

Sufficient and Profitable

The Authority, Sufficiency, and Utility of Scripture

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
1. AUTHORITY	6
A. BREATHED OUT BY GOD	6
B. CARRIED BY THE SPIRIT	11
2. SUFFICIENCY.....	23
A. SUFFICIENT FOR WHAT?.....	25
B. SUFFICIENT FOR WHOM?.....	28
3. UTILITY	36
A. MODES OF APPLICATION	36
B. SPHERES OF APPLICATION.....	40

2 TIMOTHY 3:14-17

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.¹

INTRODUCTION

This chapter in 2 Timothy begins with Paul's warning: "There will be terrible times in the last days." He proceeds to describe "men of depraved minds" who would "oppose the truth" (v. 8), "evil men" who would "go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived" (v. 13), and those who would "turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths" (4:4).

On the other hand, Paul declares that Timothy should and could be different from these evil people, emphasizing the contrast with three instances of "but you" (3:10, 14, 4:5). To paraphrase, Paul says:

Timothy, trouble is coming. There will be evil people – selfish, treacherous, unholy. They will have a form of godliness but deny its power. They will be always learning but never acknowledge the truth (v. 1-9). **But you**, Timothy, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, and my character (v. 10-11).

These people are imposters, and they will go from bad to worse, deceiving others and being deceived themselves (v. 13). **But you**, Timothy, continue in what you have learned and believed since the beginning, even as your mother and grandmother taught you the sacred Scriptures while you were still an infant (v. 14-15).

These people will not endure sound doctrine. They will gather around themselves teachers who will only say things that they want to hear.

¹ An earlier work, *Preach the Word*, deals with the passage that follows (2 Timothy 4:1-3). The present piece, then, can be considered a prequel. We will be discussing the authority, sufficiency, and utility of Scripture – *Preach the Word* considers the principles of preaching and education, and thus extends and overlaps with the final section. Nevertheless, there will be no deliberate attempt to connect one article with the other.

They will turn away from the truth and turn to myths and fables instead (4:3-4). **But you**, Timothy, even when the times are unfavorable, you must endure hardship, preach the word, and fulfill your ministry (4:5).

These three "but you" instances are more or less obscured by some translations, but are given greater attention in others, such as the NKJ, NCV, GNT, REB, and HCSB. Wuest and Lattimore translate all three instances as "but as for you," which is good. The NLT translates all three instances as "but you," and even begins a new paragraph each time.

An adequate translation should show that Paul is making sharp, consistent, and repeated contrasts between the "man of God"² and the men of evil. Jay Adams translates the three instances as "you, in contrast," "you, however," and "but you." This reflects the meaning and even the contrast that Paul tries to make, but it obscures his consistent language. Thus I would suggest that all three instances should be rendered either "but you" or "but as for you."³

Our passage begins with the second instance of "but you." The contrast is made against "evil men and imposters" who will "go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived" (v. 13). Paul wants Timothy to be different from these people, but to continue in what he has learned and believed. And what he has learned and believed is Scripture.

Thus we will discuss the authority, sufficiency, and utility of Scripture, these being the attributes emphasized in the passage.

Since verse 16 says, "All Scripture is God-breathed," one might think that our emphasis should be "inspiration" instead of authority. Inspiration is certainly in view, but it is mentioned here to provide the foundation for something else, and thus "authority" is appropriate.

The idea of sufficiency is prominent in verse 17. It also broadly represents one emphasis of the passage. Scripture is the sufficient answer against the situations and evil people that Timothy must face, and one who stands firm on sound doctrine is also one who stands in sharp contrast against those who "go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived."

The utility of Scripture is closely related to its sufficiency in our passage. Paul says that Scripture is "useful" or "profitable." It is not only effective, but also adaptable – not that its standard and meaning are flexible, but that its truth can be applied with several different methods with complete rigidity in content but perfect relevance at the same time. Thus we will consider its modes and spheres of application. For this, we will not

² See verse 17, but also 1 Timothy 6:10-11: "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. **But you, man of God**, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness."

³ "You, however" and "you, in contrast" are in fact fine translations. The point is that all three instances should be translated the same way.

limit ourselves this passage, but will take its surrounding verses and even the whole Bible into account.

1. AUTHORITY

Verse 16 asserts the divine inspiration of Scripture, and although it is mentioned as if in passing to introduce another thought, it is nevertheless foundational to the whole purpose of the passage. Without the inspiration of Scripture, the rest would be empty and futile.

We shall begin, then, by considering the meaning of divine inspiration, and how it renders the Scripture sufficient and profitable.

a. Breathed Out by God

Although we are accustomed to affirming the "inspiration" (KJV) of Scripture, the compound word *theopneustos* literally means "God-breathed" (NIV), and since the ending *-tos* indicates a passive meaning, an even more precise translation would be "breathed out by God" (ESV).

The implication is tremendous. Scripture does not contain mere human opinion or even the human interpretation of divine revelation, but it came "right out" of God, so to speak, and thus there is no difference between what Scripture says and what God thinks or what God says. The Scripture *is* what God thinks and what God says.

This being the case, there is no difference between the authority of God and the authority of Scripture. To understand Scripture is to understand the mind and the will of God, and to disobey Scripture is to disobey him. Just as one who stands before God cannot say, "I will obey you, but I will not obey what you say" – since to obey or disobey one is to obey or disobey the other – no one can say, "I will obey God, but not the Bible," for there is no difference.

Some would ridicule us as following a "paper pope," but I would much prefer the seemingly greater insult of following a "paper God," since only then would the insult correspond to the position actually espoused. The answer is that we are not following a *paper* pope or God, but we are following *God*, since again, there is *zero* difference between obeying the Bible and obeying God. Thus the "paper pope" insult is not nearly strong enough. In fact, according to God's sovereign arrangement, to obey the Bible is the only way to obey God. Let our opponents, then, insult us for obeying God, and in doing so condemn their own defiance.

Because the word *theopneustos* means "breathed *out* by God," there is a legitimate objection against translating it as "inspiration." The word "inspiration" comes from the Latin and is used in the Vulgate, and even in the English has the meaning of breathing *in* – the opposite of what is conveyed by *theopneustos*.

The danger is in supposing from this translation that Scripture is a merely human product into which God has breathed in his spirit, or that God merely exerted his influence in the

writing process while the product remained essentially and primarily human in origin. On the other hand, the translation "breathed *out* by God" would hardly allow such a misunderstanding.

The objection is technically correct; however, the misunderstanding does not appear likely or common. Under "inspiration," the idea of "divine influence"⁴ appears as the first definition in *Merriam-Webster*, but the fifth in *Webster's New World*. But even with the latter, the danger that someone would apply the first four definitions before considering the fifth is minimal, for the fifth definition is clearly designated as "*Theol.*" – that is, theological – so that it ought to be the first one considered in such a context.

Due to usage and common understanding, the English word "inspiration" has long become a broad theological term for what the Scripture actually teaches about its own origin, that it is "God-breathed," and thus also infallible, inerrant, and carries absolute authority. For this reason, I would not oppose using the word "inspiration" here in verse 16 because of the possible misunderstanding, since the theological meaning is generally recognized.

However, I would oppose such a translation for the simple reason that it is not truly a translation, but a (correct) theological inference or interpretation of what the verse asserts. That is, even if we agree that the word does not mean "breath in" when used in the theological sense, but broadly refers to what the Scripture teaches about its own divine origin, it is still not what is stated *here* in this verse. Rather, the verse says that Scripture is "God-breathed," and it is from this and other relevant passages that we derive the doctrine of divine *inspiration*.

Paul writes that "*All Scripture* is God-breathed." There is some debate about the correct translation for "All Scripture." Of course, we should always strive for the most precise rendering, but the dangers of other translations for the phrase have sometimes been exaggerated. Whether we translate it "all Scripture" or "every Scripture" makes no essential difference – the former declares the whole of Scripture inspired, and the latter declares every part of Scripture inspired. Either way, all of Scripture and every part of it is God-breathed.

It is true that translations such as "every scripture inspired of God is also profitable" and "all inspired Scripture has its use" greatly weaken the verse, since they seem to allow the possibility that at least some parts of the Bible are not inspired. To translate "whatever is Scripture" similarly cripples the verse as a clear text in support of the plenary inspiration of the Bible.

Even with these potential problems, none of these translations actually *contradict* the divine inspiration of Scripture. Therefore, although the problem is serious, the actual

⁴ Of course, to speak of Scripture as a product of "divine *influence*" is much too weak, unless it is clear that this "influence" is absolute and exhaustive. However, right now the question is not whether the dictionaries provide a precise definition of the biblical doctrine, but whether the word "inspiration" must mean "breathing in," or whether it is easily construed as such in a theological context.

danger is limited. Then, considering the fact that the doctrine of inspiration does not depend on this verse alone, but is attested by a mountain of biblical passages, we must not think that the very truth of inspiration stands or falls on the precise translation of this verse.

Still, some options are better than others, and some attempts are outright distortions. We can offer grammatical arguments showing that "All Scripture" (NIV, ESV) is the most accurate, and we already noted that even to translate "Every Scripture" would not undermine divine inspiration at all.

Although the other options do not contradict inspiration or make it impossible, they should not be considered serious contenders. This is true if for no other reason than that, given the historical and cultural context, and more reliably the Bible's internal evidence, it is impossible for Paul to have in mind the weaker meanings. In fact, the main thrust of the verse is not even to assert the divine inspiration of Scripture, as if Timothy needed to be convinced; rather, Paul merely states the assumption to introduce his subsequent comments and admonitions.

We will not spend any more time on this, since as noted, inspiration is not in danger, and this is sufficient for the point that I am about to make. But there is one more step to take before that.

By "All Scripture," it is certain that Paul is referring to at least the Old Testament, since as a Jew, that was his "Scripture." Also, he has just mentioned "the holy Scriptures" that were taught to Timothy by his Jewish mother and grandmother, which likewise would have been at least the Old Testament. The question is whether he has in mind the New Testament also, or from another perspective, whether what he is saying about "All Scripture" can be directly applied to the New Testament in particular.

Here we will again recall that the inspiration of Scripture, and now the New Testament in particular, does not depend on this verse alone. Jesus says that he would send the apostles the Spirit of truth, who would then guide them into all truth (John 16:13). And Peter writes that ignorant and unstable people distort the letters of Paul, "as they do *the other* Scriptures" (2 Peter 3:15-16). The necessary implication is that Paul's letters were already considered as part of the Scriptures. That is, he says that these people distort Paul's letters, which are Scriptures, as they do *the other* Scriptures.

As for Paul, he was aware that the very words he spoke were "taught by the Spirit" (1 Corinthians 2:13), and not just the general ideas. He introduces himself as an apostle, foreordained and called to be such by God and the Lord Jesus. And he repeatedly defends his identity and authority as an apostle in his writings. He tells the Corinthians to "acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command" (1 Corinthians 14:37). Then, in 1 Timothy 5:18, he prefaces both Deuteronomy 25:4 and Luke 10:7 with the expression, "the Scripture says," effectively calling the Gospel of Luke "Scripture" and ascribing to it the same divine inspiration and authority of Deuteronomy.

It is therefore unreasonable to assume that Paul must refer to only the Old Testament when he says "All Scripture." As Robert Reymond writes, Paul would have been willing to include, and "almost certainly did include, within the technical category of 'all Scripture' the New Testament documents, including his own, as well."⁵ Since the New Testament documents are regarded as inspired and even called "Scripture," we may with complete certainty regard them as "God-breathed." Both the Old Testament and the New Testament are "Scripture," and they make up *one book* that is our Bible. Therefore, there is no problem in regarding the verse as asserting, "The whole Bible is God-breathed." In fact, there is no excuse in thinking otherwise.

