who disbelieves any part of the Bible calls God a liar.

Whatever the Bible says is what God says. If not for unbelief, this statement would be unnecessary and redundant, for all it means is that what God says is what God says. Now, God is the one who judges and the one who damns. Therefore, it necessarily follows that it is the Bible that judges and the Bible that damns. God damns to hell whomever the Bible damns to hell. There is no difference.

Thus we should never hesitate to take a decisive position regarding the nature and fate of a type of person, a belief, or an action that the Bible has addressed. We should never use the excuse, "Only God knows." No, *we* know as well, because God has revealed his thinking on the subject to us. Non-Christians will go to hell. Homosexuals will suffer everlasting hellfire. Feminism is of the devil. Greed leads to perdition. Liars will be exposed and punished. Oppressors will be destroyed by divine wrath. We *know* all of these things.

To play humble and non-judgmental when God has already revealed to us his verdict is to defy him to his face. One professing Christian was unwilling to say that Mormons will go to hell because "only God could make such a decision." What an insult to God! Suppose I tell you that I enjoy beef but that I detest pork, and then you turn around and tell someone, "I do not know what to bring Vincent. Only he can tell us what he likes." Right,

and I just told you, but you had so little respect for me that it is as if you either paid no attention to me, or you ignored what I said. And it is as if this professing believer never read the Bible, or else she disregarded what she read. As for me, I *know* that true Mormons, Muslims, Catholics, Hindus, Buddhists, and all who reject Jesus Christ will go to hell. God has spoken, and I dare not pretend that nothing happened.

Then, God saves by the Bible. We know that he judges by the Bible, and by it all men are found to be sinners and rebels against God, and so the Bible condemns all men to an everlasting fiery hell. But it also reveals the only way to salvation, and that is through faith in Jesus Christ.

John 5:39-40 says, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life." These verses have been misinterpreted by some people, especially the anti-intellectual and anti-doctrinal type, to teach the opposite of what they assert. It is alleged that here Jesus refutes the error of looking to a book rather than to a person. According to this view, the Bible is not to be our direct object of belief, but it is only a pointer to the person of Christ, who is to be the true object of faith. The Pharisees err in holding the Bible in such high esteem that they embrace the book but reject the person.

However, this is not what Jesus says at all. He states that the people think that they could possess eternal life by a diligent study of Scripture, but that they reject the very thing that the Scripture testifies about. In other words, it is not that the people esteem the Bible too much, but the very opposite is true – they have no respect for what the Bible teaches. Their reverence for Scripture is a mere pretense. In fact, Jesus repeatedly accuses them for doing this. As he says elsewhere, "You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men" (Mark 7:8). The Pharisees err in studying the Bible *but* at the same time refusing to take it seriously, or to believe and obey it. This is their damnation, and this is what damns many people today.

So although it may sound pious to some people, it is at least misleading to say, "We are not saved by believing a book, but by believing a person." To say this about the Bible would be like saying, "We are not saved by believing the words of Christ, but by believing the person of Christ," as if the words of Christ can be separated from the person of Christ in such a manner, and as if we can know the person without the words. If you believe the words, you believe the person, and vice versa. But without the words, or without the contents about the person to go with the person, there is really no "person" for you to believe.

So we are indeed saved by faith in Christ, but it is only through the Bible that we receive an infallible revelation from and about Christ. Therefore, in this sense, we are indeed saved by believing a book, *this* book, for there is no difference between believing the book and believing the person. As long as we do not separate the revelation of Christ from the person of Christ, since these cannot really be separated, then we are indeed saved by the Bible, and in it we find eternal life.

It follows that just as a person's eternal destiny is determined by his attitude and reaction to Christ, his eternal destiny is determined by his attitude and reaction to the Bible. No one who rejects the Bible can accept Christ at the same time, since it is the Bible that shows us Christ. Therefore, no one who rejects the Bible can be a Christian, or can be saved, so that everyone who rejects the Bible also rejects Christ, making his damnation sure.

