INERRANCY

AND

WORLDVIEW

ANSWERING MODERN CHALLENGES TO THE BIBLE

VERN SHERIDAN POYTHRESS

"I can think of no one in the world better qualified to write a defense of biblical inerrancy than my lifelong friend Vern Poythress. This book is no ordinary defense of inerrancy that merely focuses on proposed solutions to several difficult verses (though it does examine some of them). Rather, it is a wide-ranging analysis that exposes the faulty intellectual assumptions that underlie challenges to the Bible from every major academic discipline in the modern university world. I think every Christian student at every secular university should read and absorb the arguments in this book. It is profoundly wise, insightful, and clearly written, and it will surely strengthen every reader's confidence in the trustworthiness of the Bible as the very words of God."

Wayne Grudem, Research Professor of Theology and Biblical Studies, Phoenix Seminary

"Vern Poythress has written what I consider to be definitive books on many subjects, including biblical interpretation, language, science, and sociology. In *Inerrancy and Worldview*, he brings his insights from these disciplines and more together to address the relation of biblical inerrancy to worldview. He shows quite convincingly that the issue of inerrancy is not just a matter of asking whether this or that biblical passage is factual. Rather, our attitude toward the claim of biblical inerrancy depends on our general view of how God is related to the cosmos and to us as individuals and societies. And that general view, in turn, depends on our relationship to Jesus Christ. The book gets deeper into the question of inerrancy than any other book I know."

John M. Frame, J. D. Trimble Chair of Systematic Theology and Philosophy, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, Florida

"Every new item that Vern Poythress writes is thoughtful, creative, and worth reading. This book is no exception. Among the many things I like about it is his emphasis on the personalist worldview of the Bible, as over against the impersonalism that dominates modern Western culture. Besides the book's crucial contribution to the subject of clarifying how God communicates to us through the Bible, the basic idea of a personalist worldview will be fruitful for a good number of other topics as well. Thanks, Dr. Poythress—and thanks, God, for giving him to the church."

C. John Collins, Professor of Old Testament, Covenant Theological Seminary

"To our shame, the response of Christians to challenges to our faith can often be dismissive, shallow, defensive, or disrespectful. On the other hand, we can err too much on the side of tolerance for error when truth is under siege. In *Inerrancy and Worldview*, Vern Poythress shows us how to be neither fools nor cowards. Through intelligent, informed, insightful, and respectful engagement, key foundational faith defeaters taught in many disciplines at every secular university are explained and critiqued from a biblical perspective. Poythress challenges the challenges to biblical belief at the root of their assumptions. We are left with a solid basis and defense of the Christian way of thinking. *Inerrancy and Worldview* should be required reading for all who want to think more deeply about their faith and defend it within a skeptical culture."

Erik Thoennes, Professor of Theology,
Talbot School of Theology/Biola University;
Pastor, Grace Evangelical Free Church, La Mirada, California

"Vern Poythress has provided both the church and the academy a remarkable service with *Inerrancy and Worldview*. Recognizing that the modern objection to Scripture is neither univocal nor objective, but rather varied and religious, he helpfully reframes the discussion in terms of competing worldviews. By surveying the various options for the allegiance of the modern mind, Poythress shows not only that an inerrant Bible is a reasonable expectation of a personal God, but also that our rejection of it is rooted not in evidence, but in our sinful rebellion against that God. With clear logic and pastoral care, Poythress leads us through an amazing tour of both the 'wisdom of our age' and the follies of our hearts, bringing us at last to the God who speaks—humbling our pride and setting our hearts free."

Michael Lawrence, Senior Pastor, Hinson Baptist Church, Portland,
Oregon; author, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church*

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Answering Modern Challenges to the Bible

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To my wife,
who has faithfully encouraged me
in trusting God's Word

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Preface

How do we understand the Bible? In recent decades a number of books, articles, blogs, and other voices within the broad community of evangelical Christians have urged us to rethink how we understand the Bible. These discussions about the Bible have special interest for evangelicals and fundamentalists who believe that the Bible is the word of God.[1]

Some of the new voices express discontent with the traditional view of the Bible's absolute authority as the word of God. The traditional evangelical view says that the Bible is *inerrant*; that is, it is completely true in what it says, and makes no claims that are not true.[2] Inerrancy has become a sore point. Some of the voices directly attack inerrancy. Others redefine it.[3]

The struggle about the Bible has many dimensions. Modern challenges come from various directions. We confront postmodernist thinking, alleged discrepancies or errors in the Bible, growing information about the ancient

[1]I consider fundamentalists to be a subgroup within evangelicals. I grant that the words *evangelical* and *fundamentalist* today are rather loosely defined.

[2]The classic statement on inerrancy is found in Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948). See also Archibald A. Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield, *Inspiration*, with introduction by Roger R. Nicole (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979); Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *God's Word in Servant-Form: Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck on the Doctrine of Scripture* (Jackson, MS: Reformed Academic Press, 2008); John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982); Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. 1, *Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 353–494. Some people have seen Bavinck and Kuyper as differing significantly from Warfield and Hodge, but like Gaffin I see all four—Hodge, Warfield, Bavinck, and Kuyper—in harmony. On the diversity of genres in the Bible, see Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), esp. chaps. 19 and 23 and appendix H. See also chap. 31 of the present book.

[3]Cornelius Van Til did not live to see the challenges thrown up in the last two decades; but what he wrote in responding to similar challenges in his own day is still pertinent. See Van Til, *The Protestant Doctrine of Scripture* (n.p.: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1967); Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, 2nd ed., ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007).

Near East that allegedly throws doubt on traditional readings of the Bible, and tensions between the Bible and science.

I agree that our modern world confronts us with some distinctive challenges. But I do not agree with the modern attempts to abandon or redefine inerrancy. To respond to all the modern voices one by one would be tedious, because the voices are diverse and new voices continue to appear. Rather, I want to develop an alternative response in a *positive* way.

Some of the new voices tell us that we need to think through more thoroughly the humanity of Scripture. The Bible itself identifies some of the human authors who wrote its books—for example, Paul, John, Jeremiah, Amos. It also indicates that the writing of the books was superintended by God, and that God sent the Holy Spirit to the human authors to work in them in such a way that their writings were also God's writings, his own word (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21). Thus, the Bible does invite us to think about the human authors and what they did. But we are unlikely to appreciate the role of human authors accurately and in depth without understanding God, who made human beings in his image (Gen. 1:26–27).

The Bible has much to say about God and about how we can come to know him. What it says is deeply at odds with much of the thinking in the modern world. And this fundamental difference generates differences in many other areas—differences in people's whole view of the world. Modern worldviews are at odds with the worldview put forward in the Bible. This difference in worldviews creates obstacles when modern people read and study the Bible. People come to the Bible with expectations that do not fit the Bible, and this clash becomes one main reason, though not the only one, why people do not find the Bible's claims acceptable.

Within the scope of a single book we cannot hope to deal with all the difficulties that people encounter. We will concentrate here on difficulties that have ties with the differences in worldview.

Introduction

Many people—even people who would call themselves Christians—have difficulties with the Bible. Some people are morally offended by parts of the Bible. Some parts of it do not fit modern ideas about good religion. What do we do with these parts? The Bible has exclusive claims about what is right and wrong in religion. It makes exclusive claims about God. It says that Jesus is the only way to God (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). It talks about hell.

Some people are troubled by apparent discrepancies between the Bible and modern science. What do we do with these discrepancies? Some people have decided that we must give up on the Bible. They say that the Bible has been shown to be outmoded and primitive. Others hope to find some core of truth in it, though they argue that the "wrappings" around the core need to be discarded.

Still others think that the Bible is the word of God, true for all time. But can they explain how to relate it intelligently to the swirl of modern questions and controversies?

These are important questions, so important that we can profit from taking our time to work toward answers. The challenge of interpreting the Bible has many dimensions and many challenges. We cannot consider them all equally.[1] We focus here on issues involving response to our modern situation.

Our Modern Situation

Our modern situation offers us various competing assumptions about religion, about the nature of humanity, about what is wrong with the world,

[1] All the books I have published relate in one way or another to biblical interpretation. For discussion of many kinds of questions about interpreting the Bible, I must direct readers to these books and books written by other authors. Readers who want an overview of most of the foundational areas, brought together in one place, may consult Vern S. Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1999).

about the purpose of life, and so on. These assumptions may have effects on how people read the Bible. We can begin to answer many of our difficulties in a number of areas if we make ourselves aware of the assumptions that we tend to bring along when we study the Bible.

But our deepest difficulties cannot be resolved merely on a narrowly intellectual plane. Our deepest difficulty is *sin*, rebellion against God. We have desires in our hearts that resist the Bible's views and what God has to say. We want to be our own master. The Bible talks about those who resist God as being "dead in . . . trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1) and "darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart" (Eph. 4:18). God himself must overcome our resistance (Acts 16:14; 2 Tim. 2:25–26; John 3:3–8). We will focus primarily on more intellectual difficulties, because these can be more directly and more easily addressed. But it is wise to remember that more stubborn difficulties lurk beneath the surface.

PART ONE

TWO COMMON RELIGIOUS DIFFICULTIES

1

How Can Only One Religion Be Right?

Let us consider one common difficulty that modern people have with the Bible: how can there be only *one* true religion?[1]

The View that All Religions Are Right

People ask this question partly because they are aware of multiple religions—Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism, to name a few. How do we respond to this multiplicity? One person, whom we may call Sue, concludes that all religions are equally right. She says that they all have a common core having to do with a loving God and being kind to your neighbor. But in selecting a common core Sue shows her own personal religious preferences. Sue speaks of a loving God. But Buddhism does not believe in a personal God. So Sue has excluded Buddhism rather than being all-inclusive. She has also excluded polytheism, which believes in many gods rather than one.[2] Sue speaks of being kind to your neighbor. But some religions have practiced child sacrifice (Deut. 18:9–10).

[1]See the further discussion in Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 3–21.

[2]A more nuanced discussion would have to consider monism as religion. By breaking down the distinctions between religions and trying to move toward one God behind all religions, Sue may be on the way to trying to break down all distinctions whatsoever. All is one. This view, articulated within philosophical Hinduism, actually has an affinity with polytheism. According to Hinduism, the "One" has a plurality of manifestations

When Sue talks about a common core, she has also put into the background the irreconcilable differences between major religions. The Bible teaches that Jesus is the Son of God. The Qur'an says that he is not the son of God, but only a prophet. The New Testament part of the Bible teaches that Jesus is the Messiah promised in the Old Testament. Modern Judaism denies that he is. Sue implicitly disagrees with all of these convictions when she implies that they really do not matter. Christianity, Islam, and Orthodox Judaism all exclude one another by having beliefs that are denied by the other two. Sue in practice excludes all three by saying that the exclusive beliefs are not the "core." Tim Keller observes, "We are all exclusive in our beliefs about religion, but in different ways."[3]

The View that All Religions Are Wrong

Let us consider another example. Donald looks over the field of religions and concludes that they are all wrong. He thinks that they all make arrogant, overreaching claims to know the truth. The differences between the claims show that no one really knows.

Donald's position is just as exclusive as Sue's, and just as exclusive as the claims of any one traditional religion. How so? He claims to know better than any religious practitioner the true status of religious claims. But you have to know a lot about God—whether he exists, whether he reveals himself, what kind of God he is—to make a claim that excludes all religions before seriously investigating any of them in detail. Donald thinks that religious claims are arrogant. The irony is that he is acting arrogantly in claiming to be superior to all religions.

Social Influence on Religious Beliefs

Many people in many cultures have had confidence in their religious views. But Donald does not have confidence in any religion. And today in Europe, Canada, and the United States we meet many people like him. Why? Sometimes sociology of religion has played a role. Sociologists observe that many people hold the religion of their parents or the predominant religion in their location and in their ethnic group. Religious convictions are passed on by society, and especially by parents. When Donald observes this social dimension of religion, he concludes that exclusive religious claims are a

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in nature, and this plurality is worshiped as many gods. See John N. Oswalt, *The Bible among the Myths: Unique Revelation or Just Ancient Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), esp. chap. 3.

[3]Keller, *Reason for God*, 13.

product of narrow ethnocentricity. Donald thinks that religion as a whole is suspect.

But now let us ask why Donald is so different from many people in non-Western cultures who confidently belong to a particular religion. Just like other people, Donald has received social influences, including the influence of sociology of religion. Donald's views about religion have been socially shaped. If social shaping undermines truth, it undermines the truth of Donald's views as well as everyone else's. Donald's views are just as "ethnocentric" as everyone else's, but Donald is unaware of it.[4]

Worldviews

Part of the challenge in searching for the truth is that we all do so against the background of assumptions about truth. Many basic assumptions about the nature of the world fit together to form a *worldview*. A worldview includes assumptions about whether God exists, what *kind* of God might exist, what kind of world we live in, how we come to know what we know, whether there are moral standards, what is the purpose of human life, and so on. Donald and those like him have inherited many convictions from the society around them.

Most modern worldviews differ at crucial points from the worldview offered in the Bible. When we come to the Bible and try to listen to its claims, we can easily misjudge those claims if we hear them only from within the framework of our own modern assumptions. Letting the Bible speak for itself, that is, letting it speak in its own terms, includes letting the Bible speak from within its own worldview rather than merely our own.

A Personal God

I propose, then, to explore this theme of differing worldviews through subsequent chapters. But I want to focus a little more narrowly. One crucial piece in the biblical worldview concerns who God is. According to the Bible, God is the Creator and sustainer of the world, and God is personal. God's *personal* character makes a difference. If you want to find out about an apple sitting in a fruit bowl, there are many ways you might go about it. You might photograph it, chemically analyze it, smell it, cut it up, eat it. It is up to you; the apple has no choice in the matter. But getting to know a person is different. You are not completely in charge. You may be able to observe

[4]"If the pluralist had been born in [Morocco] he probably wouldn't be a pluralist" (ibid., 11, quoting Alvin Plantinga, "A Defense of Religious Exclusivism," in *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, ed. James F. Sennett [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 205). "You can't say, 'All claims about religions are historically conditioned except the one I am making right now'" (Keller, *Reason for God*, 11).

a stranger's actions at a distance. But for real acquaintance, you must meet the person, and the person must cooperate. It is up to the other person how much he or she will tell you.

Some of the thinking about religion makes a mistake right here. If, in our thinking, God or religion becomes like an apple, we are in charge and we do our own investigating in whatever way we please. On the other hand, if God is a person, and in fact a person infinitely greater than we, it is up to him how he chooses to meet us. Until we get to know him, we cannot say whether he makes himself known in all religions equally, or in none of them, or in one particular way that fits his character.

The Bible claims to be God's communication to us. That is an exclusive claim. But mere exclusiveness, as we have seen, does not disqualify the claim. We have to find out by reading the Bible, not by rejecting it beforehand. And we have to reckon with the fact that God as a person may be different from what we imagine him to be. Getting acquainted succeeds better if it takes place without a lot of prejudice getting in the way.[5]

[5]See chap. 32, on pride.

2

Are Moral Rules a Straitjacket?

Consider a second difficulty with the Bible. Some modern people see the moral instruction in the Bible as a straitjacket.[1] They may disagree with some of the Bible's specific moral pronouncements. But they have a deeper difficulty: absolute moral rules seem to them to be an assault on their freedom.

The Worldview Question

People in other cultures have not found the same difficulty with the Bible. Many Christians in previous centuries have valued its instruction. So what causes the differences?

Once again, competing worldviews are one source of difference. The God of the Bible is a personal God. According to the Bible's teaching and its personalist worldview, God has a moral character. Whether or not we accept his moral guidance matters to him.

But if that is all we say, we can still feel as though moral rules are an imposition on human freedom. The Bible has a many-sided reply to this modern feeling. God made human beings in his image (Gen. 1:26–28), so that we have a moral character ourselves. We have a sense of right and wrong. And God made us with a purpose, so that we would grow in fellowship with him and find freedom and satisfaction in fellowship with him rather than in isolation.

[1]Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 35–50.

Different worldviews lead to different conceptions of freedom. If there were no God, freedom might mean freedom to create our own purposes. It might mean freedom from all constraint, which implies, in the end, freedom from the constraints of personal relationships. The ideal freedom would be to live in isolation. On the other hand, if God exists and is personal, freedom means not isolation but joy in appreciating both other human beings and God the infinite person. God's moral order is designed by God to guide us into personal fellowship and satisfaction. It is for our good. It is for our freedom, we might say, in the true sense of "freedom." The person who goes astray from God's wise guidance burdens himself with sorrows and frustrations. In fact, he ends up being a slave to his own desires.

What Makes Sense

The person who rejects the Bible's moral guidance thinks that he has good reasons for rejecting it. It seems reasonable to him to seek "freedom" rather than the Bible's instruction, which he deems to be oppressing and confining. But his judgments about freedom and about oppression are colored by a worldview. He already has assumptions about what would be a meaningful and fulfilling life—what true freedom would mean. And his assumptions depend on his conception of whether God is relevant, and whether God is personal. Thus, he may reject the Bible not because the Bible does not make sense in its own terms, but because he is not reading it on its own terms. He is injecting his own worldview and his own agenda about the kind of freedom that he pictures for himself as ideal.

The Bible's own view of the matter has still another dimension. The Bible indicates that God created us and designed us to have personal fellowship with him and to follow his ways. But we have gone astray and rebelled. We want to be our own master. That is sin. Sin colors our thinking and makes us dislike the idea of submitting to anyone else. Even though God's way is healthy and our own way is destructive, we do not want to stop following our own way. So when we interact with the Bible, we are not just innocent evaluators. We have a destructive agenda. And that is part of the problem. The problem is not just the worldviews "out there," so to speak, but the worldviews and sinful desires "in here." Our secret desires for sin mesh with the ideological offerings of the worldviews that are "on sale" in our society.

PART TWO

CHALLENGES FROM SCIENCE AND MATERIALISM

3

Worldviews and Materialism

Consider a third area of difficulty. Some people say that modern science has shown us that miracles are impossible. In addition, they may say that we now know that the world consists of matter and motion and energy. God is irrelevant. These claims are at odds with the Bible. How do we approach these challenges?

Worldviews

Once again, awareness about differing worldviews can help. We can generalize from the examples in the previous two chapters. In the first chapter we asked whether there can be one true religion. In the second chapter we asked whether absolute moral standards put a straitjacket on human freedom. The responses to both questions show that we are influenced by our assumptions—our worldview. Most modern people have a modern worldview that is deeply at odds with the view of the world that the Bible offers.

So what is this modern worldview? In a sense, the pluralism of our time offers many worldviews. The various traditional religions still exist, and each offers answers to basic questions. What is the nature of our world? What is its basic structure and meaning? Where did it come from? What is the significance of human nature and of each individual human being? What is the goal of living? What if something is wrong with the world or human beings in it? How can the wrong be remedied? How do we know what is morally

right and wrong? Is there an afterlife? What is it like? What implications, if any, does the afterlife have for the way we live now?

Modern Materialism

Alongside the answers from traditional religions come distinctly modern answers, especially answers that build on and appeal to the findings of modern science. One dominant influence is what we might call modern *materialism*. Materialism is a worldview that offers answers to the basic questions about the meaning of life. According to materialism, the world consists in matter and energy and motion. The world is *physical* in its most basic and deepest structure. Everything else is built up from complex combinations and interactions of matter and energy and motion. Elementary particles form into atoms; atoms form into molecules; molecules form into larger structures like crystals and living cells; cells form organs and organisms; and each one of us is such an organism. The structure of our brains leads to complex human actions and thoughts, and these lead to human meaning.

According to this view, the world has physical meaning that derives from matter and energy and motion. Everything else is added human meanings that we ourselves create in the process of interpreting what we experience.

According to materialism, the universe as we know it originated in the big bang. Human beings are random products of biological evolution, so we have no particular distinct significance except what we create for ourselves. The goal of living is whatever each of us as an individual chooses. But the cosmos as a whole has no goal, no purpose. And it looks as though life itself is only temporary, because the winding down of the amount of free energy in the universe will eventually make it impossible for life to exist. The universe will end up cold and inert.[1]

According to this view, there is nothing wrong with the world—the world simply *is*. There is no afterlife. Morality is a by-product of the human brain in its biological structure and human social interaction.

When considered in its totality, the materialist worldview is bleak and forbidding in comparison to human spiritual aspirations. We may meet people who try to hold to it consistently. But we meet many more who are influenced by it without swallowing every piece of it. They long for human

[1]One current cosmological view holds that the observable expansion in the universe will gradually slow down, then stop, then reverse, leading in the far future to a "big crunch" in which all matter will come together into a very small area. The "crunch" would be like the big bang played in reverse. If such a crunch were to take place, it would wipe out all physical life as we know it. But most cosmologists think that the present expansion will not be reversed. They predict in the far future a universe that is cold and inert. In either case, either in a crunch or in inertness, life as we know it will eventually come to an end.

significance. They find ways of adding more comfortable extra stories onto the materialist substructure of matter and energy and motion. Some people may add a religious dimension of a pantheistic sort. They may postulate a kind of spiritual "energy" in the cosmos, with which they can commune. Nature becomes "Mother Nature." There are variations on this theme. As a society, we become pluralistic in our views of human significance, just as we are pluralistic in many other respects. We autonomously choose which ideas we wish to embrace, even when those ideas are at odds with reality.

The Difference between Natural Science and Materialism

Materialism derives most of its prestige from modern natural science. Science[2] studies matter and energy and motion in their many configurations. The narrow and single-minded focus on matter and motion, and on larger things like cells that involve complex interactions of matter and motion, is one of the secrets for scientific success. Concentrate. Through concentration on matter and motion, scientists build up gradually more and more elaborate understandings of how they work.

But the path from natural science to materialism involves a key transition. The scientist makes a decision at the beginning of his investigation to narrow his focus. Materialism converts this scientific decision into a philosophy that says that the focus of science is not only *one possible* focus, but the *only* focus that is significant. The key idea of being the *only* focus is an addition. Scientific investigation, narrowly conceived, does not prove materialism. Rather, materialism arises from confusing two distinct moves: (1) the narrow scientific strategy of focusing on what is material and (2) the claim that the narrow focus is all that there is.

Materialism nevertheless has a broad influence. It influences even the people who do not adopt it as the complete story. They are tempted to think that materialism is at the bottom of the world, and much of the rest arises from human creation of meaning.

Materialism also influences our view of regularities in the world. Scientists study regularities. The more profound regularities are called laws, such as Newton's three laws of motion.[3] These laws are regarded as impersonal.

[2]Much depends on how broadly we conceive "science." Do we, for example, include social sciences? Natural sciences, especially the "hard" sciences such as physics, chemistry, and astronomy, have the greatest prestige. So our summary is focusing on them. Biology studies living things, but these living things are often seen in modern times as "reducible" in principle to matter and energy and motion.

[3]Because of twentieth-century advances in the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics, we now know that Newton's laws are an approximation. But they may serve as an example of how people think about scientific laws.

They are a kind of cosmic mechanism that keeps the world going according to general patterns.

Many people absorb from modern culture the conviction that matter and motion are the ultimate bottom layer. But, as we observed, not everyone today is a pure, hard-nosed materialist. A worldview with *only* the initial bottom material layer is too bleak. People add other layers on top: layers for living things, layers for beauty, truth, human society, maybe some moral convictions. But in their thinking these extra layers are just as independent of God as the bottom. After all, the extra layers are built on the bottom. And the bottom layer, the matter and motion, is just there, independent of God. The bottom layer is *impersonal*. And therefore the extra layers that we add are just as impersonal as the bottom. Human beings are of course persons, but all other kinds of structure are impersonal. These structures include the physical arrangements and physical activities in our bodies on which we depend. Human beings themselves are ultimately held in being by impersonal regularities.[4]

The word *impersonalism* is probably better than *materialism* for labeling these richer views that have materialism only as an initial bottom layer. In an impersonalist view, all the layers are just "there," independent of God and unrelated to God.[5]

This ultimate *impersonalism* often goes together with some kind of acknowledgment of personal significances. In fact, it is not so hard for some people to desire to *reanimate* dead matter by ascribing semi-personal characteristics to phenomena of nature. We already mentioned the expression "Mother Nature." Such an expression gives to nature semi-personal characteristics.

If matter is at the bottom of everything, there is continuity between human beings and trees. This conviction may lead some people to dismiss what is uniquely human: they could say that consciousness and moral judgments are illusory. But they could also travel in exactly the opposite direction. They could try to commune with trees and imagine that trees too must dimly possess quasi-human characteristics. A hard-nosed scientific materialism in one part of the mind can actually be combined with a soft yearning for communion with spirits; people can travel toward new forms of animism, spiritism, polytheism, and pantheism. Everyday people within advanced industrial societies are looking into astrology and fortune-telling and spirits

[4]In a more robust account, we need to discuss chance, that is, apparent randomness, as well as regularities (lawfulness). Materialism sees both of these aspects as ultimately impersonal.

[5]On personalism and impersonalism, see Van Til, *The Protestant Doctrine of Scripture* (n.p.: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1967), 37. Van Til's writings consistently emphasize the *personalism* of the biblical approach to the nature of God and the world.

and meditation. That direction might seem paradoxical. But actually it is not surprising. In principle a thoroughgoing materialism breaks down all hard-and-fast distinctions within the world. If a materialist viewpoint is correct, all is one. And the many—the diversity of phenomena—all flow into this one. This result has a name—pantheism—that shows its religious commitment.[6] Such religious commitments may begin to populate the world with many spirits and many gods, which are semi-personal. When a viewpoint includes spirits and gods, it may in a sense appear to be *personalist*. But ultimately it is *impersonalist*, because the "one" dissolves what is distinctive to persons. In what follows we will focus on the impersonalist root rather than on the religious variations that may flourish on the basis of this root.

A Contrast with the Biblical Worldview

In contrast to impersonalism, the Bible indicates that God is involved in the world. God is personal, and he governs the world by speaking—by issuing commands. He created the world by speaking. He said, "Let there be light," and there was light (Gen. 1:3). Scientists in exploring laws are exploring the speech of God and the mind of God that issued in the laws.[7] The Bible in this way provides a role for science. But science is understood within a personalistic context. The view of the world offered in the Bible is personalistic at the core, while the mainstream modern worldview is impersonalistic. That makes a profound difference, especially when we ask about the meanings and purposes of things.

When we begin to study the Bible, the difference in worldview makes itself felt. We can gain many insights into the Bible using approaches to history, culture, and language that have been developed in the modern world. But these approaches, when we examine them more minutely, prove to be infected with the impersonalistic worldview of modern life. If we apply such approaches thoughtlessly to the Bible, we create difficulties. In fact, we are likely to think that the Bible shows deficiencies. But the deficiencies actually belong to modern thinking.

How Is Materialism Deficient?

Is materialism actually deficient? Whole books have been written on the question.[8] We cannot enter into all the issues in detail. Perhaps the easiest

[6]John N. Oswalt, *The Bible among the Myths: Unique Revelation or Just Ancient Literature?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), further articulates the implications of this kind of "mythic" thinking or "continuity" thinking that tries to surpass all distinctions.

[7]See the next chapter and Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), chap. 1.

[8]See, for example, John Lennox, *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (Oxford: Lion, 2009).

way of exposing one of its problems is by way of ethics. Is murder wrong? Is theft wrong? Why or why not? Do standards for human behavior have any foundation other than the fact that individuals or societies have invented them? If everything boils down to matter, that is, if materialistic, purposeless evolution gave rise to human beings, each individual is simply the product of evolution of matter and motion. We would then have to say that each person's moral preferences are also the product of evolution. You have evolved in such a way that you prefer helping the old lady across the street. Joe has evolved to prefer mugging the old lady and taking her money. According to this view, both you and Joe are equally products of the same impersonalist evolutionary process.

But if Joe were to mug you, you would know instinctively that it was wrong. No one actually lives on the basis of complete moral relativism or materialism. There is an obvious disconnect between someone's claim to be relativist and his own moral judgments, including his judgment that people *ought* to be relativist.

Can we rescue ourselves by appealing to a *social* rather than merely *individual* moral judgment? Is murder wrong just because society declares it to be wrong? We still have to deal with whole societies that have practiced child sacrifice or have enslaved outsiders. And in modern times we have had to deal with Nazism, where the oppression of the Jews had official government sanction. A whole society was in the wrong. We know that. And we also know when we make a judgment of that kind that we do not intend merely to express a personal, subjective preference, like preferring vanilla ice cream to chocolate. We instinctively know that there are absolutes in morality, even if some of us try to evade such knowledge by clever rhetoric.

The problem of having a foundation for ethics is serious not only because our moral judgments contradict relativism, but because every area of human endeavor, not just our attitude toward gross crimes, depends on moral foundations. People cannot practice science, or undertake historical investigation, or use language to make promises or communicate truth, or even argue for moral relativism, without presupposing that we *ought* to be faithful to standards for science and history and language. They presuppose an "ought," in the form of real moral standards. In particular, they presuppose that we *ought* to honor truth. If the standards are merely artificial social products, they are ultimately meaningless, and the products produced under the guidance of the standards have no trustworthiness or ultimate value. Why not rebel against social standards, as atheistic existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre contemplated doing? The disappearance of transcendent morality undermines not only ability to act against blatant crime, but ability to evaluate

anything at all. In particular, without moral standards, criticisms that people launch against the Bible from the platforms of science, historical research, or linguistics have no foundation.

The Bible provides a clear answer. God is the source of morality. He is absolutely good and he created us in his image, so that we have a sense of right and wrong derived from him. We depend on God being there whenever we make moral judgments. But our judgments are corrupted through sin. A lot more is corrupted as well. So we have to come to Christ to receive redemption. As part of that redemption, we receive instruction from the Bible about who God really is and what he requires, as well as instruction about redemption itself.

Influences of Materialism

Now we need to examine more closely the influences of the modern impersonalist worldview on various specialized areas of thought, such as history, language, and society. We will try to distinguish helpful insights from the unhelpful distortions that creep in from modern thinking. In the chapters to come we will consider difficulties having to do with science, history, language, social structure, and psychology.

Any one of these areas could receive more detailed discussion than what we can give here. I have chosen instead to concentrate on a common thread, namely impersonalism. For more detailed treatment of some of the areas, I must refer readers to other books. For a God-centered, personalist view of science, see *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach*. For language, see *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach*. For society and sociology, see *Redeeming Sociology: A God-Centered Approach*. For a general overview, see *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation*.[9]

[9]Poythress, *Redeeming Science*; Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009); Poythress, *Redeeming Sociology: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011); Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1999).

4

Modern Science

Now let us begin to look in more detail at special areas where people find difficulty with the Bible. The most obvious difficulty in many people's minds comes from modern science. Science, it is said, contradicts the Bible. It shows that the Bible is just one among many collections of human religious ideas.

This challenge could receive an extensive answer. The short answer is that we have to look carefully at both the Bible and science to find out whether there are real contradictions. We have to avoid reading into the Bible false meanings. And we have to inspect the work of scientists to see whether their conclusions are sound in particular cases of dispute.

Challenges arise both with respect to natural sciences and with respect to social sciences. Let us first look at issues from natural sciences.

Two Forms of God's Word

Consider first the Bible's view of the world. The Bible indicates that God expresses his truth both in the Bible and in the commands by which he rules the universe. The commands from God control the weather.

> He [God] sends out his command to the earth;
> *his word* runs swiftly.
> He gives snow like wool;
> he scatters frost like ashes.
> He hurls down his crystals of ice like crumbs;
> who can stand before his cold?

> He sends out *his word*, and melts them;
> he makes his wind blow and the waters flow. (Ps. 147:15–18)

God establishes the regularities of the universe.

> By the *word* of the LORD the heavens were made,
> and by the breath of his mouth all their host. (Ps. 33:6)

The verses we have just cited show that God rules the world by his *word*; he rules by speaking. In addition, the Bible is a particular form of God's speech, namely, written speech from God addressed to human beings (2 Tim. 3:16). We must consider both forms of God's speech. God's word governing the world is the basis for science. God's word in the Bible is the basis for theology. According to the Bible's worldview, the two words are intrinsically in harmony because God is in harmony with himself. Because God is infinite and our knowledge is limited, we may not always have enough information to see immediately how all of the pieces fit together. But many pieces do fit together to reinforce the conviction that God knows what he is doing and can be trusted in both areas—in what he does in the universe and in what he says in the Bible.

To work out all the details does take time. So at this point let us consider only three sample issues: (1) the nature of miracles, (2) the issue of whether the Bible uses an obsolete earth-centered view of the world, and (3) the nature of the days of creation in Genesis 1. In each case we need to reckon with worldviews. (For further discussion I must refer readers to books that work out more details. My own book *Redeeming Science* and C. John Collins's book *Science and Faith* make good starting points.[1])

Miracles

First, let us consider the nature of miracles. Do miracles take place? Are they consistent with science? Do miracles violate scientific laws? Has science shown that miracles do not exist? To answer these questions, we need to step back and consider briefly the nature of scientific laws. How we think about these laws and about miracles depends on our worldview. That does not mean that all worldviews are equally right or equally wrong. Rather, it means that we must be circumspect and be aware that our own view may be at odds with what God has established. We must be prepared to change our thinking.

[1]See Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006); C. John Collins, *Science and Faith: Friends or Foes?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003).

As we have observed, God created the world by his word (Ps. 33:6). And he rules the world providentially by his word: "he upholds the universe by the *word* of his power" (Heb. 1:3). The real law is God's speech. Scientists who investigate the world in order to discern its laws are really looking into the mind of God and the speech of God. When they formulate laws, those laws are their human guesses about the real law, which is God's word.

God's word is personal. It is what he commands. His commandments specify the regularities, such as the phenomena of light and the movements of sun and moon and stars. He also specifies the extraordinary events that surprise us, including the resurrection of Christ. The extraordinary events, the miracles, conform to God's word, just as do the regularities. Miracles are exceptional, but they make sense when we understand God's personal plan, which accomplished salvation and brought new life through Christ's resurrection from the dead.

For example, according to Exodus 19–20 God spoke in an audible voice to the people of Israel from the top of Mount Sinai. This speaking was an exceptional, miraculous event. It may or may not have happened in conformity with modern scientists' formulations of various natural laws. It was in full conformity with God's purposes: it was a special event in which God showed his power to his people and also inaugurated a personal relationship with them, as expressed in the Ten Commandments. The exceptional character of the physical manifestations at Mount Sinai makes good sense when we consider the physical events as an expression of God's *personal* purpose for the people of Israel. The events make little sense, on the other hand, if they are viewed as merely the products of *impersonal* laws. Skeptics, reasoning on the basis of an impersonalist conception of law, prefer to believe that Exodus 19–20 is a made-up story, because only in such a way can it be reasonably integrated into their overall assumption that *impersonal* laws govern the universe.

The same principles hold for other miracles in the Bible. The common modern approach thinks of the laws of science as fundamentally impersonal. They become mechanical. Miracles are then thought to be impossible because a miracle would break through or violate the established impersonal order. This view not only misunderstands miracle by making it a violation of law; it also misunderstands the true character of law.

The change from a personal God to impersonal law makes a difference all the way through scientific practice. But the difference can be subtle. Scientists from all religious backgrounds appear superficially to agree about

what the law is. All scientists, for example, accept Newton's second law of motion, namely, $F = ma$ (Force F equals mass m times acceleration a). This law is a good approximate representation of the relation between forces and accelerations, provided the masses involved are not too large or too small, and the velocities are not too big.[2] All scientists "agree."

But if the real law is personal, we should give thanks to God for it. We should see this one law as an expression of the wisdom of God, which coheres with all the other expressions of his wisdom. The significance of the law is changed. In addition, we have to allow for the possibility that God, for personal purposes, may sometimes act in extraordinary ways that do not match our formulation for what is normal. For example, when Christ comes back and the whole universe is reconfigured for the new heavens and the new earth (Rev. 21:1), Newton's second law might no longer hold in the new universe. That is up to God and his personal wisdom.

The Bible as Earth-Centered

Now consider a second issue: does the Bible use an earth-centered view of the world that modern science has made obsolete? Some people have pointed to Psalm 93:1, which says, "The world is established; it shall *never be moved*." Does this verse teach that the earth is fixed in space? Other verses describe the sun as moving.

> The sun *rises*, and the sun *goes down*,
> and *hastens* to the place where it rises. (Eccles. 1:5)

It is easy for modern people to conclude that the Bible is using an obsolete view where the earth is fixed and the sun moves. Ever since Copernicus, we know that in fact the earth rotates and moves around the sun. How do we understand the relation of the Bible to modern astronomy?

Once again, worldviews have an influence on interpretation. We as modern readers tend to be influenced by the impersonalism that has infected science. We may imagine that a scientific focus on materialist and quantitative explanations searches out what is deepest in the world. So when we come to read the Bible, we expect it to give us quantitative materialist explanations that answer the same questions on which modern science focuses.

In fact, God wrote the Bible so that its message would be accessible to people in all cultures of the world (Acts 1:8), not merely modern scientific

[2] These restrictions on masses and velocities are known to be necessary because of the additional complexities discovered in the twentieth century in the theory of relativity and quantum theory.

and technological cultures. He chooses to speak not in technical scientific terms, which only some people would understand, but in everyday terms so that everyone can understand.

For one thing, God describes his works of creating and governing the world as they might be seen from an observer on earth, because he is communicating with human beings who live on earth and observe events from that perspective. This earth-focused view is genuine and valid, and we use it constantly in everyday life. We say, for example, that the sun rises and sets. And we are right, because we are simply describing what we see. We are not proposing an astronomical theory that would give some more ultimate account than modern planetary astronomy.

An impersonalist worldview tempts us to think that *only* a technical astronomical account of the sun is valid. According to this view, the laws of astronomy are impersonal, and they are the only thing that is *real*. A personalist worldview affirms the importance of persons and the ordinary experience that God gives them. This ordinary personal experience is valid on its own level. It does not compete with planetary astronomy, which God has also established to be valid on its level. God created people with the capacity both for ordinary experience, in which we see the sun move, and for astronomical reflection, in which we develop quantitative descriptions of distances and planetary motions. Human beings can use more than one perspective, either the perspective of ordinary life or the perspective of astronomical theory.[3] Both of these perspectives are valid. Both depend on the capacity we have as persons to think in multiple perspectives.[4]

An Alleged Three-Decker Universe?

Similar principles help us to understand the passages where the Bible makes a tripartite distinction in spatial regions. Exodus 20:4, for example, says, "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in *heaven above*, or that is in *the earth beneath*, or that is in *the water under the earth*." The three regions here are "heaven above," "the earth beneath," and "the water under the earth." Some critics have said that this language

[3]In fact, twentieth-century science also offers still other perspectives, in particular the perspective of the general theory of relativity. In its mathematical formulation both the earth-centered observer and the hypothetical observer who is stationary with respect to the sun have mathematically equivalent roles. The earth moves only from one of these perspectives, and this perspective is mathematically no more "ultimate" than the earth-centered observational perspective. See Poythress, *Redeeming Science*, 218–19.

[4]For the basis for multiple perspectives in the personhood of God, see Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (1987; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001). According to the Bible, God is three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each person has his own "perspective." Human beings dimly imitate this divine personal capacity.

belongs to a "three-decker universe." They allege that ancient people had a cosmological picture with three flat "layers": the water below, the earth on top of it, and the "heaven" above.

We should be more precise. There are many ancient peoples, and variations among them depend on both the peoples and the times. There is some evidence that when Babylonians began their astronomical work hundreds of years before the coming of Christ, they used mental pictures giving distinct space to waters, earth, and heaven. Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that the Babylonians had a detailed geophysical "theory" involving three flat "layers."[5] Does Exodus 20:4 endorse or evoke this theory? We have to be aware of the flexibility of language. Modern people may talk about their "ego" without endorsing everything in Sigmund Freud's psychology, which introduced the word *ego* in a technical sense. We can distinguish between a common, everyday meaning and a technical concept of ego belonging to a full-fledged theory. The same holds with respect to any detailed theory that early Babylonians may have held. The Bible uses ordinary language to talk to people of all kinds. It is not using language in some technical sense, even if such a technical sense existed among Babylonian specialists.[6]

Moreover, the starting point for any Babylonian speculations lay in ordinary observations. You can observe (1) things going on above ("heaven"), (2) the ground and the land on which you stand and on which are land animals and plants, and (3) water that is lower than the land that is visible.[7] Hypothetically, elaborate speculations might be built on these basic observations. But a person does not endorse the speculations merely by referring to these three distinct regions.

The Greeks by the time of Plato and Aristotle thought that the earth was a globe.[8] Details of celestial motions with respect to the globe were worked out by Eudoxus of Cnidus (fourth century BC), Apollonius of Perga (third century BC), and Hipparchus of Bithynia (second century BC).[9] Paul of Tarsus, as a result of his Hellenistic education,[10] would have known the basics of Greek astronomy. The Hellenization of Palestine introduced Greek ideas even among Palestinian Jews. Against the background of these ideas,

[5]In fact, the scattered evidence that we have is complex. See Noel K. Weeks, "Cosmology in Historical Context," *Westminster Theological Journal* 68, no. 2 (2006): 283–93.

[6]The distinction between common ordinary meaning and a theoretical system with detailed concepts is related to the distinction between word and concept mentioned in chap. 9.

[7]More fine-grained observation can distinguish between salt water (sea) and fresh water (the "Sea" of Galilee and fresh water springs and rivers): Rev. 14:7; 16:3, 4. Springs issue from water that is within the earth and literally beneath its surface.

[8]*Encyclopædia Britannica* (Chicago: Benton, 1963), 2:644; 18:61.

[9]Ibid., 2:644.

[10]Demonstrated in Acts 17:22–31.

Paul continued the practice of referring to three distinct spaces: ". . . every knee should bow, in *heaven* and on *earth* and *under the earth*" (Phil. 2:10). So did John: "And I saw every creature in *heaven* and on *earth* and *under the earth* and in the sea, and all that is in them" (Rev. 5:13), and an announcing angel: ". . . worship him who made *heaven* and *earth*, *the sea* and the springs of water" (Rev. 14:7).

This language functions literally to distinguish the spatial regions. There is nothing outmoded about it, because the distinct regions still exist, and have existed since the completion of creation. The language can also function by analogy: God dwells "in heaven." That does not mean that he is physically confined or literally located in some region within the physical space above us (1 Kings 8:27; Jer. 23:24;), but that he is exalted and that his presence with the angels is not accessible to us. God designed physical space in analogy with his heavenly dwelling so that physical inaccessibility represents by analogy the spiritual exaltedness of God.