Now we have arrived at the point that I would like to make. That is, given that the *whole Bible* is breathed out *by God* – all from a single divine source – there is no reason to regard one part of the Bible as more authoritative than another, or to regard one inspired person speaking in Scripture as more inspired by another.

Indeed, if by inspiration we mean God-breathed, then a text is either inspired or not inspired, and inspired texts are equally God-breathed. Thus Moses is not more reliable than Jeremiah, or David more authoritative than Malachi. God is the source of every part of Scripture, and not Moses, Jeremiah, David, or Malachi. Therefore, there is no difference in the reliability and authority between the various biblical books and their writers.

Here I have in mind the "red-letter Bible" mentality. Some people treat the words of Jesus as if they form a Bible within the Bible, or as if they are especially reliable and authoritative. If they are conscious of doing this at all, they might assume that this is right and good, and that it represents an attitude of special reverence for our Lord. However, given the Bible's own teaching that "*All Scripture is God-breathed*," to *especially* honor the words of Jesus is in fact an implicit denial of the inspiration of Scripture.

Probably more than a few people would find this assertion disturbing. Someone might say, "Is he denying that Jesus is greater than the prophets and the apostles? But Jesus is God, not a mere man. He is greater than Abraham and Solomon, and even David called him Lord." It is true that Jesus is greater than all men, but to even raise this point in *this* context is to betray a tendency toward the error that I am talking about.

In affirming the inspiration of Scripture, there is no place to compare the merits of the individual speakers and writers, since the doctrine of inspiration is that "*All Scripture is God-breathed*," that is, the *whole Bible* comes from *God*. In other words, when we are comparing the words of Jesus to the words of Paul, the fact that Jesus is infinitely greater than Paul is irrelevant. *All Scripture is God-breathed*, so that unless we deny the inspiration of either Jesus or Paul, we are comparing the words of *God* with the words of *God*, so that there is *zero* difference in inspiration and authority. If the words of Paul in the Bible are less authoritative than the words of Jesus, then they are not inspired at all – they are not *God-breathed*.

⁵ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Thomas Nelson, 1998), p. 34.

Sometimes people try to sound clever. Referring to what he considered an astonishing teaching, one preacher said, "If Jesus hadn't said it, I wouldn't have believed it!" He probably did not realize the implication of what he said, but the meaning was that if the same teaching was asserted only by the prophets and the apostles, he would have declared it false. This would imply that he did not believe in the inspiration of Scripture *at all*, at least everything that is not in red. Non-inspired writings can be sometimes right and sometimes wrong, but for a piece of writing to be inspired means that it is always and completely right.

When discussing the topic of divine revelation, even evangelical scholars have said, "The prophets and apostles were inspired by God, and they spoke by the Spirit, but Jesus *was* God himself." The point is true in itself, but again, to even bring up this point here betrays a tendency to think of the words of Jesus in the Bible as superior to the rest of the Bible, which amounts to a denial of biblical inspiration, that *all* Scripture is breathed out by *God*.⁶

This implicit denial of biblical inspiration is in fact present in more people than one would assume, and this might hinder some people from understanding my concern. What could be wrong with giving special honor to the words of Christ? It might seem to them that I am bringing *down* Jesus to the level of the prophets and the apostles. One who thus misconstrues what I am saying still misses the point.

If *all* Scripture is *God*-breathed, then all the writings of the prophets and the apostles already carry *maximum* authority, and the words of Jesus cannot be more authoritative because there is no room for anything higher – *every* part of Scripture carries the very authority of God. In fact, if every part of Scripture is revealed by God, then every part of Scripture is also in this sense the words of Jesus, the second person of the Trinity. And the word of God spoken through the human body of Jesus cannot be superior than the word of God spoken through David or Paul. If an "inspired" document is a "God-breathed" document, then there cannot be degrees of inspiration, but something must either be inspired or not inspired, and if inspired, then it is the very word of God.

Another point that is often missed is that, as long as the issue is inspiration and not the merits of the individuals, we are not even comparing Jesus to the prophets and the apostles, but Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to the other writers of Scripture. Without hesitation, we acknowledge the utter superiority of Christ over all men, but the issue is whether Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were inspired. Since they were, then the documents that they produced, which included the words of Jesus, carry maximum authority, just as the writings of the prophets and the apostles carry maximum authority,

⁶ Hebrews 1:1-2 says, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe." The emphasis here is that *God* spoke to us, only that he did it through the superior person of Christ, and not that the words of Christ were somehow more inspired. If the prophets spoke from *God*, then nothing could be more inspired. Also, our topic is the inspiration and authority of Scripture, but this is not what this passage from Hebrews is addressing. Nothing in the passage indicates that Christ's words were more true or inspired than the prophets, or that the words of the prophets in Scripture had anything less than the authority of God.

and just as any word from God would carry maximum authority. There is no room for one to be superior to another. Since all of them carry the authority of God, none can be any greater or lesser in authority.

We may even concede that, if "inspiration" applied to him at all, it occurred differently in Jesus than in the prophets and the apostles. Among other things, he had no sin whose effects the Spirit must overcome or suspend to ensure the perfect communication of God's mind. And he could speak by his own divine authority in harmony with the Father's will. So the mode of operation was certainly different. Yet the product is the same – infallible and inerrant "God-breathed" words. The point is that to make any distinction in authority between God and Scripture, or Jesus and Scripture, is also to deny the inspiration of Scripture.

Disregarding for now the ramifications of this truth for theology, hermeneutics, and other disciplines, it has immediate relevance to our text. Paul says that all Scripture is God-breathed and is "useful" or "profitable" for the purposes that he enumerates. It follows that we must not consider the words of Jesus in the Bible as more useful or profitable than the words of the inspired human writers in the rest of the Bible.

In fact, an exposition of our text does not strictly require us to mention the human writers at all, or to consider how divine inspiration occurred in them. This is because the word "God-breathed" has no reference whatever to any human role or agency in the production of Scripture. The term emphasizes the God-given nature of Scripture, and that it is directly given by God in terms of content. God wrote on tablets of stone when he gave the Ten Commandments, but the rest of the Bible came from him just as much, so that there is no essential difference than if God had taken up a pen and wrote the whole thing himself without using human writers. The word "God-breathed" forbids us to form a weaker conclusion.

Nevertheless, most portions of Scripture indeed came through inspired human writers rather than by a voice from heaven, by dictation, or by the finger of God, and it is often observed that the various parts of the Bible reflect the different circumstances, backgrounds, and personalities of the inspired writers. Our text does not mention or explain this about the Bible, but calling it God-breathed, it stresses the divinity of the source and the purity of the product. To learn about how God wrote down his thoughts through inspired human writers, and in a way that the Bible can be called God-breathed without qualification, we will have to take a quick detour into another biblical passage.

b. Carried by the Spirit

In explaining the Scripture's true origin and nature, Peter writes, "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:20-21).

This important passage is just as rich as our main text from 2 Timothy, and it would take just as much attention to do it justice. But as this is something of a digression, all the

fascinating details will have to await another time. Right now we will take time to extract not much more than what is needed to address the issue mentioned above – that is, the role of the human writers in the Scripture's formation, or the relationship between the human writers and divine inspiration.

To begin, Peter refers to the "prophecy of Scripture." He could be talking about specific portions of the Old Testament that are narrowly considered prophecies. Even if this is the case, it would still include much more of the Bible than what many people realize, since prophecies do not refer to only predictions, but the term refers to inspired utterances and writings by which God communicates through his agents, whether or not these utterances and writings are predictive in content.

However, it is likely that Peter has in mind something broader, so that by the expression he intends to place emphasis upon the prophetic nature of Scripture (as in "the prophetic word" in v. 19, NASB), that it is a revelation from God. This would not be surprising given the context, since he is combating false teachers and prophets that claim to speak the truth, when they could offer only their own opinions and speculations.

Even if the narrow view is true – although the opposite appears to be the case – the application cannot be limited to only certain portions of Scripture. We have established from Paul that *all* Scripture is inspired, and Peter is here telling us something about how inspiration occurred; therefore, the principle must apply to all of Scripture. Indeed, although Peter is writing against "false teachers" and "false prophets" (2:1), he does not say, "no true prophecy came about by the prophet's own interpretation," but "no prophecy of *Scripture* came about by the prophet's own interpretation." His focus is on the written product.

At first glance, the latter part of verse 20 appears to offer several possible meanings. The various translations and commentaries favor different meanings and perpetuate them.

The Jerusalem Bible translates, "the interpretation of scriptural prophecy is never a matter for the individual," and this has been used to teach the Catholic doctrine that ordinary individuals cannot just pick up the Bible and understand what it says – only the Church can interpret it for them. The Reformers fought against this false doctrine, and defended the right of individuals to read the Bible.

Then, the KJV says, "no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation." This could also be construed as above, but Protestants would tend to think that this is a repudiation of a subjective and relativistic understanding of Scripture. Indeed, much damage has come from the American way of thinking, that every person is entitled to his opinion, and that every person has a right to contribute to a discussion, even in the church. The Bible denies both – every person must affirm what God's word says, and anyone who ignores God's word must himself be ignored (1 Corinthians 14:38).

In many churches, Bible studies are performed by allowing the participants to give their private interpretations of Scripture. They would begin by saying, "I think this means..."

or "To me this means...." Nobody is ever wrong and no view is denounced as heretical, but the moderator would construe all the views presented so that they are all correct and all in agreement with one another.⁷ But then they might as well write their own Scripture, since in effect that is what they are already doing. In any case, the Reformers defended the right of individuals to read the Bible, but not to violate the text and assign subjective meanings to it.

So this second option is true enough in itself. Each passage of Scripture has an intended and fixed meaning, so that a subjective and relativistic approach to reading the Bible is to be denounced as an assault upon the word of God. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that this is what verse 20 conveys.

The word "interpretation" can mean "explanation," but it can also mean "loosening," "release," or "discharge." In the New Testament, the noun is used only here, whereas the verb appears in Mark 4:34 and Acts 19:39. In Mark 4, the verb means "to expound" or "to explain," and in Acts 19, it means "to decide." Its meaning in our verse should be determined by the context.

The immediate context has to do with how "Scripture came about" (v. 20), and Peter insists that "prophecy never had its *origin* in *the will of man*" (v. 21). The issue is the origin of Scripture and its relation to the will of man, and not the interpretation of the product of inspiration. Therefore, the "interpretation" is referring to the *writers* of Scripture and not the *readers* of Scripture.

As for the broader context, Peter asserts in verse 16, "We did not follow cleverly *invented stories* when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." He is contrasting his own preaching and the words of the prophets in Scripture against the "false prophets" and "false teachers" (2:1) who would exploit people "with *stories they have made up*" (2:3).

With the above in mind, we may paraphrase Peter (1:20) as follows: "The false prophets and false teachers would exploit you with stories that they made up, but we did not invent what we told you about Christ's transfiguration and God's voice from heaven. Likewise, nothing in Scripture came from man's personal decision or understanding. Scripture was produced in a very different way than how these false prophets and teachers operate, since they made up their doctrines and stories, but everything in Scripture came from God."

A. T. Robertson writes, "No prophecy of Scripture comes out of private *disclosure*, not of private *interpretation*."⁸ Gordon Clark suggests the translation, "No written prophecy ever came into being by any individual's setting it free [or, more literally] by private release."⁹ The emphasis would be that Scripture did not come by man's decision ("never

⁷ See Vincent Cheung, *The Parables of Jesus* for additional comments.

⁸ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Vol. 6 (Broadman Press, 1960), p. 158.

⁹ Gordon H. Clark, *New Heavens, New Earth: A Commentary on First and Second Peter* (The Trinity Foundation, 1993), p. 192-193. Brackets in original.

had its origin in the will of man," v. 21), or just because a person "wanted to prophesy" (NLT).