Paul writes, "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe" (1 Corinthians 1:21). Man cannot know God by his own wisdom and power, but only by God's self-disclosure, which he delivered through the prophets and the apostles. There is no salvation outside of the Bible because there is no way to know God or his way to salvation outside of the writings of the prophets and the apostles.

Thus God rules, judges, and saves by the Bible, or by a book. Unbelievers think that this is foolishness. They think so not because the ways of God are in fact foolish, but because these unbelievers themselves are foolish. Their minds are so feeble and blinded that they cannot perceive or understand true wisdom. As Paul writes, "Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a 'fool' so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: 'He catches the wise in their craftiness'; and again, 'The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile'" (1 Corinthians 3:18-20).

Unbelievers are experts at self-approval. They invent their own standards, and then they use these standards to judge themselves wise. But to be found wise in this manner is a meaningless honor. Let such a person become what he would consider a "fool" by these false standards. Paul says, "The wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight." When we examine the unbelievers and their philosophies from the perspective of the divine mind, we perceive that they are foolishness. To put it simply, the unbelievers consider themselves smart only because they have invented their own standards, and then they use these standards to measure themselves. By this method, even a dwarf can look like a giant. Non-Christians are just a bunch of very stupid people calling one another smart, but when we examine them according to true wisdom, we immediately see them for the fools that they are.

They ridicule us for taking orders from a book that was written thousands of years ago, as if truth changes with time. Of course, for one to suggest that a book produced so long ago must therefore contain numerous errors is to condemn all that he claims to know now. He is telling us that, even by his own standard, we should not take anything that he says seriously, since in a few years or more, even some of his central beliefs and most tightly held convictions will be disproved. But whereas the unbelievers have yet to refute anything that the Bible says, we can refute everything that they believe in even now. Knowledge never progresses, that is, if knowledge is what you start with. But empty speculation "advances" everyday, and this is the essence of the history of all the natural sciences, human philosophies, and non-Christian religions.

So the Bible is a book, but it is not like any other book. It is God's mind, God's word, God's voice, and therefore it possesses supreme value and ultimate authority. In light of this, we are amazed that God has entrusted this book to us, both to learn from it and to preach from it. He could have chosen to declare his word to mankind by himself, or he could have ordered the angels to perform the task. Instead, he allows us to handle this sacred book, pours out his Spirit upon us, and makes mere men his "fellow workers" (1 Corinthians 3:9).

Having laid the foundation concerning the Bible's relationship to us and its rightful place in society, now we turn to consider how God uses it to speak to men through men as instruments. Needless to say, this is a large subject on which many books have been written, but I have a specific purpose, and with it, several basic points that I would like to cover. I will convey only these and no more in what follows.

In Nehemiah 8, there is a description of what amounts to a spiritual revival or awakening among God's people. I urge you to read at least the entire chapter on your own. Right now we have time to read only those statements that are especially relevant to our discussion:

So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion....Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

The Levites...instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.

Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

These people were turning back from years of spiritual neglect and apostasy. Something about them had changed, and it was as if they were turning from one extreme to another. Whereas they used to be neglectful, licentious, self-centered, now they were eager to hear from God. Ezra read "from daybreak till noon," and they paid attention the entire time. Later in 9:3, it is said that the Law was read "for a quarter of the day," and then the people spent "*another* quarter in confession and in worshipping the LORD their God." Today people consider themselves dedicated Christians if they would spend an hour a week at church. The same people would probably think that only fanatics would spend several hours in hearing, in confession, and in worship.

It is true that not every church gathering must last for half a day. These people had long neglected the Law, and they were especially eager to learn all that they had missed. They were trying to do a thorough job of returning to God in their beliefs and practices, and thus it was natural for these initial meetings to last for so long. However, this certainly did not mean that subsequent gatherings ought to have been much shorter, or that they could not spend the whole day afterward in the Law and in worship as the need and desire arose.

When I first started preaching, I used to speak for forty-five minutes to two hours each time, and I would use up to forty texts in each message. Once I preached on "Trinity vs. Oneness" and used more than eighty passages. This approach is occasionally appropriate, and sometimes even necessary. Some congregations require a complete overhaul in their belief systems and a general knowledge of many biblical passages. This is one way to meet such a need.