In addition, dead people are sometimes analogically described as dwelling "below," because dead bodies are buried below ground (Isa. 14:9). These descriptions, occurring as they do in ordinary language with its flexibilities (see chap. 9), do not commit the writers to any detailed physicalistic theory.

The Days of Creation in Genesis 1

One more issue deserves our attention. People want to know about the account of creation in Genesis 1 and its relation to modern science. Genesis 1:1–2:3 indicates that God created the heavens and the earth in six days and rested on the seventh day (Gen. 2:2–3; see Ex. 20:11). How can this possibly be reconciled with the scientific accounts that say that the universe is about fourteen billion years old?

Actually, not one but several ways exist that try to do justice both to the Bible's teaching and to the claims of modern science. The issue is complex, and we must leave the details to other books.[11] Here, we focus on impersonalism versus personalism in our assumptions about the universe.

Consider first the interpretation of scientific work. If we hold an impersonalist worldview, the laws that the scientists discover are impersonal and mechanical, and there can be no exceptions in the past. Scientists look at present evidence, such as light coming from distant galaxies, and the motions of distant galaxies. They then extrapolate into the past, using the assumption that the physical laws they now observe were also operative in the past. For example, they rely on the constancy of the speed of light and the constancy of

[11] Poythress, *Redeeming Science*, chaps. 5–10.

laws of motion and gravitation. Using these laws, they infer that the universe is something like fourteen billion years old. When they make this inference, they assume that the laws for present-day phenomena are the same for all times.

But is this assumption about constancy of laws valid? Constancy seems inevitable if the laws are impersonal. But if God is personal, and if he governs the world personally, he may have reasons for acting differently in the past. One of the approaches for looking at science and Genesis reasons in precisely this way. This approach is called the theory of *mature creation*. This theory says that, according to Genesis 2, God created Adam and Eve as mature adults, rather than as babies. So, it reasons, God may have created the whole universe in a mature state. Adam and Eve would have looked twenty years old or more just after they were created. The trees in the garden of Eden would have looked mature. If a scientist had cut a cross section through a tree trunk, he would have found rings. By counting the rings he could have estimated the apparent age of the tree. Likewise the universe now looks coherently mature, with an age of fourteen billion years. But the age is only *apparent*, because God created it mature.

The theory goes on to observe that God acts in a regular way in sustaining the universe through time. This activity is called God's *providence*. "He upholds the universe by the word of his power" (Heb. 1:3). In addition, Genesis 2:3 says that on the seventh day "God rested from all his work that he had done *in creation*." He was no longer *creating*. But he was *sustaining* what he had already created. The distinction between creating and sustaining suggests that the regularities that scientists now observe belong to the *sustaining* phase, to God's providence. He may have acted in a very different way during the time of creation, that is, during the six days. In that case, the scientists' conception of scientific laws touches only on providence—it does not deal with the time of creation.

The crucial difference here is a difference due to a personal God. A *personal* God is superior to the regularities that scientists now investigate. These regularities, such as the constancy of the speed of light, are regularities that God sets in place from creation onward. But his acts of creation themselves are personal acts and may belong to a different order than the present regularities. The *personal* character of God sets a boundary to the character of scientific inference, particularly inferences into the far past.

The Nature of the Days

We can also think about the personal character of God's communication to us in Genesis 1. As we observed, in Genesis 1 God addresses all the people

in all the cultures of the world. So he does not use the word *day* as if it were a technical term for a precisely measured time as a scientist would measure it with an atomic clock. Rather, as a personal God he communicates with people in all cultures. All cultures experience the human daily cycle of work and rest. The days in Genesis 1 are God's days of work and rest, in analogy with human beings who experience work and rest in their own daily lives. In particular, consider the seventh day. It is the day on which God rested "from all his work that he had done in creation" (Gen. 2:3). God continues to rule the world through his acts of providence. But he has permanently finished his work of creation. Hence, his rest from creation goes on forever. Likewise, the seventh day goes on forever. The important thing about God's seventh day is that it is made holy by God's rest, not that it is exactly so long by some technical scientific measurement.

The seventh day of God's rest goes on forever, but it is analogous to the seventh day of Sabbath rest that the Israelites were told to celebrate (Ex. 20:8–11). Israelites imitate God by resting. The point in the analogy is not how much time a scientist would measure using technically precise clocks, but how human work and rest relate to God's work and rest. Work and rest, as purposeful actions by persons, are at the heart of it. Accordingly, we may infer that God's work days, the first six days, are analogous to human work days.

God's description is truthful, but has in mind the interests of ordinary human beings, not primarily scientists in their scientific specialties. In sum, God's account in Genesis 1 is *personalist*, not merely because God himself is personal, but because he takes into account the robust human interests among human beings in all the cultures throughout the world.

With this understanding of Genesis 1, we have taken a healthy step toward reading the Bible respectfully. This route can lead to any of several ways that people have explored as to how Genesis 1 and science can fit together well.[12]

[12]Many people are also interested in the relation of the Bible to modern evolutionary theory. See Poythress, *Redeeming Science*, chaps. 18–19; Collins, *Science and Faith*, chaps. 16–18.

PART THREE

CHALLENGES FROM HISTORY

5

The Historical-Critical Tradition

Our next focus is on *history*. Did the events recorded in the Bible really happen? In Exodus 7–12 the Bible indicates that God brought ten miraculous plagues on Egypt just before he brought the people out of Egypt. After the plagues, in Exodus 14 God divided the waters of the sea to make a path for the people of Israel to escape Pharaoh's pursuit. According to Exodus 19–20 God spoke to the people in an audible voice from the top of Mount Sinai. Did these events actually take place? Many modern people do not think so. They would say that the records in the Bible are made-up or exaggerated stories.

Why would people think the stories are made up? We have touched on the issue in discussing science and materialism (chaps. 3–4). If miracles are impossible, as a materialistic worldview says, then the stories in the Bible about miracles must have been made up. On the other hand, if the God of the Bible really exists, he has reasons for bringing about the extraordinary events.

The Historical-Critical Tradition

We also need to think about the modern atmosphere for how we look at history. An important influence in this area is the *historical-critical tradition* and its impact on biblical interpretation. What is the historical-critical tradition? It is an approach to the historical investigation of the Bible and

of other literature from the past. It has had a long and complex influence, so it is difficult to summarize in a few words.

Roughly speaking,[1] the historical-critical tradition attempts to treat the Bible as a collection of books from human authors, like any other books by human authors—it does not focus on or think about God as divine author. For example, it considers the Ten Commandments recorded in Exodus 20 as merely a human product. A typical account from within the historical-critical tradition would say that the Ten Commandments as we now have them come from an accretion of human traditions over an extended period of time, which eventually crystallized into the text we have in the book of Exodus. Hence, according to the historical-critical approach, the Ten Commandments were not a deliverance by God himself from the top of Mount Sinai (as Ex. 20:1, 18–21 claims). That is a human legend.

The historical-critical tradition raises questions about whether miracles happened. People's opinions vary. Some people within the historical-critical tradition would say that miracles do not occur. Others might admit at the level of principle that they possibly occur. Most people within the tradition would nevertheless search predominantly for historical explanations in terms of human and subhuman causes. They would observe that people can make up stories of miracles, or they may exaggerate or embellish what happened, which was actually nonmiraculous.

The historical-critical tradition has roots that can be traced back for centuries, but it came into prominence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We need to reckon with it because it continues to have dominant influence in most university departments of religion. At least in the United States, religious history programs and religious documentaries that are broadcast on the major networks rely on the expertise and the academic climate of major universities, so the television programs employ the historical-critical tradition and speak the voice of that tradition. Courses about the Bible and Christianity within secular universities will usually expound the tradition. (In the late twentieth century other secular approaches have sprung up, competing with this tradition. We will look at some of them later.)

A Short Summary of Principles

For a compact summary of the principles of historical criticism we may turn to Ernst Troeltsch. In 1900 Troeltsch wrote an essay in which he summed

[1]There are always variations and exceptions. For simplicity we concentrate on characteristic features. Where appropriate, we can always add to and qualify this roughly drawn sketch.

up three basic principles of historical method.[2] By "historical method" he meant the method of historical scholarship of his time.[3] The three principles were criticism, analogy, and correlation.

Criticism. The principle of *criticism* says that we can achieve only probable judgments about the past.[4] Historical analysis sifts all claims about past events, weighing testimonies and evidence. It takes a *critical* rather than accepting attitude toward documents from the past.

Analogy. The principle of *analogy* says that the past must be treated as analogous to the patterns of events and interpretations that we see in our immediate environment. Analogy with present-day "illusions, distortions, deceptions" enables us to weigh properly any probabilities with respect to past testimony.[5]

Correlation. The principle of *correlation*, or "interaction," says that all historical happenings are correlated to what came before and what comes after. There are causal relationships.[6]

Troeltsch also sees a kind of inevitability to the historical method. Its successes validate it.[7] It now reigns: "We are no longer able to think without this method or contrary to it. All our investigations regarding the nature and goals of the human spirit must be based on it."[8] Troeltsch thinks it has broad implications.

> Give the historical method an inch and it will take a mile. From a strictly orthodox standpoint, therefore, it seems to bear a certain similarity to the devil. Like the modern natural sciences, it represents a complete revolution in our patterns of thought vis-à-vis antiquity and the Middle Ages.[9]

The Theistic Foundations for Historical Criticism

It is not hard to understand some of Troeltsch's reasoning. Troeltsch is thinking first of all about general principles for historical research, principles that must work for investigating the life of Napoleon or Alexander the Great or

[2]Ernst Troeltsch, "Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology," in *Religion in History: Essays Translated by James Luther Adams and Walter F. Bense* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 11–32. In the table of contents offered by Adams and Bense the essay is given the date of 1898. As far as I can see, it first appeared in published form in 1900 in *Theologische Arbeiten aus dem rheinischen wissenschaftlichen Prediger-Verein*, NF 4 (Tübingen and Leipzig, 1900), 87–108.
[3]Ibid., 13.
[4]Ibid.
[5]Ibid.
[6]Ibid., 14.
[7]Ibid., 16.
[8]Ibid.
[9]Ibid.

any other figure of the past. If we are going to take past events seriously and study the past rigorously, we must reckon with human fallibility and human deceit. For example, not all reports about Napoleon, even eyewitness reports, can be assumed to be completely true and accurate. That caution represents the principle of criticism.

Second, we can understand past human actions only if we assume some commonality in human nature, as well as analogies with respect to the non-human environment. Napoleon, we assume, was a human being like the rest of us. Without some analogies, the past remains unintelligible to us.

Finally, the principle of correlation is simply the principle of cause and effect. People's actions have effects on the world and on others. Napoleon's decisions had consequences for the well-being of France.

In fact, despite misuses, these three principles all have their foundations in God. Let us take the principles one at a time. First, consider the principle of criticism. Judgments about truth have their foundation in God who is the truth.[10] Human finiteness and human sin lead to fallibility and deceit, and therefore require that, in pursuit of the truth of God, we use God and not man as our final standard.

Second, what about the principle of analogy? Analogies depend on the constancy and permanence of the created order, which includes the common principle that all human beings are made in the image of God. God has established the order for all creation, and the orderly patterns for all of human existence.[11]

Third, the principle of correlation maintains the principle of cause and effect in history. When God established the order of creation, he established an order of cause and effect as well. In Genesis 1 he specifically commanded the process of growth in plants: "'Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, on the earth.' And it was so" (Gen. 1:11).

We can infer from this instance and many others that God established all the relationships of cause and effect in every sphere, including the sphere of human action. The book of Proverbs provides abundant examples of the effects of one person's action on himself and on others.

Finally, since human beings are made in the image of God, they have the capability of thinking God's thoughts after him. Human beings are finite, but their minds are in a sense in tune with the mind of God. So they have

[10]Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), chap. 14; Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), chaps. 30, 35–36.

[11]Poythress, *Redeeming Science*, chaps. 1 and 11; Poythress, *Redeeming Sociology: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).

the capability of knowing truths that are originally in the mind of God. Among these truths are truths about causation, and truths about historical processes and events.

The Elimination of the Supernatural

We now confront a paradox. The principles of historical criticism depend on God. At the same time, they are used to oppose the God of the Bible. They do so by eliminating the supernatural. For example, according to historical criticism the Ten Commandments are not the supernatural product of God's speaking from Mount Sinai, but a merely natural product stemming from the evolution of human thinking and morality.

First, the principle of criticism denies that there could be a voice or a document in history that we could fully trust because it is the voice of God or the document of God. In particular, the principle of criticism implies that the tablets with the Ten Commandments must be viewed *critically*, rather than as the writing of God.

Second, the principle of analogy denies that there could be a miracle, because a miracle would be unlike anything that we can observe happening today. It would not be analogous. For example, an event where God speaks from the top of Mount Sinai is not like what happens today, and so it must be excluded.

Today, not everyone might want to be so dogmatic. Some people might want to soften the principle for denying miracles. But the principle of analogy pushes strongly in the direction of ignoring the theoretical possibility of exceptions. Normal historical research relies on the principle of analogy. And that typically means that for practical purposes the theoretical possibility of an exception is ignored.

Third, the principle of correlation also denies miracle, because the sequence of cause and effect must be able in principle to account for the succession of events in history. We must be able to "correlate" between the events immediately preceding a miracle on Mount Sinai and the miracle itself, and this we cannot do if the miracle breaks the natural train of cause and effect. If the principles of cause and effect operate consistently within the world, we can eliminate God as a cause. Only causes within the world count.

Troeltsch's three principles are principles with respect to *method*. They describe the mind-set with which the historical researcher is supposed to approach any historical events. They are in place before a person begins even to consider the evidence with respect to events and communications recorded in the Bible. The method excludes the supernatural before even

looking at the evidence. It assumes prior to looking at the facts that God could not have spoken directly from the top of Mount Sinai. Likewise, it assumes that Jesus could not have turned the water into wine at Cana in Galilee (John 2:9).

Such a stance might seem to be prejudicial. But Troeltsch thought that he had no choice. "We are no longer able to think without this method or contrary to it." He means that if we are going to commit ourselves to doing historical investigation of a rigorous sort, we *must* proceed according to the three principles. Otherwise, our approach will not be credible to the scholarly community.

6

Responding to Historical Criticism

How do we respond to the ideas of the historical-critical tradition? We need to be aware of the difference between the biblical worldview and the worldview presupposed in the assumptions of the historical-critical approach.

Ambiguities in Historical Principles

We can begin to unravel the issues if we look more closely at the *meaning* of Troeltsch's three principles. The principles all go back to conceptions with regard to history, human nature, and the correlation of cause and effect. These conceptions include conceptions about the regularities we may expect. The principle of criticism depends on regularities with respect to fallen human nature, including fallibility and deceit. The principle of analogy depends on regularities with respect to patterns of human interaction. These patterns have a unity because all people are made in the image of God. The principle of correlation depends on regularities with respect to cause and effect.

All these regularities depend on God. God, by speaking, rules over creation and over the realm of human interaction in particular. His speech is the real law over creation. God established all the regularities when he established

the creation order. He not only established his laws, but maintains them to this day through his providential governance.[1]

The laws derive from God's speech, which is the speech of a personal God. But our modern culture has moved away from this kind of conception of regularity. The nineteenth century saw the triumph of natural science in interpreting the physical aspect of the cosmos. Nineteenth-century natural science produced a kind of mechanistic model of the universe, which could easily be interpreted as implying a universe governed by impersonal law.

The difference between a personal God and an impersonal mechanism is significant (chaps. 3–4). An impersonal mechanism allows no present-day action of God at all, let alone supernatural action. A personal God, on the other hand, may for special purposes of his own deviate from what he has established as the normal regularities. Such surprises took place, for example, when God delivered his people from Egypt because as a personal God he had committed himself in love to the people of Israel. The supreme "surprise" took place with the resurrection of Christ. That is an unusual event from the standpoint of purely physical causation, but thoroughly in accord with God's personal purposes, not only in rewarding Christ for his obedience (Phil. 2:9–11), but in making Christ's resurrection the pattern for our future bodily resurrection, which is the endpoint of salvation (1 Cor. 15:42–49). The resurrection of Christ is *rational* according to the rationality of the mind of God. Once we understand God's purposes, we can see its rationality ourselves. However, it is "irrational" from the standpoint of someone who thinks that the laws must be impersonal.

Let us consider in more detail the principle of criticism. If God is personal, the principle of criticism must be understood as a principle that reflects his mind. Hence, it includes implicitly the acknowledgment that God himself always speaks truly, that he can speak truly through fallible human beings, and that these human beings can then be trusted in their capacity as his spokesmen. We trust them, not because of who they are, but because of who God is. We are not supposed to weigh critically God's testimony. In fact, by the standard of God's rationality, it is irrational to do so.

If, on the other hand, history is governed by impersonal laws, it requires a god who cannot or will not intervene. The Bible must be merely a human book. We must treat it with the same suspicions that we would bring to

[1]Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), chap. 1; Poythress, *Redeeming Sociology: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), chaps. 8–9. Of course the deceitful speech about which the principle of criticism is concerned became a reality only from the fall of man onward. But the possibility for such speech and the possibilities for effects on human knowledge due to deceit were established in principle by God's creation of a free man with a human nature and with speech capabilities.

any other human book. The same goes for the Ten Commandments found within the Bible. The principle of criticism can be extended to embrace all evidence whatsoever.[2]

Thus the principle of criticism has two different meanings, depending on whether or not we think God governs the world personally. The difference between the two interpretations of the principle goes back to a difference in worldview. Does God govern the universe, including its history, or do impersonal laws govern it?[3] If we assume the latter, it should not be surprising that the resulting principle undermines the Bible and biblical faith. It undermines the Bible because it assumes at the beginning that the God of the Bible does not exist. More than that, it substitutes for the God of the Bible a kind of god of its own invention, in the form of impersonal laws. This god is a substitute for the real thing, and in that sense, an idol. This false religion has therefore corrupted the understanding of historical laws, and from there has corrupted the interpretation of individual events and episodes in history.

Similar reasoning applies to the other two principles. The principle of analogy looks different when we reckon with God who is personal. God's mind is in harmony. Everything God does is analogous to who he is and expresses his character. He created the universe and now acts in and sustains it in a manner consistent with and in harmony with the way in which he created it. Christ's resurrection is analogous to our future resurrection. And Christ's resurrection is foreshadowed in the lesser instances of raising the dead, such as with the Shunammite's son (2 Kings 4:32–37), Jairus's daughter (Matt. 9:18–26), and Lazarus (John 11:1–44). Christ's healing of physical diseases is analogous to the spiritual healing from sin and the final bodily healing in the resurrection of the body. There are plenty of analogies like these that make good sense within a world ruled by God, but which will be rejected by people who hold a worldview with impersonal laws.

Finally, consider Troeltsch's third principle, the principle of correlation. This is a principle of cause and effect. There are such relationships of cause and effect, what theologians call "secondary causes." But God is the primary cause. When we reckon with him, we must loosen our expectations as to what "causes" we look for in the background of events. Supernatural acts of God are possible, which we may not be able to account for merely by appealing to secondary causes.

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[2]And when criticism comes to be applied to our own minds, we run the danger of plunging into utter skepticism.

[3]Ernst Troeltsch definitely believed in a god of a sort, but he had moved "beyond" biblical Christianity. Some conceptions of a god can be made compatible with Troeltsch's conception of historical method. But for practical purposes Troeltsch's historical method does not reckon with the personal, supernaturalistic God described in the Bible. The laws of history function for practical purposes impersonalistically.

A Series of Misjudgments

In sum, the application of a historical-critical method to the Bible gains force from a number of assumptions that need questioning. First, it assumes that historical investigation can be conducted without fundamental religious assumptions about the nature of history and the nature of law. Second, it assumes that a secular historical method can operate accurately when it conceives of historical regularities as resting on impersonal laws. Third, it assumes that the Bible and the special redemptive events described in it cannot be exceptions to God's regular ways of governing the world. Their nonexceptional character makes it appropriate to apply the same methods to them. Fourth, it gains strength from the widespread cultural assumption that academic research and writing can be religiously neutral, and that this neutrality is not only pragmatically fruitful but accurate concerning the nature of reality.

Validation of Historical Method

Troeltsch says that the historical method is validated by its results.[4] That is an understandable conclusion; but it is flawed. The historical method may indeed yield many impressive positive insights. These are the products of what is called common grace. *Common grace* is the term for God's blessings to undeserving people who are in rebellion against him. The Bible does indicate that God blesses people who do not deserve it. His blessings may include not only physical prosperity (Acts 14:17) but intellectual achievements. The historical method's insights about history rely on the similarity between the true God and the idolatrous substitute in the form of impersonal laws. Such insights may have positive value; and yet they may be corrupted, not only a little bit, but at the root, by the process of idolatrous substitution.

One of the further attractions of the historical method is that it seems to be the only alternative. It seems to be so because its principles are so obviously true and essential for historical research.[5] But the feeling that there is no alternative is an illusion. Ambiguities conceal the fact that the three principles have subtly but deeply different meaning when interpreted as expressions of regularities ordained by the personal God of the Bible. The lack of reckoning with God is at the root of the deficiencies introduced, first into "secular" historical study, then into historical study of the Bible. The

[4]Ernst Troeltsch, "Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology," in *Religion in History: Essays Translated by James Luther Adams and Walter F. Bense* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 16.

[5]For a similar illusion with respect to methodological naturalism in natural sciences, see Poythress, *Redeeming Science*, chap. 19.

remedy is not to stop historical reflection, but to conduct it in communion with God, who reveals himself through Christ and addresses us with his own voice in the Bible.

The historical-critical method can look impressive partly because it fits in with our times, which have become comfortable with the idea of impersonal laws in science and in society. The idea of impersonal laws with respect to history fits the mood. It can also generate impressive explanations at times because it is close enough to the real laws, the laws of God's rule, to function as a counterfeit and to give us insight. Common grace remains.

On the other hand, the historical-critical method rests on unsound foundations. In fact, it denies at the beginning the existence of the God described in the Bible. Over time, generations of very gifted people working with this method can produce plausible explanations for the origins of the Bible by rearranging, hypothesizing, and building layer on layer of plausible sequences of naturalistic explanations. They end up with naturalistic explanations because naturalistic explanations are the only ones that they are searching for and the only ones that count within the framework that they have already adopted. The result, though it contains some positive insights by common grace, is an illusion.

7

The Change from History to Structure

In the twenty-first century the historical-critical tradition continues to exercise influence because people continue to be interested in questions about the history recorded in the Bible and the history of its origins. But alongside the historical questions, new kinds of questions have come into prominence, which have ties with the social sciences. We first consider this shift in prominence and then consider the social sciences themselves.

A Cultural Change

In 1962 James Barr raised questions about the dominance of a historical approach to the Bible.[1] He observed that reflections about "revelation through history" figured prominently in modern theologies. These reflections may have helped theologians apologetically in interacting with the dominance of historical explanation in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century secular culture. But he wondered whether academic environments were undergoing a shift, in which social sciences would play a role.

> Historical science is no longer the chief leader and explorer in the mental environment which surrounds us and challenges us, as was the case in the

[1]James Barr, "The Interpretation of Scripture. II. Revelation Through History in the Old Testament and in Modern Theology," *Interpretation* 17 (1963): 193–205, based on an inaugural address delivered at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1962.

> nineteenth century. The modern phenomenon is the rise of sciences like the social sciences, anthropology, economics, linguistics (to mention a group from which at least one or two will increasingly influence biblical studies); their methods are only in part historical; and they show us that human life (or "historical existence" as we with our historical bias so often call it), can be and must be studied with trans-historical as well as with historical approaches. We can expect that challenges to Christian faith will arise from this newer world of thought: they will be quite different from those to which we have so far adjusted ourselves. For these challenges our present biblical and theological answers may not be relevant.[2]

Barr did not predict in detail what the challenges would look like. But he was correct in thinking that linguistics and sociology and anthropology would become influential in biblical studies. The Society of Biblical Literature, a major academic society for biblical studies, now contains in its annual meeting several distinct "Program Units" or sections specifically devoted to linguistic or sociological study. But these disciplines have an influence well beyond the sections specifically devoted to them.

Study of Structure

We can appreciate some of the shift away from the dominance of "history" by considering the distinction between diachronic and synchronic approaches to fields of academic study. The distinction was first introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure as he was on the way to founding the twentieth-century discipline of "structural linguistics."[3] Diachronic study, study *through* time, focuses on the historical development and changes in languages as the observer travels through time. By contrast, *synchronic* study focuses on the state of language as a system available to speakers at one point in time. Saussure saw that any particular language at a particular point in time had a distinct structure in the system of sounds used to convey meanings, in the words that it provided for expressing meanings, and in the grammatical structures joining the words into larger constructions like sentences. This distinct structure could become a distinct object of linguistic study, namely synchronic study. The result was *structural linguistics*. This discipline contrasted with *historical linguistics*, which had in previous centuries studied changes in language diachronically.

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[2]Ibid., 203.

[3]Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), published posthumously based on lectures from 1906 to 1911. For a brief account of the rise of structural linguistics, see Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), appendix E. For structuralism, see Poythress, "Structuralism and Biblical Studies," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 21, no. 3 (1978): 221–37.

The same distinction between diachronic and synchronic study can be carried through with other social sciences. For example, anthropology studies mankind. This discipline can be divided into *historical anthropology* and *social anthropology*. Historical anthropology studies the historical and prehistorical development of human beings and human societies. Social anthropology studies the structure and functioning of a human society that is already constituted. Since information about past societies is limited, the social anthropologist usually studies a particular contemporary society, typically a tribal society outside the sweep of modernity. This study is for the most part synchronic, looking at the functioning of a society at a particular time rather than its development through time. It is *structural anthropology*, studying the regular functioning of social institutions and relationships.[4]

The concerns of sociology overlap with those of anthropology. Sociologists can study the changes in a society over time, such as the effects of the Industrial Revolution or the spread of television. But much sociological study focuses on social structure as it now exists. It is *synchronic* study.

Old and New Challenges

So what change do these disciplines imply for studying the Bible? Old challenges continue. History has not ceased to be a focus of interest for modern students. And miracles recorded in the Bible challenge modern thinking by revealing a God who acts concretely and spectacularly.

For newer disciplines like linguistics, sociology, and anthropology, questions about miracles have lesser importance. Even if unusual events occur, the overall structure of a particular language or a particular culture remains in place. The newer disciplines raise questions in another direction, by making people wonder whether language or society or culture is a kind of prison, an ultimate limit on human vision that we can never escape. The multiplicity of languages and cultures raises questions about whether we can know universal truth from within the limitations of the language and culture that we "inhabit."

We consider these challenges in subsequent chapters.

[4]Social anthropology typically studies premodern societies, while sociology studies modern societies, those affected by industrialization, by technology, and more recently by electronic information. Similar principles characterize both disciplines. So in discussing their pertinence to understanding the Bible, I will not strongly distinguish them. The term *structural anthropology* sometimes designates narrowly the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss and those associated with him. But in a broader sense every kind of social anthropology that analyzes synchronic social structure is "structural."

PART FOUR

CHALLENGES ABOUT LANGUAGE

8

Challenges from Linguistics and Philosophy of Language

We turn now to focus on challenges having to do with *language*. What challenges do linguistics and studies of language pose for biblical interpretation?

For one thing, some people think that language is not capable of being a channel for God to communicate with us. They conclude that the Bible's message must be *merely* human. Or if it nevertheless somehow becomes a channel for God, all kinds of hindrances in language result in poor or garbled communication.

Once again, we will have to think about the influence of worldviews. But let us first take a step back and describe some aspects of modern thinking about language.

Language Structure

As we have indicated (chap. 7), the twentieth century saw the rise of structural linguistics as a distinct discipline. Structural linguistics studies the systematic resources that human languages offer for communication. Each speaker using a language sends out his own particular messages. In order to be understood, the messages have to use generic resources available to all those who use the language. Languages include resources in sounds, in grammar, and in meanings (for example, the meanings of words as supplied

in a dictionary).[1] Written languages also provide a graphical system, whether this is an alphabet or a pictographic system.

The Bible is written in languages—Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. So linguistics has an obvious potential benefit. People studied the Bible for centuries before the rise of structural linguistics because they could use knowledge of the languages in which the Bible was originally written and languages into which it has later been translated. By the first half of the twentieth century, scholars had reasonably good knowledge of the most common features of biblical languages. Knowledge of biblical Hebrew and biblical Aramaic was increased through *comparative* linguistics of the Semitic language group. Comparative linguistics was practiced in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries before the rise of structural linguistics. Structural linguistics can potentially increase and sharpen our knowledge of particular languages. But in the case of biblical languages the benefits come primarily in small increments and refinements.

Challenges about Language

The more serious challenges arise not so much from structural linguistics as from philosophical conclusions drawn from linguistics, especially in postmodernist thought. Some postmodernists have observed that nearly everything we do is carried out in an environment in which we use language to talk about the meaning of actions. Meanings are largely language-dependent. We live within a "world" of human significances affected by the language that we use. And languages differ in their grammars and in their vocabulary stocks. This situation may suggest to some people that language is a prison of thought from which we cannot escape. The limits of language are more or less the limits of our "world" of human significance.

People can move from general observations about language to conclusions about the times in which the Bible was written. The Bible is written in languages, by human beings who live in human "worlds" affected by language. So, some people might reason, the languages in which the Bible is written are prisons from which the Bible cannot escape, even in principle. Therefore, they reason, the Bible cannot be a transcendent revelation from God.

I believe that Bible scholars in the present generation—and perhaps many more Bible readers as well—feel the effects of such reasoning, even if they do not fully accept them. So let us consider this challenge in greater detail. For the sake of concreteness, we begin with a particular example.

[1]Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), chaps. 32–33.

Gods of the Ancient Near East

Various Old Testament passages compare God to other "gods."

> There is none like you *among the gods*, O Lord,[2]
> nor are there any works like yours. (Ps. 86:8)
>
> For the Lord is a great God,
> and a great King *above all gods.* (Ps. 95:3)[3]

What are the "gods" to which these passages refer? How do we analyze this language about "gods"?

A modern reader, let us call him Bob, claims that these verses presuppose the existence of many gods. Bob claims that this is an error in the Bible, since in fact the other gods do not exist. He alleges that the Bible here shows the limitations of the human author, who held an erroneous belief.

In support of his view, Bob can focus on the specific phraseology, "among the gods" (Ps. 86:8). Bob argues that such a phrase suggests a picture where God and other gods are all there in a group, and the psalmist undertakes a comparison. Bob deduces that this kind of comparison presupposes that the gods actually exist. Bob thinks that this is how language of this type functions.

Bob can further strengthen his claim about the alleged existence of the gods by appealing to the cultural environment of ancient Israel. People in ancient Israel were genuinely tempted to worship other gods, as is evidenced

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[2]Some Hebrew manuscripts have a textual variant, which when translated yields "There is none like you, O Lord" ("among the gods" is missing). (Also, Syriac Peshitta reads, "There is none like you, O Lord God.") This variant eliminates the crucial difficulty in this verse. But a similar difficulty remains in Ps. 95:3 and other verses (see Pss. 96:4; 97:9; 135:5). The text that includes "among the gods" is probably original, and for simplicity we assume that it is.

[3]The verses were drawn to my attention by Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 98. I do not, however, agree with the overall thrust of the book. Others have undertaken direct critical interaction with Enns's book (John M. Frame, "Review of Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*," accessed October 8, 2009, http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/2008Enns.htm; Greg K. Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008], and literature cited there; Enns offers a further critical response in a review of Beale's book, found in the *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 19, no. 4 [2009]: 628–31; Bruce K. Waltke, "Revisiting *Inspiration and Incarnation*," *Westminster Theological Journal* 71, no. 1 [2009]: 83–95; Peter Enns, "Interaction with Bruce Waltke," *Westminster Theological Journal* 71, no. 1 [2009]: 97–114; Bruce K. Waltke, "Response: Interaction with Peter Enns," *Westminster Theological Journal* 71, no. 1 [2009]: 115–28; James W. Scott, "The Inspiration and Interpretation of God's Word, with Special Reference to Peter Enns. Part I: Inspiration and Its Implications," *Westminster Theological Journal* 71, no. 1 [2009]: 129–83; Scott, "The Inspiration and Interpretation of God's Word, with Special Reference to Peter Enns. Part II: The Interpretation of Representative Passages," *Westminster Theological Journal* 71, no. 2 [2009]: 247–79). I choose to develop my own positive points rather than continue this critical interaction.

by the commandments against idolatry and the episode of Elijah against the Baal worshipers (Ex. 20:3–6; Deut. 6:14–15; 7:4; 1 Kings 18:20–40). Many ancient people thought that these gods actually existed, or they would not have been tempted as severely. Bob then claims that, within this cultural atmosphere, the verses from the psalms address people who believed in many gods. The word for "gods" occurs as a part of a language that has meaning in relation to the beliefs of these ancient people.

Bob's argument at this point depends partly on an assessment of the surrounding culture, not merely on an assessment of the text. But of course the text as an ancient communication by an ancient author to ancient people makes sense against the background of the author and those who receive his message. Language and culture interlock.[4] We will take up the issue of culture later. For the moment, we focus on language.

Difficulties with Claims for Many Gods

Bob's line of reasoning runs into an immediate difficulty with a later verse in Psalm 86:10.

> For you are great and do wondrous things;
> *you alone are God*.

This verse seems to be inconsistent with the earlier claim that verse 8 implies the existence of many gods. When Bob sees this verse, he may decide to back away from his earlier interpretation of verse 8. He may conclude that verse 8 is saying not that the other gods actually exist, but only that many people *believe* that they exist. The psalmist is comparing the true God with people's ideas about other gods.

But Bob might also decide that verse 10, "you alone are God," does not mean quite what it seems to mean. Bob hypothesizes that the psalmist is saying that as far as worship is concerned, he will treat God as the only god who matters. The psalmist is not denying that other gods exist, but is making a personal commitment to the God of Israel alone, based on the supreme greatness of this one God. This interpretation might plausibly be supported by observing that other parts of the psalm speak the language of personal commitment and delight in God.

> Teach me your way, O Lord,
> that I may walk in your truth;

[4]See Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, esp. 57–59, 85–90.

unite my heart to fear your name.
I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart,
and I will glorify your name forever. (Ps. 86:11–12)

The psalmist is not undertaking some kind of neutral, academic analysis of how many gods there are and what it might mean for them to exist. He is making known his personal, subjective response.

Or Bob may decide that verse 10 is a later monotheistic addition to a psalm that originally presupposed the existence of many gods. According to Bob, the tension between verse 8 and verse 10 comes from the fact that these two verses belong to different authors or editors. Unfortunately for this hypothesis, verse 10 shows impressive cohesion with the neighboring verses. The mention of "wondrous things" in verse 10 coheres with the "works" of God mentioned in verse 8. The word "alone" in verse 10 interlocks with "none like you" in verse 8. The greatness of God in verse 10 fits the greatness of God's character in verse 13 ("great is your steadfast love") and verse 15 ("a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness"). The coming of all nations to worship God in verse 9 makes sense if God is the true God of all the earth, as verse 10 says.

Bob might reply that the fit between verse 10 and the neighboring verses just shows the skillfulness of the editor who added verse 10. But under this hypothesis the editor was not skillful enough to remove the tension between verse 8 and verse 10. No final argument terminates a discussion like this one, because no one can decisively prove whether or not Psalm 86 had an earlier version that omitted verse 10. In a situation of incomplete knowledge—which is where we all are—people can always multiply hypotheses.

Canon in Distinction from Alleged Sources

One of the pieces that we need for clarification concerns the nature of the canon of Scripture. We will discuss it later (chap. 31), but we cannot enter into all the details. A summary must suffice. When the Bible was written, God used particular human beings of his choosing to write texts that added to a body of writings that have his authority. These writings form the canon of Scripture. Since God can use all the capabilities of language, he and the human writers he used can allude to or use earlier writings. For example, the New Testament quotes from the Old Testament. And later parts of the Old Testament quote from earlier parts. Second Kings 14:6 quotes from Deuteronomy 24:16. We find some cases where the Bible quotes earlier

sources that did not themselves have God's inerrant authority but were merely human.

> . . . Yet he [God] is actually not far from each one of us, for
>
> "In him we live and move and have our being";
> [probably from Epimenides of Crete]
>
> as even some of your own poets have said,
>
> "For we are indeed his offspring" [from Aratus].
> (Acts 17:27–28)

Suppose now that Psalm 86 in its canonical form has resulted from editing or rewriting an earlier poetic song. The genetic relationship to an earlier song does not make the earlier song inspired. Psalm 86 is labeled "A Prayer of David" (v. 1). It is logical to assume that David's version of the psalm was inspired (note 2 Sam. 23:1–2). But he may have used a still earlier version that was not. If so, he modified it for his own use under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Further changes may or may not have been introduced by an inspired editor when the psalm was incorporated into the book of Psalms. Psalm 86 as we have it is what belongs to the canon that God gave us. So whatever wording earlier sources had need not be the same as the meaning that God has given to Psalm 86.

Thus we need to focus on Psalm 86 as given to us in the book of Psalms. People may still disagree as to whether they should leave tension in the psalm. Bob may argue that the psalm contains unresolved tension between two views of "the gods." He may claim that the reader is presented with tension but no resolution.

An Alternate Reading

Not everyone reads Psalm 86:8 the way Bob does. Let us imagine another reader, Holly. Let us suppose that when she first begins to read, she has only a little knowledge about the Bible. The word *gods* may or may not mean much to her. Even if she knows nothing about other religions, even if the plural form *gods* is new to her, she can deduce that it is the plural of the word *god*. She knows that the Bible presents one God, who rules everything. And a neighboring verse makes the uniqueness of God explicit.

> For you are great and do wondrous things;
> you *alone* are God. (Ps. 86:10)

So "gods" (plural) must logically be substitutes for God, people's ideas about a supreme being or supreme beings.

With a little more reading in the Bible, she can find out that both the Roman Empire of the first century AD and the nations of Old Testament times believed in many gods and worshiped many gods (see, for example, Josh. 24:15–16; 1 Kings 11:1–8; Acts 14:11–17; 19:26; 1 Cor. 8:4–5). Even without specific knowledge of biblical times, she may at least know that there are many religions in the world, and that some people have thought there were many gods. By a short step she can conclude that the verses in the Psalms address this type of situation. The verses declare that the God of Israel is the true God, incomparably great in comparison with the distorted ideas of gods held by people of the time.

Assumptions Used in Reasoning

Why do Bob and Holly arrive at different conclusions? Many influences may affect them. But among the effects are assumptions about language. All of the reasoning by Bob depends on the regularities of operations of language. For example, there are regularities with respect to the way in which comparisons operate. Do comparisons regularly presuppose the existence of the objects used in the comparison? Not always. We can compare the virtues and character traits of two fictional characters. Could we also compare a nonfictional subject to a fictional one? Of course. Jesus uses fictional stories, parables, to teach about the kingdom of God, which is not fictional.

But the type of comparison in Psalm 86:8 does not explicitly warn us that the gods are fictional. Does it therefore presuppose their existence? Or does it merely offer no comment one way or the other on their existence? How do we answer these questions?

We try to answer them using knowledge or hypotheses about how language works. And that means we appeal to regularities of language. Similarly, we rely on regularities when we assume that verse 10 may color our understanding and interpretation of verse 8. We rely on regularities if we postulate different authors for different parts. Bob makes assumptions about underlying regularities in meanings when he hypothesizes that the psalmist in verse 10 is talking about personal commitment to one God but not the nonexistence of other gods.

Our view of what is "regular" matters. Most basically, we view the regularities as either personal or impersonal.[5] According to an impersonalist worldview, impersonal laws for language are just "out there," with a kind of

[5]See ibid., chaps. 8–9.

mechanical control over the particularities of any one verse. Or, according to a personalist worldview, God personally rules over all the particulars of all languages and gives these languages as gifts to humanity. That fact by itself does not decide what the rules and regularities look like in detail. But it sets the tone. The twentieth century has seen impressive advances in insight into the structures of language—some of the regularities. At the same time, the desire to make linguistics a science has sometimes produced a kind of woodenness, and has resulted in truncating some of the rich, multidimensional character of human communication for the sake of scientific "rigor."[6]

For example, in the mid-twentieth century transformational grammar aspired to rigor. One way in which it achieved rigor was by treating language as a "set of sentences." Sentences were treated in isolation from the surrounding context of discourse—paragraphs and sections and whole monologues and poems and songs. This kind of approach creates an atmosphere. When Bob comes to Psalm 86, he can treat it as just a set of sentences. Then verse 8 is not allowed to interact robustly with verse 10. The atmosphere of isolation is reinforced by the previous century of historical-critical research, which got people into the habit of cutting up discourse into discrete sources, perhaps one polytheistic source for verse 8 and a monotheistic source for verse 10. Critics produced hypothetical stories of origins for increasingly smaller pieces.

Reckoning with Context

In fact, the situation for interpreting Psalm 86 is even more interesting, because we need not stop with Psalm 86. We can view Psalm 86 in the context of the rest of the Psalter (the full collection of 150 psalms in the book of Psalms). And we can view the Psalter in the context of the rest of the biblical canon, either the canon that already existed at the time that the Psalter was put together into a total of 150 psalms, or the canon including the New Testament. According to the Bible's own teaching, the books of the Bible not only have one divine author, God, but by God's design fit together into a complete collection, the canon of Scripture, as was already anticipated in Deuteronomy 31 by the process of setting aside divinely authorized additions to a corpus of holy covenant documents.[7] Hence, the Bible invites us—and God himself invites us—to read it as one large discourse.

When we read it as one large discourse, various parts of the discourse clear up potential ambiguities in other parts. Psalm 86:8 is indeed ambigu-

[6]Ibid., appendix E.

[7]See the further discussion in chap. 31.

ous about the status of the "gods" if we take it in isolation from any kind of context. When we take it in the context of Psalm 86 as a whole, verse 10 clears up the potential, theoretical ambiguity by indicating that there is only one God. Even with her minimal knowledge of the Bible, a person like Holly may not notice the theoretical ambiguity, because she rightly realizes that Psalm 86:8 can be expected to be consistent with the rest of the Bible in saying that there is only one true God.

If we notice that there is a theoretical ambiguity, we can clear it up when we can look at other psalms.