I should add that even if the word "interpretation" takes on the meaning of "explanation" here, it would make no essential difference. The emphasis would shift slightly to the fact that Scripture did not come from human understanding about historical events and current affairs, or human speculation about the future. Wuest takes this perspective and translates, "every prophecy of scripture does not originate from any private interpretation [held by the writer]."¹⁰

Both ideas are found in verse 21, which says that "prophesy never had its origin in the will of man" (not by human *initiation*) but that "men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (not by human *interpretation*).

Thus in declaring the inspiration of Scripture, Peter first makes an important denial. He denies that Scripture is a product of human initiation and interpretation, unlike all non-Christian religions and philosophies. But then, he makes an affirmation about the origin of Scripture that tells us something about the nature of inspiration. Scripture "came about" (v. 20), he explains, as "men spoke *from God*" (v. 21). The words of Scripture came from God, and not from the men themselves.

We can learn something about the nature of true prophetic utterances by noting how false prophecies are described and condemned in Scripture. For example, Jeremiah 23:16 says, "Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes. They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD." False prophets speak "from their own minds," but true prophets speak "from the mouth of the LORD." The New Testament says that "God...spoke through David" (Hebrews 4:7), and that "The Holy Spirit spoke the truth...through Isaiah the prophet" (Acts 28:25).

It was God who spoke, not men – he spoke *through* men. The implication is unmistakable – the words of Scripture are so much "from God" that it is as if they came straight "from the mouth of the LORD," and in fact, they did. Therefore, we are to make no distinction between the words of Scripture and the words of God.

In fact, we can – we *must* – regularly and in various contexts use "God" and "Scripture" as interchangeable terms, for this is also the Bible's own practice. Genesis 12:1-3 says, "*The LORD had said...*," but referring to the same instance, Galatians 3:8 reads, "*The Scripture foresaw...and announced...*" Exodus 9:13-16 says, "Then *the LORD said...confront Pharaoh and say to him...*," but referring to the same instance, Romans 9:17 reads, "For *the Scripture says to Pharaoh...*"

In the Bible, "Scripture" is personified and sometimes used in the place of "God" altogether. This is only right and natural if Scripture is *exactly* the word of God, so that there is zero difference between them in thought and in authority. And it is only right that we as Christians adopt the same practice. It reflects our belief in the divine inspiration of

¹⁰ Kenneth S. Wuest, *The New Testament: An Expanded Translation*. Brackets in original.

Scripture to think of God and the Bible as interchangeable. We refer to both as powerful, penetrating, wise, just, pure, and holy. Galatians 3:8, cited above, attributes prescience to Scripture. We can even refer to the Scripture as the judge of mankind: "And if anyone hears My words and does not believe, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him – the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day" (John 12:47-48, NKJ).

All of this does not apply only to the Old Testament, as if the Old and the New are two separate books forcibly put together instead of one organic whole foreordained, developed, and preserved by God. As Peter writes, "I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles" (2 Peter 3:2). The apostles also "spoke from God." Their inspired words were not their own, but came from the mouth of the Lord, and thus carry the authority of God (1 Corinthians 2:13, 14:37).

Scripture "came about" when "men spoke from God," so that Scripture carries absolute authority, and the term can even be personified to be used interchangeably with God. The ramifications for the sufficiency and utility of Scripture should be as obvious as they are numerous. But before we take this next step, we must recall the purpose for this detour into 2 Peter in the first place, which is to explain the human role in divine inspiration and the writing of Scripture.

Peter indeed says that Scripture came about as "men spoke *from God*," so that it did not come by human initiation or interpretation. But he also says that "*men spoke from God*," so that men were involved in the writing of Scripture. What was this role? What did they do? In what sense and in what way were they involved? Peter proceeds to tell us. He writes, "men spoke from God as they were *carried along* by the Holy Spirit" (v. 21).

The translation "moved by" (KJV, NASB) at least indicates that the men were passive, that they were *acted upon* by the Spirit, and this is certainly a main emphasis here. But the translation "carried along" (NIV, ESV) paints a better picture of what the word means. It is a metaphor taken from the nautical world, and describes how a ship is carried and compelled by the wind. Thus in Acts 27:15 and 17, the word is translated "driven along" (NIV, ESV). In that passage, the ship is not self-powered, nor does it *actively* cooperate, but it is passive – acted upon and driven along by the wind, which is active.

Likewise, when men spoke from God and wrote Scripture, they were passive and the Spirit was active. In fact, the men were so passive relative to the Spirit that they were described as being "carried along," as if the Spirit went under them, lifted them up and carried them for his own purposes. They were the passive objects carried entirely by the power of the Spirit, and this was their role and their involvement.

As Edward J. Young writes: "If a person picks up something and bears it, he does it by his own power. That which is picked up and borne, however, is absolutely passive. So the

writers of Scripture who spake from God were passive. It was the Spirit of God who bore them. It was He who was active, and they were passive."¹¹

Some commentators insist that the words "men spoke" grant an active role to the prophets, but in what sense were they active? If I were to take up a pen to write a letter, of course the "pen writes," but its role is active only relative to itself and relative to when it is not writing at all. Relative to me, the pen is entirely passive, and cannot even be described as actively cooperating. For those who always seem to misconstrue analogies, I am not saying that a man is exactly like a pen,¹² but I am saying that we cannot infer too much from the words "men spoke" themselves, but the sense and the extent of these words are restricted by the context.

Peter qualifies "men spoke" by saying the Spirit *carried* them, so that even their speaking was performed under this passive condition. So the men *did* speak, but only as they were carried by God's active power. That is, their act of speaking was active only relative to not speaking at all, but they were in no sense self-moved or self-powered as they spoke, nor did they have a "free will" from which God must obtain cooperation. Thus the entire verse speaks of men as passive, and God as active.

Perhaps motivated by his theological bias, as he offers his exposition on this same verse, Michael Green writes, "For revelation was not a matter of passive reception: it meant active co-operation."¹³ However, this is the very opposite of what Peter emphasizes in the verse. Green makes no mention of the obviously passive sense of "carried along," or how he could derive active human cooperation from the text. Of course, Green serves only as an illustration here in our discussion, since many others describe divine inspiration in such a manner.

What beliefs and assumptions is Green trying to protect, so that he would assert them even when they are nowhere to be found in the verse, or anywhere around the verse? He continues, "The fact of God's inspiration did not mean a supersession of the normal mental functionings of the human author....Moreover, he did not use *any* men, but *holy men*, those who were dedicated and pledged to his service. And even with such men, he did no violence to their personalities...."¹⁴

Green is concerned to preserve the "mental functionings" and the "personalities" of the human writers, and also the fact that they were holy men. And from this he infers that revelation could not be "a matter of passive reception," but demanded man's "active co-operation." To put this another way, he wants to prevent the misunderstanding that the human writers were unconscious, unthinking, unaware, or in a trance when they spoke and wrote from God.

¹¹ Edward J. Young, *Thy Word is Truth* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1957), p. 25.

¹² See Vincent Cheung, "More Than a Potter."

¹³ Michael Green, *2 Peter and Jude* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), p. 103.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

However, Green's inference does not follow from his concerns. When I write, of course the "pen moves," and when I play tennis, of course the "racket swings." In this sense, both the pen and racket are active, but they are active only relative to themselves, and relative to their previous resting condition. Relative to me, they are completely passive, being carried along by my strength and my design to do my bidding. Do they "cooperate"? Of course! But this is not because I politely request their assistance, to allow me to channel my thinking and energy through them. They "cooperate" because I have control over them.

Such an analogy will stir up much indignation: "How much greater is a man than a pen, and an intelligent thinking being is in an entirely different category compared to a tennis racket!" Rather than enforcing a right view of man, this objection betrays a false view of God. For if you think that God needs you to be in a trance or somehow get your mind out of the way to exercise exhaustive control over you, then your view of God is way too small.

Of course the "mind thinks," but what causes it to think? And what causes it to think a certain thought in a certain way at each moment of the man's life? Do you think that God does not continuously control man's conscious mental states? Of course God spoke through holy men, but what caused them to be holy? Did they create themselves or make themselves holy, or did God, as the Scripture says, out of the same lump of clay created some for noble purposes and others for common use? "It is God who works in you *to will* and *to act* according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:13). It is God who works in man to produce holy decisions and actions.

Moreover, although he rarely did it, God could just as easily speak his words through a wicked man, exercising exhaustive control over him just as he does all his other creatures, including the holy prophets, so that he would speak his words just as infallibly as the prophets did. Balaam is such an example. For inspiration is not a matter of man's cooperation, but the Spirit's power to *carry* the person to do and say all that God wills. And God's control over man is so exhaustive that he does not need to suspend the person's thinking and personality in order to speak through him exactly what he wills, since even the person's thinking and personality are under his direct and continuous control.

Therefore, that the prophets retained their "mental functionings" (most of the time), their personalities, and that they were holy men have no immediate relevance to whether they offered active cooperation – God had direct access and total control over all of these factors. Rather, we must ask Peter what happened as the prophets spoke, and he tells us that they were "carried along by the Holy Spirit," as if they were ships passively driven by the wind.

Now, because Christians affirm that God inspired every word in the Bible and not just the general ideas, critics sometimes allege that this amounts to claiming that God gave the Scripture by *dictation*, while the prophets served as secretaries and wrote them down. Then, on this basis, the critics attack the inspiration of Scripture by pointing out that such

a dictation theory is inconsistent with the actual characteristics of Scripture. This is because the various documents in the Bible apparently reflect the different backgrounds, personalities, conditions, and circumstances of the human writers. But if Scripture came by God's dictation, then supposedly there should not be these variations.

Theologians are quick to deny this dictation theory of inspiration, charging the critics with attacking a straw man. Many of them would approach the issue from a perspective similar to Michael Green's, stating that inspiration does not imply dictation, but it even required active cooperation from the human writers, only that God "superintended" their writing so that the product is jointly human and divine, and at the same time exactly what God intended to set in writing.

However, this falls short of a biblical answer, and is itself ensnared by false assumptions. We have already said something about this above when we interacted with Michael Green, but here we will apply and extend what we have said to address the dictation theory in particular.

But before explaining why we must reject the theory, we should point out that there is nothing *inherently* wrong, repugnant, or impossible about dictation. If God had chosen to speak his words to the prophets and have them write down what they heard, then that is how the Bible would have been written, and there would be nothing wrong with it. In fact, some parts of the Bible were apparently written this way. The prophets would say something about the contexts and the circumstances, and then relate a verbatim quotation of what God said to them.

Even if we were to apply dictation to the whole Bible, there still would not be any inherent difficulties. The objection stems from the fact that the Bible reflects a variety of writing styles and personalities. However, God is not a man and does not have the limitations and narrowness of a man's mind. He could have dictated different parts of the Bible in different ways to reflect his intellectual immensity. The essential issue is whether this multifaceted revelation nevertheless exhibits a perfect internal harmony. If it does not, then whether God gave the Scripture by dictation is the least of our problems, but if it does, then this harmonious variety found in Scripture cannot be used to argue against a dictation theory of inspiration.

Although there are no inherent problems with dictation, there are indeed several definitive reasons to reject it as a description or explanation of biblical inspiration. We will discuss only three – the theory is false, irrelevant, and weak. Any of these reasons would be enough as a basis to reject it.

First, we must reject the dictation theory simply because it is false. It is not that dictation was impossible in principle, but it was not how Scripture was written – it was not how it happened. We mentioned that some parts of Scripture were written when the prophets recorded verbatim what they heard from God, but the whole Bible was not written this way, so that the theory fails to describe or explain the inspiration of the entire Bible.