However, it has its problems, as people often cannot sustain their attention for such a long duration without interruption, and using so many passages means that almost all of them would fail to receive detailed treatment. In my case, I did it partly because I believed the people needed it, but also partly because I did not know better, and tried to fit everything I knew on the subject into one session. Looking back, I realize that it was too much for them – they could not endure it, especially when there were small children in the audience!

Whether this is the right approach depends on several factors, such as the nature of the listeners and the amount of time (in terms of weeks, months, and years) that the minister has to work with them. This probably should not be the primary approach for a preacher who has access to the same group of listeners for long periods of time. Even if he were to preach for two hours, he should structure the presentation clearly, and usually select fewer number of passages, but expound them in some detail.

Strict rules are unhelpful, but if a preacher would spend thirty minutes to an hour expounding on one to three passages every Sunday, a healthy congregation can be developed over the long run. Anything less than twenty-fives minutes is probably too short for most Sunday sermons, unless the preaching is at the same time concise, deep, and explosive, or unless the church holds several meetings a week with good attendance

from the people. A pivotal factor, of course, is in how skillfully the preacher expounds and applies the biblical passages.

Nevertheless, if a shorter approach is taken, the members should consume supplemental materials throughout the week. This is true even if the Sunday sermons are much longer and detailed, but it is especially needed when they are rather short and simple. The church can help supply these in various ways, perhaps through suggested readings, prayer meetings, and Bible classes. The leadership should realize that some congregations take "church" very seriously, making it an integral aspect of their lives, so that they even have daily meetings. I think all congregations should strive toward this, but the least they can do is to have two or three meetings a week.

At any rate, it is good for believers to develop greater interest in preaching and zeal in worship. Endurance will naturally increase. Where it has been established as a matter of habit and culture, as with many congregations in times past, extended gatherings are the norm. And where there is revival and awakening, the people even yearn to have them daily.

Here we find the basic model of the ministry of the word, or the two elements of biblical preaching. First, the preacher reads from the Bible. Then, he gives the exposition and application of the verses that he has read, just as the Levites were "making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read." Likewise, Paul instructs Timothy, "Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching" (1 Timothy 4:13).

Whether the preaching lasts for five minutes or five hours, this is to be the basic and usual pattern. There are a number of examples from the Bible to illustrate this. We will select one from the ministry of Jesus:

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:16-21)

We are to build all our ministry efforts on this model of Scripture reading and exposition. This applies not only to the Sunday sermons, but to all aspects of Christian outreach such as discipleship, evangelism, and even parenting.

In cases where the formal structure of a sermon is either unnatural or undesirable, these two elements of Scripture reading and exposition are still usually present. We may illustrate this from Philip's encounter with the eunuch:

Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked.

"How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth."

The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. (Acts 8:30-35)

The incident involves a conversation and not a formal sermon, which would be a monologue. It is the eunuch who provides the text for the occasion, and it is Philip who then offers the exposition and application. But note that the two elements of Scripture reading and exposition are still present. Thus this is also the model for individual or small-scale outreach.

Incidentally, the passage also illustrates the need for exposition. As our reading of Nehemiah 8 also shows, many people will not understand what a biblical passage means without someone explaining it to them. Of course, as they sit under the ministry of an expositor, they will most likely grow in their ability to understand the Bible for themselves. Even in this instance, we can be certain that as a byproduct of Philip's exposition on Isaiah, many other passages have opened up for the eunuch that were previously ambiguous to him.

The so-called "expository" method is often an excellent way to present the teaching of Scripture. However, the "read and expound" approach should not be identified with or restricted to the expository method in its approach to the text or the structure of its presentation. With all its potential pitfalls, topical sermons can easily adopt the "read and expound" approach, and even the hated "proof-texting" method is used in Scripture more frequently than many homileticians care to admit. But of course, it should go without

saying that when you give a proof-text for something, the text better be a proof for whatever you are asserting.

The sermons and discourses that we find in the Bible often do not conform to what is called the expository method. Some principles are never violated, but some of the things that preaching textbooks prescribe, in terms how best to employ a biblical passage or to structure a sermon, are often not followed by Scripture itself.