> For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
> he is to be feared *above all gods*.
> For all the gods of the peoples are *worthless idols*,
> but the LORD made the heavens. (Ps. 96:4–5)

Psalm 96:4 has the expression "above all gods," which like the expression "among the gods" might seem to imply the existence of the plural gods. But the next line (v. 5) declares that these gods are "worthless idols."

Or consider Psalm 135.

> For I know that the LORD is great,
> and that our Lord is *above all gods*. (Ps. 135:5)

> The idols of the nations are silver and gold,
> the work of human hands. (Ps. 135:15)

The expression in verse 5 "above all gods" once again leaves uncertain the exact status of these "gods." But verse 15 declares that they are "silver and gold, the work of human hands," thereby clarifying their status.

The message about the one true God is further reinforced if we travel to other Scriptures. Jeremiah 10:6 uses language similar to Psalm 86:8.

> There is none like you, O LORD;
> you are great, and your name is great in might. (Jer. 10:6)

The context in Jeremiah 10:1–10 indicates that the idols of the nations are worthless human products.

We can observe a similar point being made in Deuteronomy 4:28: "And there [in exile] you will serve gods of wood and stone, the work of human hands, that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell." Deuteronomy sometimes polemicizes against false gods in a manner that might seem to suggest that

they actually exist: "Did any people ever hear the voice of a god speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and still live? Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation?" (Deut. 4:33–34). The next verses conclude, "To you it was shown, that you might know that the LORD is God; there is no other besides him" (v. 35). "Know therefore today, and lay it to your heart, that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other" (v. 39).

Readers are more likely to pay attention to these other verses if they are awake to the fact that God is personal and that God is addressing them in the whole Bible. They may then realize that they are not just examining a loose text in Psalm 86:8, with no attention to God.

Worldviews, whether personalistic or impersonalistic, have an influence on interpretation. But there is an even more fundamental issue: the state of our hearts. We need the Holy Spirit to change our hearts if we are going to be willing to come to God and hear his word submissively. We will talk about these matters of the heart at a later point.

9

Words and Meanings concerning Many "Gods"

What then should we say about the existence of "gods" in Psalm 86:8? Should we conclude that the gods do not actually exist? It is not quite that simple. If language is a divine gift by which God himself communicates, it has depth dimensions. Simple conclusions may be right as far as they go, and yet not exhaust the depths of the implications. In fact, the very texts at which we have looked hold more complexity than modern ideas about "existence." Let us see how.

Gods and Idols

The "gods" do exist in a sense, in the form of idols. Idols were real physical objects in the ancient Near East—wood and stone and metal. Deuteronomy 4:28 calls them "gods of wood and stone." Psalm 135:15 says that they are "silver and gold, the work of human hands."

In a sense the gods *are* the idols, the physical objects. This kind of language doubtless has a polemical edge. People who worshiped idols thought that they worshiped gods who were behind the idols and who were greater than the physical objects before whom they bowed down. The equation of the gods with idols invites such people to come to their senses and not to be entrapped by some physical object.

We cannot be certain about all the details as to how people thought about the idols in ancient Israel. According to Romans 1:18–25, all people everywhere know God (Rom. 1:19, 21). But they "suppress the truth" (1:18). They twist or try to forget or ignore this knowledge. Their minds themselves do not think with full rationality, because they are rejecting the true God whom they still continue to know. They think about gods and objects of worship in the midst of the confusions of spiritually darkened minds: "They [Gentile idol worshipers] are darkened in their understanding" (Eph. 4:18).

It seems likely that in ancient Israel, many people who worshiped idols had some kind of loose identification between the idol as physical object and the god whom it represented. The god could be accessed through the idol, or else why bother with the idol at all? The idol brought the spirit of the god close and was perhaps inhabited by the god or was a channel to the god. A god and its idol ran together in people's minds and their associations. So a bare question about the "existence" of god can fail to do justice to the confusions of idolaters. The god is both the god as a powerful spirit and the idol as the physical object.

Thus, there is no simple, formulaic answer to the question of whether these gods "exist." Rather, the initial question leads to further questions. Do you mean the idol as physical object? Do you mean to ask whether the god exists as a spirit with exactly the characteristics that Ahab the idol worshiper ascribes to the god? But there are as many conceptions as there are worshipers. Do you mean to ask whether or not some kind of spiritual force is associated with the idol?

The last question leads to reflections of its own. The Bible teaches about Satanic deceit.[1] Idolatry comes not only from sinful corruption of the minds of individuals, but also from the enticements of Satan and his agents. The apostle Paul calls Satan "the *god* of this world" (2 Cor. 4:4). He also indicates that behind idol worship stands the demonic.

> What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. (1 Cor. 10:19–21)

Paul indicates that those who participate in a religious meal in celebration of a false god drink "the cup of demons" and eat from "the table of demons." Demons exist. In this sense, false gods exist, namely, the demons who work

[1]See chaps. 28–29.

behind the scenes in religious deceit in the arena of false worship. If God so permits, demons may even produce counterfeit signs and miracles.

> The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness. (2 Thess. 2:9–12)

Similar accounts of counterfeiting occur in Deuteronomy 13:1–3 and Revelation 13:13–15.

In addition, we should remind ourselves that gods as ideas have a real, and not imaginary, impact on people's thinking and action. According to a biblical worldview, these ideas have triple causation—divine, human, and demonic.[2] Second Thessalonians 2:11 says that "God sends them a strong delusion." That is the level of divine cause or "primary cause." God sends the delusion as a judgment on unbelief. In addition, human beings form ideas based on past ideas and on what they observe. That formation is the level of "secondary causes" and draws on the coherence of human thinking and acting. Third, demons come in with deceit, possibly in the form of counterfeit miracles (2 Thess. 2:9).

We can taste something of the complexity from Paul's discourse in 1 Corinthians 8.

> Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "an idol has no real existence," and that "there is no God but one." For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1 Cor. 8:4–6)

An idol "has no real existence." That does not mean that the physical object does not exist. But the physical idol stands for and is thought to embody the spiritual force of a god. No god exists who exactly corresponds to the ideas of the worshipers. The demons, however, do exist. If we wish to unpack the implications and make things explicit, there is quite a bit here. There are *so-called* "gods." And these gods have psychological and spiritual power, affecting the conscience (1 Cor. 8:7). The pagans in Corinth think that the gods exist

[2]See Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Sociology: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), chap. 21.

in accordance with their conceptions. Accordingly, Christians must think and behave with discernment in a context in which these beliefs have sway. There are many "gods" and many "lords." Two chapters later in 1 Corinthians, Paul draws attention to demons behind the idols (1 Cor. 10:19–21).

Bob, as a modern Westerner, may come to the Bible with a modern Western worldview already in place. He probably has not lived in a culture where physical idols are feared. Bob's worldview tells him that there are no spiritual forces. He then interprets the biblical passages in accordance with his assumptions and forces them to say either that the gods exist or that they do not. But the actual situation is more complex and is concealed from Bob by his own distorted assumptions. The Bible, he thinks, is "primitive" if it does not measure up to his expectations. His arrogance keeps him from the truth.[3]

Word Meanings for "Gods"

From one perspective, we can consider the difficulty as a matter of word meanings, in this case the meaning of the word *gods* (or the corresponding words in Hebrew or Greek). Bob thinks he knows what the meaning is. If he does not know, he is confident that he can find out by looking it up in a dictionary: a god is "a being or object believed to have more than natural attributes and powers and to require human worship; *specif[ically]*: one controlling a particular aspect or part of reality."[4] Given that definition, Bob reasons, we can pose an unambiguous question as to whether Psalm 86:8 presupposes the existence of "gods."

It seems easy, but it is not as easy as it seems. For one thing, as we have seen, the question hinges on the manner of "existence," as well as the meaning of "gods." Are we talking about existence in people's minds or existence in the world outside the people's minds? But if we lay that question aside, we still have difficulty. Demons partly fit the dictionary definition for "gods." A demon is "a being or object believed to have more than natural attributes and powers." That part of the definition fits. The Hebrew for Psalm 86:8 shows more. Underlying the English word *gods* is the Hebrew term *elohim*. One Hebrew dictionary offers the sense "*divine ones*, superhuman beings including God and angels,"[5] which would presumably include demons. For

[3]See chap. 32.

[4]*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2008), "god," meaning 2.

[5]Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, eds., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), 43–44, lists the following senses for *elohim*: 1a *rulers*, *judges*; 1b *divine ones*, superhuman beings including God and angels; 2 *god or goddess*; 3 and 4 *God*. (Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, [Leiden: Brill, 1994–2000], shows a similar range, but uses as a translation the word *gods*, leaving us in a situation similar

either the Hebrew or the English word *gods*, the definition appears nearly to work when applied to demons. It is close enough to working that we may suspect an instance of counterfeiting. Demons counterfeit themselves in the form of "gods," which are similar to the demons themselves, but retooled according to the craftiness of demonic deceit so as to be more enticing objects for human worship.

We can distinguish between *words* and *concepts*. A word is what we find in a normal dictionary. A concept is the larger rich set of associations that a particular person may attach to the word, particularly if the word occurs within a loaded or technical context. A concept can summarize someone's views about a whole field of knowledge.[6] The word *god* (or its Hebrew analogue) could fit a spectrum of possible beings, including demons. The concept of god in the mind of a particular idol worshiper is more specific than the word; it is colored by an accumulation of previous experience with idols and thinking about them. The concept cannot therefore be equated completely with the meaning of the word.

Yes, word meanings are relatively stable, and we can access them. But meaning has depth. Meanings of words typically have a range.[7] The word *gods* can cover a variety of so-called gods, with different powers, and even a variety of concepts as to what counts as a god. Animists, for example, may believe that there are spirits in the trees and in the rivers. Are these spirits "gods," or merely "spirits" because their powers are less than those typically associated with the gods of (say) ancient Greece? The word *gods* is not perfectly precise, so there is no perfectly precise answer.

The answers about word meanings can be influenced by what we think language is, and what we think the regularities are with respect to words, their meanings, and their uses. Again, conceptions of law as personal or impersonal can have their influence. Impersonal conceptions can still counterfeit a personal conception, so that some of the results may be similar. But impersonalist conceptions tempt people into mechanistic and then reductionistic views of meaning.

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to the English situation.) Verses like Ps. 82:1 that speak of God "in the midst of the gods" present another aspect, where "the gods" are heavenly beings, the court of angels (as in 1 Kings 22:19; Job 1:6; Ps. 89:7).

Given the general principles of variation, flexibility, metaphorical extensibility, and gradual adjustment in word meanings, as discussed in Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), chaps. 17, 19, and 34, we expect that the Hebrew *elohim* with sense 1b will show a flexibility similar to the English word *gods*. In the following discussion I have for the most part concentrated on the English word *gods*, to make the discussion more accessible to English-speaking readers. With only small changes, similar principles apply directly to the Hebrew.

[6]See James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).

[7]See Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, chap. 19, on variation.

Perhaps Bob thinks that the meaning is perfectly fixed and perfectly precise in principle, so that clear answers must be forced on recalcitrant or ambiguous texts. Either gods exist or they do not. On the other hand, perhaps Bob is in a mood more influenced by relativistic trends associated with postmodernism. Meanings shift around; they vary. So maybe it is up to each reader to bring his own conception of gods, and each reader may have his own answer. The relation between these two views and other alternatives needs fuller discussion than we can give here. If we may simplify, these two extremes are the extremes of non-Christian rationalism and non-Christian irrationalism. One extreme, the rationalist extreme of modernism, claims infinite precision.[8] The other extreme claims infinite multiplication of meanings. Neither is true. The truth is that meaning rests ultimately in God, who is Trinitarian, three persons in one God. Meaning exhibits both unity and diversity. Unity implies stability and the potential for understanding one another's meanings in an agreement. Diversity implies that in human recipients variation will exist as each person appropriates meaning in a way that at some points is distinctive to that person.

God has given stability to the meaning of the word *gods*. That is why the meaning can be summarized in a dictionary definition. But the stability exists in relation to uses in a variety of ways, as we have already illustrated in our discussion of various biblical passages. No one passage is simply to be reduced to another. Passages bring to light different highlights, different emphases, and different aspects of the truth, the truth of God, which is infinitely deep and infinitely rich. Moreover, meaning exists in relation to whatever God has ordained for the world. There are demons. There are so-called gods. The meaning of the word *gods* depends partly on a relationship to these truths about the world and about human ideas about the world.

The flexibility in meanings, including flexibility in the word *gods*, is provided by God. By virtue of this flexibility, and by virtue of God's presence in general and special revelation, people can come to revise their ideas about gods. They can move from believing in and worshiping many gods, to totally denying the significance of gods (as in a modern materialist worldview), to believing in one God, to believing in demons who are powerful spiritual creatures distinct from God. And all this time they can be using the word *gods*. The meaning has a reasonable stability, but the exact set of associations can be shifting around.

[8]On precision, see also the appendix.

Depth of Meaning

Further reflection on depth of meaning can lead to still other insights. For instance, in accordance with the general counterfeiting pattern of Satanic deceit,[9] gods are counterfeits. Of what are they counterfeits? They are offered as objects of worship, and in this respect they counterfeit the true God. A counterfeit is a fake. The so-called gods are not gods. They do not measure up. But a counterfeit needs to be close to the truth. What truths are being aped? Truths about God. The god Baal in ancient Israel was thought to be a storm god. In actual fact, God rules the storms (Pss. 18:7–15; 29:3–9). Aphrodite in ancient Greece was the goddess of love and beauty. In fact God is the God of love and is the origin of beauty. Mars was the Roman god of war. God wages war against evil and delivers his people from their enemies (Ex. 15:3; Rev. 19:11). The plurality of gods and goddesses is therefore actually a counterfeit of the plurality of attributes of God, who is one God. The plurality of attributes of God is related to the plurality of designations for God, all of which are summed up in the person of the Son, who is the Word of God (John 1:1; Rev. 19:13).[10]

The unity and diversity in God who is Trinitarian is also reflected in the things that God has made. He has made not only the things of the earth, but angelic creatures. These creatures reflect his glory and serve in his presence (e.g., Rev. 5:11–12; Dan. 7:10). Because of our human limitations, we know only a little about angels, that is, what God has told us in the Bible. But we do know some things. We know that angelic creatures exist. We know that they have great power (Gen. 19:10–11). They reflect the greatness of God in their splendor (Matt. 28:3). They are called "sons of God" in Job 1:6. God is pleased to consult them, as in 1 Kings 22:19–22. They form a kind of "court" around God's presence, analogous to the court of a human king.

We also know that Satan is a spiritual being who was created by God (Col. 1:16). He rebelled against God, and now he and his angelic assistants in the rebellion are called demons. Before they fell, they were presumably members of the court of angels. Now that they have fallen, they deceive people into false worship, and one of the forms of deceit is worship of plural gods. The plural gods are in fact a counterfeit image of the plurality of demons, who are a counterfeit of the plurality of God's court, who image the reality of God consulting his own wisdom, who is the Son of God (Col. 2:3).

Even through a distorted, counterfeit lens, the lens of so-called gods, we may see the truth of God once we have come to know the truth through

[9]See chap. 28.
[10]Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, chap. 34.

Christ who is the wisdom of God. In the light of that truth, the attractiveness and subtlety of the counterfeit makes sense. A simple answer, "the gods exist," or "the gods do not exist," is superficial, in comparison with the depth of wisdom available to us in Scripture. Bob is likely to miss this depth as long as he presupposes a materialistic worldview and does not reckon with demons or the religious role of physical idols. Or perhaps he is preoccupied with a conception of language and its functioning that does not allow for infinite depth. Or his problem is that he believes that the Bible is not the word of God, but merely human words, words captive to their times and to their languages.

10

Growth in Understanding

We must also consider how people change and grow. People's understanding of Psalm 86:8 is not an all-or-nothing matter. A person can understand partially and yet truly. Consider one such person, whom we will call Amy. Amy does not have to understand all about polytheism in the ancient Near East to grasp the main point that God is superior to all possible conceptual rivals, whether ancient or modern. Amy does not have to understand about the role of angels as God's court to understand some of the errors of ancient polytheism.

Partial Understanding

A person who believes in many gods and worships many gods can hear and understand Psalm 86:8 in part even before he abandons his polytheism. Psalm 86:8 does not carry on a philosophical debate about the existence or nonexistence of gods. It challenges the heart. Suppose Ahab is an idolater, and he hears Psalm 86:8 read to him. If God works in his heart, Ahab may take the verse to heart and come to believe that God alone has the greatness, and steadfast love, and other excellencies ascribed to him. Ahab would find his allegiance changing, body and soul. He would come to worship God alone. And in worshiping God alone, his mind and the eyes of his heart would be cleansed of their spiritual blindness, and he would begin to see the testimony, in both general and special revelation, for God's sole godhead. His intellectual conceptions with respect to the many "gods" would change.

The meaning of the word *gods* (or, rather, the corresponding Hebrew word) would subtly change, not so much in basic dictionary definition, but in its further ramifications and associations.

God is a God of love and patience and compassion. For the sake of Christ, he works with those who do not already know him fully. Many misconceptions may temporarily remain in their minds. If Ahab is saved, it is not because of his intellectual acuity, or even because he has formally correct ideas about the spirit world. He is saved by God's mercy and grace (Eph. 2:7–9). God uses, along the way to his salvation, Ahab's response as he trusts in God and abandons self-service and trust in self. Ahab trusts also in the promises and the faithfulness of God, which lead forward to Christ, who actually accomplishes the salvation the benefits of which people tasted in a preliminary way even in Old Testament times. Ahab can in principle begin trusting in God, God whom he knows partially but nevertheless truly, even while Ahab remains confused about the intellectual question of the existence and supposed powers of other gods.

The language in Psalm 86:8 is clearly designed to reach out to people like Ahab. It has something to say even to people who are hardened in polytheistic idolatry—it says that they are making a gigantic mistake and that what they are doing is folly. There is more than one way of addressing darkened people with truth. All truths lead in principle to the God of truth. We need not imagine that starting with a debate about the existence of the gods is the only way.

Bob with a modern view of language may make the mistake of focusing only narrowly on intellectual content and on the verse in isolation. Does a verse imply that gods exist or not? But that focus neglects dynamics of communication. God's communications have his power as well as his meaning and his presence. God's power leads somewhere. People do not stay the same. We must ask where the verse leads people. God designs it not to be an endpoint when viewed in isolation from God himself and the rest of his words, but to be received in fellowship with God and his words.

But still the question remains. Does Psalm 86:8 actually tell the truth to people like Ahab? Does it not confirm them in their previous assumptions about the gods? No, we have already seen that when received humbly it changes Ahab's assumptions. But it is also true that Ahab might resist change. It is always available to people to misunderstand God's Word. That is nothing new. If people have hearts filled with falsehoods and darkness, misunderstanding is a natural consequence (secondary cause). It is also, as we have said, a judgment from God on the guilt of their previous darkness. Truth is not measured by sinful people's misapprehensions, but by God.

Actually, the verse itself contains something more as an aspect of its design for dynamic communication. By extolling the greatness of God, it logically puts a question mark next to "the gods." God is incomparable, it says. What does that imply about the gods with whom Ahab might compare the true God?

To understand meaning, we can start with dictionary meaning if we want. But that is only the start. Meaning exists also in relationships. The "gods" are what they are not only individually but in relation to the other gods. We can see this by reflecting that we would form an idea of "gods" in the plural partly by having specific examples of individual gods, like the ancient Greek gods Zeus and Artemis and Hermes. The meaning of "gods" is a generality in relation to these particulars. And these particulars have meaning in relation to other kinds of beings that are in contrast with them, such as human beings and an impersonal idea such as "fate." Suppose Ahab has this understanding of the relationships in his mind. What happens to his mind if he finds that God, the God of Israel, has been added? Well, at first he may think that God may be just one among the gods. But the verse says that he is incomparable. If so, the *other* gods must be rethought. They have, as it were, been "demoted" in Ahab's mind. If they were to be sufficiently demoted, they would for practical purposes be worthless. Would they in fact be nonexistent? Of course the answer to that last question is complex.

My point is that this verse, even taken more or less by itself, raises challenging questions about "the gods." It disrupts and challenges Ahab's thinking, not only with respect to God, but with respect to his notion of the gods, the plural gods, who appear in a vastly different light because of the verse's claim. Hence, the verse does not simply "presuppose" the existence of the gods in an unqualified sense. It grants to people like Ahab the acknowledgment that it speaks into an environment where people believe in gods. It welcomes people like Ahab to listen, and addresses their universe of discourse and their worldview assumptions. But it does not address them without an implicit note of challenge.

What we see here is the wisdom of God in addressing people who are in darkness, and also his power to challenge and undo darkness even in the midst of darkness.

We can approach the matter from another direction. The verse invites Ahab to serve the God of Israel alone. Exclusive heart allegiance leads logically, when played out faithfully, to exclusive mental allegiance. When one God alone is worshiped, he becomes all-important. To ascribe all glory to him and to him alone is the impulse of the heart and the demand of worship. This glory includes the glory of having an exclusive role in creation

and in power and in moral authority. Hence, the gods in the plural cannot remain gods. The whole "world" of Ahab gets transformed, including the world of his thought.

Consider one more angle. Suppose that, due to a converted heart, Ahab devotes his allegiance to the God of Israel alone. God claims the exclusive right to be worshiped (Ex. 20:3). Ahab's exclusive loyalty means that God's moral standards must become Ahab's. In the long run Ahab will therefore find himself not only ceasing to worship the other gods, but also regarding these other gods as evil. They oppose the true God by opposing true worship. At the same time, they are inferior to God both in power and in character. They might be spiritual beings of some kind. This conception of gods is virtually identical with the character of demons. Demons are powerful spiritual beings who are evil and in opposition to God. Ahab could achieve a good view of what the "gods" really are like directly from Psalm 86:8 and similar verses.

More Objections

Bob might reply that the verse does not imply all that I am seeing in it. Bob thinks it can be read "on the surface," and that with this reading it presupposes "the existence of the gods" (which phraseology, as we have seen, is problematic, but we leave that to one side). If we have an opportunity for further dialogue with Bob, we can present further evidence from biblical texts. We can also challenge Bob's misconceptions about language and the influence of his worldview. Meaning goes back to God and has depths that we can escape only by suppression. But if Bob desires rebellion or autonomy, human arguments—no matter how cogent—will never be enough. Only God's work will result in fundamental change.

The Final Dynamics in Communication of Meaning

The final power for change in apprehending meaning is the power of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. Christ was crucified in weakness (2 Cor. 13:4). In obedience to the Father's will, he submitted himself to powers of the civil state, in the persons of Herod and Pontius Pilate, and the powers of the religious leadership, in the Sanhedrin. Behind these powers was the power of darkness: "But this is your hour, and the power of darkness" (Luke 22:53). Looking forward to the crucifixion, Jesus says, "I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world [Satan] is coming. He has no claim on me, but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father" (John 14:30–31). Hebrews says that the Devil had "the power of death" (Heb. 2:14), and to death Christ submitted himself. Through

Christ's obedience God "disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him" (Col. 2:15). Christ defeated the demonic hosts and triumphed. At that time, in his resurrection and ascension, he established his reign over all, and the demonic hosts—that is, "the gods" —were demoted. They were humiliated.

It has always been the case that "there is none like you among the gods, O Lord." But through Christ's work this truth has now been made manifest; it has now been definitively demonstrated and accomplished. By the power of resurrection life, the power of the demonic behind the false gods has been broken. This breaking of their power, by which they kept the nations in darkness, opens the way for the gospel to spread among the nations and to turn around, in repentance and faith, those who to this day serve a plurality of man-made gods.

"Nor are there any works like yours" (Ps. 86:8). Chief among these works is the work of the resurrection.

Progressive Revelation

The resurrection of Christ comes as the climax of what has been called "progressive revelation." We must reckon with the *progression* in revelation. In addition to changes in individuals like Ahab, changes can occur over longer periods of time. God has the purpose of giving special revelation over a long period of time, extending from the times of Genesis to the New Testament period. Because God knows the end from the beginning, God's intentions with respect to earlier revelation cohere with the messages of later Scriptures. That which is hinted at earlier becomes plain later. Readers must read the Bible having in mind God and his purposes. This understanding comes from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

In particular, a passage like Psalm 86:8 belongs to a larger history of revelation. Those who read Psalm 86 must understand that it belongs to a larger corpus of God's speech. He does not make everything perfectly clear all at once. When someone reads Psalm 86 by itself, he must not draw too many precise conclusions about what it means "in isolation," or even about what it means when read against the background of already existing canon. By God's own design, the meaning will be completed later, when other meanings of later New Testament Scriptures are added to it. Therefore the reader must treat Psalm 86 as open-ended. It is not God's complete statement, but only part of it. Hence, if Bob confidently insists on certain alleged definite implications with respect to the gods, he forces the passage in a direction contrary to the nature of its divine authorship. He misreads it.

Let us be specific. Psalm 86:8 makes claims about the gods against the backdrop of passages like the book of Exodus, which records how God showed himself to be the true God and how he triumphed over the so-called gods in which the Egyptians trusted: "For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all *the gods of Egypt* I will execute judgments: I am the LORD" (Ex. 12:12). The song in Exodus 15 celebrates God's deliverance and draws the implications for "the gods."

> Who is like you, O LORD, *among the gods*?
> Who is like you, majestic in holiness,
> awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders? (Ex. 15:11)

The triumph in the deliverance of the exodus foreshadows the great, climactic triumph through the deliverance accomplished by Christ. His work throws further light on the meaning of a word like "gods." It gives illumination on the difference between the true God and false substitutes.

11

Contexts for Language

In discussing language we have more than once appealed to context. A verse like Psalm 86:8 exists within the context of the whole of Psalm 86, so that the meaning of verse 8 needs to be construed in the light of verse 10 and other verses. The whole of Psalm 86 comes within the literary context of the book of Psalms, which in turn is part of the whole canon of the complete Bible. In addition, Christ's triumph over demons offers a key climactic context for understanding Psalm 86:8.

Psalm 86 comes not only in a literary context of other writings, but also in the communicative context of God as its divine author and a human author through whom he speaks. Psalm 86 also exists in the context of communication to human beings. The human beings reside in cultures where people have various beliefs about the gods. This influence of contexts is so important that it is worthwhile focusing on it.

Possible Impersonalist Ideals

The effect of context can be frustrating to people who do not like it or who are suspicious of it. Various influences from an impersonalist worldview may have their effect. For example, one human ideal for truth imagines that truth in its purest form would be truth without a context. It would take the form of "pure propositions." Each proposition would contain within it all the information needed to establish its meaning. It would also be truth that existed without the need for persons interacting with or knowing the truth.

Aristotle needed something approaching this kind of truth for the purpose of syllogistic reasoning. In a syllogism, individual propositions are isolated. A premise or a conclusion of a syllogism cannot be a whole paragraph; it must be only on a single sentence that needs no extra information from outside. And in principle the meanings of individual phrases within the sentence should be perfectly precise. They must exactly match the meanings in the other sentences in the syllogism, because otherwise the fallacy of equivocation may interfere with the validity of the reasoning. This kind of isolation from context does not ordinarily exist in real human communication. But a certain philosophical ideal for truth can come to expect it for any language that would fully live up to the nature of the highest kind of truth.[1]

A similar longing for an ideal can arise from looking at modern science. Certain sciences, such as physics, try to arrive at generalized formulations of laws that apply throughout the cosmos, independent of any context. People who take these laws as an ideal for truth may conclude that the "truest truths" should in principle be independent of context. Of course, expositions of the laws by scientists still fall back on a context in human language and human action. But it can seem convenient to forget that or suppress it. Sciences also seek to eliminate observer bias. People can interpret this search for objectivity as implying that the highest truth must be independent of any personal involvement.[2]

We already observed (chap. 8) that in the twentieth century structural linguistics, in the form of transformational-generative grammar, made the decision to focus on sentences and treated the sentences in virtual isolation from larger discourses and contexts in human use. This focus can appear to strengthen the philosophical ideal of decontextualized truth.

When people come to the Bible with a decontextualized view of truth, they will find themselves disappointed, because the Bible looks so "ordinary"—it uses ordinary language rather than the philosophical ideal. For example, the meaning of Psalm 86:8 has to be interpreted in the *context* of verse 10 and the rest of the psalm. Moreover, the meaning has a certain flexibility because the meaning of the word *gods* is not infinitely precise, but allows variations in use. This contextual influence does not reflect the philosophical ideal. But is this really a problem with the Bible, or is it rather a problem with the philosophical ideal?

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[1]See the critique of this ideal in Vern S. Poythress, "Reforming Ontology and Logic in the Light of the Trinity: An Application of Van Til's Idea of Analogy," *Westminster Theological Journal* 57, no. 1 (1995): 187–219.

[2]For a critique of the ideal of eliminating personal involvement in science, see Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Toward a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).

Embedding in Larger Situations

Ordinary use of language takes place within larger situational contexts.[3] The contexts include larger pieces of language: words occur in sentences, sentences in paragraphs, paragraphs in whole discourses. Discourses occur in the context of human interaction, which is embedded in the history of the world. Language usage also invokes a particular language, such as English or Greek, that already exists in the background. Understanding the meaning of a particular word or sentence depends on assessing both the language to which the word belongs and the setting consisting of other words and personal interaction.

This contextual aspect of language use and meaning has ties with the personal character of God and the personal character of human beings who are users of language. God has placed us in a world. As finite people in the world, we are surrounded by dependencies on which we rely. We rely on word meanings that we did not invent from scratch, on grammar that we did not invent, and on characteristics of human action that are already in place. When we express our purposes in lingual communication, our purposes are shaped in light of these dependencies.

God is infinite and not subject to the finite dependencies on which we rely. But he does have *contexts* within himself from all eternity. The Father exists as a person in eternal fellowship with the Son and the Spirit. The Spirit is the ultimate "context" or situational environment for the interaction of the Father and the Son. Each person in the Trinity acts in harmony with this eternal fellowship, and the communication among persons of the Trinity happens within the context of the eternal knowledge of the persons, who know one another (Matt. 11:27). Because God has made us in his image, God's Trinitarian character gets reflected in the structures of language. In particular, the contextual structure of the persons in the Godhead is reflected in the contextual elements in language in numerous ways. The interaction with contexts within language is not an unfortunate limitation due to human finiteness, but has its roots in God himself and is in full accord with his character as divine communicator. Hence, the Bible in its structure actually corresponds to the divine wisdom at the very point at which it seems to fail when we import a false philosophical ideal to evaluate it.

Personal Perspectives in Language and in Truth

The contexts continue to play a role when we turn from a focus on the *situations* of language to a focus on the *users* of language. We are people. What we

[3]Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), esp. chaps. 7 and 11.

say always has a personal dimension because we say it from our own distinct point of view, against the background of our own distinct configuration of knowledge, and with our own distinct purposes.

Personal involvement with language also finds itself at odds with a certain philosophical ideal. Plato and Aristotle for the most part invited people to see truth as beyond personality and independent of persons. For Plato, truth concerned abstract ideals such as "the good" or "the beautiful." For Aristotle, truth was more concretely manifested in the particulars of this world, but was still independent in principle from the involvement of any particular personal knower. And of course this idea of independence has a grain of truth in it, because truth comes from God and so does not depend for its existence on any one particular *human* participant. It does depend on God the divine participant.

The ideal of impersonal truth can also become more attractive within a culture influenced by modern science. If scientific laws are just "out there," independent of God, they are ultimately impersonal. And if science is a model for truth, it suggests that truth in general is impersonal. The scientist is enjoined to be "objective" and not to let his personal feelings interfere with scientific judgment. This ideal of objectivity can suggest that ultimate truth should be independent of persons.

The Alleged Deficiencies of the Bible

According to this kind of ideal, the Bible shows glaring deficiencies. The four Gospels have differences among them, and these differences can be attributed to the different *personal* concerns of the four authors, the four Evangelists. According to the philosophical ideal of impersonal truth, truth is inevitably compromised, even contaminated, by the entrance of a personal perspective. Similarly, the various letters in the New Testament, and the prophetic utterances of the prophets in the Old Testament, show the coloring of individual human personalities. Psalm 86:8 shows the coloring of the personal commitments of its human author. So the whole Bible falls short of the philosophical ideal.

The alleged deficiencies become particularly evident in considering biblical accounts of historical events. According to the philosophical ideal, the truth about a particular historical event is truth conceived *impersonally*. The selective attention and evaluation and theological interpretation that we find in the Bible in its accounts of events therefore show the human limitations of the Bible in comparison to absolute truth. So runs the reasoning of a person who has accepted the philosophical ideal of

impersonal truth. But this reasoning is deficient because it derives from a false philosophical ideal.

Personal Truth according to the Bible

All truth is ultimately personal because it is the truth of God, the truth in God's mind. *Human* persons and their perspectives on truth are dispensable in principle, but *God* as a person is not dispensable.

Moreover, God is Trinitarian, not unitarian. There is one God, which guarantees unity and harmony in all truth. But God is also three persons.[4] The Father knows the Son and the Son knows the Father (Matt. 11:27). There are three *personal perspectives* on the truth, namely, the perspectives of the Father's knowledge, the Son's knowledge, and the Holy Spirit's knowledge.

This ultimacy of personality and of personal perspectives has implications for our thinking about human truth. Diversity in human thinking may sometimes be the result of error and falsity. But in addition it may sometimes result from richness of truth, reflected in several perspectives, all of which are completely true. The Father's knowledge of the Son is completely true. The Son's knowledge of the Father is completely true. By analogy, the distinct theological and personal emphases in the Gospel of Matthew can be completely true, and likewise the theological and personal emphases in Mark, Luke, and John. Consequently, a flawed view that desires impersonal, nonperspectival truth interferes with appreciating the Bible for what it is.

Influence of Philosophical Ideals for Norms for Speech

A philosophical ideal of truth without context can influence our expectations in another way, by affecting our ideas about the *norms* for speech.

A philosophical ideal runs the danger of focusing on only one dimension of speech. It will then falsely judge success or failure in terms of only one dimension. For example, the ideal may propose to focus only on the issue of accuracy, independent of speaker intention and hearer effect. The ideal for truth can then easily become the ideal of total or exhaustive truth, which is impossible for human beings. And in the attempt at least to approximate to this ideal, human beings may artificially be required to pack speech with detailed information, without regard either for the speaker's attitude or for the practical needs of hearers.

The Bible is disappointing by this artificial standard. It does not always pack in all the pedantic details. Its concerns are typically more practical, more

[4]For further reflection on the implications for truth, see Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (1987; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001).

functional. It cares about real people and addresses their heartfelt needs. It has a concern for the whole person. Is this a deficiency? It may appear to be if we lapse into a false view of the norms for communication.

Personal Norms for Speech

Speech is to be weighed by reference to an ultimate personal context, namely, the personality of God. God weighs speech not only by its content, but also by evaluating the speaker's attitude and effects on the world. God is one God, and these three concerns—content, attitude, and effects—intersect in any one act of speech. They are not independent of one another. For example, Jesus told parables, which were fictional stories. A superficial analyst might be disappointed in parables because they are fictional and give no direct information about "the real world." They may be alleged to be "deficient in content." But when we analyze speaker attitude and hearer effect, we can begin to appreciate why Jesus proceeded the way he did. Parables may be able to operate within the special circumstances of Jesus's ministry in ways that direct, blunt statements of truth cannot so easily travel because the hearers are not ready for reception (Mark 4:3–9).

The Bible can also use other literary devices where it becomes important for readers to discern the intention of the speaker. There can be hyperbole, sarcasm, irony, and other literary devices that exploit the rich potential of language for communication in depth. Are such complexities, which are deviations from the most blunt, literalistic form of communication, a liability? They may appear to be if we use distorted standards that go back to an impersonalist view of language and truth.

Awe of God

In sum, a robust understanding of language answers temptations to come to the Bible with a false ideal. In fact, an appreciation for language and a close examination of its riches can uncover reflections of the wisdom of God and his Trinitarian character. Language is a more glorious gift than the philosophical ideal. The ideal, in its one-dimensional, reductionistic approach, is impoverished in comparison to the reality.

12

The Idea of Closed Language

Let us now think more broadly about one aspect of modern assumptions about language, the idea that language is closed to divine presence and divine revelation. Language is viewed as a merely immanent, human tool. God is essentially absent. How do we summarize this view of language?

Ernst Troeltsch provided a clear summary of modern assumptions about history (chap. 5). We could use a similar summary with respect to language. As far as I know, no one has yet produced such a summary. Perhaps no one could because modern discussion throws up a whole spectrum of ideas. Impersonalist thinking has an influence, but there are many variations. For simplicity, we will concentrate on only one view of language, a view analogous to Troeltsch's three principles for historical research.

Troeltsch's summary can serve as a starting point for thinking about language if we reconfigure his formulations and convert them into hypothetical principles about language. His three principles for historical research were criticism, analogy, and correlation.[1] Could people claim that analogous principles apply to research about language? They could.

Supposed Principles for Language

Criticism. The principle of criticism for history says that reports and data from the past must always be weighed, and that we can only draw *probable*

[1]Ernst Troeltsch, "Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology," in *Religion in History: Essays Translated by James Luther Adams and Walter F. Bense* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 13–14. See discussion in chap. 5.

conclusions about past events. Suppose we transpose it into language. Pieces of language must be weighed for meaning, and we can only draw *probable* conclusions about meaning.

Analogy. The principle of analogy for history says that the past must be understood by analogy with our experience of the present and with observations of historical unfolding in the present. What principle might apply to language? Pieces of language and whole languages from either the present or the past must be understood by analogy with pieces of language and whole languages that we already know.

Correlation. The principle of correlation for history says that historical events involve causal interactions. The future springs from the present and from the past by a continuous unfolding of events. What do we say about language? We could apply the principle diachronically and causally with respect to developments and changes in languages over time. The changes take place in a continuous manner, and there are correlations between the forms of language at any one time and the forms in immediately preceding times.

But we can make a more fruitful formulation by using the principle not diachronically (surveying historical development through time) but synchronically (examining language at one time). Language as a system is one whole in which all the parts correlate. The meaning, use, and function of any one part depend on and correlate with the meanings, uses, and functions of other parts. For example, the word *dog* is a noun and so correlates with both the whole class of nouns and the other nouns that function in a similar manner within English: *cat*, *horse*, *mouse*, and so on.[2]

Preliminary Affirmation

A little contact with structural linguistics, or some reflection on the experience of learning a second language, suggests that the three principles are not only true but fairly obviously true. Take the three principles one at a time. First, consider the principle of criticism. Potential ambiguities in sentences, misunderstandings in ordinary communication, and the possibilities of flaws in language learning all confirm that interpretation sometimes includes probabilities.

Second, consider the principle of analogy. How else do we learn new vocabulary, or learn more complex sentence constructions, than by analogy with what we already know? Consider an example. Suppose a person

[2]Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), chap. 33.

is learning English and knows the word *dog* but has never encountered the plural form *dogs*. He can recognize it when he encounters it, because it is analogous to the plural forms *hogs*, *bogs*, *fans*, *cans*, and so on. Every language has some exceptions to regularities like these. The plural of *mouse* is *mice*. That fact has to be learned separately. But even with this exception, the learner classifies *mice* as plural, and knows how to use it as plural by analogy with other plural forms.

When we are beginning to learn a second language from a teacher, the teacher provides us with explanations that invoke our knowledge of some language that we already know. Sometimes, of course, a person learns by "total immersion" in a language without the help of explicit explanations. It is hard to say exactly how children do this, because they are not self-conscious about it. For an adult who already knows some language, some of the learning takes place on a subconscious level. But the adult looks for words to learn. He expects that some words refer to objects in the environment, and some refer to events and actions in the environment. So he is still using analogies between the new language and his experiences with a language that he already knows.

Third, consider the principle of correlation. Language would be impossible to learn if each bit had to be learned afresh, with no relation to anything else. Verbs fit into a system for how verbs work. There are general patterns. Every speaker knows intuitively how to fit words into sentences. The words correlate with the sentences in which they are embedded, and with the other words in the same sentence.

Framework for the Principles

So the three principles for language appear in some ways to be valid principles. Can we now be more specific about their implications? Just as the use of a word depends on the larger context in which the word appears, so the character of the principles depends on the larger context in which they are understood. The principles can be understood either personally or impersonally. That is, they can be understood as the product of a personal God, who gives the gift of language to human beings. Or they can be understood as principles that are just "there," without a personal origin.

The Bible indicates that God rules the entire world and everything in it through his word (Heb. 1:3). This rule includes his rule over the regularities of languages. His word is personal, the expression of his personality. Language principles have the impress of his person, his wisdom, his desires. People who

understand the personal origin understand and interpret the rules against the background of what they know of the person, namely God.

Does it make a difference? Yes. The difference may at first appear to be subtle, but it has vast consequences in the long run.

Impersonal Prison

For the sake of illustration, consider what it might mean for Bob to think that the principles are impersonal. First, all meaning is probable. Bob concludes that if a god were to speak, we could not effectively hear him, because we could not be certain of his meaning. Nor could we be certain that it is a god speaking rather than a fake or just a chance event. So understood, the principle implies that the Bible cannot function effectively as divine speech. Even if somehow it *is* divine speech, we cannot with certainty recognize it as such.

Second, consider the principle of analogy. Bob reasons that new meanings can only be understood by analogy with old meanings. The meaning of a god cannot be understood, because it is without proper, controllable analogies to the meanings that we already have.

Third, consider the principle of correlation. Bob reasons that meanings hang together; they are all dependent on neighboring meanings and contrasting meaning. The meaning of a god, if it were to come into the system of language, must correlate with the other finite meanings within language. Hence, it is itself finite and therefore inadequate for representing an infinitude. Or if a god is finite, he may be partially accessible to us through the system of language, but even then only insofar as he is within the scope of human language and human description, that is, only insofar as he becomes man-like. By necessity, we conform all statements about gods to the constraints of language. Language is the limit of our conceptual world. The god cannot really "be himself" in our descriptions of him, but only what we "make him" according to the constraints of language.

13

Breaking Out of Closure in Language

What is wrong with Bob's reasoning?

General Response

A satisfactory refutation of Bob's way of thinking includes a view of language and its significance. A full response needs a whole book to take up questions about the nature of language. For a compact answer, we will content ourselves with the following observations.