However, even if the entire Bible was written this way, dictation would still fail to describe or explain inspiration, at least because of the next two reasons.

Second, the dictation theory is irrelevant. Although it is called the dictation theory of *inspiration*, dictation has little to nothing to do with inspiration. Dictation describes how God speaks to a person or conveys *that* God speaks to a person, but inspiration refers to or must include what God does to a person as this person speaks and writes the words of God to produce an accurate product. Paul refers to the Scripture as God-breathed – something that came directly out of God. And Peter writes that men spoke from God as they were carried along. In other words, God did not just carry the prophets to *hear* his words, and then left them to relate what he said to the best of their human ability, but God carried them *as* they were speaking and writing his words.

God could dictate his words to an *uninspired* individual and the person could write down what he heard, but the product would still be an *uninspired* document, since without inspiration at the moment of writing, the authenticity and authority of the document would depend on the uninspired person's human ability to recall, arrange, and record what he thought God revealed. And there is no guarantee that he would not subtract from or add to what he heard.¹⁵ In fact, God could speak from heaven, and some would say that it thundered (John 12:29). Paul says that the *Scripture* is God-breathed, and not that the prophets heard God-breathed words which they then tried to relate without any divine guarantee of success or perfection.

For this reason, I wrote earlier, "If God had chosen to speak his words to the prophets and have them write down what they heard, then that is how the Bible would have been written, and there would be nothing wrong with it. In fact, some parts of the Bible were *apparently* written this way." I said "apparently" because the truth is that, when the subject is inspiration, *no part* of the Bible was actually written by mere dictation. Even when dictation was involved, if we were to associate "inspiration" with what Paul and Peter are talking about in the passages that we examined, then inspiration must at least refer to how God carried along the human writers as they were speaking and writing the words of God, and not just when they were hearing the dictation.¹⁶

Therefore, if the Scripture was nothing more than dictated, then it was not inspired. And even if the original dictation was God-breathed, unless God ensured by his omnipotence that his words were faithfully recorded as the human writers wrote, we still cannot say that the written product is God-breathed. The dictation theory is irrelevant because it addresses something other than the question at hand, that is, whether the *written product* is the infallible and inerrant revelation of God. As we have seen, Paul's answer is that

¹⁵ Of course, the person is still not autonomous in this case, but it would be God who controls him to produce a flawed document. But if this is the case, then the document is not rightly described as inspired, and still less infallible, inerrant, or God-breathed. It would be just another flawed piece of writing produced under God's ordinary providence.

¹⁶ It could be that they were also "carried along" by God as they were hearing his words, but it remains that the only issue of *immediate* relevance is whether they were carried along when they were speaking and writing.

"All Scripture is God-breathed," regardless of whether it was dictated or not dictated, or whether we are referring to the narratives, the prophecies, or the genealogies.

Third, the dictation theory is far too weak to describe or explain the divine inspiration of Scripture. This might surprise some people, since they think that dictation would have been the strongest possible method for God to produce the Bible through human writers. However, we have shown that if the Bible was nothing more than dictated from God to men, then it was not inspired at all. For if such were the case, although the dictation would indeed be God-breathed, and thus infallible and inerrant, we would not be able to say the same about the written product.

People usually oppose the dictation theory because they think that pure dictation would have obscured the personal characteristics of the human writers, but since the Bible exhibits these characteristics, it is said that the Scripture was not given by dictation. Inerrancy is not in question here, as these people could also affirm it, but we are trying to ascertain *what happened* in inspiration, and the implication of this perspective is that dictation is too "strong" to describe or explain inspiration.

However, the opposite is true. The above fails to consider where these human characteristics came from in the first place. They were not self-created, and the human writers were not autonomous. Dictation is not false because it minimizes the human role, although the human role was merely to be "carried along," but the theory is false because it undermines the sovereignty of God. It is false not because it gives too little freedom to man, but because it leaves too little control to God.

Consider the relationship between an employer and his secretary, not only on the interpersonal level but on the metaphysical level as well. In the first place, they have to find each other. The employer puts out an advertisement for the opening, and an interested person applies for the job. After reviewing her qualifications, the employer either accepts or rejects the applicant. This continues until the employer finds a satisfactory candidate and hires her.

As she begins to work for this employer, the secretary brings into her work her education, experience, personality, belief system, and even health condition – the employer has no influence over these previously determined factors. He assigns a number of tasks for her to do, and one of these is probably to take down his dictation. He would dictate to the secretary memos, letters, and various documents. For our purpose, we can even assume that his dictation is always perfect, so that all the secretary needs to do is to write down his words exactly as spoken. The written product, of course, should reflect only the personality, vocabulary, and other characteristics of the employer, and not that of the secretary.

After work, the secretary goes home. The employer has no access to her private life, inner thoughts, personal decisions, and physical condition. He has no right or power to determine how many children she has, where they go to school, where her husband works, what friends she makes, and when her mother dies. All he can do is to dictate his

words to her, but she has to write them down of her own will (the human employer has no direct control over her will)¹⁷ and according to her ability.

The relationship between God and the human writers of Scripture is wholly different. In the first place, God did not *find* the human writers, as if they were created and developed apart from God, only to be discovered by him later, but he *made* them according to his own specifications. Commenting on a related subject, Geerhardus Vos writes, "The revelation does not spring from the character; on the contrary, the character is predetermined by the necessities of the revelation."¹⁸

Some theologians are fond of using "natural propagation" to explain human traits, including the universal sinfulness of man.¹⁹ However, natural propagation is at best relative – that is, it describes the relationship between past generations to the current one – it cannot function as the metaphysical explanation of the propagation of these traits, the relationship between God and human beings, or the relationship between God and human depravity.

Otherwise, Romans 9:21 could be referring to only Adam and Eve at best, but of course this is impossible – the immediate context as well as the entire Bible forbid such an interpretation, nor have I read anyone propose such nonsense. Those who make natural propagation into almost an absolute explanation of human traits seem to altogether ignore this verse and others like it, and given their theory, this is indeed what they would need to do. Also, this perspective has never been able to explain the origin of sin. Its proponents must relegate it to a complete mystery.

Rather, this verse as well as the entire Bible affirm God's direct and total control over the characteristics and destinies of all his human creatures.²⁰ And *this* is both the immediate and ultimate explanation for all human traits, and for the origination and the perpetuation of human depravity. As Luther writes, "the children of wrath" are "*created such by God himself*" after the pattern of Adam.²¹

Therefore, the various human characteristics exhibited in Scripture can never undermine its inspiration, for this variety is part of God's design. God did not dictate the Scripture using only one set of characteristics (personality, vocabulary, etc.), nor did he dictate it using a numerous sets of characteristics. Rather, if we wish to speak in terms of dictation, the *whole creation* is God's "dictation," including these human writers who exhibited different characteristics, since these characteristics themselves were "dictated" by God. He did not only dictate the words of the Bible, but he "dictated" the very *people* who

¹⁷ Here we are not speaking of her relation to God, who exercises direct, total, and continuous control over her will.

¹⁸ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), p. 91.

¹⁹ For example, see William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (P & R Publishing, 2003).

²⁰ See Vincent Cheung, "More Than a Potter."

²¹ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (Fleming H. Revell, 1957), p. 314. Luther does not here address what caused Adam to commit the first sin, since he is discussing Ephesians 2:3 and not Adam, but he does assert that all of Adam's descendents are *created as sinful* by God. Lesser theologians prefer to hide behind "natural propagation" so that they can distance God from evil.

spoke his words and held the pens to write them down. And he even "carried" them along as they did so.

This is why a theory of mere verbal dictation is far too weak to describe or explain biblical inspiration, since behind the production of Scripture is God's exhaustive and pervasive control over all of history and all of humanity, including the rise and fall of nations, every good deed, every evil thought, the course of every drop of rain, and the precise length and number of a person's hair. And even now he must sustain all things by his word (Hebrews 1:3).

What an insult, then, it would be to say that he dictated the words to the human writers, or that these human writers "actively cooperated" with God. No, God first "wrote" the prophets themselves and then "carried" them to write the Bible. He created, caused, and carried the men to write his words. No weaker description or explanation can do justice to the inspiration of the Bible.

To summarize our position on the inspiration and authority of Scripture, Edward Young is right when he says that the Bible is "not a magical book dropped down from heaven",²² however, the result is the same. The Bible that we have now is so absolutely infallible, inerrant, and authoritative that it is as if God had taken up a pen himself and written the whole book, and then dropped it down from heaven to us. But we have already made the strongest possible statement about this long before, that is, when we refer to the Bible in a personified sense, God and Scripture are interchangeable.

²² Young, *Thy Word is Truth*, p. 25.

2. SUFFICIENCY

Although it is not the main focus of our passage (2 Timothy 3:14-17), we have spent so much time on the inspiration of Scripture because, besides its inherent importance, it is the foundation for a proper view of the sufficiency and utility of Scripture. Given its claims and purposes, the Bible can be sufficient and profitable only to the extent that it is authoritative, so that a false view of inspiration will limit and distort all aspects of our relationship with Scripture – that is, all aspects of our Christian life and relationship with God.

Scripture is the very word and mind of God, and just as it is a contradiction to say that we love a person but hate everything about him (since everything about him *is* him), our love, faith, and reverence toward God can never rise higher than our love, faith, and reverence toward the Bible. Thus only the highest and most extreme view of inspiration can serve as a proper foundation for our Christian life. As we proceed, it will become evident how the sufficiency and utility of Scripture are dependent on its divine inspiration and absolute authority.

Now, when it comes to the sufficiency of Scripture, we cannot just say that "the Scripture is sufficient," and leave it at that. This is because the idea of sufficiency remains empty and meaningless unless we also ask, "For *what* is Scripture sufficient?" and "For *whom* is Scripture sufficient?" Something that is "sufficient" is sufficient *for something*, and not "sufficient" in general or in the abstract. The Bible contains the answers, but what are the questions?

This brings to mind a common pastoral problem. Christians often ask questions that they either should not ask in the first place, or that are latent with false assumptions and unbiblical concerns, so that from the start their approach blinds them to what Scripture is really saying.

For example, someone might complain, "I understand that the Bible is sufficient, but it does not tell me which stocks to buy," or less reverently, "*You say* that the Bible is sufficient, but it does not tell me which stocks to buy." Of course, people ask questions about all kinds of topics. Another one would be, "The Bible does not tell me whom to marry, so how I am supposed to decide?" Thus I am not only thinking about stocks, but there are common problems with these questions, so with the appropriate adaptations, the following response will apply to all of them.

First, like most people, this person probably never read the entire Bible, so he is just assuming that the Bible does not specify, even by name, which stocks he is supposed to buy. And even if one has read the entire Bible, he cannot say that he has derived all that is possible from it. More often than not the Bible has something very specific to say about the question, and one can always derive some definite principles that will either

render the right choice obvious or at least greatly limit the allowable options. The problem is that this person has too little knowledge of what the Bible says.

Second, the person assumes a goal and the means to that goal that he probably did not derive from the Bible, and then expects the Bible to instruct him on how to attain this goal by such means. He wishes to make a financial profit, and he thinks that purchasing the right stocks would be the right way to attain this goal, and since the Bible is infallible, he approaches it to find the answer. But does the Bible approve or command such a goal? If it does, does it say that this is the right way to attain it? How about the lottery? Is the Bible insufficient if it does not tell you which numbers to choose?

Many people first define what they want or need apart from the Bible, and then come to the Bible for answers. In a financial situation, they would think, "The Bible is supposed to be sufficient for every situation that I face in life, and to tell me God's mind on the subject. With this problem that I am facing, what should I do so that I will *make a profit* or *not suffer loss*?"