For this reason, there are at least two dangers in adopting and approving the expository method *alone*. First, a preacher who does this has, without good reason, limited himself to use only one approach when there might be several others that will help him better communicate his points when it comes to certain texts and topics. Second, it induces the listeners to despise sermons and discourses that are not strictly expository, but that are nevertheless totally scriptural and legitimate in both their contents and methods. Even worse, some who have been taught that only the expository method is acceptable may become confused over those portions of Scripture where it is clearly using some other method to handle biblical passages, and this in turn might cast doubt in their minds regarding the reliability and competence of the biblical characters themselves.

Just so there is no misunderstanding, I affirm that every sermon must be biblical in its contents – it must completely agree with the Bible, and every biblical passage must be interpreted in context. In my own preaching and writing, I have – sometimes strictly, sometimes loosely – employed the expository method perhaps more than any other. But I disagree that to be biblical necessarily implies that one must always employ what is called the expository method. We must be careful lest an excellent option becomes a requirement without biblical warrant. There is to be absolute rigidity in faithfulness to Scripture, but some flexibility when it comes to presentation.

Then, let us say a word about the proper reaction to biblical preaching. Ministers will appreciate what I am about to say. Some people would come up to me after a sermon and say, "That was wonderful" or "I really enjoyed that." When I hear this I would always think to myself, and on occasions I have said aloud, "But did you hear what I said? Do you understand it? Are you going to do it?"

One of the most disappointing responses that a sincere preacher can get is for a listener to say nothing more than that he "enjoyed" that "wonderful" sermon he has just heard. I could not care less about whether the sermon was wonderful or whether he enjoyed it. I would much prefer a response appropriate to the message, whether it is prayerful silence, tearful repentance, joyful celebration, rekindled love, or renewed determination.

The people were weeping who heard Ezra read from the Law of God. They could perceive the difference between God's requirements and their actual practice. Unlike many churchgoers today, they were not there as sermon connoisseurs, to critique and to rate what was being said. They were not saying, "That was too long," "He did not fully develop the second point," "An illustration would have helped!" or even, "I give that a four out of five." No, they were pricked to the heart by what they heard, and repented

with tears, confessing their sins. This was followed by actual obedience and a change in lifestyle.

God's people ought to be humbled, encouraged, and stirred up by biblical preaching. As the disciples said, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32). If this never occurs in our listeners, then it is either because our preaching is seriously deficient, almost completely void of anything biblical, or it is because there is no spiritual life in the people, so that there is nothing to stir up and nothing to awaken. Nevertheless, as the Spirit wills, biblical preaching can give life even to dead bones and put new flesh upon them. And this brings us to the next section of our discussion.

The decisive factor in the effectiveness of preaching is the sovereign action of the Holy Spirit. Although God uses men as instruments to proclaim his word, they lack the ability to directly transform the hearts of the listeners. On the other hand, the Spirit exercises active and direct control over the minds of all men, causing thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and motives in them according to his own will. The Bible is the usual instrument – the intellectual content that he works with as he controls men's hearts – that he uses to convert and to sanctify, but also to harden, the hearts of men. And men are the usual instruments by which he propagates the contents of the Bible.

Paul realized that men were "only servants, through whom you came to believe" (1 Corinthians 3:5). Paul planted, Apollos watered – they could not do more than that – but "God made it grow" (v. 6). This knowledge was a controlling factor in Paul's preaching ministry. It caused him to depend on the Spirit for effectiveness, and he rejoiced when the Spirit came in power as he preached: "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction" (1 Thessalonians 1:4-5).

In a way, all that I have said so far is to lead to this point, which is often acknowledged on paper but far too often neglected in practice. That is, the mature minister or believer is marked by his ability to handle the Bible with wisdom and skill, but this must include a genuine dependence on the Holy Spirit to work with the Scripture to render it effective. He knows his role. He knows what he must do, but he also realizes that there are some things he must not even try to do – instead, he must count on God's Spirit to make them happen.