First, in a broad way Bob's thinking presupposes that God is essentially absent, both from the regularities of language and from the detailed processes of linguistic communication among human beings. According to Bob's assumptions, God could only become present to human beings in some special, extraordinary intervention. And because such an intervention would produce a break with the normalities of language, it would not be intelligible or digestible. But the fundamental assumption of God's absence belongs to a worldview that is already impersonalistic and antibiblical at the start. It should not be surprising that it produces antibiblical fruit in its conclusions.

Response to the Principle of Criticism

Now consider the three more specialized assumptions, concerning criticism, analogy, and correlation. The principle of criticism uses an understanding of

probability and the ways in which we doubt various claims. The principles of probability and the pattern of doubting both presuppose the regularity of God's governance of the world. God cannot be avoided; we are always dependent on him. In particular, probability depends on constant mathematical principles, which issue from the speech of God, which governs creation.[1] The practice of doubt presupposes a human procedural pattern, which cannot itself be doubted during the process. The rules for the procedures of doubting depend on truth, and on the difference between truth and falsehood, which depend on God.[2]

These realities about God's sustaining the world undermine Bob's fundamental assumption that language is self-sufficient. That self-sufficiency is what opens the way to believing that God must "intervene" from outside into an essentially mechanical, impersonalistic system.

But questions still remain about how, living in God's world, we identify *special revelation*, that is, particular speeches in human language directed from God to human beings.[3] A full response would again require elaboration. As a short answer, we may say that God himself makes provision for the confident identification of his speech, both through external evidence and through the work of his Holy Spirit opening our eyes to receive the evidence.[4] Among the external evidences, the chief one is the resurrection of Christ. Whole books have been written about it. Over five hundred people saw the resurrected Christ at the same time (1 Cor. 15:6). Jews were expecting a bodily resurrection at the end of history, but not in the middle. Christ's resurrection surprised everyone, including his disciples (Luke 24:11). This surprise factor confirms that Christ's resurrection was not a made-up story to match what his disciples secretly wanted.

We need to confront the deeper personal issue here, the issue of where our trust rests. People who are uncertain about the Bible always have some reasons for their uncertainty. These reasons make good sense to the people who use them. And yet behind the reasons there always lies a confidence, a basic certainty, concerning the assumptions they make in evaluating the Bible. People's reliance on other grounds underestimates the difficulties of corruption of the mind and overestimates the accuracy of judgment to be expected from people alienated from God. Personal moves like these are matters of trust, ultimately religious trust, in our own powers. Underneath these moves is the desire for personal autonomy, each person desiring to be

[1]Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), chap. 22.
[2]Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), appendix B.
[3]On general and special revelation, see Poythress, *Redeeming Science*, chaps. 2–3.
[4]See chaps. 29–30.

a god. It is rebellious. We cannot avoid basic commitments of some kind to whatever we regard as most reliable. Christian faith means placing trust in Christ, who is completely reliable. He is therefore more reliable than other sources to which we are tempted to give allegiance.

Response to the Principle of Analogy

Consider next the principle of analogy. Bob's reasoning with respect to analogy assumes that we have no analogue to a god within the world. But this assumption already contains the core of a worldview at odds with that of the Bible. According to the Bible, God is continually present in the world. He makes himself known through what he has created (Rom. 1:18–25). Earthly fathers imitate God's absolute fatherhood. Earthly kings imitate God's absolute kingship. Human creativity imitates God's creativity. God has built into creation analogies like these through which we know him. And these analogies include analogies within the very structure of language itself.

Response to the Principle of Correlation

Finally, consider the principle of correlation. Bob's reasoning about the principle of correlation presupposes the finiteness of ordinary meanings. But even the most ordinary meaning is anchored in the knowledge in God's mind, which is infinite. Bob has begun with a faulty view of meaning, and this view automatically excludes God from the outset.

To put it another way, God is part of the context of meaning. Bob has perhaps been seduced by the decontextualizing desires of some trends in modern social science, which attempt to isolate some aspect of the world, treating it as detached from the presence of God.

Plausibility of Bob's Viewpoint

Bob's reasoning seems plausible to many in our modern environment. It seems to many that Bob's reasoning conforms to the actual nature of language as we find it and use it. And Bob's reasoning also gains strength from a broader ideology, namely, materialism or impersonalism. Materialism and, more broadly, secularism say we live in a world in which God either does not exist or is absent, and we must make our way as best we can with the human and subhuman resources that we have.

But all this plausibility, which has considerable power in persuasion, derives from distinctively modern cultural patterns of thinking. These patterns treat language, human beings, and their surrounding environment as

"secular," unrelated to God. They view these matters as matters where God is essentially absent. If these practices are carried out with considerable consistency, and in massive detail, they have great power to reassure us that our way of thinking is natural and correct. Our modern way of thinking excludes God from the beginning, and so it is not too surprising that it finds that God cannot be wedged in at the end without creating tensions with its understanding of language and the world.

Comparison with the Historical-Critical Method

An appeal to language can in fact generate more persuasive power than the nineteenth-century appeal to history. Let us see why. Ernst Troeltsch's appeal to the principles of historical research (chap. 5) had a flaw that was hard to conceal: it excluded miracles as a matter of method. It was dogmatic in its exclusion. And alert people could see this exclusion. People who were inclined for other reasons to believe in Christ's resurrection could see that it was a most exceptional event, which by definition would not fit well into standard secular historical methodology. Their reaction would be, "So much the worse for the methodology!" The methodology was inadequate to deal with this unique, all-important case.

From the one central example, the resurrection of Christ, reasoning could extend to other examples. What about other miracles attested in the Bible? Did they happen or not? Were they genuinely miraculous or not? How could they be treated by Troeltsch's historical methodology? The miracles in the Bible are not arbitrary, absurd happenings that make no sense. They make sense once we see in them God's working his own personal purposes to bring redemption to the world. So, in the case of miracles, many people have seen that they have good reasons for rejecting the universal applicability of a historical-critical method.

When we shift from history to language, the need to reject modern assumptions is not as immediately evident. Modern thinking about language does not require a foundational denial of the possibility of miracles. There is no need for it. Analysis of language depends on the *regularities* of language, not on exceptions. Theoretically, we could allow for exceptions either in the area of strange events (deed miracles) or strange utterances (word miracles). Such exceptions would make no difference to modern linguistics, because modern linguistics focuses on the regularities.

In other words, miracles, if they were to be allowed, would make no real difference to linguistics. Why not? Reasoning based on modern assumptions runs as follows: If a deed miracle occurs, we who are human must still process

the events using the resources of ordinary language. We are still within the "prison" of language. The miracle does not break us out. Or suppose that a speech miracle occurs, and we receive some divine speech. We who are human must still process the speech using the resources of ordinary language. Again, we are still within the "prison"; a single strange piece of speech does not break us out. If the speech is totally unintelligible, it does not help us at all. If it is intelligible, it is intelligible only to the degree to which it coheres with the system of language in which we already dwell. All intelligibility takes place *within* the system. Hence, the new speech does not break us out.

In fact, according to these assumptions, *nothing* can "break us out" of the language system, because inhabiting the system is part of what it means to be human. We cannot even imagine what it would be like to break out, because our imagination itself operates against the background of language and its system. To think of being ourselves outside the system is to think of ourselves as nonsensical, irrational, crazy. Meaning itself depends on relationships sustained with the ordinary language that is the system.

People within this frame of thought may come to inspect the Bible. The Bible they inspect is, let us say, an English translation. It is ordinary English. It derived from human translators who were constrained by the resources of the English language system. Hence, it is purely human and cannot break out. People who read it cannot break out either. Going back to the original languages—Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek—does not help, because these languages are demonstrably human languages, with features similar to all the other human languages in the world. The only way to break out would be to have a nonhuman language, and then we could not understand it.

The Issue of Speculative Reconstruction

The argument for this modern point of view becomes still more powerful when we observe that for the most part it stays free from obvious speculation. In this respect it differs from the issues raised by historical reasoning. Historical reconstruction of any kind involves guesswork. Every historian faces incomplete evidence. For events in ancient history, frequently the direct, firsthand evidence is sparse. Historians must make the best of it and try to make reasonable guesses as to the probable course of events. Naturalistic historians make reconstructions that harmonize with their naturalistic assumptions. They believe that miracles do not occur, and so they produce alternative nonmiraculous accounts of how the biblical records came to record miracles. But because the whole process is guesswork, a person who believes in God and in miracles may disagree. He may say: "Your reconstruc-

tion seems plausible. We can imagine that things could have happened that way. But you have not proved that they did. You have at best shown that you can postulate one way in which things could have happened. But a God capable of miracles could have done it another way—in fact, he could have done it in exactly the manner that the Bible describes."

In this sense, no one in historical research can "prove" anything. The weight of plausibility may shift toward naturalistic, anti-miraculous explanations because many intelligent people are working on such explanations, and because the surrounding culture promotes a naturalistic, materialistic worldview. But other people may still resist these pressures and just tell themselves that, however plausible the naturalistic explanations may be, they are still speculative and do not exclude the possibility of God's miraculous work.

Bob's argumentation based on language has a different character. It is *not* speculative—at least not in the same way. Bob's argumentation therefore seems to close in on us far more effectively than the old arguments about history.

God's Involvement

Bob's modern argumentation could even go a step further by appealing to God. People differ here. Some postmodernist thinking about language is atheistic in tendency. According to this thinking, the thoroughgoing humanity of language is one more evidence that God is a linguistic illusion and does not exist. Others are agnostic: God may exist, but because we inhabit the prison of language, we can never have access to him. We cannot know whether he exists, because such knowledge would require that we could escape from the prison.

Still a third view allows that we could in some sense have contact with God. But the contact must be indirect because of our prison location. This view results in a God akin to the God of neoorthodoxy. This view may say that the Bible is still indirect evidence that God exists and wishes to have a relationship with us. God himself undertakes to meet us through the special events recorded in the Bible and through the words of the Bible. But the meeting is indirect. God created us with our language situation. And he himself is happy with this situation. When he communicates with us, he uses the resources of the human language system and never breaks out of the system. He accommodates himself to our limitations. And so, the reasoning goes, we hear in the Bible human, fallible reflection on God.

I imagine that all this may sound plausible to a good many people nowadays, because this kind of reasoning fits in plausibly with modern thinking

about language and humanity and the world. That of course is one reason why we are taking time to consider it. But it has a flaw. It has not taken God or his communication to us seriously. When we take the Bible seriously, it ends up overturning the entire set of assumptions that characterizes our modern way of thinking. The modern way, as we have been saying, is the way of impersonal laws, including impersonal laws of language. These laws form a systematic whole from which God is absent.

The truth rather is that God is present—everywhere. He is present in the structures of language that he gives us. He designed language as a means for communication from him to us, and not merely from one human being to another. Human language is not *merely* human, but also divine, both in its origin (God gave it to us) and in its capacity (God can speak using it). But we make clever attempts to reinterpret the world, including the world of language, in such a way that we can exclude him and be comfortable in our autonomy.

Bob's entire argumentation is specious because he does not reckon with the fact that language from one end to the other reveals God.[5] And language, as a gift from God, comes to us designed as a vehicle for God to speak to us exactly as he wishes, and to communicate his truth in harmony with his being the God of truth.

[5]Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*.

14

Analysis of Biblical Narratives

We should look briefly at one more modern issue related to language, namely, the treatment of narrative. In the last half of the twentieth century interest has blossomed in literary approaches to the Bible and in analysis of narrative discourse—stories. Like many other areas, this one can help us in reading the Bible. A good portion of the Bible is composed of narrative discourses. It contains historical accounts. Such accounts need not be dry-as-dust records of minutiae. They can show us not only what happened but also the theological significance of what happened. And because narratives have ways of resonating with the "narrative" of each person's individual life, they can encourage us in seeing applications.[1]

The Danger of Evaporating History

But, as we might expect, modern thinking about narrative can contain distortions and lead to counterfeits. What dangers do we confront? People may talk about treating the Bible as literature or analyzing biblical narratives for their "narrativity." Such an approach might offer insights here and there. But it might also mean reducing our reading to a one-dimensional approach. Such reading could affirm a narrative merely as "story" but discount its claims about what happened. In this kind of approach, the words are treated as if they floated in a vacuum, disconnected from the events about which they

[1]Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), chaps. 24–29.

speak. Reference, that is, reference to real events in real time and space, is alleged to be irrelevant to meaning. Reading then becomes merely an aesthetic experience, rather than an engagement with the claims that the Bible makes about who God is and what he has done.

When we apply this principle across the board, it implies that whether the resurrection of Christ really took place in time and space does not matter. Allegedly only the "story" of the resurrection matters. But that is not how the people who wrote the Bible intended it. The apostle Paul argued vigorously that it mattered whether Christ was actually raised (1 Cor. 15:12–19). The gospel depends on it. A mere imaginary story does not have divine power to save us; Christ's resurrection in time and space has that power.

Ordinary people both from the first century and from modern times want to base their lives on something more substantial than a made-up story, however entertaining or moving it may be. They want to know whether Christ's resurrection was a reality in time and space. The Bible answers them by saying that, yes, he really did rise from the dead. And we have to reckon with how we respond to that reality: "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:30–31).

The same principle extends logically to the Bible's other claims about what happened in history. A literary approach that evaporates history and makes the text a self-contained story does not do justice either to the Bible's own claims or to readers' honest questions.

Courses about "the Bible as literature" in public education run this danger. We can of course be glad that something is being done to address widespread ignorance of the contents of the Bible. But such courses are likely to avoid confronting the Bible's claims about reality. By doing so they set an example that in fact disrespects the Bible's own design and intent.

The Danger of Disconnecting History and Theology

A second, related danger concerns the relation of history to theology. How are the two related? A materialist worldview supposes that the realities of the world boil down to matter and motion. History, according to this view, is just a bare list of what happened. It has no human meaning, let alone divine meaning. Or if it has human meaning, it is a meaning that we human beings have imposed on the "raw" events. History develops according to impersonal laws and chance. Theology is therefore a secondary human imposition of meaning.

By contrast, the Bible presents us with a personal God who rules history and works events according to his plans. His plans are personal. Meaning starts with God. The meaning of the events, within God's plan, is actually prior to the events. The events are never "raw" events, never "bare" events, but events that already have meaning. They have a richness of meaning in the infinity of God's mind. We as human beings can never completely plumb God's infinity, but we can appreciate some of his meaning.

We can consider the Gospels as one key example. The four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—expose us to events with meaning. History, that is, the events, goes together with theology, that is, the meaning of the events. The two belong together because they go together in God's mind. For example, Matthew tells us about the virgin birth of Jesus, which was an event in time and space. The event was *history*, that is, what happened. Matthew also indicates something of its significance:

> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:
>
> "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
> and they shall call his name Immanuel"
>
> (which means, God with us). (Matt. 1:22–23)

Matthew's explanation of the significance of the event gives us *theology*. The history and the theology belong together. The theological explanation shows the meaning that God already had in mind when he planned the virgin birth.

The Gospels and other historical accounts in the Bible do not create a freshly minted human meaning and impose it on events with no prior meaning. The Gospels express divine meaning that was in the mind of God all along, and so is intrinsic to the events themselves.

The four Gospels differ in focus and emphasis. How do we respond to these differences? Within an impersonalist worldview, it is natural to conclude that any differences are merely weak human inventions, imposed on bare events. So meaning and theology get discounted as merely human. But the Gospels are the word of God, and therefore they are divine interpretations that expound the meaning *already* in the events according to God's design. They have invented nothing, but have uncovered meanings already there. This reality makes a lot of difference in the attitude with which we read.

PART FIVE

CHALLENGES FROM SOCIOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY

15

Challenges from Sociology

Now we turn from language to society. What challenges do sociology and social anthropology pose for biblical interpretation? In some respects the challenges are analogous to those concerning language. If the Bible arose within a particular human social context, does the context imply that the Bible is *merely* human and that it cannot be a transcendent revelation from God?

Sociology and the Bible

First, let us consider potential benefits. Sociology and social anthropology, like linguistics, have developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the practice of studying structures and not simply history (chap. 7). They study social structures. All cultures depend on regularities in human interaction, and regular expectations concerning cultural behavior and cultural meanings.

The Bible was written in the midst of ancient cultures. A variety of ancient Near Eastern cultures impinged on the situation of the Israelites to whom the Old Testament originally came. Similarly, the culture of the Roman Empire and the distinctively Jewish-influenced subculture of Palestine affected the people to whom the New Testament was originally written. God addressed people back then and there.

People can profit from the Bible without any knowledge of the ancient cultures. But knowledge of the cultures, some of which can be gleaned from the Bible itself, shows us how God in his wisdom addressed people in circumstances other than our own. Understanding the Bible deeply includes

understanding what God was saying to these people. The ancient cultures were markedly different from modern industrialized cultures, so reflection on cultural differences helps us to appreciate more deeply the meaning of what God was saying, in distinction from a first impression. It can enable us to grow in appreciating God's wisdom and the scope of his purpose. And it can help to remind each modern reader that neither he or his culture is the center of the world. It can promote humility.

Any one detail from sociology or social anthropology may not matter so much, because the detail comes from the study of a particular modern society, whether postindustrial societies, societies in developing countries like Nicaragua, or isolated tribal societies that have not yet had robust contact with modernity. Such details are not directly relevant to biblical interpretation. Rather, we have to see how the ancient societies of Rome and ancient Israel and the Hittite Empire and Babylonia operated internally. We have considerable evidence from the period of the Roman Empire, but it can never equal what researchers can gather from a society that is still functioning today. The evidence from societies of Old Testament times is gradually accumulating through archaeological discoveries, but it remains fragmentary. It takes skill—and some guesswork—to piece together the larger picture.

Challenges about Culture

But sociology and social anthropology can also be used to *undermine* the Bible. How? Most basically, if our hearts are in rebellion against God, the inclinations of our heart will affect the shape of our sociology and anthropology.

Let us be more specific about some of the ways in which biases come in. The incompleteness in our knowledge of ancient societies and the guesswork that fills out the picture can allow the introduction of biases. Such biases may be influenced by the framework of thinking and the expectations provided by a worldview. If our worldview is materialistic, our picture of an ancient society will also be biased in a materialistic direction.

Serious challenges can also arise from philosophical conclusions drawn from sociology and anthropology, especially by postmodernism. In some ways these conclusions run parallel to the earlier conclusions that we have discussed concerning language (chaps. 8–13). Some postmodernists have observed that nearly everything we do, we do within a culture, and the meanings we ascribe to our actions make sense against the backdrop of our culture, its assumptions, and its conventions. Meanings are largely culture-dependent. We live within a "world" of human significances affected by the culture that we use. And cultures differ from one another in a host of

ways. The ancient cultures of the Bible differ from one another and from our modern cultural situation. This situatedness may suggest to some people that culture is a prison of thought from which we cannot escape. The limits of culture are more or less the limits of our "world" of human significance.

The parallels between culture and language are many. So we will repeat in the context of reflections on culture some of the reasoning that we developed earlier in discussing language.

People can move from general observations about culture to conclusions about the times in which the Bible was written. The Bible was written in cultural situations, by human beings who lived in human "worlds" affected by culture. So, people might reason, the individual books of the Bible belong to their cultures. The cultures are prisons from which the Bible cannot escape, even in principle. Therefore, they reason, the Bible cannot be a transcendent revelation from God.

I believe that Bible scholars feel the effects of such reasoning, even if they do not fully accept them. So let us consider this challenge in greater detail. For the sake of concreteness, we return to our earlier example concerning Psalm 86:8.

Gods of the Ancient Near East

Psalm 86:8 says,

> There is none like you *among the gods*, O Lord,
> nor are there any works like yours. (Ps. 86:8)

In chapters 8–10 we saw how readers can interpret this and similar verses in a manner compatible with biblical monotheism. But application of sociological thinking can lead us into problematic interpretations.

An Alternate Cultural Reading

Our modern reader, Bob, can read the verse against the background of ancient Near Eastern culture. Not only this verse, but other Old Testament verses, and documents like the *Enuma Elish*[1] recovered by archaeologists, contribute to a socio-anthropological picture of the ancient Near East. Polytheism pervaded the ancient Near East. Israelites were affected, as Solomon's worship of false gods shows (1 Kings 11:1–9). Israelites were familiar with the

[1]See my discussion in Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), chap. 4.

idea of many gods. And those who fell into the practice of worshiping other gods clearly believed that these gods actually existed.

Given this cultural context, Bob argues that the language about one God "among the gods" must have a meaning related to its context. The culture points the way to the meaning. The verse, says Bob, acknowledges the existence of plural gods, but advocates in the midst of this cultural assumption the superiority of the God of Israel.

Bob's argument here is similar to but not identical with Bob's earlier arguments about language (chap. 8). The difference here lies in his focus on culture. The culture has polytheistic meanings in it. Israelites, both the author and his readers, live in the midst of cultures dealing with these polytheistic meanings. We are now focusing on this cultural side to the arguments. But clearly the linguistic and the cultural-sociological arguments can reinforce one another. The language functions in the way that it does within the context of culture. And the cultural meanings are activated by language that invokes them.

Difficulties with Claims for Many Gods

As we observed in chapter 8, Bob's line of reasoning runs into an immediate difficulty with the later verse Psalm 86:10.

> For you are great and do wondrous things;
> you alone are God.

Bob hypothesizes that in verse 10 the psalmist is saying that as far as worship is concerned, he will treat God as the only god who matters. Bob appeals to the culture again. In the surrounding cultures of the ancient Near East, various people had "favorite" gods. For example, the whole country of Moab had the god Chemosh, whom they regarded as a patron god for their country (1 Kings 11:33). Some of the women of Ezekiel's time devoted special attention to the god Tammuz (Ezek. 8:14). Jeremiah's opponents placed hopes in offerings to the "queen of heaven" (Jer. 44:17–19). These people had a favorite god or goddess. So, says Bob, given the cultural environment, the psalmist is not denying that other gods exist, but is making a personal commitment to the God of Israel alone, based on his personal favoritism toward this one God, whom he thinks is supremely great.

Or Bob may decide that verse 10 is a later monotheistic addition to a psalm that originally presupposed the existence of many gods. According to Bob, there were a variety of subcultures in Israel. And there was development over time, so that by the postexilic period, the Jews who returned to Palestine were

becoming monotheistic. Bob claims that he is trying to reckon thoughtfully with the relationships of Israelites to their cultures. According to Bob, verse 8 signals a surrounding polytheistic culture, while verse 10 signals either a monotheistic subculture of the same time period, or a later culture.

In the final form of the psalm, Bob claims, tension still exists between verse 8 and verse 10. Bob may appeal to cultural differences to explain this alleged tension. He may hypothesize that it was part of the culture—part of the customs and understandings in dealing with sacred writings—to add to, emend, and otherwise make small changes rather than to rewrite a whole piece from scratch. Thus the scribe who added verse 10 was influenced by cultural constraints different from our own. Whereas we would likely rewrite the whole psalm in order to eliminate tension, the scribe is more circumspect and leaves a remaining tension. Supposedly, both he and his readers are culturally attuned to this kind of procedure.

Assumptions Used in Reasoning

All of the reasoning by Bob depends on the regularities in the operations of cultures across the world, and Israelite culture in particular. For example, there are regularities with respect to the fact that people interpret texts in light of cultural assumptions like polytheism. But what if the psalmist is addressing a mixed situation where not all his readers are polytheists? Or what if he is a newly minted monotheist, in rebellion against the cultural stereotype, but is trying to convince his hearers gradually?

How do people attempt to answer these questions? They try to answer them using knowledge or hypotheses about how cultures work. And that means they appeal to regularities of culture. They assume regularities if they postulate that ancient scribes had different habits and expectations than our own with respect to relieving tensions. Bob assumes regularities about meanings when he hypothesizes that the psalmist in verse 10 is talking about his favorite patron god.

Our view of the regularities matters. The same issue comes up here as with our earlier discussion of language. We view the regularities as either personal or impersonal. Impersonal laws for culture would be laws that are just "out there," with a kind of mechanical control over how cultures operate. Such a picture may suggest that people have no real control, but mechanically accept whatever their culture teaches them.

In reality God rules over all the particulars of all cultures and gives these cultures as gifts to humanity. That by itself does not decide what the rules and regularities look like in detail, but it sets the tone. The twentieth century

has witnessed impressive advances in analyzing the structures of cultures—some of the regularities. And yet, the desire to make sociology and social anthropology "scientific" has sometimes resulted in a kind of woodenness and has truncated some of the rich, multidimensional character of human culture for the sake of scientific "rigor."[2]

For example, it is easier to deal rigorously with a particular culture if it is uniform. We all know intuitively that each individual is unique. But sociologists and anthropologists cannot possibly dwell on this uniqueness and still achieve results. The uniqueness has to be placed in the background in comparison with what is common. And then, somewhere along the way, reasoning may fall into the pattern of oversimplifying by overestimating what is common. The principle holds in the area of religious viewpoints in particular. The religious, cultural generality of the ancient Near East is polytheism. And that may suffice for a simple analysis. But cultures may have variations within them. Even if a whole culture is polytheistic, different people will vary in their religious commitments. Some will be fervent; others will be less so. Some may have a favorite god or goddess. Others may play the field or switch allegiances, depending on circumstances. It might also be possible that the Israelite people, at certain periods in their existence, might contain a mixture of polytheists and monotheists. And would it not be possible that an individual Israelite, specially moved by God, might become monotheistic even though everyone around him was polytheistic?

Reckoning with Multiple Cultures

In fact, the situation for interpreting ancient Israelite culture is even more challenging because Israelite culture varied over time, and because it was in contact with surrounding cultures. Israelites knew to some extent about other cultures whose beliefs differed. For example, when they were in Egypt, they would surely have learned something about Egyptian religion without necessarily agreeing with it. Most of the Jews who returned from exile were monotheistic or traveling toward monotheism, but they knew about the gods who were worshiped in the Babylonian Empire.

The contact with neighboring cultures means that the religious situation is potentially "pluralistic." People are aware that other religious options exist. And that creates a situation in which a verse like Psalm 86:8 can be read as addressing more than one option. Psalm 86:8 obviously addresses itself to the practices of people who worship all kinds of other gods besides the one God

[2]Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Sociology: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), appendices B–E.

of Israel. But if so, these "gods" are psychologically and religiously real in the eyes of those who worship them. In a multicultural context, language about gods would not necessarily be addressing objective "existence" in a modern sense, but rather practical "existence" as an object of worship in practice.

The prospect of cultural change over time also introduces an evangelistic dimension into biblical interpretation. When the Bible warns against polytheistic practices, it is undertaking the task of pushing people not only toward individual change, but in the long run toward cultural change. People are being told not to rest with the cultural practices that may be common around them or in the midst of them. Change is then change in the light of progressive understanding of revelation. And so the inhabitant of one culture looks beyond the bounds of his culture and into an unknown future, where he or his descendants may think thoughts that might seem strange to the person who only has his eyes fixed narrowly on common religious practices of his immediate environment. The social effect here is analogous to the linguistic effect of considering Psalm 86:8 in the light of not only the rest of the psalm, but also the rest of the Psalter, or a more extended canon—the whole Old Testament, for example.

To put it another way, one of the potentials of a culture is for people in the culture to think beyond themselves and to act beyond their current culture by changing.

In addition, we need to take seriously the claim of Romans 1:18–25 that everyone everywhere, in every culture, knows God but suppresses the knowledge. A pagan culture cooperates in the suppression by supplying reasons and practices and comfortable social circumstances in which to worship false gods, or spirits in the trees. Or in pantheism people talk about a nameless "all" that they allege to be the ground of all existence. Counterfeit religion takes many forms. But counterfeits are counterfeits of the true. And they never succeed thoroughly because no one ever escapes God, who is omnipresent. The universe itself, the laws of language, and the laws of society reveal the true God. Even unbelievers know God (Rom. 1:19–21). They have to suppress that knowledge when they misread a text like Psalm 86:8.

16

The Idea of Closure of Culture

We have focused on Psalm 86:8 as a particular example of thinking about culture. Let us now consider more broadly modern thinking about culture. In modern sociological and anthropological thinking, society and culture can be viewed as a merely immanent, humanly produced environment. God is essentially absent. This kind of thinking has affinities with the corresponding thinking about the absence of God in historical research (the historical-critical tradition) and in language (modern philosophies of language and its limits).

Ernst Troeltsch's summary of principles for historical research can serve again as a starting point. Can we reconfigure his formulations in order to address society and culture? His three principles for historical research were the principles of criticism, analogy, and correlation (chap. 5). Could people claim that analogous principles apply to research about culture? They could.

Supposed Principles for Culture

Criticism. The principle of criticism for history says that reports and data from the past must always be weighed and that we can only draw *probable* conclusions about past events. Suppose we transpose it into culture. Cultural practices and beliefs must be weighed for meaning, and we can only draw *probable* conclusions about their meaning.

Analogy. The principle of analogy for history says that the past must be understood by analogy with our experience of the present and with observations of historical unfolding in the present. What principle might apply to culture? Specific cultural practices and beliefs, as well as whole cultures from either the present or the past, must be understood by analogy with cultures that we already know.

Correlation. The principle of correlation for history says that historical events involve causal interactions. The future springs from the present by a continuous unfolding of events integrally related to the present. We assume the same for understanding sequences of historical developments in past times. What do we say about culture? We could apply the principle diachronically and causally with respect to developments and changes in cultures over time. The changes take place in a continuous manner, and there are correlations between the forms of culture at any one time and the forms in immediately preceding times.

But we can produce another principle of correlation by using the principle not diachronically (tracing historical development through time) but synchronically (examining culture at one time). Culture as a system is one whole in which all the parts correlate. The meaning, use, and function of any one part depend on and correlate with the meanings, uses, and functions of other parts. For example, the practice of idol making and idol worship is a general pattern, with some characteristic features appearing no matter which god the idol symbolizes. In this way idol worship of Tammuz has ties with idol worship of Chemosh or another ancient god or goddess. Idol worship also has ties with practices of sacrifices, the possibility of priests who serve in an idol temple, and the practical benefits that people characteristically expect to obtain from idol worship.

Preliminary Affirmation

A little contact with social anthropology, or some reflection on the experience of trying to learn to appreciate a second culture, suggests that the three principles are not only true but fairly obviously true. Take the three principles one at a time. First, the principle of criticism. Potential ambiguities in cultural practices, misunderstandings in the course of observations of ordinary events within a culture, and the possibilities of flaws in cultural learning all confirm that human interpretation is a matter of probability.

Second, consider the principle of analogy. How else do we learn new cultural meanings and practices, except by analogy with what we already know? Consider an example. Suppose a person is trying to learn Chinese

culture. When he sees the regular use of chopsticks as eating utensils, he can recognize what is happening by analogy with the American use of forks, knives, and spoons as utensils. When he sees a Chinese marriage ceremony, he understands it by analogy with an American marriage ceremony.

Every culture nevertheless has surprises. The American may be surprised to find that traditional Chinese culture has arranged marriages. But the surprises themselves begin to make sense when the learner fits them into a growing body of sympathetic understanding of the culture as a whole.

When we are beginning to learn a second culture from a teacher, the teacher provides us with explanations that invoke our knowledge of the culture that we already know. Sometimes, of course, a person learns by "total immersion" in a culture without the help of explicit explanations. It is hard to say exactly how children do this, because they are not self-conscious about it. For an adult who already knows some one culture, some of the learning occurs subconsciously. But the adult looks for customs to learn. He expects to find practices analogous to what he knows about marriage, child rearing, government, and religion. So he is still using analogies between the new culture and his experiences with a culture that he already knows.

Third, consider the principle of correlation. Culture would be impossible to learn if each bit had to be learned afresh, with no relation to anything else. Every culture has general patterns for marriage, for eating, and for raising children.

Framework for the Principles

The three principles are valid. Can we now be more specific about their implications? The principles can be understood either personally or impersonally. That is, they are understood as the products of a personal God, who gives the gift of culture to human beings. Or they can be understood as principles that are just "there," without a personal origin. How we look at them makes a difference.

Impersonal Prison

Consider what it might mean for Bob to think that the principles are impersonal. We will formulate his view so that it sounds plausible—and indeed it can sound attractive within the environment of modern thinking. Then we will refute it in the following chapter.

First, all meaning is probable. Bob concludes that even if a god were to act in some striking way within a culture, we could not effectively understand him, because we could not be certain of his meaning. Nor could we

be certain that it is a god acting, rather than a fake or just a chance event. So understood, the principle implies that God cannot meet us in the human world of culture. Even if somehow he acts, we cannot with certainty recognize his action and its meaning.

Second, consider the principle of analogy. Bob reasons that new meanings can only be understood by analogy with old meanings. The meaning of a god cannot be understood unless it is analogous to human beings or gods about which we already know something. The gods that we already know, we know because of their social functions in the society. So they are not truly transcendent.

Third, consider the principle of correlation. Bob reasons that meanings hang together; they are all dependent on neighboring meanings and contrasting meaning. The meaning of a god, if it were to come into the system of culture, must correlate with the other finite meanings within culture. Hence it is itself finite, and therefore inadequate for representing an infinitude. Culture is the limit of our conceptual world. A god cannot really "be himself" in our thinking of him, but is only what we "make him" according to the constraints of our culture.

17

Breaking Out of Closure in Culture

What is wrong with Bob's reasoning?

General Response

A satisfactory refutation of Bob's way of thinking requires a biblical view of culture and its significance. A full response needs a whole book to take up questions about the nature of culture. For a compact answer, we can make observations similar to what we did earlier for language (chap. 13).

As with language, so here with culture, Bob's thinking presupposes that God is essentially absent, both from the regularities of culture and from the details of cultural acts among human beings. According to Bob's assumptions, God could only become present to human beings in some special, extraordinary intervention. And because such an intervention would produce a break with the normalities of culture, it would not be intelligible or digestible. But the fundamental assumption of God's absence belongs to a worldview pattern that is already antibiblical at the start. It should not be surprising that it produces antibiblical fruit in its conclusions.

Response to the Principle of Criticism

Now consider the three more specialized assumptions, concerning criticism, analogy, and correlation. The principle of criticism can receive the same

answer as we offered for language. The principles of probability and the pattern of doubting both presuppose the regularity of God's governance of the world. God cannot be avoided; we are always dependent on him.

But questions still remain about how, living in God's world, we identify *special revelation*. In chapter 12 we considered word revelation, revelation where God speaks to human beings. Now let us consider deed revelation, where God acts in special ways to redeem or judge human beings. A full response would again require elaboration. As a short answer, we may say that God himself makes provision for the confident identification of his special acts by giving verbal revelation before and after the events, through the spectacular character of the events themselves, and through the work of his Holy Spirit opening our eyes to receive the evidence. The central miracle is the resurrection of Christ. When we accept this miracle and its significance, it begins to change our orientation toward the rest of the Bible and toward the other miracles recorded in it. The fundamental answer is very similar to what has been said about word revelation (chap. 13).

Response to the Principle of Analogy

Bob's reasoning with respect to analogy assumes that, within the world, we have no analogue to a god. But this assumption already contains the core of a worldview at odds with that of the Bible. According to the Bible, God is continually present in the world. He makes himself known through what he has created (Rom. 1:18–25). God has built into creation analogies like these through which we know him. And these analogies include analogies within the very structure of culture itself. Earthly fathers offer an analogy with God, the original Father. And so on.

Response to the Principle of Correlation

Bob's reasoning about the principle of correlation presupposes the finiteness of ordinary meanings. But even the most ordinary meaning is anchored in the meanings in God's mind, which are infinite. Bob has begun with a faulty view of meaning, and this view automatically excludes God from the outset.

Plausibility of Bob's Viewpoint

Bob's reasoning seems plausible to many in our modern environment. It seems to many that Bob's reasoning conforms to the actual nature of culture as we find it and interact within it.

But all this plausibility, which has considerable power in persuasion, derives from distinctively modern cultural patterns of thinking. These patterns treat language, culture, human beings, and their surrounding environment as "secular," unrelated to God. They treat culture as if God were essentially absent.

Like the appeal to language, an appeal to culture can in fact generate more persuasive power than the nineteenth-century appeal to history. The reasons why run parallel to the reasons why thinking about language produces a powerful appeal.

God's Involvement

All this may sound plausible to a good many people nowadays because this kind of reasoning fits in plausibly with modern thinking about culture and humanity and the world. But it has a flaw. Like the thinking about language, it has not taken God or his communication to us seriously. When we take the Bible seriously, it ends up overturning the entire set of assumptions that characterizes our modern way of thinking. The modern way, as we have been saying, is the way of impersonal laws, including impersonal laws of culture. These laws form a systematic whole from which God is absent. The truth, rather, is that God is present—everywhere. The secular treatment has to suppress and distort evidence.

18

Marxism and Feminism

We should also consider briefly Marxist and feminist approaches to interpreting the Bible. We cannot here undertake an extensive analysis. We content ourselves with indicating how these approaches fit into the larger picture concerning the dominance of an impersonalist worldview.

Proposed Ways of Redemption

Marxism and feminism include many variations. There are variations that claim to be "religious" and even "Christian." And *feminism* may be used quite broadly as a label for any kind of thinking that is sympathetic with gender equality. For simplicity we concentrate on the more popular, militant, secular forms.

Both Marxism and feminism in their typical expressions include a redemptive program. They have ideas as to what is wrong with the human race and how to cure it. If we may simplify, they claim that the fundamental malaise among human beings is a malformed social and economic and political system. The remedy is to restructure the system—though just how to go about the restructuring in practice may be debated. According to Marx's original vision, through a number of stages societies across the globe will finally arrive at the communist utopia of material abundance and social peace, in which each will contribute according to his ability, and each will receive according to his need.

Whatever the details, the proposals for restructuring society are redemptive proposals. The fundamental "sin" is a malformed social system, and the

fundamental "redemption" is its restructuring. When the restructuring is complete, human nature itself will be transformed by the new structure and will be at peace. Both "sin" and "redemption" are viewed purely "horizontally," as human problems unrelated to God.

Counterfeiting

Marxism and feminism represent counterfeits for the Christian redemption set forth in the Bible. Like any counterfeit, they would not be attractive unless they mimicked the truth and contained elements of truth. Human beings do indeed need redemption. Sin is the root problem. Sin resides in individual human beings. But it also has social, political, and economic ramifications.[1] Sin has effects not only on individuals but on whole social systems. Money or pleasure or sex or power can become idols, and the idols may be fed by a cultural atmosphere that contains various means for promoting their attractions.[2] Thus, the cultural atmosphere is ideologically charged. An ideological analysis of the malady has plausibility because it is partly true. Ideology supporting illicit use of power is indeed a major human difficulty.

The Bible is realistic about the fact that when human beings as a race are infected with sin, sin corrupts the use of power. People with power may use it selfishly or prejudicially; people without power find themselves oppressed and crushed by those wielding power.[3] Whole social institutions may develop that perpetuate the abuse of power. In addition, those in power may use language, ideas, and means of communication to enforce their viewpoint. Hence, we should be aware of how communication can be an instrument of power. The Bible contains specific examples of how people use words for the benefit of their own power.

> They [Judaizers] make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them. (Gal. 4:17)
>
> For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face. (2 Cor. 11:20)
>
> But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying

[1]Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Sociology: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), esp. chap. 13.
[2]Vern S. Poythress, *The Returning King: A Guide to the Book of Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), esp. 22, 139, 161; Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Dutton, 2009).
[3]Poythress, *Redeeming Sociology*, chaps. 25 and 27.

> the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. And in their greed they will exploit you with false words. (2 Pet. 2:1–3)

Religion itself becomes one means among many through which people maintain abusive power. Even the Bible itself can be twisted and used in the service of abusive power. The people whom the New Testament rejects as false teachers were most often not teachers belonging to completely distinct new religions in the Roman Empire. Rather, most of them were "insiders," people within the Christian community who claimed to represent the truth.

Distortion in teaching is one way to abuse power. But there are other ways. Even people who are intellectually orthodox in doctrine may try in practice to lord it over those under them.

> You know that the rulers of the Gentiles *lord it over* them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Matt. 20:25–28)

> Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not *for shameful gain*, but eagerly; not *domineering over* those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. (1 Pet. 5:2–3)

Marxist or feminist analysis of texts is often attuned to questions of power and manipulation. Such analysis can have elements of truth in it because power and manipulation are indeed social realities within a sinful world. Studying power and manipulation within a context guided by a personalistic biblical worldview can be fruitful. Like study using other perspectives, it can reveal previously unnoticed dimensions of biblical truth.

Marxist and Feminist Critiques of the Bible

But often critical analysis of power comes with a slant influenced by modern thinking about power and gender, and influenced also by the modern worldview that comes along with the thinking.

Many Marxists and feminists think that the Bible is like any other human book. It is logical for them to look for how the Bible affects power relations and to treat it with the same suspicion that they use with other human sources.

They are ready to criticize the Bible when they think that it legitimizes power in a way that they do not approve.[4]

Their criticism has plausibility for at least two reasons. First, abuses of power do occur in a world of sin. The Bible can be twisted to justify such abuses. Second, Marxists and feminists usually have their own standards as to what constitutes abuse and legitimacy. If God does not exist, virtually *any* concentration of power can be seen as arbitrary and "unfair."[5]

But how do Marxist and feminist analysts know that they themselves are not captive to an egalitarian ideology? Egalitarian ideology in our day has itself become an instrument to seize and maintain power, even as it was used to justify the oppressions by the Soviet bureaucracy. Marxists and feminists are indignant about abuses of power. But any moral indignation that cuts itself off from God and sets up its own standards runs the danger of becoming arbitrary and corrupt.

My own response would therefore involve a distinction between the Bible and the distorted readings of the Bible. The distorted readings include readings not only from those throughout history who have used heresy or even orthodoxy to their selfish advantage, but from Marxists and feminists themselves, when they are influenced by sinful distortions in their analysis of the Bible. We need the Bible as a pure word from God to free us from these distortions.[6]

Impersonalistic Worldview

Marxism and feminism have affinities with the social-conflict approach to sociological analysis.[7] In fact, Karl Marx was the founding figure in the development of the social-conflict approach. Like other paths in sociology, Marx's analysis of society and systems within society stemmed from an impersonalist worldview. He believed in regularities in society and in history. In fact he thought that the triumph of the proletariat and the communist movement was historically inevitable. He was a materialist who analyzed religion as a social phenomenon that those in power used to stabilize society

[4]One variation on Marxism, namely, the theology of liberation, endeavors to combine it with some elements of biblical belief. Various representatives of the theology of liberation may or may not advocate reading the Bible with suspicion. Even when they do not advocate suspicion, I believe that they read the Bible selectively and do too little to criticize Marxist assumptions using the Bible as the standard. Similarly, some feminists would consider themselves "Christian," and may endeavor to interpret the Bible in their favor. But we cannot enter into these debates here.