They appear to seek guidance from the Bible, but they have already assumed the proper result that the Bible is supposed to help them attain. However, they never asked the Bible as to whether God wishes for them to make a profit or not suffer loss. Their respect and dependence on the Bible does not start from *the beginning* of their chain of priorities and their process of reasoning, but only when they have made enough assumptions apart from the Bible that they are now willing to let it take over to satisfy those assumptions.

But the Bible might not offer them the answers that they seek, since it probably never approved what generated the questions in the first place. Or, in our example, even if the Bible would declare profit a proper goal, it might do so for a different reason, or from another perspective, attaching to it different motives and background assumptions.²³

The point is that the Bible tells us about its own purposes and powers, what it is for and what it can do. The Bible tells us what are the important things in life and what questions we should ask about them, and then it answers those questions. And since the Bible is the very word and mind of God, it is God who is saying these things to us.

Therefore, the Bible should define *both* the questions and the answers. It is authoritative and sufficient to tell us what questions to ask and then to answer those questions. The Bible is sufficient because it is at the same time God's revelation of the right questions and God's revelation of the right answers to those questions. If the Bible does not address something, then who says we need to know it? But if there is no need to know it, then how can the Bible be insufficient if it does not address it? In contrast, human philosophy asks the wrong questions, and then it cannot even answer those wrong questions.

Those who go to the Bible only for the answers and not the questions betray a feigned reverence. They are not treating God as God, but as a mere expert that they wish to consult in order to attain their own goals. Underlying all of this is their rebellion and

²³ See Vincent Cheung, "Biblical Guidance and Decision-Making" in *Godliness with Contentment*.

unbelief – they either refuse to let God define their goals or they doubt that God's will is better, or both.

In our example, the goal of making a profit is so dear to the person's heart that rather than letting Scripture challenge or modify it, he would even shield it from Scripture. The goal is tenaciously held, and not open to question – he only wishes to know how to attain it. It so drives his agenda that he never even thought to ask the Bible whether it is right, or whether he is thinking about it the right way.

Again, here we are not at all considering what the Bible says about wealth and stocks, but we are making the point that the Bible should define both our questions and our answers at the very beginning of our thinking. We also mentioned a question about whom to marry. Applying our point to this question, we are saying that rather than carrying to the Bible all that the person *thinks* that he knows about marriage and then demanding it to tell him whom to marry on such a basis, the person should start by learning what the Bible teaches about God and man, then men and women, Christ and the Church, and the marriage covenant in general. Then, instead of demanding the Bible to answer a question that it never asked, or at least not in the way and with the assumptions that this person asks his question, the answer as to whom he should marry should be a logical application of what the Bible teaches about marriage.

A person who pays no attention when the Bible talks about what marriage is cannot expect to rightly derive an answer from the Bible as to whom he should marry. But for one who starts with the Bible on the subject, the answer is easy – applying what Scripture says about marriage to what providence has arranged around a person often eliminates all other possibilities except one.²⁴ Pastors and counselors sometimes assume that the Bible offers only general guidance on the subject, but this is not true. The Bible gives very specific criteria and instructions, and providence never confuses us with too many options.

Consistent with what we are teaching here, in what follows even the idea of sufficiency is derived from our passage, and the questions "Sufficient for what?" and "Sufficient for whom?" are also thus derived. Paul tells us that the Scripture is God-breathed, and on this basis, it is useful or profitable, and also sufficient. But he tells us more than this, since he also mentions for what and for whom the Scripture is sufficient.

Of course, to learn all that for which Scripture is sufficient, one must read the entire Bible and note all the topics, situations, and people that it addresses. But our project is much more modest – we will limit ourselves to 2 Timothy 3 and 4.

a. Sufficient for What?

Paul says that "the sacred writings" (NASB, ESV) are "able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:15). Salvation is one of Scripture's chief concerns, and Paul affirms that it is "able" to give us the answer on this all-

²⁴ See Vincent Cheung, "Unfading Beauty" in *Renewing the Mind*.

important topic. It asks the question, "If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?" (Psalm 130:3). And then it answers, "But with you there is forgiveness" (v. 4). It tells us how God could be at the same time "just and the one who justifies" sinners (Romans 3:26).

Paul's statement about Scripture is made in contrast against the people described in 3:1-13. Among other things, these people are "men of depraved minds" (v. 8). They are "evil men and imposters" who are "deceiving and being deceived" (v. 13), "having a form of godliness but denying its power" (v. 5). Therefore, as Paul affirms the sufficiency of Scripture when it comes to salvation, he is at the same time condemning any form of religion and lifestyle that is not derived from it. It is the Bible that will lead us to salvation, and that will make us different from these evil men.

Scripture is the light of salvation. The Bible supplies us with the categories and concepts of good and evil, law and sin, salvation and damnation, and then it gives us the truth on these subjects. Apart from it, man remains trapped in darkness. Without it, man remains caged in by his own foolish speculation, so that there is no salvation for those who reject its teachings.

Human philosophy has been a dismal failure. Even if man manages to come up with the right questions, he certainly does not have the answers within himself, and all his striving is nothing more than the outworking of his blindness and rebellion, leading only to despair, death, and damnation. Accordingly, it is spiritual treason for professing Christians to concede that there is some wisdom in every religion and philosophy. To be double-minded on this issue is to weaken and confuse the message of salvation.

This message is clear, specific, and exclusive, for Paul says that the wisdom Scripture provides leads us to salvation "through faith in Christ Jesus" (v. 15). And throughout his letters, Paul leaves no doubt as to what he means by "faith in Christ Jesus." Not only must a person believe in the grace of God and the atonement of Christ, but this faith must exclude dependence on anything else. In addition, this is a faith that God sovereignly gives to his chosen ones – it is not something that a wicked and unbelieving person can just all of a sudden decide to generate by himself.

Human wisdom will try to add to this faith good works, sacred rituals, infused grace, and whatever else they can imagine, but then they are back to "having a form of godliness but denying its power." Any salvation message that demands more or less than "faith in Christ Jesus" spells damnation for those who preach and follow it (see Galatians 1:8-9). It is the biblical "life and doctrine" that will "save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Timothy 4:16).

According to some, the way of salvation is so simple even from a human and natural perspective that even "fools shall not err therein" (Isaiah 35:8, KJV), in the sense that even fools can understand the gospel and will not make a mistake about it. However, the verse is saying exactly the opposite: "And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness. The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that

Way; wicked fools will not go about on it" (NIV). That is, "the Way" (Acts 9:2, 19:9, 23, 24:14, 22) is reserved for those whom God has chosen and Christ has redeemed, so that the unclean and the fools will not enter into it, and will not even stumble upon it or wander into it by mistake.

Spiritual fools can never find salvation by themselves. It is so far from their reach that they will not even stumble across it. All are spiritual fools by nature, but the Bible can make one wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.²⁵ Thus the Bible is sufficient for salvation.

Then, Paul writes that "All Scripture...is useful...so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (v. 16-17). The NIV obscures the triple emphasis on the sufficiency of Scripture in this verse. The NKJ is better – it says, "that the man of God may be *complete, thoroughly equipped* for *every* good work."

The word "complete" can mean "adequate," "fitted," and "capable" (ESV: "competent"). The KJV has "perfect," which carries the same meanings in old English. The word translated "thoroughly equipped" or "fully furnished" is even more descriptive in the original. Together with "*every* good work," Paul is obviously making a special effort to stress the sufficiency of Scripture. It is enough. It is complete. You need nothing else.

Verse 17 is mainly referring to Timothy in his capacity as a minister – that is, a "man of God." So the Scripture is sufficient to fully equip Timothy for every "good work" that he would need to perform in ministry. However, we must not isolate this statement from its surrounding verses. Paul also makes a contrast between Timothy and the evil men that he has been describing. In verses 1-13, Paul mentions people who are, among other things, "lovers of themselves," "lovers of money," "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God," "having a form of godliness but denying its power," "evil men and imposters" who are "deceiving and being deceived." And it is against this background that Paul says to Timothy, "But as *for you*, continued in what you have learned and become convinced of," and by this he means "the sacred writings" (v. 15) and "All Scripture" (v. 16).

Therefore, Paul is not only telling Timothy that the Bible is sufficient to equip him as a minister to effect sanctification in others, but he is also saying that the Bible can make him the opposite of these evil people that he has just described. That is, if Timothy will persist in following its teachings, the Bible will make him into a lover of God rather than a lover of pleasure, and he will have the power and reality of godliness rather than a mere appearance of it. Rather than "deceiving and being deceived," he will be able to save himself as well as those who hear him (1 Timothy 4:16).

Paul applies the sufficiency of Scripture to "training in righteousness" and "every good work." Scripture is thus a complete and sufficient revelation of God's will in that it can always show us the *right* path, that is, the path that leads to *righteousness*. Many people struggle with the sufficiency of Scripture, constantly complaining about what the Bible

²⁵ In connection to 2 Timothy 3:15, please also see my *On Good and Evil*, where I correct an anti-intellectual misinterpretation of John 5:39-40.

does not tell them, because they want it to point out the path to prosperity, a favorable outcome, or some other effect that they desire. But Paul's point is that if Scripture is perfectly followed, then we will never do anything that is sinful, and all that we do will be "good work" in the sight of God.

Of course, with the remaining sinfulness even in believers, perfect obedience to Scripture is not attained in this life, but the point is that the needed information to define perfect righteousness for every situation, and every area of life and thought, is indeed contained in Scripture. The Bible is sufficient for sanctification. This means that it can cause us to grow in knowledge and holiness, and shield us from deception and contamination. If we sin, if we fail, and if we do not know the right way, it is never because the Bible lacks the relevant warnings and instructions.

b. Sufficient for Whom?

Since the Bible is the word of God, and since God has the right, power, and wisdom to define our needs and meet those needs, Christians correctly assume that the Bible is for everyone. By this we mean that every person should learn from the Bible what his needs are and then derive from it the wisdom to satisfy those needs, and that he should learn from the Bible what his duties are and draw from it the strength to fulfill them.

Regardless of times and cultures, the Bible wields absolute authority over every human being. Every person must believe it, obey it, and then be judged by it. In it is the message that saves some for heaven and condemns all others to an endless hell. Anyone who would approach God must come to him through faith in the Bible. It rules over mankind, and in it is written the fate of the world. Whether we are referring to believers or unbelievers, they are behaving exactly in the manner that the Bible says they would, and their respective destinies will also be exactly what the Bible predicts. No one is exempt, and no one can escape – you either fall upon the Rock and be broken, or the Rock falls on you and crushes you to powder.

Sinners scoff at the notion that humankind could be ruled by a book, but as the Scripture says, the wisdom of God sounds foolish to those who are heading toward damnation, not that God is foolish, but that sinners are too stupid and deceived to recognize true wisdom. Moreover, as we have already mentioned more than once, since the Bible is the exact and direct revelation of God, to say that the Bible rules the world is to say that God rules the world. There is no difference.

With such power and relevance, of course the Bible is sufficient for every person. Why, then, do we still ask the question, "Sufficient for whom?" Even if it was necessary to ask before, now that we have stated a general answer that covers every person, do we need to go any further?

For the most general purposes, we may indeed stop at this point, since there is no exception to what we have said. However, the Bible itself acknowledges different categories of people, and provides specific information about them and instructions directed toward them. It addresses kings, judges, and others in authority, outlining both

their powers and duties. It speaks to husbands and wives, distinguishing their roles and ranks in the home. It mentions different types of sinners, such as murderers, thieves, and homosexuals, commanding them to repent of their evil deeds, to believe in the gospel, and then to change their behavior.

In other words, although the Bible is sufficient for every person, and although every person needs the Bible, paying attention to the specific instructions in Scripture about different groups of people enable us to make deliberate and effective applications. Now, to list all the different groups specified in Scripture would require one to go through the whole Bible. We will deal with only those mentioned and implied in our passage and surrounding verses.