A non-Christian businessman once met with a preacher in a hotel lobby. The meeting was arranged by a mutual friend, which was probably the only reason he agreed to it. Even then, he gave the preacher only several minutes, perhaps fewer than ten. Throughout their short conversation, the preacher repeatedly said to him, "The way of transgressors is hard." This is half of a verse from Proverbs (13:15, KJV). As he got up to leave, the preacher said it again.

Some time after that, he ran into this preacher again at a conference of some sort. And he told the preacher, "After we spoke, I could not remember anything else that you said

except, 'The way of transgressors is hard.' And it kept on coming back to me. I was tossing and turning on my bed that night. That statement was repeating itself over and over again in my mind. I woke up the next morning, and it was as if those words were standing at the end of my bed, looking straight at me and saying, 'The way of transgressors is hard.' I went to work, and it was as if that statement was speaking to me from everywhere I looked: 'The way of transgressors is hard.' I was about to do something that I knew was wrong, and that verse came to my mind: 'The way of transgressors is hard.' That verse haunted me. It almost drove me insane. And then finally I realized...finally it hit me – the way of transgressors *is* hard! I knelt by my bed in the hotel room, repented of my sins, and received salvation through Jesus Christ."

The preacher replied, "Let me tell you my end of the story. I was disappointed that you did not give me an opportunity to say all that I wanted to say. But after you left, I prayed, 'Lord, I did not have time to say all that I wanted to this man, but still, I have preached your word to him, and you said that your word will not return to you void. Now I pray that you will use what I said to him and pursue him with it. Lord, work on his heart, even haunt him day and night, and let your will be done in him.' Evidently, God was faithful to honor his word and perform exactly what I asked of him."

Spurgeon said, "I have noticed, that if ever we have a conversion at any time, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, the conversion is rather traceable to the text, or to some Scripture quoted in the sermon, than to any trite or original saying by the preacher" (sermon no. 172). In our example, of course the preacher told the businessman about the way of salvation through Jesus Christ, but the key that turned everything around was nothing more than half a verse from Proverbs. It was *delivered* to the man by a man, but it was *driven* into his heart by the Holy Spirit.

Elsewhere Spurgeon mentioned a man who was converted by an Old Testament genealogy in which the biblical passage repeated the words, "and he died...and he died...and he died." The man suddenly realized his mortality, that one day *he* would die like the rest, and after that he would either be caught up to heaven or thrown into hell. Right away he was converted and received salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

As with the conversion of the eunuch in Acts 8, sometimes human instruments can be quite involved in the process. In that instance, Philip ran up to join the chariot and then spent some time expounding Christ to him from the Scripture. But sometimes it pleases God to reduce or even minimize the role of human instruments.

A certain young man had spent years seeking for spiritual truth and reality. He had heard hundreds of hours of sermons, and read not a small stack of books. But his spirit remained lost and dead. Then, one day he was reading a book and came across a Bible quotation: "On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, 'If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him'" (John 7:37-38). Immediately he broke down and wept, and was converted. What made the difference? He wanted this living water, and he sought it daily for many years. By God's design, he had

been made to seek, but what he was seeking eluded him. Then, *suddenly*, the Spirit opened his eyes, and what years of seeking could not produce was given to him in an instant.

The role of the human instruments is sometimes reduced or minimized, but this cannot be said of the Spirit, whose work is always necessary and decisive. William Barclay wrote about the story of Signor Antonio from Minas, Brazil, who bought a New Testament so that he could burn it. "He went home and found the fire was out. Deliberately he lit it. He flung the New Testament on it. It would not burn. He opened out the pages to make it burn more easily. It opened at the Sermon on the Mount. He glanced at it as he consigned it to the flames. His mind was caught; he took it back. He read on, forgetful of time, through the hours of the night, and just as the dawn was breaking, he stood up and declared, 'I believe.'"⁴

Paul calls the word of God "the sword of the Spirit." It is placed into the hands of Christians, and as we mentioned, this sword can be used with more or less wisdom and skill. This is why he exhorts Timothy, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). Then again, sometimes the role of the human instruments is reduced or minimized, and the Spirit of God wields the sword all by himself, breaking all resistance, and driving it deep into the hearts of men.