[5]Poythress, *Redeeming Sociology*, chaps. 25 and 27.

[6]See chaps. 27–32.

[7]See critique in Poythress, *Redeeming Sociology*, appendix D.

and subdue potential rebellion that might otherwise brew in response to the injustices and "contradictions" in the system.

Marxism and mainstream feminism both treat society as though God were absent or nonexistent. Societies are then purely human systems, closed to divine influence or divine presence. There are things wrong with society, in the form of inequalities and abusive power relations. According to their viewpoint, if these wrongs are to change, we as human beings must accomplish the changes. This approach implies man-centered or woman-centered redemption. And that is its fundamental problem. It has lost sight of God and sin.

Worldview distortions infect the readings of individual texts, including biblical texts. Marxists and feminists are familiar with this infection by worldview when they look at what other people do with the Bible. Other people, they claim, read the Bible so as to confirm their own ideological predispositions. Yes, it does happen. I am claiming that it also happens to Marxists and feminists. We need the Bible to reform our worldview. And we need Christ's redemption, working in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, to clean out the distortions in our worldview, in our desires for money, sex, and power, and in every other area of life. It is a shame when people miss the fact that God designed the Bible precisely to aid us. Marxist and feminist readings that critique the Bible cut off rather than utilize the key means that God has provided.

The standard reply from mainstream Marxists and feminists might be to observe that I myself, in the very process of writing, am not free from contamination. And they are right. I freely admit it. Such an observation, though true, does them no good. Magnify the effects of sin as much as you will, throw all kinds of accusations against me, and I will admit that, though some accusations may be off base, the accusations have not told even half of the reality. The more you magnify the power of sin, the more you show the desperation of our situation and the need for truly transcendent redemption—from God and not merely from man. We need Christ the Redeemer. I write as a fellow sinner who is on the way, not as one already perfected. But I have experienced redemption from Christ, and on those terms I speak to others in need—both to those who have already come to trust in Christ and to those who have not. We who believe in Christ have a continuing need because we are not yet perfected, and the difficulty with ideology still infects us.

PART SIX

CHALLENGES FROM PSYCHOLOGY

19

Challenges concerning Cognition

Let us now consider challenges arising from another area of social science, namely psychology. As with other social sciences, we may expect that a personal or impersonal conception of the governance of the world plays a role. An impersonal conception leads easily to an essentially mechanistic view of human thinking and behavior. Even within an approach of this type, we may nevertheless expect to find many keen and interesting observations and many fragments of truth in secular investigations because of common grace. God does rule the world in regular ways, and these ways include dimensions that are so regular, they can frequently be treated as if they were mechanistic.

We cannot take the time here to cover all the fields of psychology. Our main concern is with how modern assumptions affect biblical interpretation. Psychology has had less direct effect on biblical interpretation, because the human authors of the Bible are not available today to be cross-examined and psychologically analyzed.[1] Any kind of detailed analysis on the basis of limited surviving documents is highly speculative.

[1]But a broader view of biblical interpretation might include attention to application of the Bible to modern people. Much depends on how we look at people, what we think makes them function, and what may go amiss. Is sin the root of human difficulty? Or are difficulties merely unfortunate "dysfunctions"? What psychology says about people may for some interpreters come to function as a grid for interpreting the Bible, and then the effects may be profound. See David Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes: Counseling and the Human Condition through the Lens of Scripture* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), and other works by people of the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation.

Roots of Cognition in the Trinity

One area, however, is especially pertinent to biblical study, and that is the issue of cognition. How do we know, and how do we come to know what we know? Unlike secular approaches to cognition, the Bible indicates that God has an integral role in our knowledge.[2]

The Bible focuses for the most part on *special revelation*, the special acts of communication from God to human beings, especially in the form of oral and written speech. First Corinthians 2 indicates that the persons of the Trinity have roles in this communication.

> . . . these things [mysteries] God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. (1 Cor. 2:10–12)

God the Father is the ultimate source for knowledge—"the thoughts of God." The Spirit comes to us and stands with us in order that "we might understand the things freely given us by God." Moreover, other biblical passages indicate that God supremely reveals himself in his Son (Heb. 1:2; John 1:14–18). God the Son, who is the Word, perfectly expresses the thoughts of God (John 1:1, 18). "No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matt. 11:27). The Father, the Son, and the Spirit all know one another perfectly and exhaustively. This knowledge is the ultimate and original knowledge of God.

God reveals himself to us in harmony with who he is. We infer that the revelation of God *to us* for our redemption takes place in harmony with God's eternal knowledge of himself. So when God reveals himself to us for redemption, he reveals the glory of his Son, and the Father is known in the Son. At the same time, the Holy Spirit stands with us, interpreting to us "the depths of God" that have been manifested in the Son (1 Cor. 2:10).

God's Revelation in Scripture

God makes himself known through the Bible according to this same pattern. The Bible is the word of God.[3] As such, it expresses the wisdom of God's

[2]See John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987).

[3]See chap. 31.

eternal Word, God the Son. We come to understand its spiritual truths through the Holy Spirit.

> The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person [one who has received the Holy Spirit] judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. "For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Cor. 2:14–16)

Jesus likewise speaks about the Holy Spirit's guiding us into the truth: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will *guide you into all the truth*, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you" (John 16:13–14). Jesus may be focusing at this point on the special gift of the Spirit to the apostles, which gave their teaching divine authority. But on a subordinate level the principle applies to those who receive apostolic teaching.

General Revelation

Because of the special role of biblical revelation in instructing us in the truth about God and Christ, the Bible devotes attention to the issue of our knowledge of this revelation. But here and there it also speaks about knowledge more generally. Truth belongs to God. He is its author. Ultimately all truth is truth in the mind of God. All truth whatsoever derives from him. We may infer that it derives from his Trinitarian character. God knows all truth; the truth is in his Son; and the truth is interpreted by the Holy Spirit.

When John 1:1 identifies the Son as the Word, it implies also that in the Son is found all wisdom. Since the Son is the Creator (John 1:3) and sustainer (Heb. 1:3) of all things, all truth and all wisdom belong to him, not merely "religious" truth in a narrow sense.

We can find Bible passages that indicate something about the role of the persons of the Trinity in all human knowledge. First, God the Father has a comprehensive plan, and so all knowledge is in him.

> . . . declaring the end from the beginning
> and from ancient times things not yet done,
> saying, "My counsel shall stand,
> and I will accomplish all my purpose." (Isa. 46:10)

Second, all wisdom is in the Son, "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3). Third, the Holy Spirit instructs human beings so that they obtain knowledge.

> But it is the spirit in man,
> the breath of the Almighty, that makes him understand. (Job 32:8)

This text in Job mentions "the spirit in man," which may refer to a person's human spirit rather than the Spirit of God. But the next expression, "the breath of the Almighty," suggests that the Spirit of God stands behind the functioning of the human spirit in understanding. Consider also Psalm 94:10–11.

> He who teaches man knowledge—
> the LORD—knows the thoughts of man,
> that they are but a breath.

This text does not mention the Holy Spirit, but does make the general point that God is the source of human knowledge.

Non-Isolation of the Human Mind

Western thinking in its individualistic tendencies is accustomed to picturing the mind of each individual as wholly his, and his alone. But that is not the case. The mind of human beings is continuously open to divine operations. And the operation of the Holy Spirit, in the realm of common grace, is necessary for all knowledge whatsoever.

We must also reckon with the distortions introduced by sin.[4] Each of us has moral responsibility for his corruption because we go astray through the sinful desire to find substitutes for God—counterfeits. At the same time, our turn toward idolatry opens our minds to the operations of demons who are behind the idols. The apostle Paul indicates that Satan has a role in blindness to the truth: "And even if our gospel [what Paul proclaims] is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case *the god of this world* has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:3–4).

As a result, our own reading of the Bible is not a simple process operating in a mind immune to influence. Even within the "sanctuary" of our mind, we are in communion with other beings—God or demons or both. We are

[4]See chap. 28.

just not immediately and consciously aware of the extent and character of this influence.

If modern psychology exerts influence on biblical interpretation, the influence is most likely to be in the area of broad assumptions about the nature and operation of human cognition. Modern analysts may assume that the ancient mind, like the modern mind, is an isolated box immune to influence. The assumption is wrong not only with respect to the ancient mind but also with respect to the modern mind.

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Interaction of Minds

Let us look in more detail at God's interaction with human hearts and minds. The modern impersonalist worldview thinks of the human mind as a closed room. But when God created us, he intended our human minds to be open rooms in which the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit dwell. Our minds should dwell in Christ and feed on his Word. To confirm these claims, we need to consider what the Bible has to say about the functioning of the human heart and mind.

Receiving a New Heart

First, the Bible indicates that God not only interacts with human hearts and minds, but interacts in deep and powerful ways that reach to our innermost being. He provides people with new hearts.

> And I will give you *a new heart*, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put *my Spirit within* you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. (Ezek. 36:26–27)

This change of heart results in a fundamental change in the direction of a person's whole life. Before the change, when the person had a "heart of stone," he rebelled against God and went astray from God's ways. By contrast, the person with "a heart of flesh" is in harmony with God and walks "in my [God's] statutes."

In the New Testament the radical change is described as being "born again" (or "born from above," depending on the translation).

> Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is *born of the Spirit* is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, "You must *be born again*" [or born from above]. (John 3:5–7)

Similar descriptions occur in 1 Peter and 1 John.

> You have been *born again*, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God. (1 Pet. 1:23)

> No one *born of God* makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been *born of God.* (1 John 3:9)

Indwelling of God

In addition, the Bible describes God as indwelling human beings with whom he has fellowship. People who believe in Christ are indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

> You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God *dwells in* you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. (Rom. 8:9)

> If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead *dwells in* you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who *dwells in* you. (Rom. 8:11)

The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is closely linked with the indwelling of Christ.

> But if *Christ is in* you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. (Rom. 8:10)

> . . . this mystery, which is *Christ in* you, the hope of glory. (Col. 1:27)

If fact, Christ promises that both he and the Father will dwell in disciples: "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and *we will come to* him and *make our home with* him" (John 14:23). Christ links this promise with the coming of the Holy Spirit, which he mentions a few verses earlier and a few verses later.

> And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to *be with* you forever, even *the Spirit of truth*, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for *he dwells with* you and *will be in* you. (John 14:16–17)
>
> But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. (John 14:26)

Thus all three persons of the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, dwell in people who put their trust in Christ and follow him. The indwelling has effects in the area of knowledge. The Holy Spirit "will teach you all things" (John 14:26).

Indwelling *within* God

God's dwelling in human beings shows links with a more foundational kind of indwelling, the indwelling among the persons of the Trinity. In the same context in John 14 where Jesus talks about God dwelling in believers, he also talks about indwelling between the Father and the Son: "In that day you will know that I *am in* my Father, and you *in* me, and I *in* you" (John 14:20). He says, "I *am in* my Father," and indicates that this divine indwelling lies in the background for the indwelling between disciples ("you") and Jesus the Master ("I", "me").

In John 17 Jesus discusses further the theme of indwelling: "I do not ask for these [the apostles] only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father *are in* me, and I *in* you, that they also *may be in* us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:20–21). The expression "just as" links the indwelling of the Father and the Son to the indwelling of disciples in the Father and the Son.

Now indwelling among the persons of the Trinity is eternal. This eternal indwelling provides the ultimate foundation for the working out of redemption in time. In time the disciples come to enjoy an indwelling in God, and God in them. This later indwelling takes place according to the pattern given in its archetype, the original pattern, namely, the indwelling of the Father in the Son and the Son in the Father, in which the Holy Spirit also participates.

The Works of the Son

Once we have noticed the significance of this pattern of indwelling, we can see that it is at work in the Son of God's entire life on earth. For

example, Jesus indicates that the words he speaks arise from the Father *dwelling in* him.

> Do you not believe that I *am in* the Father and the Father *is in* me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who *dwells in* me does his works. Believe me that I *am in* the Father and the Father *is in* me, or else believe on account of the works themselves. (John 14:10–11)

The language about the Father doing "his works" implies that the principle of indwelling applies not only to the words of Jesus but to all Jesus's works.

Jesus also speaks about the words that he has given to the disciples: "For I *have given them the words* that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me" (John 17:8). These words are linked with what he identifies in John 17:6 as "your word," that is, the word of the Father. The words of the Son are also the words of the Father because the Son has given to the disciples words that "you [the Father] gave me [the Son]" (v. 8).

We conclude that communication from God is based on the indwelling of the Father and the Son. Jesus also indicates that his power works through his disciples in connection with indwelling. He counsels the disciples:

> *Abide in* me, and I *in* you. (John 15:4)

> Whoever *abides in* me and I *in* him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:5)

> If you *abide in* me, and *my words abide in* you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. (John 15:7)

We conclude that Jesus's words abide in disciples in connection with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the other persons of the Trinity. These observations could be further enriched from other places in the Gospel of John.

Human Normality

Now let us ask ourselves what is normal in human psychology, including human cognition and the functioning of human hearts and minds. What counts as "normal"? We could say that what is normal is what is statistically common. What is normal would be whatever averages out the experience of the greatest number of people. But according to the Bible's worldview,

human experience today is *disordered*. We are fallen and sinful. We are not what we were created to be. We are, in a word, *abnormal*, measured by God's standards and by the standard of what human beings originally were when they were created, before they rebelled against God.

So could we say that Adam and Eve before the fall were normal? Yes. When God completed his creative work, he pronounced it "very good" (Gen. 1:31), an even more positive description than "normal." What were they like? They enjoyed a positive relationship with God. God spoke to them, and they knew him. They should have trusted God; it was their primary obligation within that relationship.

Even if Adam and Eve had not fallen, they would have had to mature. When God created Adam and Eve, he planned a further development, and even without the fall, the development would have come to climax in the consummation, when the original mandate given by God would have been fulfilled. The fall disrupted the development, but now the goal has been attained by Christ himself, who as the last Adam has all authority (1 Cor. 15:24–27). We who follow Christ must grow to maturity through communion with him, through the power of his Spirit. We look forward to the time of the consummation, the new heaven and the new earth depicted in Revelation 21:1–22:5.

Thus, at the present time we are not yet fully normal; we are not completely free from sin. But we have been changed by being given new hearts. And we are heading toward the final "normality" of the new heaven and the new earth. In this final normality, we will be like Christ (1 John 3:2).

If we adopt this view of normality, we should also integrate into this view what the Bible says about minds. The apostle Paul boldly says, "We have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:16). We see here a kind of mutual indwelling of minds—Christ and the Spirit in us, and we in Christ.

It might be argued that in 1 Corinthians 2:16 Paul is talking only about himself, or about himself and a small group of coworkers to whom God has given special revelation and special insight. And indeed in the immediately preceding context Paul has said some things that apply most aptly to apostolic agents: "We impart this [understanding] in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual" (1 Cor. 2:13). But Paul also speaks about the recipients of his message, "those who are spiritual." He indicates that because of the indwelling Spirit, they are "spiritual" and have the ability to understand (1 Cor. 2:14–15). This line of reasoning leads directly to verse 16, where Paul says, "'For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?' But we have the mind of Christ." Thus the principle of having "the

mind of Christ" applies to all Christian believers as well as to Paul's unique role as an apostle.

In sum, the indwelling of God in a human person and the indwelling of his words in the person are part of being a "normal" person. "Normality" does *not* imply isolation of minds, as modern individualism might suppose. And this indwelling by God corresponds to the original indwelling of persons in the Trinity, as we have seen. It is not only normal, but deeply normal, because it is in harmony with who God is.[1]

[1]We have arrived by a roundabout route at the same basic point on which Abraham Kuyper stood when he observed that there is a monumental distinction between regenerate thinking (by human beings who have the Holy Spirit indwelling them) and unregenerate thinking (by those still in rebellion against the true God).

21

Thinking about the Inspiration of the Bible

We now have a view of "normal" human psychology in biblical terms. This is important. We can use this view as a starting point for considering what happened when God chose particular individuals to become human authors of the books of the Bible.

The Bible Coming from God

First, let us underline the special character of the Bible. According to the Bible's own view, the books of the Bible were "breathed out by God" according to 2 Timothy 3:16. They are not like any other books, nor is their human origin like any other books: "For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:21).[1] Thus, the manner in which human beings participated in producing the Bible is deeply mysterious. We cannot reason out how a book of the Bible must have been produced merely by a straightforward analogy with the experience of any *other* human being writing a book. In other words, the principle of analogy (chap. 5), by which we compare the experience of one human being to another, has to take into account the personal character of God, who has unique purposes for the writing of the books of the Bible.

[1]For further discussion, see chap. 31 and the appendix.

At the same time, the biblical view of human nature can still help. It helps, I think, by indicating that what happened with the human writers of the Bible was in full accord with the "normal" human psychological state, in which they were indwelt by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In addition, this indwelling was in full accord with the ultimate, archetypal indwelling of the persons of the Trinity. Genuine personhood is personhood in communion. The persons of the Trinity have communion with one another. And human beings were intended to live in communion with God and fellow human beings. Through communion with God, in the Holy Spirit, the human writers experienced an extraordinary heightening through which they "spoke from God."

The prophets and the apostles were human beings. They remained fully human throughout the time when they were writing the books of the Bible. But humanity must be rightly conceived. We must rethink the nature of humanity in relation to the ultimate model or archetype for personhood, namely, the personhood of God in the fellowship of Father, Son, and Spirit.

Christ as Final Prophet

It also helps to remind ourselves of the point of Hebrews 1:1–3, that Christ is the final prophet to whom the Old Testament prophets looked forward and for whom they prepared: "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world" (Heb. 1:1–2).

The Son of God became man. Since the time of his incarnation, he is fully God and fully man (Heb. 1:10; 2:11, 14; 4:15). The prophets and the apostles could become mediators bringing the word of God to sinful, alienated, and cursed human beings only because of the final mediation of the Son (1 Tim. 2:5). We may conclude that in some mysterious ways the work of these prophets and apostles was based on and modeled after the supreme work of the Son. Therefore, the work of inspiration is doubly mysterious. It is mysterious because it reflects the indwelling of the persons of the Trinity within the Godhead; and it is also mysterious because it reflects the speaking of God to us through the Son, who is the supreme, final speaker, the one who is both God and man. The prophets and the apostles worked on the basis of Christ's redemption, and they were empowered by the Spirit of Christ.

> Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time

> *the Spirit of Christ in* them was indicating when *he predicted* the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. (1 Pet. 1:10–11)

> Our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and *in the Holy Spirit* and with full conviction. (1 Thess. 1:5)

The two analogies, one with Christ and one with the indwelling of the persons in one another, are related. The principle of God's dwelling with human beings is symbolized in the Old Testament by the tabernacle and Solomon's temple. In giving instructions for the tabernacle, God says, "And let them make me a sanctuary, that I *may dwell in their midst*" (Ex. 25:8). This symbol of God's dwelling was fulfilled when Jesus came to earth: "And the Word became flesh and *dwelt among us*, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). When Jesus is about to leave the world and leave his disciples physically behind, he promises to send the Holy Spirit as "another Helper" to be with them (John 14:16). This promise is then fulfilled in the dwelling of the Holy Spirit in believers (see John 14:17, 20). So we become a temple of the Holy Spirit both individually (1 Cor. 6:19) and corporately as a community (1 Cor. 3:16). We have received this indwelling because of Christ our Mediator.

God Acting in the Context of Persons of the Trinity

The indwelling among the persons of the Trinity has some further implications for how we think about inspiration. God always acts in a way consistent with who he is. And that includes his action in inspiration.

Let us think it through, beginning with who God is and then moving to inspiration. God is in harmony with himself. Consider a particular example. John 3:35 says that "the Father loves the Son." This particular action harmonizes with who God is, for he is intrinsically loving in his nature. "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16). The Father's action of loving his Son also harmonizes with two eternal contexts for the Father's action. First, love takes place in the context of the Son, who is worthy of being loved because of his excellence as God. The Father's love harmonizes with the character of who the Son is. Second, love takes place in the context of the Holy Spirit. The Father's love is expressed by his giving the Spirit to the Son: "he gives the Spirit without measure" (John 3:34). The Father's love harmonizes with this expression of love, since the Holy Spirit is an eternally worthy gift.

We can generalize this principle. The persons of the Trinity always act in harmony with one another. The language about the "indwelling" of the persons in one another already implies this harmony. The harmony is a fundamental harmony in the character of God. At the same time, each person of the Trinity acts in harmony with who he is as a distinct person.

For example, when God the Father speaks his words through dwelling in the Son, the Father's words perfectly express the mind of the Father. They are distinctive in expressing the Father's wisdom. They also cohere with the context in which the Father has chosen to speak, the context of speaking *in the Son*. The speaking coheres with who the Son is. Consequently, the speech also expresses the Son, not only the Father. To put it another way, God's speech manifests both the harmony among the persons of the Trinity and the distinctiveness that resides in any one particular speech.[2]

God Speaking through Human Beings

So we may expect an analogous kind of interaction with context to take place when God speaks through human persons. When God indwells a person who believes in Christ through his Spirit, God's actions *in that person* cohere with the immediate context, namely, the context of who that person is, as well as the larger context of the circumstances in which the person currently finds himself. We can see how this coherence makes sense against the background of the indwelling of the persons of the Trinity and the contextual character of all God's actions (chap. 11).

This principle holds when the Holy Spirit dwells in an individual believer. It also holds for the more exalted level when the Holy Spirit dwells in a prophet or apostle so that the prophet or apostle speaks the words of God. God speaks with infinite wisdom, as he always does. In infinite wisdom, God harmonizes with himself. And in this harmony he takes into account the context that he himself has ordained for a particular act of speaking, namely, the context of the prophet's own person or the person of an apostle. God speaks in harmony with this context.

Accordingly, we can see that God manifests the infinity of his wisdom and his harmony with himself exactly when his speech resonates with the

[2]The relation between distinctiveness and harmonious relationships in context is further unfolded in Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), chap. 7. Distinctiveness is an expression of the particle perspective. Relationships express the field perspective. A third perspective, the wave perspective, complements them both. (The significance of the wave perspective is illustrated by chap. 10.) These three are perspectives on one another and cohere with one another in a manner that reflects the Trinitarian character of God.

particularities of the personality of a particular human being. For example, we can see in Paul's writings the person of Paul.

> Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. (Rom. 10:1)
>
> I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you. (Gal. 4:20)
>
> For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy. (1 Thess. 2:19–20)
>
> For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith? (1 Thess. 3:9–10)
>
> When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments. (2 Tim. 4:13)

What do we think about this presence of Paul as a person in his writings? Do we think that it harmonizes with inspiration? Is it strange? Some people may be tempted to conclude that such personal expressions, by showing a human side, *contradict* the divine side. But that sort of reasoning misunderstands human nature, inspiration, and the way in which God's presence can affirm and take account of human contexts. In fact, once we have come to understand in some measure who Paul is and how he speaks, these personal touches are in full harmony with who God is and how he expresses himself. He speaks in harmony with the person of Paul when Paul is the person through whom he speaks.[3] That contextual sensitivity in God's speech harmonizes with the general principle of attention to context that is characteristic of God (chap. 11).

[3]For the relation of divine and human authors, see Vern S. Poythress, "Divine Meaning of Scripture," *Westminster Theological Journal* 48, no. 2 (1986): 241–79; Poythress, "The Presence of God Qualifying Our Notions of Grammatical-Historical Interpretation: Genesis 3:15 as a Test Case," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50, no. 1 (2007): 87–103. Herman Bavinck and others have spoken in this connection of "organic inspiration" (Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. 1, *Prolegomena* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003], 428–48).

PART SEVEN

CHALLENGES FROM EXAMPLES

22

Ordinary Life and Science

We now turn to some further examples of ways in which modern thinking can produce difficulties in biblical interpretation. Let us begin with an example that touches on the field of science.

Expectations and Context

In Mark 4:31 Jesus says that the kingdom of God "is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth." Some people have claimed that this verse has an error. They tell us that orchid seeds are smaller than the size of the mustard seed.

Part of what appears to be happening here is an issue of context. People may be tempted to remove the verse Mark 4:31 from its context in the parabolic teaching of Jesus and place it in the context of a modern scientific discussion. In such a scientific context, we expect "earth" to include the entire globe. And we expect a scientific statement to use the word "all" with technical precision. "All seeds" must include every seed of every type of plant in the whole biosphere.

We need to reckon with context—in particular the context of the audience and the purpose for Mark 4:31. We already observed (chap. 4) that God in wisdom addresses all kinds of people, not only people educated in science. His address to them harmonizes with the needs of his addressees. God is in harmony with himself, and being in harmony with himself he expresses

himself in a manner that takes into account the context into which he speaks and the needs in that context.

We can also pay attention to the immediate context of verse 31 of Mark 4. Jesus is presenting a parable, not a science lecture. The parable's main thrust is to inform people and challenge them concerning the kingdom of God. We need also to reckon with the religious and cultural contexts, with which God also wisely interacts. Among the Jews to whom Jesus spoke, the expression "the kingdom of God" designated the powerful work that God would do when he brought the climactic salvation that he had promised in the Old Testament. It designated God's reign bringing salvation. Because of God's magnificence and power, many Jews expected this kingdom to appear in a most spectacular way. They hoped, for example, that God himself or God through his Messiah would drive out their Roman overlords and would bless them with peace and prosperity. Contrary to these expectations, Jesus said that the kingdom of God begins in a small and unassuming way. It then grows until it is large and all-encompassing (see Dan. 4:11–12, 20–22). The main point of the comparison is to say that the kingdom starts very small, not to provide a scientific classification of all the sizes of seed.

An objector may admit that this is Jesus's main point, but still complain about the detail. The detail, he says, is still an error.

Two reflections about language help. Both have to do with ways in which meaning is influenced by context.

The Meaning of the Word for "Earth"

First, consider the meaning of "earth." The underlying Greek word is *gē*. The standard Greek lexicon by Liddell, Scott, and Jones provides the following senses:

[I. 1.] *earth* . . . opp. [opposed to] *heaven*, or *land* opp. [opposed to] *sea* . . .
2. *earth*, as an element [in the ancient division into four "elements," earth, air, fire, and water] . . .
II. [1.] *land*, *country* [as in "one's *native land*"] . . .
2. . . . *city* . . .
III. *the earth* or *ground* as tilled . . .
IV. of particular *kinds of earth* or *minerals* . . .[1]

[1]Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, with supplement (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968). Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), provides a similar breakdown of meanings.

Only one of these senses—I. 1., "earth" in contrast to heaven—has a meaning corresponding to the modern universalizing interest of scientific classification. So we have to ask *which* sense occurs in Mark 4:31.

In Mark 4 we can see several uses of this Greek word *gē*:

- ". . . and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the *land* [*gē*]" (4:1).
- ". . . where it [the seed] did not have much *soil* [*gē*]" (4:5).
- ". . . since it [the seed] had no depth of *soil* [*gē*]" (4:5).
- "And other seeds fell into good *soil* [*gē*]" (4:8).
- "But those that were sown on the good *soil* [*gē*] . . ." (4:20).
- ". . . as if a man should scatter seed on the *ground* [*gē*]" (4:26).
- "The *earth* [*gē*] produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear" (4:28).

These instances of the word correspond to more than one of the senses given in the lexicon.

In addition, Mark 4:31 itself has not one but two occurrences of the word *gē*: "It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the *ground* [*gē*], is the smallest of all the seeds on *earth* [*gē*]." The expression "seeds on *earth*" translates a Greek expression that can be represented in a more word-for-word fashion as "seeds that are on the earth/ground." In particular, the Greek has the definite article with "earth/ground." The phrase "on the earth/ground" at the end of the verse exactly repeats the phrase "on the *ground*" earlier in the verse.

The first occurrence of the phrase "on the *ground*" is linked with sowing. Seeds are customarily sown on a surface of soil. This soil constitutes the "ground." The word *gē* therefore has a sense more like *ground* or *soil* than "the whole of the earth in contrast to the heavens." In the context of farming, no one is thinking immediately about the fact that the ground is a part of the much larger region, the "earth." So we might translate it as "on the ground." But the word "all" suggests that in the second part of the verse we are dealing with some kind of larger scope. It might then be the "land." The mustard seed was the smallest seed customary to the area of Palestine and with which people were familiar. Familiarity works much better in a parable than specialized technical information, which would only distract from the main point.

Given the practical thrust of the parable, we can also see that the generality about "all" seeds is implicitly qualified. In its effective thrust, the universality is universality over the range of all the seeds with which the people would be familiar. It is as if Jesus said, "Of all the seeds you use (in Palestine), the mustard seed is the smallest."

Then would it not be more accurate to have said merely "the smallest of seeds" or "the smallest of all seeds" as Matthew 13:32 does, rather than add the extra phrase "on (the) earth/ground"? Actually, none of the expressions is infinitely precise (on precision, see the appendix). Nor do they need to be, since God in his wisdom has a practical goal.[2] Adding too many explanations and details would actually get in the way of the goal, because it would draw attention away from the point about the growth of the kingdom of God and draw attention onto the extra details about seeds that do not really have a pertinent analogy with the kingdom of God.

The Hint of Universalizing

The added phrase "on (the) earth/ground" is not necessary for the main point. But it hints at a broader scope within the sphere of seeds. This hint suggests by analogy the theme of a broad scope within the sphere of God's kingdom. God's kingdom is destined to be universal, to fill "the whole earth," as Daniel 2:35 says. That kind of language in Daniel, and similar passages elsewhere in the Old Testament, formed part of the background for Jewish expectation that God's kingdom would be great and far-reaching. Jesus directly confirms that point when he talks about the large size of the full-grown mustard plant (Mark 4:32). In verse 32 the mention of birds probably alludes to a portion of Daniel (4:21) in which Nebuchadnezzar and his kingdom are compared to a large tree in which the birds nest. The birds symbolize a plurality of nations or people groups (Dan. 4:22). The comparison between tree and kingdom also occurs in Ezekiel 17. Jesus may be indirectly underlining this kind of connection with the Old Testament when he then contrasts the universality of the end with the smallness of the beginning. The expression "all the seeds" introduces the note of universality at an early point. But the small size of the mustard seed contrasts with this universality. The rhetorical effect created by this atmosphere is to heighten the main point, the striking contrast between the small beginning and the magnificent ending for the kingdom of God.

So the use of the expression "all the seeds on the earth/ground" does contribute to the whole parable. It contains a universalizing direction. At the same time, the word for "earth" or "ground" is not perfectly specific. Just how broad a scope do we give it? Is it the "soil" right underneath where a farmer stands? Is it the "ground" that includes other fields? Is it the "land," extending out to encompass the land of Palestine? Is it the "earth," all the dry land in the world? The context does not give us a sharp delineation of one of these choices. And avoiding too much specificity actually has positive benefits. It

[2]See the discussion of language purposes in chap. 11.

suggests a universalizing tendency without becoming overspecific and running the danger of deflecting from the larger meaning in the main point. The universalizing tendency at the same time stimulates reflection on the truly universal character of the kingdom of God in its final form (corresponding to the full-grown mustard plant).

The Prestige of Scientific Knowledge

Why do some people stumble over the language about "all the seeds"? Perhaps there are many reasons. But one such reason has a close tie with science. The prestige of science in our modern world generates temptations. Science does open windows to seeing many wonderful things about God's ways in governing the world. It can be a source for praising God. But when people see it as independent of God, it can be made into a standard for all knowledge. People think of science as the most prestigious and well-grounded knowledge that we have. They may then reason that any knowledge or any truth shows its solidity only by comparison with the most real and most solid knowledge that we possess, namely science. So it is tempting to impose scientific concerns on truth everywhere. And when we come to the Bible, which claims to be God's own word, people reason that it above all books should measure up to these prestigious standards of science.

So what can happen? We can artificially require of the Bible a technical precision, or a pedantic precision, or a conformity to the rigorous universality for which scientific theories strive. A really true truth, according to this kind of reasoning, would be a truth about all seeds or all plants whatsoever, with no qualifications or nonspecific language ("earth," "land," "ground," "soil"). And it would be a truth that, if it had to be qualified, would have all the qualifications made explicit, so that the qualifications could be rigorously tested by scientists. Ideally, the qualifications would also be built into the statements whose truth we are testing. The statement would be crafted so as to be able to stand alone, without a literary context. It would be decontextualized truth, in the problematic sense that we have discussed in chapter 11.

The scientific concerns for universality also lead to preference for statements that are maximally well defined. Metaphors can be seen as a less preferable mode of speech.

We can see that some of the techniques for rigor and some of the care for precision belonging to scientific procedures could have a positive value within their own sphere. The mistake comes when we make these criteria into universal standards for truth and become disappointed that the Bible does not conform to them.

God as the God of the whole universe provides for us the basis for all of science in the wisdom he exercises in creation and providence. But he is also a personal God who in his grace delights to meet person to person with us. And when he does so, his communication to us is more multilayered than science, as well as having different directions of focus and concern. In such a context, God wants us to understand the nature of his kingdom. He does not tell us one way or the other whether orchid seeds are smaller than mustard seeds. He does tell us that the kingdom of God, like a mustard seed, starts very small and grows to large size. In fact, Daniel 2 indicates that it grows until it fills the world (Dan. 2:35).

23

Understanding an Alleged "Contradiction"

Consider another example where attention to context helps. Proverbs 26:4–5 says:

> Answer not a fool according to his folly,
> lest you be like him yourself.
> Answer a fool according to his folly,
> lest he be wise in his own eyes.

The critic may claim that this is a contradiction. The Bible has an error, he says. He claims that verse 4a, "Answer not a fool according to his folly," and verse 5a, "Answer a fool according to his folly," directly contradict each other, and at most one can be true.[1]

At first glance the critic's claims may appear to make sense. If ever there was a contradiction, surely the most blatant contradiction happens when two expressions directly oppose each other. One expression has "answer not" and the other has "answer." In effect, "do not" stands over against "do." It is a direct opposition.

[1]Both v. 4 and v. 5 have imperatival form. They are directives rather than assertions (see discussion of speech acts in Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009], appendix H). The words *true* and *false* apply to directives in a more indirect way than they apply to assertions. Directives nevertheless have factual implications and presuppositions, and these may be true or false. The *imperative*, "Answer not a fool according to his folly . . ." implies the *affirmation* that we are obliged not to answer a fool according to his folly.

Answering the Critic through Context

But the critic's objection fails to reckon with context. It treats the two parallel clauses in verses 4a and 5a as if they were decontextualized generalities, independent of one another and with exactly opposite meanings.

So let us proceed to reckon with context. In fact, these two proverbs stand right next to one another. The parallelistic match between verse 4a and verse 5a is all the more striking precisely because the two verses come right next to each other. This contextual nearness is significant. The author wants us to notice and feel the tension between the two verses. He draws our attention to it.

Not only the context but the dynamics of communication make a difference. The author wants to achieve something by giving us this pair of proverbs. He is not just mystifying readers or closing down communication.

So what does he intend to achieve? One clue comes from the larger context of the book of Proverbs. The proverbs are short, pithy sayings that express some truth about life in a compressed form. The compressed form invites further reflection. Not all the meaning will necessarily be on the surface. The reader is invited to think—to think about God's ways, to think about the nature of life, to think about how to deal wisely with other people, to learn also from observing human life. Grammatically speaking, each proverb is self-contained. But in meaning, it is not self-contained. It asks for reflection. On the surface, it may be somewhat mysterious. It may lead us to pose the question, "Just what *does* this mean?" In the case of the pair of proverbs in Proverbs 26:4–5, the pairing is part of the mystery to be expected in Proverbs, a mystery that calls on us to meditate.

Thus, an attention to context can help us realize that the apparent contradiction between the two verses has a positive purpose. It stirs us to reflection. And proverbs promise to have some valuable meaning if we are patient in reflection and in teasing out meaning in a sensitive way, a way that begins with "the fear of the LORD" (Prov. 1:7).

Seeking Positive Meaning

So what about these two proverbs? If we seek meaning, we should do so with trust that God is in harmony with himself. The two proverbs promise to be in harmony if we can coax out their meaning through reflection. We are finite, and we might not succeed. But we can try. How do we go about it?

We can start on our way by thinking about the contrast between wisdom and folly. That contrast runs all the way through the book of Proverbs. It becomes particularly prominent in Proverbs 8–9, which personifies the con-

trast by depicting wisdom and folly as two female figures. The personification makes vivid the choices that confront each of us, and also the distinction between two ways of life—the way of wisdom and the way of folly, which we can also describe as the way of following God versus the way of following one's own devices.

The fool, accordingly, is not merely someone who makes a single, isolated, accidental mistake in life. The fool is a person *characterized* by folly. He has a distinctive manner of life and a distinctive way of thinking and talking, all of which differ from the way that a righteous person pursues when he walks in God's ways. These reflections form some of the contextual background in Proverbs with which a sensitive reader can approach the tantalizing tension in Proverbs 26:4–5.

So what about verse 4, "Answer not a fool according to his folly"? What does that mean? We have to take it in context. It is not a complete sentence. The full sentence runs,

> Answer not a fool according to his folly,
> lest you be like him yourself.

The fundamental principle is that context is significant. The context of the full sentence affects the meaning of the first clause. Moreover, we also have to think about the personal contexts that arise in actual communication. When a wise person is thinking how to answer a fool, he takes account of the fact that the person he is addressing is a fool. He ponders how best to frame an answer so that the fool might possibly be shaken out of folly rather than confirmed in it. God has given language in harmony with himself, and the contextual principle expresses this harmony.

Part of the point is that any response to the fool must avoid falling into the pattern of thinking and acting that characterizes the fool. Reflecting on life helps us to see that this is a genuine danger. If we know a little about a fool, we may realize that much of what we could say out of wisdom will be lost on him. So then we think, "I have to meet him on his own terms, speak his language as it were." But in the process we may unwittingly adopt some of his folly for ourselves.

Another interpretation of the same verse would suggest that verse 4 and verse 5 are meant to be understood as applying to two distinct situations. Verses 4 and 5 together would then imply that in some situations you should not answer a fool, and in other situations you should. The two verses would still be consistent because neither would be intended to be a completely universal principle.

I think that this alternate interpretation has some truth in it. It is true that a wise person takes into account the specific character of the situation. Not all fools are the same, and they are not always in the same mood, and we meet them in differing circumstances. But if that is all that we say, it still does not do full justice to the specificity of verses 4 and 5, and the clauses beginning with "lest." These clauses contain some specific indications as to what the dangers are. By laying out the dangers, they indirectly provide some guidance as to when and in what situations a particular tactic or response might be wise. Thus, we must continue to pay attention to the clauses with "lest."

To begin with, the clause in verse 4 focuses on the effects on "you," that is, the speaker: "lest *you* be like him *yourself*." Verse 5 focuses on the effects on "he/him," that is, the fool, the hearer: "lest *he* be wise in *his* own eyes." Wisdom counsels us to pay attention to effects on both sides. What we say should be morally positive both with respect to ourselves and with respect to a fool that we address. That may be difficult, but it is necessary.

The danger in verse 4, "lest you become like him yourself," leads potentially to more than one dimension of danger. There is more than one way of becoming like a fool. We could become like him by adopting some of his assumptions in order to talk to him in a way that he would welcome. We may concede things that we should not concede. We could also become like him by adopting a style of speaking that is disrespectful or is constantly joking and never serious. We could become like him by having motives that are selfish and uncaring. A fool is sometimes not easy to love and therefore may tempt us to be unloving or self-serving when we respond. And a difficult situation like talking to a fool also tempts us to adopt a substandard view of what love means. Does love just mean "being nice" and always nonconfrontational and affirming? That is not genuine love because it does not seek in a wise way to help the fool out of his folly and to challenge his unwise ways.

Are all these dangers actual implications of verse 4? Verse 4 does not spell out all the possible ways in which we might become like a fool. That is not how proverbs work. They are pithy, as we observed. They invite reflection. We have to think about what the implications might be, rather than demanding that they be spelled out before we will take the trouble. Our meditation on the verses should take into account what we already know about God's ways.

Now consider verse 5.

> Answer a fool according to his folly,
> lest he be wise in his own eyes.

What are its meaning and implications? What danger does it point out in the clause ". . . lest he be wise in his own eyes"? Here the focus is on the effect on the fool. If we choose merely to keep silent in response to a fool's voice, he may think that he has triumphed and that no one dares to challenge him. He may then be confirmed in the feeling that he is "wise in his own eyes." Or if we respond to him with something wise, but it makes no sense to him, he may again feel superior. His being confirmed in feeling superior does not help him. The principle of loving one's neighbor invites us to try to find a way to do him good, rather than confirming him in his folly.

Of course only God can change people's hearts. That principle is also part of the greater context for reflecting on Proverbs. We must not blame ourselves if we cannot immediately undo the folly in every single fool. But we can pray for help from God and ask him to give us words that he may use to break through the hardness of heart in the fool. We may be able to respond with something that may challenge the fool in a way that he himself can begin to grasp, and thereby at least leave him uneasy. Jesus's responses to foolishness among the Pharisees offer instructive examples (Matt. 23:17; Luke 11:40).[2] We may be able to challenge folly not merely by the content of what we say, but also by the tone.

In any case, we should respond in a way that takes into account "his folly," not only folly as a generality, but the particular form that folly takes in this particular person. We fit what we say to who he is and what will best challenge him and thereby contribute to his welfare. In so doing, we are actually answering "according to his folly," that is, in tune with the particular form of "*his* folly." His folly has become for us a context with which we interact, in imitation of the wise interaction of God with all the contexts that he meets.

When we reflect on the two verses in this way, we can see that they are in fact in harmony. Each is complementary to the other. Both express one side of what it means to love your neighbor when your neighbor proves to be a fool. One focuses more on "you," the other more on "him." Loving takes into account the character of the neighbor, but does not adopt or approve his sins.[3]

[2]See also Derek Kidner, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1964), 162, who points to the challenge Paul had in addressing Corinthian foolishness in 2 Cor. 11:16 and 12:11.
[3]Richard L. Pratt undertakes a creative development of the implications of Prov. 26:4–5 for apologetics in *Every Thought Captive: A Study Manual for the Defense of Christian Truth* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 81–132.