In verse 15, Paul says to Timothy, "*from infancy* you have known the holy Scriptures" (NIV). Another good translation would be "from an infant." The word refers to an unborn child in Luke 1:41 and 44, where it is translated "baby" or "babe." In Luke 2:12 and 16, the word refers to someone who has just been born.

It is translated "newborn babies" in Acts 7:19. There the context is Pharaoh's command to kill all the male children born to the Hebrews (Exodus 1:16). The command seems to demand immediate action, as the midwives were supposed to observe the gender of the babies right "on the delivery stool." The mother of Moses hid him for three months after he was born (2:2). The text is clear that, relative to Pharaoh's command, she was not permitted to wait that long. It is possible that the word includes slightly older children in Luke 18:15, but it remains that the word refers to *very small* children.

Instead of "from infancy" or "from an infant," a number translations say "from childhood" or "from a child." The first definition in *Merriam-Webster* for "child" is "an unborn or recently born person," and the second is "a young person especially between infancy and youth," but does not exclude the infant. To use "child," therefore, is not necessarily wrong, but unless it is understood that the meaning is a very young child, it is more clear and precise to use "infancy" or "infant" in our verse (2 Timothy 3:15).

Jewish children were taught the Scripture at a very early age, probably as soon as they could understand language. In fact, it is probable that they learned language itself from the Scripture. It is suggested that the uncommon phrase for Scripture, translated "the sacred writings" in our verse, could signify that Timothy learned to read and write with the Bible as his textbook. But whether this is what *this* verse implies, it is clear from the Old Testament that the Jews were commanded to diligently educate their children in the Scripture.

From the beginning, God's people have always emphasized the passing on of their faith to future generations. As God says regarding Abraham in Genesis 18:19, "For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."

The Jews heavily stress the early religious education of children. There are several essential characteristics about their method. First, it involves complete 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; see also 11:18-20)

Every situation and every time of the day provides the context to teach their children the Scripture.

Moreover, they are not encouraged to be original and creative, to come up with their own answers to spiritual things, or to explore the various options offered by the pagan nations around them. Instead, they are told what to believe, how to behave, and what to avoid and oppose. They are not taught to "think for themselves,"²⁶ as if sinful children can answer the ultimate questions apart from revelation, or as if they could dictate to God how God ought to be worshiped. No, they are taught to think what God tells them to think.

This method of education is very much a passing on of bare facts and knowledge, a method that the contemporary western mind detest, which is also why the average knowledge and intelligence of the contemporary western mind seems to have plummeted to an irrecoverable low.

As Hendriksen writes:

As to methodology, the Israelites were not, as a rule, afflicted with memorization-phobia. To a certain extent, necessity even demanded and common sense dictated that committing to memory receive its prominent place in the system of education (Is. 28:10). At times this method may have received undue emphasis, just as today it certainly receives *too little* emphasis.

The notion that educators should merely ask questions to which no one except the child (!) has the right to supply answers was favored only by men like Eli ("Why do you do such things?" I Sam. 2:23), who failed miserably in the task of bringing up his children. *God demanded that when questions were asked, definite answers should be given* (Ex. 13:8; Deut. 6:7; 6:20-25; 11:19; Josh. 12:26-28); that children should be *taught* Jehovah's statutes; that a body of truth with respect to the words

²⁶ Unbelievers have influenced Christians to teach this way when it comes to religion, but this is not how they teach evolution.

and deeds of Jehovah should be handed down from generation to generation.²⁷

The strength and weakness of this method is the same – it is only as good as the contents of what is taught. But when what is so rigidly taught is in fact the very word and mind of God, no other method and no human ingenuity can rival its power and excellence. It is the only appropriate method to teach a perfect book. Thus the Bible is to be dogmatically impressed upon children, both in systematic programs and daily conversations, rather than creatively subverted by modern theories, which encourage children to give their wicked and foolish hearts full expression.²⁸ This does not need to be done in an overbearing and annoying manner, but when properly performed, it can be very natural and pleasant.

Against this biblical method of early dogmatic religious immersion, many professing Christians say that they prefer to wait until their children become older, so that they can study the various religions and philosophies, and then "decide for themselves." This kind of thinking, of course, has been adopted from the parenting philosophy of unbelievers, although it is never actually practiced by them. Rather, the children are immersed in their anti-biblical beliefs and values instead. And when "Christian" parents try to avoid teaching their children religion, what do these children end up learning? Whether right or wrong, biblical or anti-biblical, the children will not learn *nothing* until they become teenagers or adults – they will not live in spiritual suspension.

Parents withhold biblical indoctrination from their children in direct defiance against God's commands. This should be enough to condemn the neglect, which is a form of spiritual child abuse. And as mentioned above, it is often *deliberately* practiced, and even believed to be a superior form of parenting. So not only do they disobey God, but these parents think that they know better than he does how to love and raise their children.

This practice of withholding biblical teachings from the children betrays another problem. Just as clearly as the above, this one also calls into question the personal faith of the parents. Part of the biblical method of total religious immersion has to do with answering the children's questions about the faith of the parents. As God states in Exodus:

"Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants. When you enter the land that the LORD will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony. And when your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' then tell them, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.'" Then the people bowed down and worshiped. (12:24-27; see also 13:14-16)

²⁷ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of The Pastoral Epistles* (Baker Books, 1957), p. 298.

²⁸ For more on theories of education, see Vincent Cheung, *Preach the Word*, and Gordon Clark, *A Christian Philosophy of Education*.

If the parents practice their faith at all, religious questions from children are unavoidable. Do the parents go to church, receive communion, read the Bible, make petitions to God, preach the gospel to their neighbors? If they do any of these things, then the children are going to ask about them. They will say, "What is this place? Why do we go to church? What are you reading? Can I read it? Who do you talk to when you bow your head like that? And who is this Jesus you were talking about with Uncle Bob?"

And do these parents ever exhibit an integrity that would intrigue their children? "Mother, why did you give the money back when the person at the store gave you too much change?" Or, what do these parents say when they tell their children not to lie, and they ask, "Why"? The answer will either be God-centered or man-centered. It will be based on either biblical revelation and absolute moral laws, or pragmatic concerns and mere convenience. The children will be indoctrinated one way or the other.

Parents who think that religion is too difficult or boring for children betray a fundamental ignorance of both religion and children. God declares that the biblical religion is an appropriate topic of conversation *all the time*. These children were expected to learn about God, Egypt, slavery, freedom, grace, power, prayer, and rituals, as well as the prohibitions against such things as homosexuality and bestiality. If taught properly from the Bible, and if taught within the framework of the whole Christian worldview, no topic is too mature for children to hear about.

As for the parents whose lives never generate religious questions from their children at all, they are most likely not Christians in the first place. They are just false converts trying to avoid acting like true believers. For if they indeed perceive religion as a matter of salvation or damnation rather than a matter of mere preference and mental well-being, then doubtless they would earnestly teach the whole counsel of God to their children, and practice the faith before them.

Now, even if the children have been properly instructed from infancy, there will come a time when the world will challenge and oppose what they have been taught. Their faith will be tested. As Paul writes in our passage, "everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12). The solution is just to "continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of" (v. 14). The Bible is sufficient to teach even infants, and if they will continue in what they have learned, it will see them through persecution and unfavorable times.

Finally, for the Bible to be sufficient to teach children also implies that extra-biblical materials are unnecessary to achieve the desired outcome. It is unnecessary to supplement dogmatic verbal instructions with cartoons, puppets, toys, and all kinds of gimmicks. The correct method is to immerse the children in biblical teachings, and enforce them with discipline.

As I mentioned earlier, the "man of God" in verse 17 is mainly referring to Timothy as a minister or preacher, instead of a Christian in general. Of course, much of what applies to

a minister will also apply to any Christian, and what is sufficient for a preacher should also be sufficient for any believer. Nevertheless, Paul is indeed addressing some pressing problems relative to Timothy's situation as a minister, and since we cannot spare time to give a full exposition, we can consider only the primary emphasis of the verse.

Note again the problems and the people that Paul has brought up so far. He mentions people who are "lovers of themselves," "lovers of money," "not lovers of the good," "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God," and "having a form of godliness but denying its power," they are "evil men and imposters" who are "deceiving and being deceived."

Against the "terrible times" (3:1) in which Timothy must live, Paul reminds him that it would be enough if he would "continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of" since infancy. When Paul says this, he of course has in mind Timothy's ministerial duties and difficulties. Thus "the sacred writings" that Timothy has learned since he was an infant would be sufficient to sustain him, both as a Christian and as a minister, in these "terrible times." The Scripture is sufficient to sustain the minister as an individual believer, so that he would become and remain the *opposite* of these evil men that Paul has just described.

Then, Paul adds that by the Scripture, "the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (v. 17). Although the Scripture is certainly sufficient for an individual's sanctification, here the "good work" mainly refers to what Timothy must do as a minister. Paul is saying that the Scripture is also sufficient to equip Timothy for his ministry to other people.

Thus the Bible is not only sufficient to *train and sustain* the minister, but it is also sufficient to be *used by* the minister. Just *how* he ought to use the Scripture in ministry to others is a topic we will reserve for the section on the utility of Scripture (see v. 16). Right now, we will briefly consider the implications of Scripture being sufficient to equip the minister for every good work.

Our passage and its subsequent verses (3:16-4:5) show that Timothy's task is very much a ministry of the word of God. One of the main ways that God reaches the world through his ministers is by preaching, and in our passage, preaching is evidently the primary solution to be applied against all the problems and people that Paul has just described. The question, then, is whether the Bible supplies the necessary materials that a minister needs in his ministry of preaching.

To this, Paul writes that "All Scripture is God-breathed and useful...so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (v. 16) The verse hints at no exception, and the unmistakable assertion is that the Bible is sufficient for whatever the minister needs to accomplish. That is, whatever is the minister's duty to do, he can take the Bible and apply it to the need, and it would be an adequate solution.

It follows that extra-biblical materials are unnecessary. In his ministry, it is *never* necessary for the minister to have studied the disciplines of psychology, sociology, physics, biology, astronomy, or even secular history and contemporary culture. At this point, we are not saying anything about whether these can be helpful to the ministry, but we echo Paul's triple emphasis that the Bible is sufficient for the minister, so that he may be *complete*, and *thoroughly equipped* for *every* good work. And this means that no supplemental knowledge is necessary. To assert otherwise is to deny the sufficiency of the equipment that divine inspiration insists to be sufficient.

In his ministry, Timothy would have to deal with many people who are enemies of the Christian faith. Since we have already referred to it several times, we will not repeat Paul's description of these "men of depraved minds" (3:8). But besides what he has said in 3:1-13, Paul adds in 4:3-4 to his description of the kind of people that Timothy would have to face: "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths."

It is in such a context that Paul charges Timothy to "Preach the Word" (4:2).²⁹ He must do it "in season and out of season," whether the times are favorable or unfavorable. This is a remarkable charge, and very instructive for our time. Can you not see what Paul is saying? He tells Timothy that the Scripture is useful and sufficient to equip the minister "for every good work." And then he adds that the Bible is sufficient, that it is *the* answer, even when the people refuses to listen to the Bible!

To paraphrase, Paul is telling Timothy, "Terrible times are coming, when all kinds of evil people will roam the earth and the church. When this happens, Timothy, just continue in what you have learned and become convinced of. I am referring to the Scripture that you have known since you were an infant. It will carry you through these terrible times; it will secure your faith in God and maintain your holy character. Moreover, this same Bible will function as an adequate equipment with which you can teach and correct others. Now, the time will come when people don't want to hear what the Bible has to say. But you must preach the word of God, whether the times are favorable or unfavorable. Even when people refuse to listen to the Bible, preach the Bible some more – 'keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry' (4:5). Even when your preaching ministry is not welcomed, just keep on doing what you are supposed to do."