Again, Barclay writes, "Vincente Quiroga of Chile found a few pages of a book washed up on the seashore by a tidal wave following an earthquake. He read them and never rested until he obtained the rest of the Bible. Not only did he become a Christian; he devoted the rest of his life to the distribution of the Scriptures in the forgotten villages of northern Chile."⁵

In no way am I urging us to neglect our role in the ministry of the word, since we must be diligent in developing our skill in handling Scripture (2 Timothy 2:15), so that we can ably deal with whomever we encounter, "as the Lord has assigned to each his task" (1 Corinthians 3:5). What I am urging is a stronger confidence in the Bible and a genuine dependence on the Spirit to work powerfully and effectively, to produce conversion in the elect and sanctification in the believers, at times in conjunction with our exposition, and at times almost completely apart from it.

Based on what we have said about the Bible, the preacher, and the Spirit, let us now consider some applications.

God has given to the Bible a central role in human history. He rules by it. He judges by it. He saves by it. And his Spirit works with it to summon the elect to faith, to mature the saints, and to harden the reprobates. By its various effects, it even influences the fate of nations. It follows that the Bible must occupy a place in our ministry that is consistent

⁴ William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, Revised Edition* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1975), p. 200-201.

⁵ *Ibid.*

with the authority and worth that God has ascribed to it. What is its authority? What is its worth? If we have a proper view of this book, then when we refer to "the Bible," it is only a shorthand for the revealed portion of the divine mind. From this perspective, the Bible carries the very authority of God and the very worth of God.

The negative application is that we are to allow nothing that would compromise or substitute the place of the Bible in our ministry. The Bible can shatter rocks, scatter demons, and call down fire from heaven, and yet some of us think that we need cheap gimmicks to reach people. What an insult it is to God to think that the Bible is more effective when it is presented by puppets, through cartoons, novels, and movies, or other devices produced by human creativity.

Spurgeon says to ministers, "If you are not conscious of a supernatural power and presence with the Word of the Lord, let it alone....Now, if your gospel has not the power of the Holy Ghost in it, you cannot preach it with confidence, and you are tempted to have a performance in the schoolroom to allure the people, whom Christ crucified does not draw. If you are depending on sing-song, and fiddles, and semi-theatricals, you are disgracing the religion which you pretend to honour."⁶

This is what I am talking about. There is power in the Word. There is power in the Spirit. And it is this divine power that I count on when I minister, whether I am preaching, writing, or counseling. It is futile for me to enforce it with the flesh. This dependence on divine power removes any pressure on me to produce that which man can never accomplish in the first place. We are to proclaim, persuade, and plead, then refute, rebuke, and remind. And that is enough. But not everyone will believe – some are foreordained by God for destruction.

Think with me how you have been using the Bible – or rather, how you have not been using it. Sometimes we have replaced the Bible with something else without being aware of it. Perhaps you have debated evolution with a friend on several occasions, trying to convince him of its error. But now that you think of it, you have dealt with him entirely on the basis of science, using scientific arguments alone. Suppose he now continues to think about his discussion with you, and even comes to the conclusion that evolution is false. Now what is he supposed to believe? You have not told him anything. You have only refuted inferior human speculation with superior human speculation.

That is the true nature of science – mere human speculation, and you have brought in something so infinitely inferior to divine revelation in an attempt to reinforce the Bible. Do we care if the idiot approves of the genius? What does it matter if the villain vouches for the saint? And so what if the irrational vindicates the rational? Even if the testimony of the former is not completely useless, let us hear more from the latter. A ministry becomes powerless if in its very attempt to vindicate Scripture, it is at the same time distracted from proclaiming it.

⁶ C. H. Spurgeon, *An All-Round Ministry* (Banner of Truth), p. 389.

The Bible is sufficient to both assert and defend its own teachings. It is a mighty sword, and we must develop the skill to wield it. However, most people must first develop a confidence in it before they would even consider it their primary weapon, let alone their exclusive one. Only then will they stop depending on substitutes and alternatives, and stop looking at the Bible as something helpless that they must desperately protect by extra-biblical methods. Once they learn to respect the Bible as what it is, they will begin to see it as the divine weapon by which all oppositions are slain.