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Law in Cultural Context

We turn now to some examples that focus more on culture. God gave laws to Israel in the time of Moses. But modern people may claim that these laws are merely human.

A Case Law

Let us consider a particular example. The Bible says that God gave Israel the Ten Commandments, which express general moral principles, like "You shall not steal" (Ex. 20:15). He also gave "case laws," which instruct judges about how to deal with specific crimes, plus personal and property damages (Ex. 21–23; Deut. 21–24). Here is an example:

> If a man causes a field or vineyard to be grazed over, or lets his beast loose and it feeds in another man's field, he shall make restitution from the best in his own field and in his own vineyard.
>
> If fire breaks out and catches in thorns so that the stacked grain or the standing grain or the field is consumed, he who started the fire shall make full restitution. (Ex. 22:5–6)

The texts in Exodus and Deuteronomy claim that God delivered the laws, using Moses as a mediator. What can we expect when modern frameworks of assumptions are brought to bear on these texts?

The Historical-Critical Approach to Laws

Historical-critical research, operating on the assumption of the absence of God, rejects the claim that the law of Moses had a divine origin. This rejection follows from its starting methodological principles. According to these principles, the laws must have a merely human origin. When the texts make a claim for divine origin, they present a later religious fiction designed to give a divine weight of authority to the laws, for the benefit of their reception within the community. This kind of explanation uses both sociological principles and historical guesswork to reconstruct the origins of the claim that God gave the laws through Moses.

The historical-critical method also tries to reconstruct the actual origin of the laws in their *content*. It speculates that the content probably developed gradually by borrowing from neighboring cultures and by generalizing from various *ad hoc* solutions to individual cases.

Given the assumptions contained in the historical-critical method, these reconstructions seem plausible. But they do not achieve more than plausibility. The critics do not really know. They have essentially no hard evidence in their favor. They do not have any actual documentary record on which to base their speculations about the many texts and oral traditions going back centuries before the texts that we have. They do not have documentary records that would demonstrate the presence of religious sleight of hand and the introduction of the claim of divine origin only at a late stage. They are guessing. The disagreements in detail among different interpreters in their reconstructions show the potential for multiple hypotheses and multiple historical explanations.

As usual, historical reconstruction of this kind engages in speculation.

The Code of Hammurabi

Historical critics can try to strengthen their hand by appealing to ancient law codes that archaeologists have uncovered. The most famous is the Code of Hammurabi, which first came to light in 1902.[1] The Code of Hammurabi shows both interesting parallels and differences in comparison with the case law in Exodus and Deuteronomy. Here is a sample that shows similarities to the Exodus case law about damage from grazing or fire (Ex. 22:5–6):

[1]For an introduction, see R. E. Hayden, "Hammurabi," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev. ed., ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 2:604–8. An English translation is available at several places; see James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 163–80; or Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East*, vol. 1, *An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958), 138–67.

> If a seignior [free man, or free man of high rank], upon opening his canal for irrigation, became so lazy that he has let the water ravage a field adjoining his, he shall measure out grain on the basis of those adjoining his. (Code of Hammurabi #55)[2]

Or compare the following laws from Exodus and the Code of Hammurabi:

> *Exodus*
> He shall surely pay. If he has nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft. (Ex. 22:3)

> *Hammurabi*
> If he is not able to make good the grain, they shall sell him and his goods. (Hammurabi #54)

We can also find similarities with other ancient Near Eastern codes.

> *Deuteronomy*
> But if in the open country a man meets a young woman who is betrothed, and the man seizes her and lies with her, then only the man who lay with her shall die. (Deut. 22:25)

> *The Laws of Eshnunna*
> If a man gives bride-money for a(nother) man's daughter, but another man seizes her forcibly without asking the permission of her father and her mother and deprives her of her virginity, it is a capital offence and he shall die. (Laws of Eshnunna #26)[3]

Historical critics can easily argue that the Mosaic case law is simply adopting and modifying laws from a larger body of laws in the ancient Near East. No trail of ancient documentation—outside the Bible itself—conclusively shows how Mosaic laws originated. But if we insist on a naturalistic explanation for the laws, an explanation like this one will serve the need.

If, on the other hand, we accept the testimony of Exodus 20:22 and 21:1, we reach the conclusion that the laws originated from God and were mediated to the people by Moses. The laws have a direct origin in God. This claim seems incredible to people who do not believe that God would speak directly to a human being as he did to Moses. But the lack of belief in this case goes back to a general lack of belief in the kind of God that the Bible describes. God is a personal God, and the regularities are due to his governing power

[2]Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 168.
[3]"The Laws of Eshnunna," in ibid., 162.

and wisdom. So when it pleases God, he may act in ways that deviate from what is customary. There is no difficulty, once we accept who God is.

But even if we accept that God may work miracles, we may still wonder why God's case laws have striking parallels with ancient case laws from Hammurabi or Eshnunna. To modern people with materialist or Enlightenment presuppositions, that fact seems very suspicious. To them, an explanation depending on divine origin seems implausible, given that we have at hand a possible explanation based on completely naturalistic, human origin.

Again, the difficulties go back to erroneous conceptions of God. We are tempted to think that if God gave laws, the laws would be totally dissimilar to anything in the environment. That is, we expect decontextualized laws. But why should that be? Is not God free to give some laws that match the environment and others that are dissimilar? In fact, within the total corpus of laws in the Pentateuch, we find both similarities and dissimilarities to what has been uncovered elsewhere in the ancient Near East.

We must also reckon with general revelation. God reveals his moral standards universally. Every human being has a sense of morality and a conscience. We know the difference between right and wrong, though we may try to suppress that knowledge, particularly when we ourselves want to do something wrong. Whole societies as well as individuals may engage in distortion. But the distortions are still distortions of the truth. It should not be surprising that Hammurabi and Eshnunna and other ancient Near Eastern sources show reflections of God's moral standards with respect to crimes and punishments and liability for damage. The laws do not perfectly reflect God's standards, because they are distorted by sin. But they show a dim sense of what the standards might be.[4]

Let us put it another way. It is a mistake to think that only what is culturally new or different in the law of Moses comes from God. All of the law of Moses comes from God. And that includes those points in the law that are similar to what crops up elsewhere in the ancient Near East. By saying this, we are *not* saying that Hammurabi or Eshnunna were specially inspired. That is true only of Moses. But Hammurabi and other wise men and legislators lived in God's world; they benefited from God's common grace, by which they wrote imperfect laws that still had some dim recognition of God's standards.

We must also reckon with the fact that God is the Lord of all cultures and all societies. He does not morally approve everything in every society, but he governs the events by his decrees. In giving laws to Israel, he exercised his wisdom by giving laws that were appropriate for their situation, a situation

[4]See further John N. Oswalt, *The Bible among the Myths: Unique Revelation or Just Ancient Literature?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 92.

that he knew comprehensively because he had put it in place. He spoke in a way that interacted with their cultural context.

For example, some of the case laws deal with young women who are *betrothed*. Betrothal was a kind of legally binding engagement between a prospective bridegroom and bride; it does not correspond directly to modern American engagement. God gave laws that told people how to handle violations of this ancient commitment.

God's laws also take into account that the Israelites lived in a culture where agriculture and animal husbandry predominated. The laws naturally used examples from common situations within this kind of culture. They show similarities with ancient Near Eastern laws because both address similar cultural issues. The laws also address situations with slaves because slavery existed in the ancient Near East.[5]

The laws show God's wisdom by taking into account human sin. Ideally, marriage should last for a lifetime (Matt. 19:4–9). But human sin means that people will sometimes violate their marriage commitment. The Mosaic law makes provision for mitigating the effects of divorce; but it does not undertake to cure the underlying problem of sin. It merely regulates the relation between sinners.

Jesus observed that Moses's law permitted divorce "because of your hardness of heart" (Matt. 19:8). It takes the work of Christ to destroy sin. Before Christ's coming, various ceremonial provisions pointed forward to his work. And that temporary forward-pointing function also shapes the details of Mosaic law.[6] God shows his wisdom in the way in which he made temporary provision for the nation of Israel, as Israel looked forward to the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation in Christ. More could be said, but this much must suffice.

Sociological Analysis of Mosaic Laws

In trying to understand the Mosaic case laws, we have already reckoned not only with the question of historical origin—in God—but also with the question of how they function, how they give wise direction for the judges and for Israelite society. The question of how they function is next door to the concerns of modern sociology and social anthropology. So let us consider where a sociological analysis of the Mosaic case law might lead.

Here we confront the question of what kind of sociology we are going to practice. How do we conceive of the regularities governing societies and

[5]God's law through Moses regulated slavery. But the time for definitive deliverance for slaves, especially slavery to sin, would come only with Christ (Luke 4:18–19; compare Leviticus 25).

[6]Vern S. Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (1991; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1995).

cultures? Are these regularities personal (from God) or impersonal? In our explanations just given above, we have endeavored to use what we have come to know about God as a person. We have thought personalistically.

What would it look like if we had chosen to look at the Mosaic laws impersonalistically, using an impersonalistic version of modern sociology? We will endeavor to sketch out some effects. But we must simplify: we present only a sketch of some possibilities.

Using a Structural-Functional Model

John Macionis's textbook on sociology describes three different models for sociological theory, which derive from three distinct schools of sociology.[7] The first is the structural-functional approach, which sees "society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability."[8] In analyzing an area like law, the structural-functional approach would ask how laws contribute to solidarity and stability of the society as a whole.

What threatens stability? From time to time individuals within a society will have selfish temptations, and may want to murder or steal. In addition, they may accidentally cause damage to other people or their property. Given these sources of potential friction, society must have in place resources for promoting and reestablishing harmony. A system of uniform laws promotes a society-wide feeling of fairness. The laws provide guidelines that enable disputes and injuries to be settled without escalating each conflict into warring factions.

The society also appoints judges or other leaders whose authority is recognized, in order to have a unified basis for settling disputes (see Ex. 18:13–27). The society moves toward having laws, judges, and procedures that maximize stability. According to this kind of analysis, the laws of Israel and the laws of Hammurabi and of Eshnunna represent phases in the process of stabilizing society through a system of laws.

The similarities between different social systems of laws derive from several factors. First, every society confronts challenges due to the limits of human nature and the environment. People do get angry with one another, and biological limits make it inevitable that sometimes one person can kill another. Property and goods of value are limited in quantity, and people's selfishness tempts them to steal. Any society has only a certain number of options for stabilizing itself in the face of these realities. Similar solutions are likely.

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[7]John J. Macionis, *Sociology*, 11th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2007), 14–21. For critical analysis of these approaches, see Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Sociology: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), appendix E.

[8]Macionis, *Sociology*, 15.

Second, ancient Near Eastern societies, with an economic basis in agriculture and animal husbandry, shared certain common challenges, and it was natural for them to arrive at similar solutions for promoting stability.

Third, because the ancient Near Eastern cultures did not live in isolation from one another, people's views of justice and fairness would be partially molded by what they saw and heard in other societies around them. Hence, stability for any one culture included stability in people's perceptions as to whether the laws matched their idea of fairness. Other things being equal, this desire for matching promoted similarities between the systems of laws in various cultures.

Finally, it may be easier to borrow an idea from a neighboring culture than to work painfully through a process of trial and error in trying to formulate a case law to meet a new contingency. Hence, borrowing is understandable.

What do we say about this kind of analysis? From a Christian point of view, the account as a whole is unsatisfactory, because it views societies as semi-mechanistic, instead of seeing them as thoroughly controlled by God who is personal. And yet, because of common grace, sociological analysis still makes a good deal of sense. God rules over all societies, and he has created a world in which there are secondary causes. He also gives common grace to human beings, who are made in his image.

People do think about the effectiveness of laws. In doing so, they are thinking God's thoughts after him. When they think about what would be just, they think according to the background of God's justice. Some people may explicitly acknowledge God; others may suppress their knowledge of God, but they are still secretly dependent on God for their conception of justice. God's character is the ultimate foundation both for human justice and for human effectiveness.

At the same time, human agents of justice are always limited in their abilities. And human laws that are wise will take the limitations into account. This reckoning with limitations also reflects God's wisdom. In the law that God gave through Moses, he delegated authority to human beings, but also put bounds to their authority through an appeal system and through directions about the future king (Deut. 17:8–20).

Thus, human law in general reflects God's wisdom and God's justice, though it does so imperfectly. That is why human laws in the ancient Near East show similarities to the divine law that God himself gave to Israel.

The principal difficulty with an immanent structural-functional approach is that it can leave God out and begin to think of society as an impersonal structural system. Allegedly a society invents both gods and morality to serve its pragmatic functions. Such an approach can then conclude that the laws embody *only* social pragmatism and not at all God's wisdom or his provision.

According to this secularist vision, all societies are merely human systems. Hence Israelite society must be also.

As we have observed at earlier points, the reasoning that excludes God from social structure can be more plausible in some ways than the historical explanations of the historical-critical method. Historical reconstruction inevitably weighs probabilities. It cannot exclude the possibility of divine action. But beginning from an atheistic premise, sociological study claims to set forth what a society is like in its regularities. Israelite society in its regularities is not constantly the product of a series of divine miracles. So the sociologist has considerable plausibility when he claims that Israelite laws will function in the same way as laws in any other society.

Using a Social-Conflict Approach

A second approach to sociological analysis is called the social-conflict approach. The social-conflict approach "sees society as an arena of inequality that generates conflict and change."[9] How might this approach be applied to ancient Israel? Israel, like all societies, contained people with more or less power, more or less wealth. The social-conflict approach might consider how various laws reinforced or undermined status in power and wealth.

Property laws, for example, protect those who have property. In so doing, they protect a certain kind of inequality. The social-conflict approach tends to see conflict as a product of inequality rather than a product of sin. It might therefore reason that property laws, by endorsing inequality, generate resentment and theft. According to this kind of reasoning, the resulting conflict gives rise to social responses. Theft is headed off by laws that threaten punishment for theft. It is also headed off by ideology, typically an ideology that justifies the existing differences in property. Through such justification the ideology defuses the potential resentment from the poor.

Laws against theft also theoretically protect the poor from having the rich steal from them. For example, the laws with respect to damage from fire or from grazing protect a poor man's field as well as a rich man's. But the rich man has more fields. Moreover, people in power can frequently find ways around the laws. We see symptoms of this evasion in Amos's protests against the exploitation of the poor (Amos 3:10, 15; 4:1; 5:11; etc.).

So this kind of social analysis could encourage cynicism. A cynical analysis could claim that the apparent equity of the law subdues the resentment of the poor, while the actual practical application of the law favors the rich (Prov.

[9]Ibid., 17.

13:23). Change comes only when the system breaks down and the people as a whole go into exile (Amos 6:7).

We can see a good many grains of truth in this kind of analysis. In a fallen world, those with power tend to use their power corruptly. But we must have a standard by which to judge what is just and what is not. The standard should come from God.[10] When we acknowledge the presence of God in the workings of society, we can see that God is at work in the Old Testament in the midst of Israel as a sinful people. He works short-range acts of justice in a manner that looks forward to the final justice accomplished in Christ. The Old Testament laws make sense in this context and do not set forth a way for stabilizing those in power so as to endorse injustice.

Using a Symbolic-Interaction Approach

The last of the three sociological approaches is the symbolic-interaction approach. It "sees society as the product of the everyday interactions of individuals."[11] How would this approach look at the laws for restoration of damage from grazing or fire (Ex. 22:5–6)? A naive form of symbolic interaction might offer a kind of social-contract theory of law. People agree with one another in a social contract to submit to a government and a set of laws. For example, each person sees the fairness in having the person who started a fire pay for its damage. So the people agree together to have a law to this effect, as in Exodus 22:6. (This kind of account ignores the fact that people have ideas of fairness because they are made in the image of God.)

Of course modern sociologists know that the US Constitutional Convention, which was organized to draw up the Constitution, was an unusual event. In the ancient world, kings or other prominent leaders would have the main role in formulating laws. But to be effective the laws would need wide approbation. Wise kings would probably pay attention to the feelings and expectations of their subjects. And if a law that was too onerous were nevertheless put in place, a wise king would eventually see effects that might make him reconsider. According to this sociological approach, even in the ancient world the passage of time leads to continuing interaction between leaders and subjects, through which the effectiveness of laws is tested and changes may be made.

Like the other two approaches, this sociological approach can make a good deal of sense. God has made people in his image. And he has established regularities in the way people act and interact. So people do behave in some of the ways that the symbolic-interaction approach describes.

[10]See the critique of the social-conflict approach in Poythress, *Redeeming Sociology*, appendix D.
[11]Macionis, *Sociology*, 20.

The symbolic-interaction approach runs into trouble in the same way as the other two. It can leave out God and consider society as *merely* a human construction.[12] But God as the *primary* cause sovereignly acts and determines laws. As primary cause he governs the secondary causes of human actors in all societies. And in the case of Israel, he acts at Mount Sinai directly to produce the laws, using Moses as the intermediary. The laws have a reasonable match with the people's expectations, because the people are made in the image of God and because God in promulgating the laws takes into account the interests of his subjects. He does so even more thoroughly and more radically than a human king or leader could do.

At this point it is easy for people to have distorted conceptions about God. In effect, they may substitute a "god" of their imagination. They may imagine that if laws were to derive from a "god," the laws would give no thought to practical needs or to the limitations in justice that creep in because of sin. Such laws would be *decontextualized*. But the true God is not like that. His laws are indeed divine. Precisely in accordance with his divinity and with the infinity of his wisdom, the laws *also* give wise attention to the real needs and situations of the people whom he cares for. They match human consciences, because those consciences match God's moral standards. The match is, of course, corrupted by human sin; but it is not utterly wiped out.

Explaining Law

Any one of the three main sociological approaches, or all of them together, provides insightful explanations for how the Mosaic laws for ancient Israel functioned. The three approaches provide insights by virtue of common grace. But sociological approaches can also lead us astray. They can go astray through the concept of impersonal laws governing society. Or they can go astray through not recognizing that God had a special commitment to Israel (Ex. 6:1–13). He accordingly did do a special work in giving Israel the Mosaic laws directly from his mouth, without the corruptions that might come in through human lawmaking.

We can explain much of the content of laws from the standpoint of human functioning of laws because God designed them for the purpose of functioning for human guidance and human need. The sociological "fit" of the laws seems to a modern mentality to disprove the presence of God. But it is completely in harmony with his presence and his authorship. The impression that modern sociology shows the absence of God is an impression deriving from unfounded modern assumptions, not from the nature of societies or the substance of the laws.

[12]Poythress, *Redeeming Sociology*, appendix D.

25

Proverbs in Cultural Context

Let us consider another case where the Bible shows similarities to material in surrounding cultures. Proverbs 22:17–20 shows affinities with an Egyptian text, the *Instruction of Amenemope*.[1]

> *Proverbs*
> Incline your ear, and hear the words of the wise,
> and apply your heart to my knowledge,
> for it will be pleasant if you keep them within you. (Prov. 22:17–18a)
>
> *Amenemope*
> Give thy ears, hear what is said,
> Give thy heart to understand them.
> To put them in thy heart is worth while. . . . (*Instruction of Amenemope* 3.9–11)

How do we treat the similarities? A modern secular worldview tempts us to treat all proverbs as *merely* human.

Sociological Analysis

As in the case of ancient Near Eastern laws (the previous chapter), ancient Near Eastern proverbs can be analyzed sociologically. Given the mod-

[1]James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 421–24; Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East*, vol. 1, *An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958), 237–43.

ern atmosphere of academia, sociology often regards culture as a "closed system" from which God is absent. From this assumption it follows that Proverbs, like any other part of culture, is a merely human artifact. In other words, the book of Proverbs and the individual proverbs within it have meaning within their culture only through their human social and psychological functions.

The original Egyptian *Instruction of Amenemope* has an uncertain date of origin, but probably comes from about the thirteenth century BC. If so, it existed before Solomon's time. The book of Proverbs is later and could in theory have borrowed from Amenemope. The literary relation between the two is uncertain. But from a sociological point of view, it does not matter that much. The *Instruction of Amenemope* and the book of Proverbs had similar social functions. Both are collections of proverbs. Both contain exhortations to attend to their teachings. Both come in the context of a father instructing his son.

The structural-functional approach might easily analyze proverbs for their role in promoting and maintaining stability in a society. Widely circulating proverbs promote social cohesiveness by providing society-wide standards for social behavior and social expectations. Everyone in the society can be expected to be familiar with a large number of common proverbs. Proverbs also promote social bonds by encouraging some thoughts and actions as right or appropriate and discouraging others as wrong or inappropriate. Each person therefore knows what is socially expected.

Finally, the book of Proverbs and the *Instruction of Amenemope* encourage the passing on of wisdom to the next generation by setting their collection of proverbs in the context of passing wisdom from father to son. The *Instruction* identifies Amenemope as an official in Pharaoh's court. And Solomon, the principal person identified with the book of Proverbs, was king of Israel and should be training his sons for kingship and royal responsibilities. Wise rulers promote the stability of society (Prov. 29:4). So a collection of proverbs functions to promote stability through training of the future generation of ruling officials.

This kind of structural-functional analysis makes sense as far as it goes. Much depends on whether the analysis treats culture *as a closed system*. If it does, it implies that proverbs have *only* a social function and do not bring us into contact with God. According to this viewpoint, a book of proverbs or a book of instruction can of course invoke God. But the invocation itself has a merely horizontal, social function. It gives religious sanction to the rules of society and thereby promotes cohesion and social stability. But that is all.

On the other hand, what does social analysis look like if we conduct it within a biblical worldview? Then the book of Proverbs has both a human author (Solomon, and later Hezekiah's men as editors, Prov. 25:1) and a divine author. God is speaking.

Then how do we account for the similarities between Proverbs and the *Instruction of Amenemope*? The *Instruction* has no special divine origin as God's own speech. It does, however, claim to embody wisdom. Even people who do not have a special covenantal relation to the God of Israel are made in the image of God and have a created capacity to receive wisdom. But they have corrupted their relationship to God. In spite of their corruption, through common grace God may give them wise insights here and there. These insights arise from general revelation, rather than special revelation. General revelation is present to every human being in the world. Since God "sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt. 5:45), he may also cause his wisdom to come to the saved and sometimes to the unsaved.

Divine and Human Together

We can see how well divine and human authorship go together in the book of Proverbs. First we focus on the divine author. God gives us divine wisdom in Proverbs, speaking in harmony with his infinite wisdom and infinite knowledge of human nature. His speech shows wisdom not only in its content, but also in its modes of communication and its sensitivity to the needs of readers. As noted above, individual proverbs are typically short, pithy sayings whose full implications require meditation, and they encourage us to be keen observers of life. God thereby gives us encouragement to meditate and to observe. Such are some of the blessings that he intends to give through the manner in which he speaks. So God's way of speaking also is one aspect of his wisdom and kindness in addressing us. Moreover, rather than giving us some esoteric knowledge that would have no practical benefit, God chooses to talk about issues and challenges that confront people daily, and issues where their righteousness or sin makes a difference.

God also chooses to give some proverbs that resonate with wisdom sayings he has providentially given other nations around Israel. After all, God's providence governs all cultures. His governance does not imply that he morally *endorses* everything in surrounding cultures, nor even that he endorses some extrabiblical wisdom saying. The resonance between an inspired saying in Proverbs and an uninspired wisdom saying elsewhere shows only the

work of God's common grace among the nations. When God produces a resonance between Proverbs and an extrabiblical saying, he underlines the universality of his wisdom, and the universality of the challenge to human beings to seek his wisdom.

Thus, the book of Proverbs makes good sense if we recognize that God is its author. God could have written it with no difficulty *even without* a human agent. In fact, he did use human agents, and these human agents are *also*, along with God, the authors.[2]

All of these characteristics in the book of Proverbs match what we might expect from a very wise human writer, though of course God in his infinity surpasses every human writer. So it is not surprising that some people may read the book of Proverbs with a focus on the fact that it is the product of a human author (Solomon, with Hezekiah's men as editors) and make fairly good sense of it.

If we have an impersonalist worldview, we will naturally treat the evidence as confirming that the book is *merely* human. But within a personalist worldview our reasoning ought to go in a different direction. God can speak to us, and has spoken. Proverbs shows the deep harmony between the wisdom of God's mind and the wisdom given to the human mind when a human being is instructed by God. Solomon's mind was in tune with God's mind because God gave him wisdom through the Holy Spirit (1 Kings 3:12). In addition, God sent his Holy Spirit to work in a special way for writing the book of Proverbs so that it was God's own speech as well as Solomon's (2 Pet. 1:21).

Proverbs in this way is a special case. But it has affinities with the general case: human beings were created to exercise wisdom through minds in harmony with God's mind. And this harmony came to climactic fulfillment in a case that was greater than Solomon and was the most special of all. Jesus Christ has in himself the full wisdom of God: ". . . in whom [Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3). The harmony between the mind of God and the mind of Solomon that issued in the book of Proverbs anticipated the harmony of the divine Son, who is not only the wisdom of God, but became man for our sake, so that we might be made wise by the wisdom of God revealed in him (1 Cor. 1:30).

We make similar observations about the laws given through Moses. These laws are divine in origin (see the previous chapter). But they show wisdom that we as human beings are supposed to digest, and Moses was the human

[2]See Vern S. Poythress, "Divine Meaning of Scripture," *Westminster Theological Journal* 48, no. 2 (1986): 241–79; Poythress, "The Presence of God Qualifying Our Notions of Grammatical-Historical Interpretation: Genesis 3:15 as a Test Case," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50, no. 1 (2007): 87–103.

writer. He acted as one whom God made wise, in full harmony with God's speech (see Num. 12:6–8; Acts 7:22).

Assumptions

In sum, much depends on the framework of assumptions we bring to the book of Proverbs. If we come with the assumption that society is a closed system, we will likely see in Proverbs a confirmation of our assumption. We will claim that it is a merely human book with merely horizontal social functions. That conclusion *seems plausible*, given our starting assumptions. But it seems so only because we are suppressing the reality of the presence of God, who speaks in Proverbs.

On the other hand, if we come with the assumption of God's universal presence through general revelation, we will see in Proverbs a confirmation of his universal presence and control. In addition, because God is personal, we will comfortably acknowledge God's special care for Israel in addressing them personally through canonical words. By God's grace, he clears away our resistance, and we hear him speaking to us as we read from Proverbs.

26

The Glory of Christ

We have now considered several examples of difficulties. I hope that these examples show the value of studying the Bible with patience and respect. Patience may sometimes open doors that would remain closed if we dismissed difficulties too quickly. The quick dismissal could take place if we were to pronounce the difficulties in the Bible to be errors that show the Bible's human limitations. Or dismissal could take place in the opposite direction, if we were to dismiss all difficulties with a wave of the hand as due to modern unbelief. Unbelief in some sense may lie behind many difficulties. But the Bible contains depths that deserve careful thought and not merely quick dismissal of apparent difficulties.

Following Christ

Through understanding a verse deeply enough, we may sometimes be blessed with understanding more of the glory of Christ. That is, we may know Christ more deeply through our study. In 2 Corinthians 3:16–18 the apostle Paul holds out this possibility for those taught by the Spirit of Christ: "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor. 3:18). Paul uses the expression "beholding the glory of the Lord" in a context where he has just mentioned the reading of the law of Moses. This law remains "veiled" in its meaning to Jews who have not yet come to know Christ. But those who know Christ "behold the glory of the Lord" as they read.

We may accordingly ask how we may begin to see the glory of Christ in the passages of the Bible, including the passages that have been difficult. If we continue to struggle with these passages, asking for God's help and illumination, we may sometimes come to a point where we appreciate more of God's wisdom in giving the passage. This appreciation may sometimes grow even if God does not give us a complete answer. When we admire God's wisdom, we glorify him. And the Bible indicates that Christ is the ultimate wisdom of God "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3; 1 Cor. 1:30). We are seeing the glory of Christ when we see God's wisdom. This way of seeing is common to all passages in which we grow in appreciation of God's wisdom.

But we may also sometimes grow in appreciation of Christ in more specific ways. I will illustrate by considering one by one many of the passages and issues that we have discussed in the previous chapters of this book.

In Chapter 1: One Religion

In chapter 1 we considered the issue of whether there could be only *one* true religion. Biblical teaching is exclusive because Jesus Christ is "the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father [God] *except through me* [Christ]" (John 14:6). "For there is one God, and there is *one* mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all" (1 Tim. 2:5–6). At the heart of the exclusiveness of the Bible is not some man-created prejudice about one religion, but the exclusive character of Jesus Christ, who alone is God and man. Jesus accomplished a unique ransom of sinners. Those who have come to know and love Christ cannot give their loyalty to anyone else, because no one else deserves it. Our whole heart belongs to Christ.

Chapter 2: Morality as a Straitjacket

In chapter 2 we considered the question of whether the absolute morality of the Bible puts a moral straitjacket on our freedom. In fact, the moral standards of the Bible derive from Christ, the Son of God, who *is* the righteousness of God (1 Cor. 1:30). He sets us free from sin. True freedom means being reconciled to God, being restored from the corruptions of sin, and becoming like Christ. The absolute standard of morality, which Christ himself is, represents the way to true freedom rather than a man-made straitjacket. "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples," he said, "and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you *free*" (John 8:31–32).

Chapter 3: Materialism

What can we learn from thinking about materialism? Over against materialism stands the personalism of God, who is himself personal. And his personal character has been disclosed to us intimately in the *person* of Christ, who makes the Father known (John 14:8–11).

Chapter 4: Modern Science

What can we learn from science? Modern science is nowadays often treated as a justification for a materialistic worldview. But the laws that scientists investigate go back to God, who governs the universe by speaking. God's speaking is a manifestation of his Word. The ultimate Word behind the individual words that God speaks is the eternal Word, the Word that John 1:1–3 identifies: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made." This Word is Jesus Christ, who has been the Word from all eternity, even before his incarnation (John 1:14). Scientific law, rightly understood, manifests the glory of Christ in his beauty, majesty, power, and wisdom.

More specifically, we can learn from more specialized difficulties. What about miracles? Miracles in their spectacular character point to the greatest miracle, the resurrection of Christ, which accords with the personal purposes of God and his plan for saving human persons.

What about the fact that the Bible uses the earth as the point of view for description? The earth is in fact important because God created man on the earth in his image, after the pattern of Christ who is the image of God (Col. 1:15). In addition, Christ became man (John 1:14) and lived on earth in order to redeem us.

What about the days of creation? We distinguish the six days of God's activity in creation and the later time when he rests from creation and governs providentially. This pattern of work and rest is recapitulated in Christ, who works redemptively (see John 5:17), and enters into the eternal "rest" of eternal life with the Father in his resurrection and ascension.

Chapters 5–7: History

What can we learn about history? The events of history are the events that God works out according to his providence. Jesus Christ as the second person of the Trinity has a role in all the events: "He [Christ] is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he *upholds the universe by the word of his power*" (Heb. 1:3). At the center of history stands

the redemptive turning point that Christ brought about through his death and resurrection. This central event throws its light on the meaning of all other events.

In chapter 5 we used the particular example of God's speaking from the top of Mount Sinai. This speaking foreshadows the climactic speaking of God through Christ (Heb. 1:1–3).

Chapters 8–14: Language

What can we learn from language? Language has its origin in Jesus Christ, who is the Word of God (John 1:1). That is the foundation for the wisdom that we can find in language, as discussed in chapters 8–14. The many "gods" mentioned in Psalm 86:8 turn out, according to the progress of revelation, to be demons, over whom Christ triumphed in his death and resurrection (Col. 2:15; Heb. 2:14–15).

Chapters 15–17: Sociology

Sociology and social anthropology remind us of the significance of cultures. All cultures are under the rule of Christ (Matt. 28:18–20). To the degree that they display wisdom, their wisdom ultimately comes from Christ by common grace.

Chapter 18: Marxist and Feminist Interpretation

Marxism and feminism distort the idea of sin. But even in the midst of distortion they remind us of the power of sin and the need for a remedy for sin. This remedy has been provided once and for all by Christ, and it is comprehensive. It will be fully worked out in new heavens and a new earth, "in which righteousness dwells" (2 Pet. 3:13).

Chapters 19–21: Psychology

Human knowledge is analogous to divine knowledge, which exists among the persons of the Trinity. The pattern for human knowledge is the pattern of Christ himself, who became man. The inspired human authors of Scripture communicate to us in a manner related to the final prophet, that is, Christ himself.

Chapter 22: The Mustard Seed

Consider the parable of the mustard seed. The mustard seed in its smallness points to the kingdom of Christ. That kingdom is already present during

Christ's earthly life (Matt. 12:28; Luke 11:20). But to human eyes it is in a sense the "smallest of all" kingdoms, since it does not come with the spectacle of human war and military might.

Chapter 23: Answering a Fool

What do we learn from Proverbs 26:4–5 about answering folly? Christ's answers to the Pharisees and religious leaders show the operation of wisdom and folly. The word of Christ overcomes the folly of unbelief. This word of Christ came to people not only during Jesus's earthly ministry, but beforehand, when God the Son, along with the other persons of the Trinity, spoke to Old Testament saints. Thus the word of Christ includes the book of Proverbs. And it includes the writings of the New Testament, written through messengers empowered by Christ. Christ overcomes not by compromise or truce or by partially adopting unbelief (as Prov. 26:4 forbids answering according to folly), but by addressing the folly of unbelief in such a wise way that it has the power of shaking people out of unbelief (as Prov. 26:5 indicates that there is a positive way of answering according to folly).

Chapter 24: The Law of Restoration

The law for restoration of damages expresses a general principle of justice. Human agents of justice, such as judges and magistrates, have authority from God to maintain justice (Romans 13). But human judges have limited power and insight, and they cannot achieve perfect restoration for wrongs. Christ achieves such restoration on the basis of his sacrifice and his resurrection, which provide both punishment for sins and establishment of righteousness. His work is the basis for the perfect restoration and justice of the new heavens and the new earth.

Chapter 25: Proverbs

Both Proverbs and the *Instruction of Amenemope* advise us to incline our ear to wisdom. This advice finds fulfillment in the perfect wisdom of Jesus Christ (Col. 2:3; 1 Cor. 1:30). He is the object of our search, whom we hear. And he also brings about inward readiness, the "inclining" of the ear. Through his Spirit we are born again and receive the circumcision of the heart (John 3:5–8; Col. 2:11–13; Heb. 8:8–13). All wisdom among all peoples of the world is a gift from his fullness of wisdom.

The Christ-Centered Character of Scripture

I have offered only a sketch, and I am fallible. But the Bible is not. It contains riches if we are willing to read it with the submission that is appropriate to followers of Christ. Those who want to caution us against full confidence in the Bible do not help us to appreciate its riches.

PART EIGHT

CHALLENGES FROM OUR ATTITUDES

27

Do We Need Help?

So far we have looked at people's difficulties with the Bible by focusing primarily on the difficulties generated by differences in worldview. But other challenges arise from another quarter—from within us. To obtain a fuller picture of the difficulty, we need to consider whether we are in fit condition to study the Bible. And if we are not, we need to consider how God undertakes to make us fit.

A Fresh Start

Jesus said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:31–32). That saying is one example of the surprising character of Jesus's life, and one example of the amazing message that he brought. His message is refreshing and threatening at the same time. It is refreshing because he offers a fresh start for "sinners." Sinners include murderers, robbers, and hardened criminals. Jesus cares about these people. He invites them to come to him. Sinners include people who have come to think that their life amounts to a total failure. In our modern setting, sinners include people who are so weighed down by failure that they are contemplating suicide, or drowning their minds in alcohol or drugs.

By using the word "sinner" Jesus implies something else. A "sinner" is not simply someone whose life is messed up and full of failure. "Sin" means rebelling against God, by violating his rules and following one's own way.

Sin is more serious even than abject failure, because it is treason against the person who created us—God. If God is personal, we as creatures have personal responsibility toward him. And we have failed to be responsible. God created us for the opposite of what we have made of our lives. Sin is deadly, dreadful. Jesus reminds the people who have failed that their failure is deeper and more dreadful even than what they have thought.

But Jesus gives a message of hope. He says that he has come to bring the remedy. Sin is the "sickness," metaphorically speaking, and he is the physician. He knows how to heal sin. What is even more wonderful is that the Bible tells us that he is still alive today, having accomplished a worldwide victory over sin and over death (Rev. 1:18). He is still the physician, and he is available to you if you are sick with sin.

The Peril of the Righteous

Jesus's words also introduce a distinction between sinners and another group, "the righteous." In metaphorical terms, the righteous are the people who are "well," not "sick." They "have no need of a physician." That is, they do not need Jesus, because—they would allege—they are already living satisfactory, spiritually healthy lives. The context in the Gospel of Luke gives us a good idea of who these people are: "And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, 'Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?'" (Luke 5:30).

Jesus's statement about the physician and the sick comes in answer to this accusatory question from the Pharisees and scribes. The Pharisees and their scribes were respected religious leaders among the Jews of Jesus's day. They considered the association of Jesus and his disciples with "tax collectors and others" (Luke 5:29) a lapse in true piety. Tax collectors were considered sinners because they collaborated with the oppressive government from Rome. And many of them grew rich by overcharging when they collected taxes. According to the reckoning of the Pharisees, truly pious people should not and would not associate with the sinners.[1] If Jesus were thoroughly pious,

[1]The situation involved additional complications because of the way in which the Pharisees interpreted the Old Testament laws for ritual purity (dealing with the "clean" and the "unclean"). Tax collectors associated with non-Jews (Gentiles). Gentiles were unclean according to the standards of the ritual law in the Old Testament because they did not observe the special boundaries for ritual purity given to Israel. It could then be reasoned that association with Gentiles would make a person unclean, and a second person's association with an unclean person could make the second person unclean, and so on. (But these additional levels of transmission of uncleanness are not supported explicitly by Mosaic law, except in one case, Num. 19:22.) The laws concerning uncleanness had several functions. One function was symbolically to represent the disorder created by sin and death. They pointed forward to the coming of Christ to rescue us from sin and death.

they reason, he would be associating with their kind rather than the sinners. Their kind are "the righteous."

Jesus's reply indicates why he is doing something different from what they expect. They do not need him, because they are "well." He is going to those who are "sick." Such seeking out of the sick is clearly in accord with God's revelation in the Old Testament (see, for example, Ezekiel 34). So Jesus answers the mistaken supposition that what he is doing shows a lack of true piety.

Jesus may appear to be conceding that the religious leaders are "righteous." But he does not directly say so. In part, he answers them in their own terms. *Even if* they are righteous, it makes sense for him as a spiritual physician to spend his time with those who are spiritually sick. But once we think through the larger implications of Jesus's point, it undermines the presumption of the religious leaders. If they are resisting Jesus's righteous, caring actions toward the sick, they show themselves at a fundamental level to be opposing righteousness rather than supporting it. They are not as righteous as they might suppose.

This one exchange recorded in Luke 5:29–31 belongs to a larger picture. The Gospels record a whole series of tense encounters between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day. As time passed, their suspicions about him grew, and they came to hate him and plot against him. In some of these encounters Jesus made clear their failings in true piety (Matt. 15:1–20; 23:1–36). They were not in fact righteous, though they thought they were. They needed Jesus's work as a physician. But they did not believe that they needed him in that way, because they were satisfied with their lives. They were proud of their status (see Luke 18:9–14). Their situation shows a special irony. Their very religiosity and the satisfactory sense that they had of their own lives were keeping them from genuine religious health. Religion can be a deadly thing.

The situation with the religious leaders during Jesus's earthly life contains broader lessons. None of us today is exactly in the same situation, but the human tendency to pride and self-satisfaction remains in us today. When I talked about the murderers and robbers and sinners, did you see yourself as like them, as needing Jesus the physician? Then I am writing to you. Or did you see yourself as better off than they? Is your life relatively satisfactory? Then I am writing to you as well. But I am writing partly to warn you that you are in danger of having a false comfort from the achievements in your life. You seem to yourself to be "righteous," not in need of the kind of service that Jesus came to give. But you need him nonetheless because you conceal your needs from yourself. And your peril is greater, because you do not see it.

You and I are not literally murderers. No. But both the Old Testament and Jesus say, "Honor your father and your mother" (Ex. 20:12; Matt. 19:19). Have we always done that? God says that we must "not covet" (Ex. 20:17), that is, desire to take something belonging to another. The Bible says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37; see Deut. 6:5).

We have failed to do what we ought. And the failures are not small, because they reveal inward corruption in our hearts: "But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person" (Matt. 15:18–20). Jesus came to heal heart corruption, not merely to reform people's behavior. But it is not easy to accept that. If we fancy ourselves to be "righteous," we avoid the humiliation of admitting that we are sick. That keeps us from coming to the One who is the physician.

Corruption in the Mind

What was going on with these religious leaders in Jesus's time? A few, like Nicodemus (John 3:1–2; 19:39), had a favorable attitude toward Jesus, but most did not. Why not? They were satisfied with their lives, as we observed. But in addition, their minds invented ways of reassuring them that they were in the right and that Jesus was in the wrong. The religious leaders included many people who were experts in the Old Testament. They knew the law of God. Why did they, of all people, fail?

They knew the law after a fashion. And yet they were deeply mistaken. They were mistaken in assessing their own status as "righteous" and mistaken in their picture of what the Messiah would be like when he came to fulfill the promises in the Old Testament. How can someone think he knows, and know so well, and yet not know? They did not know or love the God who issued the law. Jesus has this to say to them, "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures [the Old Testament] nor the power of God" (Matt. 22:29). Yet they thought that they knew.

> The heart is deceitful above all things,
> and desperately sick;
> who can understand it? (Jer. 17:9)

Deceit in the heart leads us to excuse our own sins. We twist the Bible and what we know of God. It only takes a subtle twist to move us away from our spiritual discomfort. We can relabel unrighteous anger as righteous indig-

nation. We can relabel neglect of others as respect for their living their own lives without interference. Greed is relabeled as enjoyment of God's good gifts. And so on. The Pharisees told themselves that they were defending God himself by defending Moses's teachings. Who was this upstart Jesus to challenge not only them but previous generations of revered teachers who supported their understanding of the law?