But Paul does *not* say, "If the people refuse to listen to Bible preaching, then you must accommodate them and reach them where they are. You must dilute the message somewhat so that you will not offend them right away. You must make your church seeker-friendly so that even those who hate the Bible will come in and feel comfortable, and that even those who gather around themselves teachers who will say what they want to hear will somehow accept you. If they don't like the Bible, maybe you can make your sermons shorter, or not preach at all. Maybe you can play the kind of music that they will

²⁹ See Vincent Cheung, *Preach the Word*.

enjoy. And if you will open a coffee shop *inside* the church, then it will make the church experience even more enjoyable for people."

Many churches have strayed far from what the apostle prescribes. He says, "If people don't want to hear the Bible, *keep on preaching it*. Discharge all the duties of your ministry." The Bible is sufficient for everyone – to teach children, to equip ministers, and to confront hardened apostates and hostile detractors.

3. UTILITY

The utility of Scripture cannot be separated from its sufficiency. As we will see, the Scripture is useful because it is inspired and sufficient, and it is sufficient because it is inspired. By the utility of Scripture, we have in mind the fact of Scripture's usefulness as well as the ways that it is used and applied. We have in mind the question of how this *sufficient* book becomes *efficient* in our lives and ministries.

To this question, Paul writes, "All Scripture is God-breathed *and is useful* for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). In context, Paul is telling Timothy that the Scripture is able to see him through the "terrible times" and is "useful" to fully equip him for ministry. Of course, the inspiration of Scripture is not a new teaching to Timothy, but Paul mentions it here to explicitly base the usefulness of Scripture on its inspiration and authority. We will consider why he does this and what this means in a moment.

The word translated "useful" here means "useful," "profitable," "beneficial," "advantageous," and so forth. It also appears in 1 Timothy 4:8 and Titus 3:8, and is consistently translated "profitable" in the KJV and NASB. In 1 Timothy, it refers to the enduring and far-reaching "value" of godliness, "holding promise for both the present life and the life to come." In Titus, it seems that the word refers to holy character, sound doctrine, and "doing what is good," with Paul saying that "These things are excellent and profitable for everyone." There are no interpretive problems with this word in 2 Timothy. Precisely what "useful" or "profitable" means here is defined by the context.

a. Modes of Application

Other than what we can derive from the broader context, Paul immediately lists several things for which Scripture is useful and profitable.³⁰ He says, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for *teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness*, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." The word "for" (*pros*) appears before each of the items listed in verse 16, but the NIV omits this. That part of the verse literally says, "profitable *for* teaching, *for* reproof, *for* correction, *for* training in righteousness" (NASB).

We have already dealt with the triple emphasis on Scripture's sufficiency in verse 17 – it is an unmistakable declaration that the Bible is the *all-sufficient* tool for ministry. It is enough to address every need. Here we will turn our attention to the four items in the second part of verse 16.

³⁰ Also see 2 Timothy 4:2: "correct, rebuke and encourage." I have given an exposition of this in *Preach the Word*.

Scripture is useful "for *teaching*." The word appears also in 1 Timothy 4:6, 13, 16, and 6:3. As it is "a technical term in the [Pastoral Epistles] for the doctrinal formulation of Scripture,"³¹ another good translation is "doctrine," which is how the word is often rendered. Here it refers to the positive task of teaching the biblical doctrines, or the system of truth that God has revealed in Scripture. It is the positive exposition of the whole counsel of God. As Gordon Fee notes, this is the minister's "primary responsibility."³²

If the Scripture is merely "useful" for teaching, then the possibility remains that it needs to be supplemented with something else that is also useful for teaching. But Paul does not allow such an inference, since in this verse he declares that Scripture is useful for teaching and other things, *so that* the man of God may be *complete*, and *fully* equipped for *every* good work. In other words, the Bible is not only "useful" for teaching, but it is also sufficient and complete, containing all that is necessary for the teaching ministry.

There is also an essential relationship between the utility and sufficiency of Scripture with its inspiration and authority. Scripture is useful for teaching not only because it contains sufficient doctrinal information, but it is also sufficient in another sense, namely, that it is "God-breathed," and therefore speaks with ultimate authority. Thus the Scripture is useful and sufficient for teaching because, if the Bible asserts something, it is God's word on the subject, and that settles the matter. No additional confirmation is required, and any extra-biblical evidence cited as support would in fact carry an infinitely inferior authority, so that its rational value would be negligible.

Then, Scripture is useful "for *rebuking*." Several English versions favor "for reproof." This translation can be misleading, and at best it conveys only part of what the word means. The original has the sense of prosecuting a case against error, so that Jay Adams translates it as "conviction."³³ This is to be taken first in the objective sense, as in to convict someone in a court of law.³⁴ Only in a secondary sense or as a byproduct of the objective conviction does the word refer to a subjective feeling of guilt or admission of wrongdoing.

Here the word mainly refers to the minister's opposition against false teachers and their doctrines instead of the people's sinful behavior (which is taken up by the next item). Paul is saying that, besides offering a constructive system of truth, the Bible is also sufficient for "the conviction of false doctrine."³⁵ Therefore, Lenski suggests the word "refutation" instead.³⁶

³¹ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2000), p. 570.

³² Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), p. 279.

³³ Jay E. Adams, *The Christian Counselor's New Testament and Proverbs* (Timeless Texts, 2000).

³⁴ Jay E. Adams, *How to Help People Change* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), p. 113-115.

³⁵ Mounce, p. 570. Also, Fee, p. 280, and Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles, Revised Edition* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), p. 176.

³⁶ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus, and to Philemon* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), p. 846.

Just as the Bible is both sufficient and profitable for teaching, it is also sufficient and profitable for refuting error. Lattimore even offers the translation, "useful...for *argument*." Keeping in mind that Paul considers it "useful" to the extent of being "complete," he is saying that Scripture supplies all that is necessary to perform such a task, so that the minister requires no extra-biblical materials.

Also, since he bases the Scripture's usefulness and sufficiency to refute error on the fact that Scripture is "God-breathed," this means that once a position has been refuted by Scripture, it has been declared false by God. Nothing else can add to God's authority, and thus nothing else can strengthen the refutation. Any belief that has been rejected by Scripture is a dead position. Possessing an infinitely inferior authority, or none at all, human philosophy and the natural sciences cannot resuscitate any position that has been refuted by the Bible, nor can they make it any more false or absurd. God's word is true and final, and thus Scripture is sufficient and profitable for refutation, for doctrinal combat.

Paul then proceeds from the doctrinal to the ethical. Scripture, he says, is useful "for *correcting*." The word means to restore to an upright position, and denotes moral reformation. To "correct" something implies existing wrongdoing, and so this word refers to the negative aspect of Scripture's moral authority and guidance.

Because Scripture is "God-breathed," it carries God's own authority on moral matters. Therefore, when Scripture exposes sin and corrects error, God himself is speaking. This ends all moral debates and speculations. If the Bible says something is good and right, then it is good and right. If the Bible says that something is evil and wrong, then it is evil and wrong. Nothing can add to or take away from the authority and certainty of Scripture's declarations on moral matters. The Bible is sufficient and profitable for correction.

Scripture is also useful "for *training* in righteousness." The word for "training" is *paideia*. It can refer to instruction, discipline, or the whole program of training for the young, so that some translations prefer the word "education." But Paul is talking about a training and education "in righteousness," and thus the phrase denotes positive ethical instruction, or the other side of "correction."

Again, since God is the sole moral authority, since his moral declarations are absolute and final, and since the Bible is the very word and mind of God on all matters revealed through it, this means that the moral teachings of the Bible are authoritative, absolute, and final. There is no difference at all between what the Bible says and what God thinks concerning moral matters.

Moreover, the Bible contains enough information so that the man of God may be fully equipped for every good work. In other words, the Bible contains a complete moral system. It is sufficient and profitable to provide moral instruction and guidance, and to define good and evil. It is the first and final word on all moral considerations, and is to be the first and final court of appeal for all moral debates and discussions.

Putting together all of the above, the verse teaches us that Scripture is God-breathed, and therefore it is profitable to address the positive and negative aspects of both creed and conduct. Moreover, it is profitable to the utmost extent, so that with it, the man of God is complete and fully equipped for ministry. He needs nothing else.

This provides us with pivotal insights for faithful and effective ministry, although the principles are also relevant to any setting in which the word of God is applied. The obvious point, which we have repeatedly emphasized, is the sufficiency of Scripture, and we have also noted what this sufficiency means. But Paul is more specific, and specific instructions enable us to be more precise and deliberate in our use of Scripture. He tells us that Scripture could be used to address both creed and conduct, not just one of the two. Then, whether we are addressing creed or conduct, he tells us that Scripture has both constructive and destructive uses.

We should examine how we are using Scripture in the light of this information, and align our ministry's focus and agenda with it. To illustrate, some ministries focus almost exclusively on refuting doctrinal error, cults, and false religions. They are doing the Body of Christ an important service, but at the same time, this imbalance could inflict great damage and hinder the overall progress of the gospel.

Of the four items listed in the verse, the first one is the foundation – that is, the constructive teaching of Scripture. Hendriksen agrees that "This is ever basic to everything else."³⁷ Doctrinal error is discerned and refuted only relative to an absolute standard of doctrinal truth. Likewise, both the positive and negative aspects of the ethical principles in Scripture are founded on the authority of God's positive revelation. Without the positive and constructive teaching of Scripture, the other items would lack the necessary reference point from which they must operate.

Even so, the negative uses of Scripture are not to be neglected. Certainly the man of God must confront heresies and sins with the Bible, but these are what they are only because they stray from or go against the positive teachings of Scripture. As Paul writes, "He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (Titus 1:9). The minister must refute those who oppose sound doctrine, but this means that sound doctrine must be previously defined, and it is sound doctrine that we seek to uphold even as we issue the refutation.

So whether we are referring to our preaching, our parenting, or our individual spiritual growth, our work is inferior and incomplete if we apply the Bible only to refute errors and neglect to provide constructive teachings, or vice versa. Likewise, we must make the proper adjustments if we notice that we are addressing only matters of conduct and not of creed, or vice versa (see also Jeremiah 1:10). Then, we shall be well on our way to having, as one of Spurgeon's books is called, an "all-round ministry."^{38 39}

³⁷ Hendriksen, p. 303. Also, Fee, p. 279.

³⁸ Charles H. Spurgeon, *An All-Round Ministry* (The Banner of Truth Trust).

b. Spheres of Application

When it comes to the sufficiency of Scripture, we have said that the Scripture itself must define both the questions and the answers. Scripture tells us what subjects are important and then it tells us what to believe about them. And although it is sufficient for everyone, it specifies various categories of people so that we may be more conscious and deliberate in our application of biblical teachings.

The same is true with the utility of Scripture. Because Scripture tells us about its own various uses – such as to teach, refute, correct, and educate – we can be much more deliberate in our application, and we are much more likely to become aware of our negligence and imbalance.

For this reason, it would benefit us to also consider the different spheres in which the Scripture can be applied. By "spheres," we refer to the social contexts or circles in which people function. A simple dictionary definition would be "place in society" or "walk of life." For example, the school and the office represent two different social spheres or circles.

The various spheres accommodate different types of relationships and operate by different rules, and they present different opportunities as well as difficulties, challenges, and temptations. Of course they overlap, and what happens to a person in one social sphere carries over to another. Nevertheless, they are often well-defined enough to be discussed separately and specifically. Again, this enables us to become more deliberate in our application of Scripture, and also more aware of our negligence.