On the positive side, a proper understanding of the Bible's authority, power, and its all-important role in human history warns us not to become weary but to persist in its frequent and pervasive propagation. It admonishes us to become more deliberate in our use of the Bible, and to give it the supreme place in situations where we have neglected its role and potential.

Some people tell me that they wish to do more in terms of evangelism, but they lack skill in defending the faith and so they strive to become better equipped. Their desire to improve is commendable, but if even half a verse from Proverbs can convert a worldly businessman who had previously shown no interest in religion, then certainly no believer should feel powerless, or as if he has no strong message that he can declare to the sinner. Of course, as one's skill improves, he more easily brings to the surface the force that is inherent in divine revelation, so that its truth becomes more readily obvious. But even then, it is still the Spirit who must drive it deep into the hearer. But with the Spirit, even half a verse of Scripture inadvertently overheard by an unbeliever can crush his obstinacy and convert his soul.

It would be impossible to mention every aspect of our life and ministry, but let us consider only one more. And that is, we must be more deliberate and diligent in our use of the Bible in dealing with children. We must not make rigid rules about how we are to do this, but even a verse of Scripture posted on the wall can be used by the Spirit to convict, convert, and sanctify a child. Or it might be something that the Spirit will use to bring the rebellious child back to God many years later.

One preacher mentioned that he was converted by a verse of Scripture written inside the front cover of a Bible given to him by his mother. He had put that Bible away and never read it, but he did read the note his mother wrote. The Spirit reminded him of it one day, and that was sufficient to turn this person back from many years of riotous living. But although God can use even half a verse to accomplish his will, his prescription is total immersion:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on

your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

Dependence on the Spirit entails that we stop trying to enforce the Bible with our flesh. What do I mean by this? To mention one aspect of this, some preachers use a sing-song, whiny, teary, begging voice when they speak. Some lower their voices and try to sound mysterious. Still others are very loud and exuberant for no reason. Besides being artificial and annoying, these attempts at enforcing the divine words of Scripture add nothing to the substance of the message. There is no real power, because there is no dependence on the Holy Spirit, but they are trying to make the hearers respond to the message with these silly devices.

The truth is that when we tell people, "Believe this," *they will not* – unless the Spirit gives them faith. And when we tell people, "Do this" or "Stop that," *they will not* – unless the Spirit grants them repentance and obedience. We deliver the message, but we need the Spirit to cause the proper reaction in the people, and to inject the necessary inner strength into them to perform the things required of them. This is what we are counting on. We will only make matters worse when we try to produce that which only the Spirit can generate.

Perhaps some preachers think that they are supposed to sound like they do in order to exhibit a sense of earnestness. But if this is the intent, then let there be a genuine overflow from the spirit instead of just a demonstration of poor acting. It would be better for the preacher to open up to a passage of Scripture, read it three times, and then send everyone home with a prayer for the Spirit to act, than for him to try to produce spiritual power and effect with his flesh.

Some Christians suffer under persistent doubt, and many struggle with stubborn sins. They need to know that one cannot just take the Scripture's exhortation to believe and produce faith in himself by himself. A person cannot just decide to believe something that he does not in fact believe. Just as we cannot even make our own hair white or black at will (Matthew 5:36), still less can we transform our own hearts at will, including the impossible task of changing our will at will. Likewise, a person does not progress in holiness just because he decides that it should happen. Paul writes, "It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:13). Failing to grasp this point, many people try to manufacture what the Scripture demands by sheer willpower, and then of course they become disappointed and disillusioned.

What is the right way? We must have no confidence in the flesh, but we must expose ourselves to the Bible, immerse ourselves in its words and its teachings, and then pray for the Spirit to render it effective in our lives. The flesh is impotent and counts for nothing. The life and power are in the Scripture and the Spirit. Of course it is right to strive and to struggle, to exert effort in the Christian life. But only the Spirit can change the human heart, including your own. Even a right striving and a fruitful struggling must come from the Holy Spirit. It is he who grants us holy spiritual effort, and then it is he who blesses it in us.