I write concerning these things partly because I am one of these people, the sinners in need of healing from the tangles and deceit of sin. Sin corrupts my mind. I have never literally murdered anyone. But I murder people with my mind, not by directly plotting how to murder them in action, but by wishing I could crush what is different and that they would conform to what I want. And by so doing I also show that I would murder God if I could. I want his Word, and therefore also his person, to conform to what I want rather than my conforming to what he wants. To the degree that I am clever, I am not only clever in interpreting Scripture but also in distorting it for my benefit, clever in hiding the distortion both from myself and others by giving my interpretation pleasant, approving labels. I am clever, in other words, in believing what I find flattering and comfortable to believe.

Reading Jeremiah 17:9 about the deceitfulness of the heart makes me believe that others have similar afflictions. I write about the physician of the heart in order to tell about the remedy for my own need and the needs of others.

The Remedy

The heart is *desperately* sick. But we do not get anywhere by wallowing in the sickness or going into despair or burying our pain. Go to the physician of souls. The Pharisees, the "righteous" people, were scandalized that Jesus associated with the desperately sick. Yet he did it. To people who did not deserve love, he gave love nonetheless. In all this he was acting for God. And he was God, God come to earth and become man for the sake of sinners (John 1:1, 14).

Sinners do not get anywhere by just looking at sin. Jesus has to rescue them. And the story of how he accomplished the rescue forms the heart of the Bible. It announces that God forgives sins for the sake of Jesus the Son of God, who bore the penalty for sins in his crucifixion and death, and rose from the dead to give us life—life lived for God and in fellowship with God forever.

I believe these things because they are true. But I have also come to believe them and continue to believe them in a way that involves me personally. I

need Jesus Christ to heal me personally and to heal me in my understanding of the Bible. I trust him, that he is able to do for me what he did for others.

I am not writing a book to tell about my own life. Nor am I writing primarily to convince skeptics that the Bible is true and that it is the word of God. Plentiful evidence for that exists if one reads in the right places.[2] But I am not doing it here. I am writing to show how the Bible itself expects us to read it. If we come merely with a casual interest in its information or its religious ideas, we may be disappointed because it was not designed for that. It was designed to enable people to hear the good news about Jesus Christ, to respond to him in faith, and to be healed of the spiritual disease of sin.

If you are not desperate about your own sins, including sins in your mind, you may still read the Bible, and read this book, but I am not sure how much good the Bible or my thoughts will do for you. If, on the other hand, you are desperate, you fit God's design for the Bible.

Actually, desperation has two sides. Some people may feel desperate because of their sins; that is the negative side. Others may feel desperate because they have begun to value God and to want to know him, but they have not yet found the satisfaction of knowing him. These two sides go together. Our sins keep us alienated from God even if we have some longings for him. On the other hand, our longings for him are quenched by the deceits of sin.

But God gives hope. You are not on your own. God has made provision for sins, not only through what Christ accomplished on earth, but also through Christ's life now. He reigns as King in the presence of God the Father (Heb. 6:20; 7:24–25). And he sends the Holy Spirit, who empowers people to understand and receive what he is saying in the Bible. Robust reading of the Bible means reading that is filled with the presence of the Holy Spirit in your heart and mind and life while you are reading. If you do not have the Holy Spirit in your life right now, you can ask Jesus Christ, who is alive in heaven, to send his Spirit to you to enable you to hear and understand the Bible. But, as usual, there is a difficulty: to do that, you have to admit failure—you need supernatural help. You have to admit that you cannot receive adequately what God says unless God enables you.

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[2]Concerning the claims of the Christian faith, see Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008); on the Bible, see Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948); D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge, eds., *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983); John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010).

28

Corruption in the Mind

We have already considered briefly how sin can corrupt people's minds. It is worthwhile probing this area more deeply, so that we may appreciate the need for Christ to rescue us from sin, not only in its gross forms, but in the subtle forms that it can take within the mind. By so doing, we can also grow in appreciating the role that the Bible has to play in renewing our minds.

Sin in the Mind

The Bible indicates that sin enters the mind as well as corrupting human beings in other ways.

> Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their *minds*. They are darkened in their *understanding*, alienated from the life of God because of the *ignorance* that is in them, due to their hardness of *heart.* (Eph. 4:17–18)

> The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every *intention* of the *thoughts* of his *heart* was only evil continually. (Gen. 6:5)

> The *heart* is deceitful above all things,
> and desperately sick;
> who can understand it? (Jer. 17:9)

American culture associates the word *heart* primarily with emotions. But in ancient Hebraic culture the heart represents the core of a person's being, and includes thinking.

> . . . making your ear attentive to wisdom
> and inclining your heart to *understanding.* (Prov. 2:2)
>
> . . . a heart that devises wicked *plans.* (Prov. 6:18)
>
> The *plans* of the heart belong to man. (Prov. 16:1)
>
> The heart of man *plans* his way. (Prov. 16:9)
>
> An *intelligent* heart acquires *knowledge.* (Prov. 18:15)
>
> Apply your heart to *instruction.* (Prov. 23:12)

So passages that talk about the corruption or hardness of the heart include the possibility of corruption in knowledge and in the mind. These effects can involve whole cultures as well as individuals, as is indicated by the cultural multiplication of evil before Noah's flood (Gen. 6:1–7), the corporate evil in the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9), and the pervasive idolatry in the nations around Old Testament Israel (Mic. 4:5). The apostle Paul alludes to this phenomenon when he speaks about the "ignorance" among the Gentiles (non-Jews, Eph. 4:18). In Paul's day Greece had very sophisticated philosophers, but at the most crucial point they fell short: they were ignorant of the true God (Acts 17:22–31).

The Exchange in Idolatry

The Bible describes this ignorance in more detail in Romans 1:18–25.

> [18] For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. [19] For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. [20] For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. [21] For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. [22] Claiming to be wise, they became fools, [23] and exchanged the glory of the

immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

[24] Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, [25] because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

The passage describes everyone who goes astray by refusing to worship and have communion with the true God. People do know God after a fashion (v. 21). But they twist and suppress the knowledge (v. 18). They do not know God as they ought to, and so we can also describe them as "ignorant" or not knowing God.

The corruption of knowledge takes place through an exchange: they "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things" (v. 23). That is, they made idols, images that allegedly represented God or gods, and they worshiped these images. The images became substitutes for the true God. Verse 25 says that they "served [worshiped] the creature rather than the Creator."

In our modern Western world most people no longer worship images—though pagan spirituality is coming back here and there, and in some parts of the world the worship of images still holds sway. But in a broader sense, whatever holds ultimate allegiance in a person's life becomes a "god" to that person. In this broad sense, there are people who worship money, or fame, or sex, or pleasure, or their families, or their hobbies—a thousand things beckon for our attention. The thing that captures ultimate allegiance takes the place of God. It is a substitute that has come in through an exchange. They "exchanged" the true God for another allegiance.

These other allegiances are always unsatisfactory. Money, for example, is not personal. You cannot have personal communion with money in the way that you can have personal communion with God. Money nourishes only some parts of your person, and other parts starve, spiritually speaking. Money does not have the power or righteousness or compassion of God.

The unsatisfying character of the substitutes pushes us to multiply the substitutes. It does not seem to be merely an accident that, when people lose communion with God, they end up worshiping multiple gods or multiple spirits or multiple ultimate allegiances. The peoples in the Middle East in Old Testament times worshiped multiple gods, and so did the Greeks and Romans in the time of Christ. In such cultures, a person might seek out whatever god seemed to be most relevant to his needs at a particular time. And people have many needs.

Some needs are more practical. People need food, health, and shelter to survive. "Nearby" practical gods such as money and power suit them. The ancient god Baal was a storm god to whom people appealed for rain needed to grow crops. People accessed Baal concretely through his priests and his temples. They hoped to manipulate him to do their bidding.

People also have more exalted needs. Our minds wonder about transcendent order, the meaning of it all. As persons, we need transcendent significance, significance to our lives in relation to God the ultimate personality. Philosophical theories or myths step in, which purport to give us the meaning of existence.

All of our needs coalesce in the need for the fullness of God himself, who is the source of all blessings of whatever kinds. Satisfying, tasty food, sexual pleasure, material goods that enhance life, the beauty of a sunset—all of these are tokens of God's goodness. "Yet he [God] did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness" (Acts 14:17). But we corrupt these good things when we make them into our ultimate allegiance. Money signifies the goodness of God. But having abandoned the true God we isolate money from God who gave it, and money becomes a substitute god. The gift, in other words, gets confused with the Giver. The sun is a glorious display of God's beauty and bounty. But people in some cultures have worshiped the sun instead of the God who created it and to whom it testifies.

The Impersonal Concept of Scientific Law

In modern times, the need for transcendent significance is answered to some extent by science. Scientists study the law-like patterns that support the whole order of our existence. Meaning for the entire order and power to manipulate the world in new ways come through the advances of science. Has science become a substitute for God?

We cannot deal at length in this book with the complexities in understanding science. That belongs to other books. We addressed some of the issues in chapter 4. Scientists make reasonable guesses about the *real* laws "out there." Order is already there before scientists begin their investigations. The real laws, according to the Bible, are God's speech.

> By the *word* of the LORD the heavens were made,
> and by the *breath of his mouth* all their host. (Ps. 33:6)

But many people today have persuaded themselves that the laws of science are *impersonal*. What has happened here is one more example of substitu-

tion. In this case, the idea of impersonal, mechanical law has been substituted for the personal speech of God. Thus, people are carrying out a form of the substitution or exchange described in Romans 1:18–25. They have exchanged the true God for an impersonal substitute, an abstract idea of law as mechanism.

Exchange in Truth

Romans 1 indicates another exchange. In exchanging the true God for substitutes, people also exchange the truth for a lie: "They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (v. 25). This principle is important for us, because it focuses on an effect in people's minds. They lose grip on the truth. What truth? From the context, it is the truth about the true God. They cease to know as much about him, not because the truth is unavailable (vv. 19–20), and not because they do not "know" God (v. 21), but because they suppress the truth (v. 18). More precisely, they substitute a lie for the truth. A "lie" in verse 25 means not that they are consciously trying to persuade someone else to believe something that they know to be untrue, but that they themselves believe something that is untrue. They believe that the substitute that they have put in place is worthy of their allegiance. But their mistaken belief is not merely innocent. They have suppressed the truth. They have rebelled against better knowledge. They have, as it were, lied to themselves long enough that they have persuaded themselves that their lie is actually true.

Does this corruption stay confined to one tiny lie? Even in ordinary life, lies have a way of propagating. A person may reach a point where he is about to be trapped in his lie. He escapes by telling a second lie to cover over the first. And then a third.

In the case of the lie about God, the multiplication of lies takes place more directly. God is the God of truth. Truth is what God knows, and what he specifies. Truth is personal, rooted in the person of God. When we make a mistake about God, we also generate a mistake about the meaning of any truth whatsoever. That does not mean that we utterly lose sight of all truth. It remains true that 2 + 2 = 4. You know it to be true. But what do you know about it, and how do you conceive of this truth?[1] Is it truth in the mind of God that he has given you to know out of his goodness and has thereby created a fuller and richer harmony between the infinite beauty of his mind and the

[1]On the theistic foundations of all of mathematics, see Vern S. Poythress, "A Biblical View of Mathematics," in *Foundations of Christian Scholarship*, ed. Gary North (Vallecito, CA: Ross House, 1976), 159–88; Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), chap. 22; James Nickel, *Mathematics: Is God Silent?*, 2nd ed. (Vallecito, CA: Ross House, 2001).

beauty and rest that you have in knowing truth? Or is this truth an abstract, impersonal fact that is just "there"? When we corrupt our knowledge of God, we corrupt our knowledge of 2 + 2 = 4 and every other truth. In many cases the corruption may be subtle. But sometimes it may be extensive. If we need to protect the first lie, we may multiply lies.

Exchange in Human Action

When we exchange God for a substitute, we may also exchange the moral standards of God for the moral standards of our substitute. The multiple gods of ancient Israel and ancient Greece were often immoral. Human moral life gets corrupted by analogy with the corruption of the gods. If the substitute god is impersonal, as with the modern scientific conception of impersonal law, we may be left with no absolute standards at all, but merely pragmatism and vague feelings about doing good. Such vague feelings are not very good protection against secret selfishness.

The exchange or substitution can have particular forms. I mentioned already that I can relabel unrighteous anger as righteous indignation. The relabeling is an exchange.

Romans 1 goes on to talk about various "exchanges" in moral behavior.

> For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women *exchanged* natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise *gave up* natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. (Rom. 1:26–27)

> And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. (Rom. 1:28)

The first of these two passages, Romans 1:26–27, talks about homosexual relations of women with women and men with men. Homosexuality is a sensitive topic today, and it is beyond the scope of this book to discuss it in detail.[2]

The passage in Romans needs attention because it talks about an exchange and indicates that the exchange with respect to God links itself to an exchange with respect to desires and moral standards pertaining to the desires. Having seen the pattern of exchange in these verses, we can see that the exchange continues in verse 28, where a "debased mind" leads to doing "what ought not to be done." In context, this passage implies that people exchange a

[2]For a defense of a biblical view of homosexuality, see Robert A. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001).

sound mind for a debased mind, and a mind knowing the truth for a mind holding a lie. The term "debased" indicates that the mind is corrupted with respect to its judgments in matters of morality. Its corruption in morality opens the door to the practice of immorality. The person exchanges moral passions for immoral passions, and moral actions for immoral actions. The list that follows in Romans 1 shows the kind of immorality that the apostle Paul has in mind.

> They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. (Rom. 1:29–31)

Many people will agree that at least some of the practices on this list are morally reprehensible. But my point is not to decide what is reprehensible. It is to reflect on how these reprehensible things come to be practiced. What about murder? How can a person bring himself to commit such an obviously wrong act? Well, some people murder in a fit of anger. They are carried away by anger and act against their better judgment. But some people *plot* murder. How could they do it? They may make themselves excuses. They exchange the truth for a lie about what they are plotting to do. They tell themselves that their victim does not deserve to live. They are noble agents for cleaning the world and making it comfortable both for themselves and for others. Hitler murdered six million Jews, and he offered a *rationale*. Jews were, he alleged, a plague and corruption on humanity, and he was doing a service by removing them. I can still remember reading a biography of Hitler and being horrified not merely by the slaughter, but by the perverse reasoning meant to *justify* the slaughter.

The people who make excuses are doing the same thing, in principle, as I described when I talked about "murdering" people figuratively in my mind with the desire that their differentness be crushed. I use my cleverness to relabel this desire as desire for truth and for justice. I exchange the truth for a lie. And if I do it cleverly enough, it is subtle and neither I nor others notice.

These issues are not pleasant to think about. It is not comfortable to realize how much potential for evil we have. And it is more disconcerting when we realize that our minds can be enlisted on the wrong side of the moral battle. I would spare you this overview if I could do so responsibly. But I have ventured into this arena because it is pertinent. It is pertinent because biblical interpretation by sinners is subject to the same failings that we see in other areas of life. Sin corrupts our relation to God. And that corrupts our

relation to the truth, which is found in God. Corruption of the truth corrupts the mind, and the mind corrupts the meaning of the text that we read. If the mind is clever, the corruption is clever, and we may not notice it happening.

We need to look at one more aspect of mental corruption. And then we will turn to God's remedy.

29

Counterfeiting the Truth

The exchange of the truth for a lie becomes all the more dangerous because it takes place by way of counterfeiting. The Bible indicates that Satan, the Devil, the angelic opponent of God, carries out a strategy of counterfeiting in order to trap people into his deceits. And people go along with it because their own minds and hearts are corrupt.

The Devil

Many people today do not believe in the Devil. He has been made into a cartoon character, and prestigious thinkers are ready to assure us that such beliefs are outmoded. As modern people, they say, we have become more sophisticated and have abandoned childish beliefs. They dismiss the Devil because he is not part of what might be called "the modern worldview."

Here, as in many other areas, the view of the world presented in the Bible is different. It has a place for science (contrary to simplistic dismissals). It *also* has a place for spiritual activity and spiritual beings. There are multiple levels of causes. If we are to read the Bible seriously, we must adjust to this aspect and not simply assume dogmatically that the modern view of the world has omitted nothing and is right in every respect.

Counterfeiting in Revelation

The idea of spiritual counterfeiting deserves extended analysis. We can only summarize here what has been discussed at greater length elsewhere.[1] The book of Revelation depicts a spiritual war between God and his people on one side and Satan and his agents on the other. Satan is a deceiver (Rev. 12:9). And his principal mode of deceit is counterfeiting. A counterfeit $20 bill has to look like a real bill if the deceit is going to succeed. Likewise, Satan's lies and deceiving ideas have to look like the truth if they are going to have a chance of succeeding. Deceit is parasitic on the truth.

Satan himself acts in a way that counterfeits God's action as Creator. God brought forth mankind and an ordered world after an early point where water covered everything. In imitation of these acts of creation, Satan brings forth out of "the sea" a beast who is an image of himself. The Beast of Revelation 13 counterfeits Christ, who is the true image of God. The second beast in Revelation 13:11–18, the beast from the earth, is also called "the false prophet" (Rev. 16:13; 19:20). He works counterfeit miracles and promotes the worship of the Beast (Rev. 13:12–14). His work is a counterfeit of the Holy Spirit, who works miracles and promotes worship of Christ. Finally, the prostitute who figures in Revelation 17–18 is a counterfeit of the church, the bride of Christ (Rev. 19:7; 21:9).

Counterfeiting in Idolatry

Idolatry is one kind of counterfeiting. Idolaters exchange the true God for a substitute, a false god. The false god has to be enough like the true one to make worship attractive and plausible.

The sun displays the glory of God (Ps. 19:1–2). Its brightness reminds us of the brightness and purity of God's presence, in some of the instances where he appears to human beings. The sun is a blessing from God. So people have fallen into the trap of worshiping the sun. Though such worship has ceased to be plausible to us in a modern society, it was plausible in other times and places because the sun could, through Satan's deceit, serve as a counterfeit for the true God who created it to display his glory.

Money, as a symbol for exchanging valuable goods, is a good gift from God. And the valuable goods that we obtain from the money are gifts that ultimately come from God. Money expresses the goodness of God, and that

[1]Vern S. Poythress, "Counterfeiting in the Book of Revelation as a Perspective on Non-Christian Culture," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40, no. 3 (1997): 411–18; Poythress, *The Returning King: A Guide to the Book of Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), 16–25; Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), chap. 14.

is why it can become at all plausible to worship the gift, the money, instead of God.

Scientific law, as we have seen, is often construed as impersonal, mechanistic law. This is a distortion. It is a counterfeit. But it is close to the truth. Scientific law, even in the impersonal conception, is still allowed to retain many of the attributes of God. It is conceived of as everywhere present (omnipresent), unchangeable (immutable), everlasting, omnipotent (no violations), true, and so on.[2] Because conceptually it is quite close to the character of the true God, it still allows scientists to accomplish their goals more or less satisfactorily. A person who did not have a conception of truthfulness of law, or stability of law (unchangeability), or sameness of the law in different times and places could not work on scientific projects fruitfully, because science presupposes the stability and orderliness of law. To get along, scientists must borrow from the truth, the truth about God.

The Dependence of Idolatry

Satan's counterfeiting depends on God in his original character. Satan's counterfeits can be attractive only because God is the original attraction. And idolaters underneath the surface still rely on God, the true God. That is one of the paradoxes and frustrations of idolatry.

We can illustrate in a number of ways. Greek polytheism should logically lead to the conclusion that the world is chaotic, because the gods are many and they have conflicting purposes. But the average Greek still relied on the orderliness of his everyday world in conducting everyday tasks. In doing so, he was relying on the orderliness that God ordained by creating the world and sustains day by day as he rules over the world in his acts of providence.

> The Lord has established his throne in the heavens,
> and his kingdom rules over all. (Ps. 103:19)

> You [God] cause the grass to grow for the livestock
> and plants for man to cultivate,
> that he may bring forth food from the earth
> and wine to gladden the heart of man,
> oil to make his face shine
> and bread to strengthen man's heart. (Ps. 104:14–15)

The scientist with an impersonal conception of scientific law still relies on the rationality of law and its accessibility to the human mind. In doing so,

[2]Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), chap. 1.

he is relying both on the rationality and personality of God and on the fact that scientists have been created in the image of God.

Our Plight

Our minds seem to us to be in reasonable working order. Yes, but we have our own substitute concept of what constitutes being "reasonable." And we are selective about our evidence, suppressing from view those moral failures that have included mental excuse making, suppressing times when we were carried away by selfish desires, suppressing above all the unbearable presence of God that convicts us of our guilt.

We will not admit it (another substitution of a lie for the truth), but we are in flight from God. We want in our hearts to run our own lives, to be little tin gods. The ultimate substitute god is the self. We were made in the image of God, to be like God. And this too we twist, in the attempt to be a little god. But try as we might, we cannot achieve success with our rebellion. We cannot escape God, whom we know (Rom. 1:21).

Be careful! Clever though you are, God, like the hound of heaven in Francis Thompson's poem,[3] may yet weary you and track you down and bring you to surrender. Surrender is what I need and what you need. But we do not surrender easily.

I write as one who has made that fundamental surrender. But the desire to flee and to be my own tin god has not completely disappeared. We do not get over our sickness easily. It takes the great physician to do it. And he takes his time, just as a physician of the body sometimes takes time in an extended surgery.

I have descended into the mess of human sin partly so that we may appreciate the remedy that God offers in Christ. We need a remedy that is comprehensive, that works in our hearts, our actions, and our minds. And I am particularly concerned for the mind. We need truth. We need Christ, who is the truth (John 14:6). And we need to respect how Christ has designed the Bible to instruct us in the truth.

[3]Francis Thompson, "The Hound of Heaven," frequently republished; accessed September 25, 2009, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hound_of_Heaven.

30

Truth

Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice." Pilate said to him, "What is truth?" —John 18:37–38

We need truth. Jesus says, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). The claim that "the truth will set you free" is sometimes used as a motto without thought of its original context. The motto may suggest to casual readers that a modern education "will set you free." But that of course depends on what kind of "freedom" we picture for ourselves. The possibilities rise up for substituting one kind of freedom for another.

Finding the Truth through Jesus

Having more context for Jesus's statement can help: "So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, 'If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free'" (John 8:31–32). The truth about which Jesus speaks is truth found in his "word." Looking at the rest of the Gospel of John shows that his words include truth about himself and about God. And he tells us that we can access this truth by "abiding" in his word and so being his "disciples."

Within a postmodern environment, some people will have doubts about claims like these.[1] Can we know truth? Or are we confined to what our cultural environment tells us is truth? Let us exercise a little skepticism about skepticism. A person has to know a lot about the nature of the world and the nature of our human situation in the world in order to draw a sweeping conclusion to the effect that we cannot know truth. From where does all this knowledge come? Is it sound? And if it is sound knowledge, would it not be knowledge of some things that are in fact *true*? It is wiser not to be dogmatic with such a sweeping claim. Can we know *before* we listen to Jesus that his claims about truth are necessarily false? Why not listen to him first? That is the route that I am taking.

Being a Disciple

Jesus is talking about being "my disciples." A disciple in the first-century context is a learner who submits to being taught by an esteemed teacher, a "master." Jesus is the Master. And it becomes clear in the rest of John and in the other Gospels that being a disciple involves not only learning things in one's mind, but obeying: "Go therefore and make *disciples* of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *teaching* them to *observe* all that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19–20).

The passage in Matthew 28 also shows that being a disciple is not limited to the time when Jesus was physically present on earth. Jesus intends for people to become disciples throughout "all nations," and throughout all the periods of time leading up to his second coming. It includes, therefore, a challenge to us today. Jesus also implies that what he has "commanded" will continue to be available to disciples throughout the nations and throughout the times. His commandments come to us through the Gospel of Matthew in particular.

Being a disciple of Jesus requires comprehensive commitment: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26–27). The mention of father and mother and other family members is particularly shocking in a first-century context, because the Jews of Jesus's time had much stronger family loyalties than do many people in the modern Western world. And they knew that God himself had commanded them to "honor your father and your mother" (Ex. 20:12). Jesus

[1]On postmodernism, see Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), appendices A and B.

says "hate," which is a strong word. It should be interpreted relative to the superior loyalty and love that Jesus expects to be given to him. Loyalty to Jesus must supersede all other loyalties.

That claim to loyalty demands a lot, if we are honest about it. Something in us resists that kind of total surrender. Yes, and Jesus knows what he is asking. He wants people to assess realistically whether they are willing to make a commitment of that depth. The immediately preceding verse says that "great crowds accompanied him" (Luke 14:25). They were interested. They were drawn to him. Some of them perhaps wanted to see a miracle. But all that is superficial. Jesus tells them to count the actual cost of being a disciple, and he tells two parables about people who failed to count the cost before making a commitment (Luke 14:28–33). He sums it all up with a final statement: "So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple" (v. 33). "All that he has" includes not merely possessions in the ordinary sense, but one's own self, "his own life" (v. 26). The image of bearing "his own cross" in verse 27 does not mean bearing a burden. In the first century, a person bore his own cross on the way to being crucified as a criminal by the Roman authorities. It meant that the person was on the way to suffering and death and total disgrace. That person was losing everything of value that belongs to this life.

People today still have to confront the same issue when it comes to Jesus. Listening to Jesus, as his words are recorded in the Bible, can be superficial. You can listen will all kinds of attitudes, from hostility to skepticism to mild interest to fascination. That is all superficial. What is not superficial is to understand what Jesus is actually demanding—commitment. And the commitment involves horrendous cost. Why would anyone be crazy enough to take up such an offer?

The Bible has many sides to its answer. Jesus is God himself, who made us and who has all the wisdom about who we are and what we need. He sacrificed his own life to redeem us from sin. And his leadership is wise and gentle, rather than oppressive: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28–30). The opposite side of the answer is to say that the alternatives are worse. We desperately need God and his truth and his remedy (Jesus the physician). The cost is worth it because from fellowship with God, through Jesus, come all lasting blessings.

You go to a surgeon. You are putting your life in his hands. You will lose everything if you die on the operating table. Why is anyone crazy enough to do it? The question answers itself. But you had better find out beforehand the

seriousness of your condition, the necessity for an operation, the competence of the surgeon, and the risks of the operation. That is what Jesus is saying.

Unfortunately our situation is *worse* than the situation with a surgeon who operates on our bodies. For the bodily surgeon, we at least have intact minds beforehand to weigh our options. But in this present case our minds and our hearts are fouled up. We are not competent to judge our own condition, and we please ourselves by substituting a lie ("you are healthy") for the truth. Jesus's truth is necessary even to enable us to see enough truth to make a commitment. Otherwise, to pick up another statement of Jesus, we are still thinking that we are "righteous" and have no need of a physician.

Let us listen to Jesus.

The Truth in Its Origin

Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). He is "the truth." It is a startling claim. He makes a point similar to what we have already observed. Through his instruction we come into the truth. But in addition, he is himself central to that instruction. Healing is many-sided. It embraces our minds, our hearts, and our passions, and it takes place through communion with Jesus that is rich and multidimensional. Healing includes truth. Truth includes knowing particular truths about God and Jesus Christ. For example, "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God" (1 John 5:1). We know that Jesus is the Christ. Truth also includes knowing God and Jesus Christ personally. "And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3).[2] That verse promises that we will know the God of truth. So let us go deeper and reflect on the origin of truth.

The Bible's teaching about truth is closely related to what we have said before about knowledge (chaps. 19–20). Just as God is the origin of knowledge, he is the origin of truth. It is worthwhile to think through some of the implications. In the process, we will cover some of the same themes that we mentioned earlier in discussing knowledge and cognition.

God is true (John 3:33). He knows all things (Isa. 46:10). He is always truthful and never lies (Num. 23:19). When he speaks, he always speaks the truth, in accordance with his character (Ps. 18:30; 19:9; John 17:17). All truth is God's truth. What we come to know, God has always known.

[2]"If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him" (John 14:7).

The Bible reveals that there is only one God, and that this one God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—three persons.[3] This character of God is a mystery. God understands himself completely. As we come to know him, we come to understand him, but his infinity surpasses what we know. The truth of God is the truth of the one God. It is also truth shared by the three persons. All three persons are omniscient. All three know all truth.

The Bible also indicates a differentiation in the roles of the persons. The Son indicates that he is "the truth." He conveys truth to us in the context of our need for a remedy, for spiritual healing, for redemption. But in acting for our redemption, he acts in accordance with who he is eternally in relation to the Father and the Spirit. Hence his redemptive actions have a background in the eternal being of God. The Son, we conclude, is the truth eternally, as well as in relation to our redemption.

In redemption, the Holy Spirit is sent into the world to instruct us in the truth.

> When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me [the Son], for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16:13–15)

The Holy Spirit has a role in guiding people into the truth. This role in guidance applies preeminently to the apostles whom Jesus appointed. But by analogy it applies to any who come to Jesus in faith. The Holy Spirit guides us into redemptive truth.

Once again, we can infer that this role of the Holy Spirit is in harmony with his role in the Godhead. The Holy Spirit receives the truth from the Father and the Son in eternal communion.

Truth in Communication

God's truth gets communicated to human beings. Jesus brings truth from the Father to us. "For I have given them [your people] the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me" (John 17:8). Jesus's words are the Father's words, "the words that you gave me." This receiving of the Father's words has an eternal root in the communion of the three persons

[3]For evidence, see John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 619–735.

in the Trinity. But Jesus is focusing on the redemptive conveying of words to the disciples. "The words that you gave me," the Father's words, are also what Jesus has given to them. The Son's words are the Father's words by virtue of the mutual indwelling of the persons of the Trinity in one another: "You, Father, are in me, and I in you" (John 17:21). John 12:48–50 underlines the Father's presence and authority in the Son's words, as follows:

> The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day. For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me.

The words not only have been delivered by the Son, but have been received with understanding by the disciples: "They have received them and have come to know in truth" (John 17:8). These words are true (John 17:17). We know from other passages that the Holy Spirit works to enable the words to be received, and received with understanding (John 16:13). Thus, there is no gap. We can have the truth, truth from God the Father himself, through Jesus the Son. The statements in John 17:8 appear to apply preeminently to the apostles. They are immediately present when Jesus speaks these words shortly before going out from the upper room to his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. But the rest of the passage indicates that Jesus has in mind many more people: "I do not ask for these only [those immediately present], but also for those who will believe in me through their word [the proclamation from the apostles], that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me" (John 17:20–21).[4]

[4]For more on the truth, see Vern S. Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1999), chap. 5.

31

The Bible

We now consider the Bible, which continues the transmission of the truth from God the Son, who brings the truth from God the Father.

The Bible says that it is the written word of God. That is, it is God's speaking, in writing. God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit speak in harmonious voice and in agreement with the eternal harmony that they enjoy in love. Because God is truthful and what he says is true, the Bible is true.

The Bible contains many forms of communication, including not only assertions but questions, commands, exclamations, and expressions of personal feeling, which belong to various genres.[1] Some people think of "truth" as confined to assertions. So we need to think about how God's trustworthiness applies to other forms of communication as well. God is trustworthy in all the forms of communication that he uses; he uses each form in accord with its own character that he has ordained. His trustworthiness includes the truthfulness of what he implies in these various forms of communication.[2]

In the modern world, can we still believe that? Many skeptical voices can be heard. I know. In this chapter, I want to consider what the Bible says about itself.

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[1]See Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), esp. chaps. 19 and 23, and appendix H.

[2]On the idea of implications, see Vern S. Poythress, "Problems for Limited Inerrancy," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 18, no. 2 (1975): 93–102.

Setting out the evidence for the Bible as the word of God could take a whole book. For that extended exposition I lean on others who have written the books.[3] I will summarize here.

Jesus's Testimony

When Jesus was on earth, the Old Testament, the first part of the Bible, already existed. Jesus indicates in his teaching his confidence that the Old Testament is the word of God and is reliable.

> Scripture cannot be broken. (John 10:35)

> Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. (Matt. 5:17–18)

> Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh"? (Matt. 19:4–5)

In Matthew 19:4–5 Jesus quotes from Genesis 2:24. He ascribes these words from Genesis to God as the speaker: "He who created them from the beginning." Thus he treats the word of Genesis itself as what God said. This treatment of Genesis is impressive evidence.

In one way the entire life of Jesus testifies even more impressively to the reliability of Scripture. He lived his life with reference to the Old Testament prophecies that foretold his coming (Luke 24:25–27, 44–47). He faced the agony of the cross with the conviction that it "must be" because of the Old Testament Scriptures: "But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?" (Matt. 26:54).

The Old Testament's Testimony

Jesus's conviction that the Old Testament is the written speech of God, the word of God, was not a new invention. The Old Testament itself has testimony to its authority, particularly in the focal events at Mount Sinai

[3]See Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948); D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge, eds., *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983); John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010); see also the briefer exposition in Vern S. Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1999), chap. 3.

(Exodus 19–24). God spoke in an audible voice to the people of Israel from the top of Mount Sinai (Ex. 20:1, 18–21; Deut. 5:1–33). He spoke the Ten Commandments. These commandments were then written by the finger of God on stone tablets (Ex. 31:18). The tablets recorded the covenant that God made with the people (Ex. 24:7–8) and were eventually deposited in the ark of the covenant, the most sacred piece of furniture within the tabernacle (Ex. 25:16).

God later instructed Moses to add other writings to this initial deposit, and these writings were deposited by the side of the ark (Deut. 31:26). They thus became part of a body of sacred writings—writings from God, with God's authority, expressing the covenant with Israel. They were the nucleus for a growing canon. Deuteronomy explicitly indicates that other prophets will rise after Moses's time and will speak with God's authority (Deut. 18:15–32). Deuteronomy also gives tests for distinguishing between the true prophets of God and counterfeits that Satan may send (Deut. 13; 18:20–22). God teaches in this way that there is to be a canon, a body of sacred writings set apart specifically as his words.

Some modern analysts of the Old Testament dispute this view. Some would argue that the events on Mount Sinai never took place in the way Exodus describes them. They sometimes argue that Deuteronomy comes from a much later time. I am aware of these views. We touched on them briefly in discussing how miracles are at odds with the modern worldview (chaps. 4–5). But we should follow Jesus in preference to these modern analysts—who have no more than hypotheses. Jesus endorses the Old Testament as the word of God. We should trust him more than the modern analysts.

New Testament Witness

Other portions of the New Testament confirm the testimony of Jesus concerning the Old Testament. If space allowed, we would look particularly at 2 Timothy 3:16–17 and 2 Peter 1:21. But other books have done this job well.

Jesus's Commissioning of the Apostles

After his resurrection from the dead, Jesus commissioned the apostles to bear witness to what had happened and to spread the good news of salvation throughout the world (Matt. 28:18–20). He promised that the Holy Spirit would empower them: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The presence of the Holy Spirit indicates that the apostles' message, like the words of Old Testament

prophets inspired by the Holy Spirit, bear Jesus's authority. The apostle Paul is aware of his authority to speak words with God's authority: "When you received the word of God, which you heard from us [Paul's preaching to the Thessalonians], you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, *the word of God*, which is at work in you believers" (1 Thess. 2:13).

The teaching in Deuteronomy about the idea of a canon, a deposit, leads to the expectation of additions to the deposit through prophets whom God raises up from time to time. The apostles stand in this line because they were commissioned by Christ himself. Therefore, the church was correct in recognizing that the writings of the apostles form an addition to the Old Testament deposit. They form the New Testament. Some passages in the New Testament directly indicate divine authority.

> If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are *a command of the Lord*. If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. (1 Cor. 14:37–38)

> I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. (Rev. 22:18–19)

The warning not to add or subtract echoes Deuteronomy 4:2 and 12:32, and indicates that Revelation claims to be the canonical word of God.

Second Peter 3:16 talks about the writings of "our beloved brother Paul [the Apostle]," and says, "There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do *the other Scriptures*." The phrase "the other Scriptures" indicates that 2 Peter thinks that the writings of Paul are authoritative Scripture, on a par with "the other Scriptures," including the Old Testament word of God.

But What about the Difficulties in the Bible?

Can we really accept that the Bible is God's own word? Many people are full of questions and doubts. Second Peter indicates that some things in Paul's writings are "hard to understand." That is still compatible with the claim that Paul's writings are God's word. We should recognize that we will have difficulties and struggles, and that "the ignorant and unstable twist [the hard parts] to their own destruction," as 2 Peter says in the next line. These challenges are only the beginning of difficulties.

Some people have suggested that we can find a way out of these difficulties by redefining the character of the Bible. The Bible, they suggest, is what God wanted it to be for his purposes; that is the meaning of inspiration. So if we think we find a factual error, we just have to admit that God wanted it there. But consider: Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* is "exactly what God wanted it to be for his purposes," because of God's providential control of all events. *Every* book and every speech in the entirety of history is "exactly what God wanted it to be." Definitions like this give only the illusion of helping, because they do not distinguish the Bible from God's providential control. We only make a distinction if we say, as I have been saying, that the Bible is what God says; it is his written word. What Scripture says, God says. By contrast, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* may contain fascinating ideas, and we may praise God for its stimulus, but it is not what God says. What God says has both his authority and his truthfulness, and is always consistent with who God is.

Many people have many more difficulties in other parts of the Bible. Modern people allege that the Bible contradicts itself, that it has unacceptable ethics, that its view of God is unacceptable, that it contradicts modern science at any number of points. In the earlier parts of this book I dipped into a few of these questions. Such questions could lead to much more extended answers if we had the space. There are satisfying answers, I believe—not that we know everything or can give exhaustive answers to every possible query, but that God provides good grounds for following Jesus, having fellowship with him, becoming his disciples, and listening submissively to his instruction and his claims. In the space of this one book we cannot explore the answers to every possible question, but we have made a beginning by looking at worldviews. Taking seriously the Bible's own worldview, and not imposing ideas from modern worldviews, helps to dissolve many of the alleged difficulties.

One further skeptical question deserves discussion at this point. How do we know that the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—present the "real" Jesus? Can we trust these accounts? We can trust them because they are God's own words. But of course that is one of the points in dispute. People struggle with what to believe. That is part of the whole problem we have discussed. How do we access pure truth in the midst of darkness? There is plenty of evidence for the claims of the Gospels, but different kinds of evidence can affect different people in different ways. Remember, our minds are sick, so we may resist evidence.

We cannot go into all the kinds of evidence here, but we may consider one point. Some of the sayings and the events recorded in the Gospels are

so remarkable that people can see that they were not invented later on. For example, Jesus's saying about hating father and mother (Luke 14:26) is so different and so hard to digest that it must have originated with him. Similarly, his statement about the physician going to the sick is striking in its radical contrast to the religious thinking of his day. I would urge you to read the Gospels for yourself, with an inquiring mind, and with prayer to God that he will enable you to understand and receive it as truth. God can change you as he changed me.

We can also look at the alternative. If it were the case that the Gospels did not give us the real Jesus, then Jesus of Nazareth as he really was would simply be unavailable. We would have to conclude that even if he was once the divine physician of souls, we do not now have words of his from the Father, words of purest truth to rescue us from darkness. Genuine *Christian* faith would be impossible, however much people might still use the word *Christian* with various superficial meanings. And if such faith were impossible, we would, as the apostle Paul observed, still be "in [our] sins" (1 Cor. 15:17). We would be left in mental and spiritual darkness. From such a darkened position, it would among other things be impossible to judge the truthfulness of the Gospels. Our own lives would disintegrate.

In other words, I do not think that the project of defeating or destroying the testimony of the Gospels can succeed. I say that not out of dogmatism but out of skepticism. I am skeptical about the powers of fallen, unaided human reason to find its way to fundamental religious truth, or to make sound judgments on matters as weighty as this one. Once we have thought about the corruption of the mind, skeptical questioning eats away any confidence in skeptically oriented analysis of the Gospels.

People can still be very clever. We can admire the cleverness and thank God for insights that it uncovers. But the cleverness never outpaces its own ability to conceal counterfeits, subtle distortions of the truth, which support the idol of self or some false god. Cleverness does not outpace sin—in fact, it is infected with sin. Too often, cleverness feeds pride. Sin flourishes in the soil of pride. From this cesspool there is, according to the Bible, no self-deliverance. "Salvation belongs to the LORD" (Jonah 2:9).

Jesus says, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). We need his spiritual light, for the sake of life. And here also his claims are demanding and exclusive. His promise of light goes to "whoever follows me," that is, to disciples. The disciple has to give up everything.

If there were some other way to find salvation, it would be foolish to listen to a requirement for total allegiance and total sacrifice: count the cost! But

if sin is as deeply rooted as it is, we must surrender to the physician, to the surgeon. We must let him do the operating, while we are helpless. Someone else has to do what we can never do for ourselves, because our own hearts betray us. He is not only a physician, but the good physician. He is wise with the wisdom of God and compassionate with the compassion of the Savior who died to rescue us. That is good news to undeserving people.

32

The Danger of Pride

We should explore one more difficulty. God does not look kindly on human pride. "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6). That principle is in part a variation on the principle that those who are well have no need of a physician. Those who *think* that they are righteous and are doing well boast in themselves and not in God. They make themselves into little gods who want to receive the praise that is due to God. And that is a subtle form of rebellion against the plans and purposes of God, as well as failure in loving God for his greatness and goodness.

In addition, God is holy and righteous. In his zeal for righteousness, and in the zeal of his own perfect love for his Son, he is angry with those who oppose the glory of his Son by making themselves into gods and pretending that they are the center of their world. That is, he opposes the proud.

But of course pride, like other sins, covers its tracks. We make excuses. We make counterfeits to the truth, by telling ourselves that our pride is a legitimate satisfaction in the good things that we have been able to accomplish, the admirable abilities that we have, and the generosity that we have in making our abilities manifest to the world and in serving the world through the use of our abilities. Yes, that is close to the truth, as are all counterfeits.

Intellectual Pride

One form of pride is intellectual pride. Such pride is especially tempting to clever and intellectual people because—as they would say if they dared—

they have something to be proud about. God replies, "What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?" (1 Cor. 4:7). Intellectual abilities are genuine gifts from God, which are good and admirable. We are made in the image of God, and that is a wondrous privilege and stupendous gift. Intellectual abilities, along with other abilities, display the original ability of God. They display the beauty and power of his mind. It is striking for God to show his power and wisdom in the creation of the universe. It is still more striking that he should create a human being who himself has a creative mind and who can savor the truths of God.

It is wonderful. But that which is wonderful, when it is corrupted, becomes most regrettable. We experience more sadness when a famous painting is destroyed in a fire than when a bare cardboard box is destroyed. Given the wonder of the gift, the perversion of the gift is most appalling. And because the gift of intellectual ability is so wonderful and powerful, the perversion also is a powerful perversion, capable of extending its damage from one mountain of insight to another.