Although we have already affirmed that the Scripture has universal application, and that it demands every person's attention and obedience, as with categories of people, it also acknowledges different social spheres. Here we will discuss three major ones, but only in brief, and only to raise some of the issues that must be addressed. These must be addressed by applying what we have already discussed above, and by reflecting on the whole teaching of the Bible regarding each of these areas of life.

The social spheres that we will discuss are the home, the church, and the world. It is within these contexts that we must use the Scripture to teach, to refute, to correct, and to educate ourselves and others, and to promote salvation and sanctification.

The home, or the family, is the smallest circle on our list, but it is also the building block of the others. The Scripture is authoritative, sufficient, and profitable to define the family's relationship with God, the church, and the world, the authority structure between the members, the relationship between the husband and the wife, the relationship between parents and children, the authority and responsibilities of the parents, how widows within

³⁹ At this point, the original plan for this exposition proceeds to discuss several ways or modes by which Scripture is presented – namely, speaking, writing, and reading. However, due to a lack of time, we will forgo these items and move on to the next and final section.

the family should be treated, and all other related issues. It should also regulate the family in the areas of education, work, money, sex, food, health, time, recreation, and entertainment.

In other words, Scripture's authority and usefulness touches every aspect of family life. Most families do almost nothing to enforce biblical teachings in the home. There is much more to going to church together, praying together, and reading the Bible together. For example, most men probably know nothing about dealing with ungodly in-laws other than to practice the most general biblical principles such as love, forgiveness, or "a soft answer turns away wrath," and more often than not, even these are misunderstood and misapplied by them. This is why families must *deliberately* study and apply what the Bible has to say about how the home ought to operate.

Although the family is the building block of the church, it usually functions in connection with and even under the influence and authority of the church. Yes, the family can operate in *relative* independence from the church as a self-contained unit, so that a church that seeks to exercise *absolute* authority over a family is really a cult, but the Bible's command to obey church leaders and serve the interests of the covenant community applies to the individual families that make up such a community.

Moreover, the church is where the word of God is authoritatively preached and enforced. Of course, the word of God is also preached and enforced in the family, but the church is a larger institution that preaches and enforces the word of God *to* the family. Whereas the husband is the final court of appeal in the home, if the need arises, special appeals could be made to the church, so that under the authority of Scripture, the church may offer counsel or render a verdict, and in extreme cases, even excommunicate the offender.

For example, the husband could appeal to the church if his wife persistently refuses to obey him, or the wife could appeal if her husband abuses her – that is, not as she defines abuse, but as the Bible would define it. Feuding families that cannot settle their disputes by themselves may also appeal to the church. This can work very well even when the families involved belong to different churches, that is, if both churches are committed to enforcing the biblical principles of church discipline. However, it is difficult for many families to find *any* church that even knows about what the Bible teaches on the subject, not to mention one that would enforce it. This contributes to the way that Christians often disgrace the kingdom of Christ before the world's court, as if the church cannot even settle the smallest matters among its members.

Then, as mentioned, the church's primary task is to preach and enforce the word of God, that is, the Bible. It is "the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15). Under this general description, there are many tasks that it must perform. The Sunday sermon is obvious, but it should also provide individual counseling, theology classes, and ministry training.

These are just different ways of applying the sufficient word of God in different contexts, on different levels, and toward different people. But the sufficiency and usefulness of

Scripture do not only imply *that* these things should be done by the church, but also *how* they ought to be done. For example, because the Bible is sufficient to fully equip the man of God for every good work, secular theories and methods are unnecessary and even undesirable in church counseling. If the filet mignon is just right, spreading horse manure on it would not make it taste any better.

Moreover, since the Bible itself claims that it makes the man of God *complete*, and *fully* equipped for *every* good work, then the church should be able to train its own ministers without sending them to seminary. Whether the seminary serves a legitimate purpose is a separate question, but it should not be *necessary*. If the seminary is *necessary* to fully equip the man of God, it can only mean that the church is not effectively teaching the whole word of God.

In this case, the solution is to fix the church, and not to build a seminary. And it would not do to say that it takes a seminary-trained person to fix the church, since this argument would work for one generation at best – if the seminary-trained minister fixes the problem, this deficiency in the church should no longer exist in the next generation.

Now, if the seminary is only an extension of the church, then I would have no problem with it. However, it would then be unnecessary to even call it a seminary – it would just be part of what the church is doing to train its own ministers. Also, it must then actually operate like part of the church. It should not charge any tuition,⁴⁰ and it should be overseen by church elders, not deans and directors. It should be taught by actual ministers, not just professors. Instead of granting degrees, it should issue personalized letters of recommendation attesting to both the orthodoxy and the character of the disciples it promotes to eldership or sends forth to other places. In addition, church discipline should be enforced, and those who affirm heresies or persist in known vices must not be allowed to "graduate." It should be a discipleship program (with the most rigorous academic training), not an academic program. The truth is that most seminaries are not like this, but their entire system is patterned after secular institutions, and most of their graduates are unfit for ministry.⁴¹

An even larger sphere than the church is the world. By the world, we can refer to all human beings in general, including both Christians and non-Christians, or of non-Christians in particular. Sometimes we may be referring to a circle that is outside of the church, but might include both Christians and non-Christians, such as the school, the office, or the government.

The Bible draws a clear line separating the church and the world. It tells us to remain in the world but not to be contaminated by it. Reacting against hermitism, many believers throw themselves into the world, participating in almost all that it has to offer. As a result, they have ended up on the other extreme, that of befriending the world, and using as an excuse the claim that they are embracing God's creation and functioning as salt and

⁴⁰ However, the church might require a faithful pattern of giving from its students as part of their character training and to help them become good examples to others.

⁴¹ See Vincent Cheung, "Church and Seminary," in *Doctrine and Obedience*.

light to the world. If this is what they are really doing, then the world would either change, or vomit them back out. But the world is comfortable with them because they *are* the world. Let us not deceive ourselves. The Bible says that we must remain in the world so that we may preach to it, to be a witness *against* it, to lead people *out of* its darkness, but not so that we may play with it.

The Bible is sufficient to address all people, even hostile unbelievers, scoffers, and apostates. It supplies sufficient materials for a full system of apologetics, and a complete method and message for evangelism. But as we are speaking of all things outside the church, the Bible is not only good for apologetics and evangelism, but it defines and rules over all aspects of all people. This means that it is the defining standard for art, science, commerce, and even government.

Speaking of the government, there is much discussion and debate about the separation of church and state. The controversy in this country has much to do with the meaning and interpretation of the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States. On this point, I agree that the First Amendment is meant to protect the church from the state, or at best from each other, but not to eliminate religion from all government sponsored programs and activities, such as the public school system.

However, the First Amendment has only a local, legal, and practical relevance. It has no direct relationship with whether something is right or wrong from the perspective of God's absolute revealed standard. The prior question is whether the First Amendment is biblical in the first place. If it is unbiblical, then it is wrong, and believers must oppose it. But if it is biblical, then it is right, and believers should advocate what it says even if there is no such amendment in the Constitution. Regardless of what human law actually says and means, the more important, universal, and spiritually relevant issue is what the Bible teaches about the proper relationship between the church and the state.

Now, suppose we agree that the church and the state are two different institutions with different functions, and that one should not usurp the other's authority. For example, the church has the power to excommunicate a murderer, but it has no right to execute him. This indeed answers some questions, but sometimes people miss the larger point, and therefore arrive at erroneous conclusions about how the government should operate. They tend to forget that just because the church cannot control or replace the government does not mean that the government is free from God's authority, or what is the equivalent in this context, the Bible's authority.

Lawmakers, politicians, judges, police officers, and so on, are all human individuals, and as such, they are *never* exempt from believing the gospel and behaving as Christians. They are not morally free to be atheists, to ignore biblical precepts, or to follow non-Christian religions and philosophies just because they work for the state. Every unbiblical law and every unbiblical opinion is sinful when found in any context and in any person, and will be judged by God according to the standard that he has revealed in Scripture.

Thus a government is either for Christ or against him. Just as no human individual can be neutral toward Christ, neither can a government, which consists of human individuals, be neutral. Any government that claims to be religiously neutral has already set itself against Christ. In fact, as is true with human individuals, any government that fails to explicitly pledge allegiance to Christ is an enemy of Christ.

Therefore, at least from this perspective it is irrelevant that the state is a separate institution from the church, and that the church has no legislative authority over it – the government is *directly* under the threat of divine curse to follow *all* that the Bible commands in *all* that it does. The fact that it is not accountable to the church makes no difference, since it is still directly accountable to God, and God condemns all laws, all opinions, and all actions other than those that he approves and permits through Scripture. Thus if the government does not learn its obligations to God from the church, it must still learn it directly from the Bible.

Many Christians are wary of theonomy, but how can the state rationally justify laws against murder, theft, rape, perjury, or any such thing without appealing to Scripture? In fact, how can the government justify its very existence apart from the Bible? Here we do not have to discuss the rights and wrongs of Reformed Theonomy, but there is no denying the fact that the government cannot justify its own existence, understand its own purpose and mandate, or define the various crimes and the severity of each crime without the Bible.⁴² If we must call this a form of theonomy, then so be it.

Many Christians have no idea what they are fighting for. They claim to reject all forms of theonomy, and that they want total religious freedom for everyone, but then they would fight for the government sanctioned public display of the Ten Commandments. Do they not see that there is no such thing as the "Ten Commandments" in the abstract? What are these ten commandments? If they are fighting for the right to display two tablets of stone with ten Roman letters engraved on them, then they are not fighting for the biblical ten commandments at all. They frequently speak of how our laws are based on "Judeo-Christian values." But there are no values in "I, II, III, IV...."

The Ten Commandments are not just the words "Ten Commandments," but there are actually *ten commandments* that God revealed to Israel in the midst of a spectacular display of his power and glory. To cite only the first commandment would be sufficient to make my point: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). To fight for the government's permission or sanction to publicly display the Ten Commandments is not to fight for the right to display two blank tablets of stone or the words "The Ten Commandments," but the *actual* ten commandments, including this first one. To fight for "Judeo-Christian values" is not to fight for a meaningless expression, but to fight for the moral laws revealed in the Bible, including the first commandment.

⁴² To defend this statement, we only need to apply our usual approach of biblical-presuppositional apologetics to the area of politics. If all non-Christian worldviews fail at the start, then there can be no rational justification for any non-Christian theory about *anything*, and this includes politics. See Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions, Presuppositional Confrontations, and On Good and Evil*.

What is the meaning of all this? It means that if you are fighting for the Ten Commandments as a mere abstraction, instead of fighting for the government's sanction to *declare* and *enforce* the actual ten commandments, then it is not worth the effort, since you are fighting for a cause that is without meaning and without content, and that has nothing to do with Christianity.

On the other hand, if you are demanding the government to sanction and sponsor a public declaration of the Ten Commandments as the actual ten commandments, beginning with "You shall have no other gods before me," then understand that you are not just fighting to make room for Christianity as one option among many, but you are fighting for the right – by the government's sanction, on the government's property – to publicly condemn all non-biblical religions, all non-biblical philosophies, and all their adherents, and to exalt Christianity as the only true religion and the only legitimate basis for human civilization. Now *this* is a cause I can support.

For the government to admit that it is founded on Christian principles is also to declare that its very foundation condemns all non-Christian ones, as such a condemnation is fundamental to Christianity. And although such a government might not actively persecute them, all non-Christians living under it are nevertheless regulated and judged by explicitly Christian principles. This is what we demand our government to tell the world when we call for it to acknowledge its Christian roots. And what a grotesque monster our government would seem, if from Christian roots it grows not only Christian, but also Muslim and Buddhist fruits. The Bible is sufficient and profitable to build a nation, and if the foundation is truly Christian, then exclusion must be part of this foundation.