God has a suitable response. "He catches the wise in their craftiness" (1 Cor. 3:19). Those who fancy themselves proud in their wisdom have their very wisdom twisted by their pride, and through the twist they fall into intellectual and spiritual traps. The traps are set by God himself, because he is angry with pride. We already saw an instance of it in Romans 1: "Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things" (Rom. 1:22–23).

Scientists as an Example of Pride

According to common reckoning, scientists are among the most intelligent people of our time. Outstanding scientists possess incredible intellectual gifts. They have not only abilities, but abilities developed by long training, which enable them to make advances in understanding deep secrets in the universe. We can praise God for their remarkable achievements.

But when scientists are caught up with pride in their gifts and their achievements, it may keep them from asking questions about whether in the midst of all their achievements their minds could have gone astray. Their minds are in fact astray if they have exchanged the laws of the universe, spoken by God, for laws that they think are self-sufficient, impersonal, and mechanical. They think that they are so successful—they with their fellow scientists who agree on the impersonal character of scientific law. And they are successful

in many wonderful ways. How could they then be wrong in the very thing in which they are successful?

> The heart is deceitful above all things,
> and desperately sick;
> who can understand it? (Jer. 17:9)

All scientists know God, according to the testimony of Romans 1:21. But they, like all of us, can suppress that knowledge and counterfeit it. Every day they rely on the fact that the laws are rational and language-like, features that belong only to persons.[1] But they also say to themselves that the laws are impersonal. They live a contradiction.

God's Design

In spite of our rebellion, God in his mercy has undertaken to rescue us from the folly created by our pride. But the rescue operation includes an operation that attacks our pride. First Corinthians 1 lays it out.

> For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,
>
> "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
> and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."
>
> Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe [the analogue of a modern scholar]? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1 Cor. 1:18–25)

God undertook to save us through the death of Christ on the cross. Christ died condemned as a criminal. It seems foolish to the thinking of the world that such weakness, humiliation, and apparent failure could help anyone. But that is what God chose, and those to whom God has given understanding are in awe of his wisdom in it. God confounded the world's wisdom by the

[1]See Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), chap. 1.

superiority of his wisdom. And the superiority of his wisdom shows up the folly of what the world counts as wisdom.

If we are going to get anywhere with God, or get anywhere with wisdom, or get anywhere with truth and enlightenment, we have to give up pride. It is a barrier, by God's own standards. He warns against it repeatedly in the Bible.

> Pride goes before destruction,
> and a haughty spirit before a fall. (Prov. 16:18)

> When pride comes, then comes disgrace,
> but with the humble is wisdom. (Prov. 11:2)

> Everyone who is arrogant in heart is an abomination to the Lord;
> be assured, he will not go unpunished. (Prov. 16:5)

Here is the antidote: "As it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord'" (1 Cor. 1:31). The only legitimate pride is pride in the greatness and goodness of God, whose greatness and goodness make everything else insignificant by comparison. If we are full of pride, we are full of ourselves. We close ourselves to receiving the truth from God. If we are full of pride in the Lord, we come to him and receive wisdom, truth, and instruction from him. Then we are advancing.

Multiplying Meanings

By reflecting on the power of pride, we already have one piece for a response to the troubling questions about why different people interpret the Bible in radically different ways. If people are full of themselves, they are listening to themselves and their own ideas and prejudices as much as they are listening to the Bible when they read. This process can happen with those who profess to be Christians as well as those who are hostile. Remnants of pride afflict us all, and the more subtle they are, the harder they are to detect in the midst of the beginnings in genuine humility. People's own selves interfere with careful, humble listening. In response, God gives them their own thoughts back to them as a judgment on their pride. They learn nothing. Or what they think they see in the Bible is really the mirror of their own thoughts. Or they see in the Bible something that contradicts their own thoughts, but then they are quick to reject it. "It is rubbish," they say to themselves, as their own pride sets the terms.

Or perhaps, in God's goodness, they receive some profound insight into genuine truth. But they are proud of their own achievement, and that clouds

their insight. Their discovery becomes an excuse for thinking that their insight is the full truth, and they cease listening carefully and respectfully to things in the text that would deepen or complement or qualify their insight in unexpected directions. They stop listening carefully to people of lesser insight who may nevertheless have noticed something true that they have not yet fully digested. A good insight gets corrupted and becomes a counterfeit. But it seems so true and so insightful. Nothing is wrong, they assure themselves.

God is not surprised by all this. He designed the Bible, among other things, to catch the wise in their own craftiness (1 Cor. 3:19). The riches of his wisdom do not open themselves to those who will not abandon pride and boast in God.

The Right Route

We should admit our need for God and ask him to help us understand. If we do so, we follow the fruitful path to understanding. Proverbs 1:7 confirms it: "The fear of the Lord [reverence for the Lord] is the beginning of knowledge." We avoid flattering ourselves about our own competence. With God's help, each of us can read the Bible himself and do it fruitfully, because God's Word opens itself to those who humbly seek him. But we can also profit from what others have found. We can go to a church that believes in the Bible and studies it actively. We can read books. Humility includes the realization that we can learn from others.

Unfortunately, pitfalls and dangers still arise in studying the Bible because of human sin and the corruption of the mind (chap. 28). Corruption belongs not only to your own mind, but to any church you care to attend, and any modern books you care to read. You have to be prepared to sort through things. What you find is a mixture of good and bad, true and counterfeit. And the difference is not always easy to detect. We need patience. As the Bible brings truth and clarity into our minds, God equips us to be more discerning. It is a process.

In the process, God takes care of us. Christ promises:

> My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one. (John 10:27–30)

We must surrender our pride and realize that God is the one who saves.

PART NINE

CHALLENGES FROM CORRUPT SPIRITUALITY

33

Religious Gullibility

Let us now consider one more challenge to the Bible, namely, skepticism about religion. Some skeptics consider religious belief to be a symptom of gullibility or psychological weakness. The skeptics might say that people have religious beliefs either because they do not ask critical questions about religious claims or because they are psychologically weak and feel a need for a crutch. They want the support and comfort of religious belief, which imparts meaning to their lives.

If this principle of gullibility holds for religious belief in general, the skeptic maintains that it also holds for *Christian* belief and for the religious claims made in the Bible. Skeptics conclude that the Bible is bogus.

What do we say about this skepticism toward religious beliefs? We touched on one aspect of this question back in chapter 1 when we discussed whether there could be only *one* true religion. Skepticism with respect to the distinctive claims of any one religion over against the others makes it natural for people to wonder about all religions together.

The Materialist Explanation of Religious Belief

In addition, a *materialistic worldview* may exert an influence. Materialism says that either God does not exist or he is essentially irrelevant. It thereby debunks religion because most religions claim that God or gods are vitally relevant. Moreover, since materialism rejects the idea of direct divine interaction with human beings, it looks for purely material causes for religious

belief. Beliefs must arise from some structures in the brain, structures that in the end are a product of a long process of evolution. Materialists hope that eventually scientific research will show how such structures can all be associated with some practical, life-enhancing function. General intelligence, for example, helps human beings to get food, protect themselves from harm, and survive to the next generation. Religious belief, like shared beliefs of other kinds, can enhance the unity of a human social group, and that in turn may help the group to act cooperatively and so survive to the next generation. The materialist concludes that religious beliefs are not true, but arise merely because they have been pragmatically useful in the evolutionary struggle for survival. They are a kind of accidental by-product of structures in the brain that natural selection favored for other, unrelated reasons.

This kind of materialistic explanation of religious belief has a considerable plausibility in our time because materialism itself is widespread and lends its support. In addition, as we have observed, materialism carries with it some of the prestige of natural science (chap. 3). But the debunking explanation based on materialism has a notable flaw: it can easily prove too much. A similar argument can be used against all beliefs whatsoever. If beliefs are the product merely of chance evolution, they exist because they are useful for survival, not because they are true. They are a product of our brain structures, not ultimately a product of weighty evidence in favor of their truth. When this principle is followed consistently, it leads to the conclusion that beliefs in general must be debunked. And that includes belief in materialism, belief in evolution, and belief in brain structures. The debunker ends up with no grounds on which to stand to do his debunking.

Gullibility

Skepticism about religious belief should, nevertheless, not be dismissed too quickly. It is a counterfeit, which means that it is close to the truth. It has seen some things to which we do well to pay attention.

Why are some people so gullible about religion? If we like, we can expand the category of religious belief to include not only traditional religions but also "spirituality." People go to fortune-tellers, or they try to contact the spirits of the dead, or they try to establish spiritual communion with the trees. Why do people do such things? We can find people today who in ordinary issues show themselves to be sensible, but who have weird ideas about spirituality.

The ancient societies around the Bible showed similar symptoms. Why did the ancient Greeks believe in their gods? The Greek legends told of immoral activities among the gods, and Socrates could challenge the validity of the

legends merely by pointing out the obvious fact that the alleged immoralities were unworthy of real gods.

People often seem to be *more* gullible in spiritual matters than elsewhere. They are *more* gullible about the gods than they would be if a seller tried to cheat them in the marketplace or their child tried to lie his way out of a tight spot.

Deep Personal Needs

At least three characteristics of fallen human nature help to explain this gullibility. We long for deep significance, for safety, and for assurance, particularly when it comes to the big questions of life. These longings go back to creation. God created human beings in his image. He designed that they would have fellowship with him. God met with Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. According to this plan, God himself gave them significance not only by creating them, but also by giving his personal love to each of them. This fellowship would have continued if Adam and Eve had not rebelled. God would have had fellowship with each person. God would have provided safety partly by holding out for the long-range future the promise of eternal life in his presence. But in the world before the fall of mankind, he would also have given short-range protection. He committed himself to work for their good, which would include making sure that they had food, work, joy, and physical well-being. Finally, he gave assurance by his instruction to them and by the fact that he was a trustworthy God.

Human beings nevertheless rebelled against God. And ever since we have been looking for substitutes for God. These are the counterfeits discussed in chapter 29. The gods of ancient Greece were one form of counterfeit. Counterfeits must be close enough to the truth to lure people in.

Significance

They lure people in first of all by supplying a counterfeit answer for the longing for significance. You are significant when you are connected to something bigger than yourself, particularly if you have a key role to play in that bigger whole. God's plan was for each person to be significant by being loved by God and loving God in return. In knowing and loving God who is infinite, each person would find supreme satisfaction and supreme meaning for his own life.

A false god offers a substitute for the true God. It claims to answer our longing for meaning by being big enough to give meaning, and by being interested enough in a person to allow him to participate. The longing in

people is so strong because it is a corrupt form of longing for God himself. We were created to have fellowship with God, so that the longing originally was a longing for God. But it is corrupted into a longing that people hope to have fulfilled by a false god. Anything that promises to fill their longing—whether an idea, another person, or an idol—may be received gullibly. A person believes and receives because he desperately *wants* to believe and receive. This kind of longing creates much more tension for many people than cases where the stakes are not as high. Longing for ultimate meaning is more profound than longing for an ice-cream cone.

Or in a scientific investigation, for example, we might want to test whether pumpkin seeds are more likely to sprout and grow well when in contact with pure water or sugar water or water mixed with soil. We may have our opinion, but we are not desperate to have the experiment come out in one particular way. By contrast, when we are dealing with religion and spirituality, we are desperate. The desperation makes us gullible.

Care for Our Situation

A second potential source for gullibility arises not merely from our longings but also from our circumstances. How do we secure safe shelter, good crops, adequate food, a safe sea voyage, healthy children, and so on? Before the fall, God committed himself to bless mankind. But after the fall our situation is mixed. God does supply food (Acts 14:17), but on occasion he may also bring famine (Gen. 41:30–32; Deut. 28:18). People want their situation to be good. They may therefore look to magic, fortune-telling, gods, and religious manipulation of various kinds.

Now and then people may get some favorable result after they have invoked a religious procedure. Perhaps a particular instance of fortune-telling seems to work out. This favorable result seems to them to validate their religious procedure. They long to have some way of controlling their environment. So they persist in religious observance as long as it seems to bring them benefit. According to Greek religion, Poseidon is the god of the sea. So the ancient Greek citizen reasoned that maybe if Poseidon is bribed, he can help with a sea voyage. Aphrodite is the goddess of love, so she can help with love. Ares is the god of war, so he can help win battles. And so on.

The incentive here is to practice religion because it brings tangible benefits. Sure, the practitioner admits, it may not always work, but sometimes it works. And the "sometimes" offers enough incentive to keep up the practice. In fact, when a practice appears not to work, it may become an incentive to redouble one's efforts. The practitioner thinks, "I need more devotion,

bigger sacrifices, more impressive ceremony." The redoubling of efforts may also include the suppression of doubts. Maybe a particular god can see into one's mind, and he is not pleased with doubts. Even if he is not a mind reader, he can overhear verbal expressions of doubts. And he certainly will not be pleased if the doubts cause someone to slacken in his routine of religious ceremonies. The needs of the situation therefore put pressure on people to be more gullible than usual.

Ultimate Commitments

Finally, people want assurance. They want not just assurance about little things, but assurance from some ultimate rock on which to stand. This rock would be the ultimate commitment that unifies a person's life. We are designed so that God will be this rock, this ultimate commitment.[1] God designed us in order that we might be committed to him, to "love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deut. 6:5).

When we forsake the true God, we make commitments to ultimates that become substitutes for the true God. In other words, we commit ourselves to counterfeits. We worship them. Worship is an expression of ultimate commitment. The Greeks had their gods whom they worshiped. Modern people may worship money, or sex, or power.[2]

Whatever is ultimate cannot, in the very nature of the case, be weighed against some criterion that would be still *more* ultimate. If God is ultimate, he is the standard for testing truth, both in matters of religion and in everywhere else. When we rebel against God, we still must wrestle with issues of truth and certainty. We get nowhere without *some* criteria. The best criteria derive from the most ultimate allegiance. So the allegiance itself remains unquestioned. People then become gullible in the standards that they use to sift truth and to sift evidence *with respect to* their ultimate commitment.

If the Greek god Zeus is ultimate, the Greeks as human beings have no right to doubt him or to bring objections against him. Zeus gets a kind of "free ride" in comparison to the normal ways that Greeks might use to sift evidence in lesser issues.

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[1]My reflections have ties at this point with what Cornelius Van Til has called "presuppositions" and what John Frame has called "basic commitments." See Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1963), esp. 179–80. The expression "basic commitments" or "ultimate commitment" indicates more clearly than "presuppositions" the fact that the commitments are not always conscious.

[2]Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Dutton, 2009).

An ultimate commitment of the wrong kind can easily corrupt truth. Some religions have explicitly allowed their adherents to lie whenever a lie would promote their religion. The religion, as ultimate commitment, takes precedence over normal standards for telling the truth. Even when a religion does not say so explicitly, lying becomes a temptation to those who care deeply about their religion. What does a little lie matter when the cause is right—the cause of promoting what the individual thinks is the true religion? And what about bending or concealing truth? For example, high-ranking officials among the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses have tried to bury uncomfortable facts about failed prophecies that came from the lips of their authorities of past generations.[3]

Money as an Example of Ultimate Commitment

Or consider the modern person who worships money. Let us say that he is a successful businessman. He pours his life into making his business successful because, in a sense, that *is* his life, driven by greed for more and more money, and more and more success. With this goal in mind, he may be very critical and careful and sound in the way he inspects and evaluates the processes and products and sales within his business. He is not at all gullible. He will not be taken in by a vendor who makes glowing promises but has a reputation for not delivering the goods. He is a very sensible businessman because he is committed to sensibility for the sake of a larger goal, the worship of money. Money is his ultimate commitment.

But does he ever ask himself whether his ultimate commitment is worth it? Does he ask himself whether money is a *worthy* object of worship, and how he came to have the devotion that he now holds? Probably not.

If our businessman began to ask too many uncomfortable questions of this sort, he would already show that he was setting sail and shifting his ultimate commitments. Typically, people only wake up to this sort of question when their false god is already failing them so obviously that they can no longer ignore it. The stock market crashes, and the man's business crashes with it. Or his wife is fed up with his workaholism and files for divorce. Or his teenage son gets into trouble with drugs, and his wife accuses him of not being there for his son. Or he achieves so much success that he realizes he ought to be satisfied and yet is not. Money does not actually give deep satisfaction

[3]Robert Morey, *How to Answer a Jehovah's Witness* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany Fellowship, 1980); Morey, *How to Answer a Mormon: Practical Guidelines for What to Expect and What to Reply When the Mormons Come to Your Door* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1983).

in his heart. Until questionings of this kind arise, a person who worships money can be gullible about his ultimate commitment.

Did the same sort of gullibility arise with the ultimate commitments of people in the ancient world? What about the people who worshiped the gods of ancient Greece or ancient Babylon? Of course they too may have fallen into gullibility. It is in the nature of things; it is in the nature of human beings as finite creatures who have the capacity for personal commitment. Ultimate commitments are, after all, ultimate.

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The Nature of Ultimate Commitments

Ultimate commitments are peculiarly dangerous. The *wrong* ultimate commitment represents a trap from which it is difficult to escape. In fact, according to the Bible it is impossible for an unaided human being to escape in order to return to God. Jesus says this with regard to money.

> Jesus, seeing that he [a rich man who turned down the invitation to give up his wealth and follow Jesus] had become sad, said, "How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." Those who heard it said, "Then who can be saved?" But he said, "What is *impossible* with men is possible with God." (Luke 18:24–27)

Commitment to wealth is only one possible barrier. We all erect barriers of our own. And the last, most fundamental barrier is the barrier of *self*. In the deepest analysis, we are worshiping ourselves instead of God. Even the devotee who worships Ares, the god of war, serves Ares because he himself, the devotee, hopes to be great in war by using Ares for his own advantage. The businessman who worships money also worships himself. Money is only a means for satisfying himself. This worship of self goes together with *pride*. Pride is the attitude of caring for oneself above everything else; it is the attitude of the worshiper of self.

We do not deliver ourselves from this trap. God must deliver us. He does it through Christ. That is why we are described as being "dead in the trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1), not merely wounded or disfigured or disabled.

Perspectives from Ethics

We can describe the dilemma of false religion from the standpoint of ethics. Let us use the triad of ethical perspectives developed by John Frame.[1] Frame offers us three interlocking perspectives on ethical matters: the existential perspective, the situational perspective, and the normative perspective. The existential perspective can also be called the personal perspective, in order to distinguish it from secular forms of existentialist ethics (of, for example, Jean-Paul Sartre).

The existential perspective focuses on ourselves and our attitudes and motives. The situational perspective focuses on the situation, including the people around us, their needs, the opportunities, and God himself as the most important person in our situation. We ask how we may serve the glory of God in our situation. The normative perspective focuses on norms, the moral standards for our attitudes, our thoughts, and our behavior. The Ten Commandments give a summary of God's moral standards.

If we are followers of Christ, our goal should be to bring glory to Christ (chaps. 27, 33). This goal is at the heart of the situational perspective. The goal goes together with an attitude of love for Christ and a renunciation of human pride. These attitudes belong to the existential perspective. The goal also goes together with submission to Christ's norms, namely, the word of God, which is found in the Bible. This focus on norms constitutes the normative perspective.

If we do not have the right goal, we have some other, competing goal. This competing goal is a counterfeit ultimate commitment. And it has implications for attitudes. In our attitude we attach ourselves, in loyalty and love, to our ultimate commitment. So false religion corrupts us in the existential perspective. We try to gain significance and personal peace from our relation to a false god, whether money or Aphrodite.

False religion also corrupts our situational perspective. If we make an ultimate commitment to Ares as the god of war or to the supposed spiritual power of crystals, we try to change our situation by using Ares or crystals. We hope that our "god" can improve our situation. It can give us what we want.

[1]John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008); a shorter introduction is found in Frame, *Perspectives on the Word of God: An Introduction to Christian Ethics* (1990; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999).

Finally, false religion corrupts us in the normative perspective. Since our ultimate commitment is unchallengeable, we make it the test or norm for everything else. We become gullible about whether false religion is really true. If we worship money, we never ask the crucial test question as to whether money is worthy of our allegiance or whether the promises we hear about it are actually true.

A counterfeit ultimate commitment corrupts judgment in all three aspects: the existential, the situational, and the normative aspect. In all three spheres—in personal feelings, in the situation, and in norms for evaluation—it produces gullibility. The result is a triple, deadly gullibility.

Counterfeits, by necessity, remain close to the truth. They ape the truth, or they would cease to be attractive. Consequently, all false religions are counterfeits of the true religion. And they all show similarities. If you do not already know God in a true way, religions can in some ways all look the same. It is no wonder that Sue and Donald, in chapter 1, both tried to treat all religions in the same way. Sue adopted a uniformly accepting position toward all religions, while Donald adopted a uniformly rejecting position.

The historical-critical tradition relies directly on this similarity among religions when it develops an account of Mount Sinai. It treats the account in Exodus 19–20 with the same skepticism that it would bring to any other religious document. It appeals to the gullibility factor in order to explain how an account like this could be produced and claim to be true, yet be a pious fraud. Given the assumptions made by historical criticism, such an account has superficial plausibility. But historical criticism typically does not critically examine its own foundational assumptions. Those foundations can themselves become a part of an ultimate commitment that is accepted gullibly.

Compromise

I have painted this picture of gullibility in black-and-white colors, with stark contrasts between true and false allegiances. But in real life we meet compromises. We mix goals and find ourselves with ambiguous, confusing lives. Both Christians and non-Christians live with mixed goals. Christians on earth are not perfect, sinless followers of Christ, but fall away into sins, some subtle, some gross. Non-Christians are still made in the image of God and still live in God's world, with consciences that reflect God's moral standards. And God through common grace holds them back from being as bad as they might be. They know at some level that they need God; but simultaneously they rebel and flee God and grab onto substitutes—counterfeits.

Materialism as a Counterfeit

Materialist analysis of religious gullibility still *seems* to many people so plausible. People are gullible about spirituality. So it *seems* reasonable to think that the Bible is the product of this same gullibility.

It is helpful to realize that when anyone evaluates religions, he must have criteria for evaluation. And the criteria must in some sense be more ultimate for him *in practice* than the religions that he is evaluating. The most ultimate criterion is probably himself, his own sense of reasonableness. He still has an ultimate commitment. He cannot get on in life without one. His ultimate commitment is to himself as ultimate. That commitment has been labeled *autonomy*. It is a strong tradition in the Western world, at the very least since the Enlightenment. During the Enlightenment "reasonable" people undertook to free themselves from the "yoke" of religion and tradition and to think *for themselves*. One can see predecessors to the Enlightenment in people like Socrates and Plato.[2] In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as we have seen, this desire for autonomy, the rule of the self by the self, and the alleged infinite freedom that might go with it have been overlaid by materialism or impersonalism.

The same questions about gullibility come up when we look at materialism from each of the three perspectives on ethics. First, consider the existential perspective. What existential desire lies behind materialist philosophy? The desire for autonomy. If God is eliminated or irrelevant, each of us can be in control himself. We desire to worship and serve ourselves. This desire is a counterfeit of the created desire to have on one's side the infinite autonomy of God, and to imitate God, who is autonomous. Strong desire pushes us to grab commitments that we would otherwise inspect critically.

Second, consider the situational perspective. Materialist philosophy offers us the promise that we can control the world by understanding it from the bottom up, beginning with matter and motion. We can control it for practical benefit through technology. We can control it intellectually. The devotees of materialism think that their materialist account is doing a good job intellectually. It is yielding fruit.

Materialists conveniently ignore evidence that does not fit, just as the person who consults fortune-tellers ignores the cases where the alleged fortune does not pan out. Materialists think of themselves as being scientific and rational and committed to weighing evidence in a scientific manner. And within the sphere of science, they may indeed be that way. But they do not weigh the

[2]The idea of autonomy actually began with the serpent's temptation to Eve in the garden of Eden (Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009], chap. 14).

evidence when they look at the resurrection of Christ. They think they know beforehand that it did not take place, because their ultimate commitment tells them so. Moreover, they overlook a counterevidence that is right before their eyes in the very heart of science. Scientific laws are not material. The matter and energy and motion that the scientist investigates are "material," in the sense in which we have been using the term. But the laws *governing* matter and energy and motion are not. Thus, science itself has shown us over and over again that materialism is disconfirmed. It takes a kind of religiously empowered gullibility to overlook a counterevidence of that magnitude.

Third, consider the normative perspective. Materialists would usually say that they use scientific criteria in sifting truth claims. But those criteria cannot be used to justify science itself. That would be circular. The materialist also has no support when he moves from a focus on the material to the conclusion that the material level is all there is.

Where Do We Stand?

Where does that leave us? There is no escape from ultimate commitments. If a person—call him Don—tries to escape all commitments, it is because he is already committed to himself. He resists any outside commitment because commitment is in competition with his freedom, which he values because of his commitment to himself as ultimate. Don worships *autonomy*. And one aspect of that commitment is a desire to conceal from himself the arbitrariness and folly of that commitment. It must remain unquestioned and without critical analysis because it is ultimate. Any counterevidence has to be ignored. And there *is* counterevidence.

Existentially, autonomy is not satisfying. Don needs love and connections with human beings, and those connections require a surrender of the purity of his autonomy. With respect to the situational dimension, autonomy does not work. Don has before him, in the history of his past life, countless evidences that in the most fundamental matters he is not competent to run his own life.[3] In the area of norms, for Don to have himself as a norm for himself is utterly empty. It is little more than a commitment to live without any real norms, but only to conceal his lawlessness, the lawlessness of saying that he will do what he likes.

The bad news is that we are all like Don. The good news is that God sent Jesus Christ to save us from this disaster and this prison. Despite the claims of the historical-critical tradition and modern materialism, the Bible is unique because the God of the Bible is unique. And what he did for us is unique, partly because we deserved only the opposite.

[3]I owe this observation to a sermon from Timothy Keller.

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Why Are We So Gullible?

Why are we so gullible? Why do ultimate commitments makes us so prone to disaster?

Accusing the Designer

Human beings are puzzling; of that there is no doubt. But the question about gullibility can be asked not only in a tone of puzzlement, but also in a tone of accusation. If there is a God, why did he make us this way? Surely he could have done a better job.

These questions lead in more than one direction. In one direction lies the question of whether God did create us the way we are now. According to the Bible, the answer is no. God made human beings so that they were naturally in communion with him and received with pleasure instructions and communication from him. He had fellowship with them, and he spoke to them to give them direction in life. That is the way we were made. In that situation, our commitment to God himself would anchor our lives, and God himself would be the rock on which we would stand and the one who would provide the stability.

Instead, our first parents rebelled against God, and ever since we have been in a state of rebellion. Rebellion implies alienation on our side. Some of us may *say* that we are seeking God, but another part of us resists submitting to him because we *want* independence. We want autonomy. When we accuse God, it is actually a symptom of our twisted desire. We wish we could be

stable and sound and reasonable and intellectually healthy *on our own*. Our failures to make autonomy work frustrate our desire, and we accuse God for not allowing us to follow our own way. But it is the way of death, because it cuts itself off from God, who is the source of true life.

Distorting What Is Good

In another direction, we might ask what can be learned from this gullibility in ultimate commitments. It is a deep failing in human beings. But a deep failing may be a distortion of a deep aspect of human nature as it was meant to be.

We were made in the image of God, and we have a capacity for personal fellowship with God. Our capacity for fellowship and for worship is a deep aspect of who we are. Rebellion against God is therefore a deep distortion. But in the midst of distortion we retain the impulse to worship and the capacity for commitment in depth.

God is one. Each one of us, made in the image of God, has deep internal unity. If someone distorts the deep aspect of ultimate commitment, his unity still remains, but this unity implies the distortion of the whole. It implies the distortion of existential, situational, and normative aspects in our ethics, our behavior, and our hearts. The corruption of what is deeply good produces what is deeply bad.

We have our true foundation in God. God in his goodness is himself our ethical norm. God in his rule over the world presides over our situation. God in creating us made our inmost being and our existential aspect. God as one God holds together the three aspects—normative, situational, and existential. Replacing God with a substitute produces distortions in all three. God in his sovereignty gives rebels over to distortions and their consequences as part of his judgment against sin (Rom. 1:18–32).

Distortions in Different Areas of Study

We can see how distortions corrupt not only individuals, but human relationships and whole societies. They corrupt how we understand ourselves. And, in spite of the efforts toward scientific objectivity in the modern world, science cannot cure corruption in the heart, namely, the desire for autonomy, which nowadays manifests itself in many ways, including an atmosphere of *impersonalism*.

Impersonalism corrupts sociology and social anthropology and the study of history, which together would claim to offer us godless ways of understanding our situations (a situational perspective). Impersonalism corrupts psychology, which would claim to offer a godless understanding of our

persons (an existential perspective). Impersonalism corrupts our thinking about language, reasoning, and logic, which would fabricate materials for a normative perspective.

The perspectives do not vanish just because our desires corrupt them. They remain, but with a gullibility factor, particularly where our ultimate commitments come most directly into play.

Causes of Gullibility

In this world many influences contribute to our gullibility. We can explore three levels of causation: human cause, divine cause, and demonic cause. Each is real.

Human causes are the focus for modern sociology and psychology. And their observations have a measure of truth. Our social nature means that we as human beings tend to follow the crowd when it comes to ultimate commitments. A society with one dominant religion tends to pass on that religion to the next generation. Likewise, a society committed to impersonalism or autonomy tends to pass on its commitments. This passing on involves human causation. We are also led along by the desires of our hearts, according to the existential perspective.

God also acts in this world in reference to human gullibility. He is holy, and he acts to judge human pride (chap. 32). Gullibility is a judgment on the pride that always enters into the desire for autonomy.

Demons are active in deceiving. The counterfeit gods and the counterfeits of materialistic thinking are close enough to the truth to lure people into false ultimate commitments. These are forms of false worship, and they occur not only when people worship personal spirits but also when they give ultimate commitment to money or materialism or self. Demons work on their minds to trap them with counterfeit offers (chap. 29).

The Light

The picture formed by these three levels of causation presents us with gloom and doom. But God still rules the world. The counterfeits never give true satisfaction. Christ has defeated the demonic forces of evil (Col. 2:15). And Christ is the great physician. Today he is still in the business of healing human beings sick with sin.

PART TEN

CONCLUSION

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Scripture and Worldviews

We have now considered several areas where mainstream modern thinking collides with the Bible. The collision arises largely from differences in worldview. The differences are all the more important because worldviews have entanglements with our hearts. People with corrupt hearts, in rebellion against God, corrupt their view of the world. They pass corrupt worldviews to their children, who absorb them because they too have corrupt hearts to which corrupt worldviews appeal. It is the ultimate vicious cycle.

A Reminder about Worldviews

Let us remind ourselves once again of the basic issue about worldviews. The Bible teaches that God not only created the whole world but is continually active in sustaining it. "You [God] cause the grass to grow for the livestock" (Ps. 104:14). God's activity encompasses the subhuman world, the world of animals and plants and casting lots.

> The lot is cast into the lap,
> but its every decision is from the Lord. (Prov. 16:33)

God also governs the human world of history, language, society, and cognition.

> Commit your work to the Lord,
> and your plans will be established. (Prov. 16:3)

> He who finds a wife finds a good thing
> and obtains favor from the LORD. (Prov. 18:22)

God is faithful and consistent in his purposes, and so we enjoy many regularities in nature and in society. God is also personal and personally cares for every human being whom he has created. Hence, we are not trapped in a mechanism.

By contrast, popular thinking in the modern world regards God as essentially absent or irrelevant, if he exists at all. Modern thinking says that the natural world and the human world run along more or less by themselves. Though natural science experienced early development through Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, Newton, and others within the context of a worldview influenced by the Christian faith, later developments in science drifted away from this worldview. The natural world came to be viewed as mechanical, and the laws of nature as impersonal laws.

The growth of social sciences has tended to extend the same viewpoint to the human world. According to this view, history, language, society, culture, and cognition operate according to impersonal laws or regularities. This view becomes more enticing because it is seldom debated. The background of this viewpoint is simply part of how modern life operates, particularly the intellectual life of the universities. The intellectual life has a long-range influence on mass media presentations, on the policies and curricula of elementary and secondary schools, and on the policies of large organizations that have to operate within a society in which this view predominates. Intellectual life is also reinforced by the pragmatics of social interaction. The idea that God is absent seems to promise that society can function smoothly among adherents to various religious viewpoints, because these viewpoints are declared to be irrelevant to the main areas where we must function together—in business, in economic exchange, in education, in government, in entertainment, in the arts.

Given the many cultural influences in this direction, it is understandable that people would approach the Bible with these assumptions in mind. But the assumptions are flawed.

The Formidable Character of Modernity

The growth of social sciences offers potential for understanding the Bible more accurately because the Bible interacts with human nature in a host of ways: historical, linguistic, sociological, and psychological. But a dependence on social sciences also produces dangers of misreading the Bible. The dangers grow as the social sciences gain influence, even outside the area of

narrow academic specializations. And these sciences, one and all, tend to assume that God is absent. As the influence of social sciences grows, the assumption gets carried more consistently and more relentlessly into the study of the Bible. Rigorous biblical scholarship should use whatever tools modernity provides, should it not? That is the logic of modernity. And the application of those tools leads naturally to people feeling that the Bible is a merely human book, and that past generations have naively accepted its message because they did not have our modern sophistication and insight.

The Bible is clearly human, people will assert. It is written in human languages and addressed to people who live in human cultures. Yes, but that depends on what we mean by humanity, language, and culture. The nature of humanity is itself being weighed in the process. If humanity is what modern sciences say in their secularized moments, we necessarily live in the closed systems of matter and motion, of history, language, society, and psychology. But as we have observed, such pictures of closed systems belong to a worldview—one that misunderstands God. In misunderstanding God, modernity also misconstrues humanity. Humans in fact live in the presence of God, created by God, sustained by God.

The perception of the Bible as merely human is of course the product of a circular argument. The assumption of the absence of God, at the foundation of modern intellectual thinking, has led to the conclusion that God is essentially absent in the composition of the Bible as a particular social and linguistic product. But the conclusion about God's absence does not *seem* to be circular, because the assumptions of modernity have penetrated many academic fields, much of modern media, and the thinking of many individuals and institutions. Each of these areas supports the assumptions of the others, like a house of cards.

If modernist assumptions are challenged at any one point, the rest of the set of social assumptions comes in to support the one assumption being challenged. Social sciences might observe that they operate in the way they do because the natural sciences operate that way. Both social and natural sciences operate that way because they achieve impressive insights by so doing. The assumptions are confirmed by the results. People in this situation are not aware that they can be achieving results as a blessing of God's common grace, even though their foundational assumptions have gone astray.

Illusion

In short, the inhabitants of modern cultures—what the Bible calls "the world"—think that the Bible is merely human. To many, this view seems

"obvious." And yet it is a gigantic social illusion. We are corporately, as a whole society, captive to a counterfeit. The counterfeit is the idea of impersonal instead of personal laws, impersonal instead of personal divine governance of the universe. That substitution of the impersonal for the personal conforms to the description of Romans 1:18–25. It is a form of idolatry. It is false religion. But as a society we have found a way of concealing from ourselves its religious roots. It does not seem to be religious, but merely noncommittal.

People captivated by this illusion can still offer remarkable insights and remarkable triumphs in knowledge, especially in the natural sciences. Why? Scientific investigation still "works" because when it holds to an idea of impersonal laws, it still mimics the truth that God rules the world by his *personal* law. Scientists may borrow enough of the truth to succeed in many cases.

Modernity Redefining Scripture

As a result of our modern atmosphere, many people are tempted to regard the Bible as one more book on religion. In their judgment it is merely human, and so they pay no attention to it. But other people may still be attracted to its message. So they may try to find a way not to give it up completely, but to make it fit in with what our modern society and our modern scientific results allegedly "know" about the world.

A person can subject the Bible to his modern assumptions by postulating a god who acts indirectly. This person assumes that human action is closed off from God. So he postulates—contrary to the Bible's own claims—that the Bible must be language-bound and error-prone in the same ways as other human products. But a god can still meet people mystically and personally in the depths of their being when the Bible is read, because this so-called god somehow comes to people in the depths of their being. This meeting with god must be related in a paradoxical manner to scientific analysis of history, language, and society, because in those public realms no god can be allowed to appear.

A person who holds this view may also argue that such a god is pleased with humanity as we moderns now understand it. Human beings live their lives in history, in language, and in society because this is the way this god made it, and he cooperates with what he has made. Allegedly he has no wish to appear or speak directly, but only through the indirect media of history, language, and society as modern sciences have analyzed them.

A person may travel by this means through a series of steps until he reaches a position similar to neoorthodox theology. He need not ever have heard of classic neoorthodoxy. It does not matter. Neoorthodoxy makes a

good fit to modernity because it need not break with the assumptions of modernity, but is in fact in harmony with them. It adds a god as an extra dimension, while leaving essentially unchanged the results of secular historical, linguistic, and sociological analysis. Meeting with a god is defined as personal and mystical, beyond normal categories of understanding. So modernity is safe. Divine meeting allegedly takes place through a Bible that is human in the modern sense. The merely human Bible becomes a channel for the mystical divine meeting.

This approach has many attractions, culturally speaking. Its main difficulty is that it must remake God and the Bible after its own conceptions.[1] Since those conceptions have no firm basis, the whole project offers only a man-made god.

Modernity Redefining Christ

Modernity, as I have described it, invokes a worldview. Everything has to fit into the world as modern people conceive it. The process of fitting the Bible into the modern world does not logically stop with the Bible. It has an effect on our conception of Jesus of Nazareth. The Bible itself indicates that Jesus was fully human (Heb. 2:14, 17; 4:15). The records in the Gospels confirm his human nature in detail. He is also fully God (John 1:1; 20:28; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16; 2:9). How it is so—how he is both divine and human—is ultimately a mystery. He is unique; there are no parallels. But his human nature is in harmony with the fact that human beings were originally created in the image of God, and therefore in the image of God the Son, who is the unique "image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15). Human beings were created with the capacity for deep personal fellowship with God, in imitation of the fellowship between the persons of the Trinity.

If we step away from a biblical worldview and into a modern worldview, neither the deity of Christ nor his humanity stays the same. Jesus's humanity does not stay the same because modernity redefines humanity using its assumptions that God is absent and law is impersonal. The reasoning works as follows: According to modernity, Jesus, to be human, must live in the closed space of history, language, society, and psychology, all governed by impersonal law. Within this space, no transcendent revelation occurs directly. So Jesus himself cannot directly reveal God when he speaks and acts. Jesus's words and teachings in principle are subject to the same human limitations as belong to all merely human words and teachings. He is also

[1]See critique in John M. Frame, "God and Biblical Language: Transcendence and Immanence," in *God's Inerrant Word*, ed. John Warwick Montgomery (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany Fellowship, 1974), 159–77.

a prisoner of his culture, subject to its moral and intellectual limitations. According to this view, he is not free himself, and he is no longer really the Savior who can free others. If a god is revealed at all, he must be revealed indirectly, through paradox.

People who take this view may also say that anyone who rejects their conclusions has a "docetic" view of Jesus, a view that denies his full humanity. They can say this because for them "humanity" *means* humanity within a closed system of language and culture. Given their assumptions about "humanity," their conclusion follows. We get nowhere unless we challenge the underlying assumptions.

It follows also from the premises of modernity that Jesus cannot really be the Word through whom everything was created (John 1:1–3) and who "upholds the universe by the word of his power" (Heb. 1:3). He cannot be because the role that the Bible assigns to him has already been assigned by modernity to impersonal law. God, if there is a god, is therefore inaccessible, behind the impersonal barrier of law.

People may, nevertheless, try to come up with some religious substitute for biblical Christianity. For example, they may postulate that Jesus is a channel through which we meet a god because he himself has first of all met a god. This kind of conception is radically different from the testimony in the New Testament itself. But a modern person can reject the testimony of the New Testament by claiming that at this point it shows its cultural limitations. It expresses something innately inexpressible in forms that were possible in its cultural environment.

The upshot of the entire sequence of reasoning is that Jesus cannot be absolute Master or absolute Lord, to whom we submit unconditionally. And without this submission, we are not his disciples, nor can we be saved from intellectual darkness, because Jesus too, as fully human, must be captive to the darkness of his time.[2] A person with these kinds of ideas is really showing that he has confidence in himself and in the superiority of his own ideas. He proposes to be his own savior and lord. He is operating according to the principle of autonomy.

I reject this whole train of reasoning because I reject its starting point: the assumptions of modernity as a worldview. I write as I do to indicate that much is at stake in the acceptance or rejection of its assumptions. Foundational presuppositions make a big difference in who we think Jesus is, how he can help us, and what he requires of us.

[2]See Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 457–59, who already saw how rejection of Scripture leads to rejection of Christ and to embracing alternative proposals for salvation.

The Faithful

Many people in this modern world continue to trust in Christ and read their Bibles in a believing way, in spite of the pressures around them. Many of them are not philosophical reasoners. They may not be intellectually brilliant. They have come to know Christ. They trust him because they know him personally. Christ teaches them through the Holy Spirit, and they grow in discernment. They come to distrust much of what claims to be knowledge in the mainstream culture around them, because it does not seem to help them in understanding the world in a biblically informed way. And some of what they hear from modern culture directly contradicts what they find in the Bible. They may end up rejecting a lot of modern culture, because once suspicion grows, they do not know where the falsehoods stop.

Many people in the mainstream then look at these exceptional faithful people as ignoramuses. Biblically based Christianity seems to the mainstream to be a threat to intellectual life. And some of the faithful have indeed become anti-intellectual. But one of the reasons is that intellectual life, as conceived in the modernist mode, conceals assumptions that deny the true God from the outset.

Going Forward

I have no quick solution to our cultural problem, because the central problem is rebellion against God in the heart. This rebellion leads to rejection of Christ and his ways. It may be that God in his mercy will open the eyes of multitudes of people, and they will come to know him in spite of the barriers erected by modern ideology. God can do it. No one can keep him out. Those of us who are Christians should be praying that he will open spiritually blind eyes.

But God might not act in this way immediately. Instead, Christian faith might for a while thrive primarily among those whom the world disdains, because the "knowledgeable" people of our cultures have too much at stake to give up, and too much temptation to conform to the life of the society around them. If so, it will not be the first time in history that God chose those whom the world counts foolish.

> But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. (1 Cor. 1:27–29)

The final issue for our aspiring intellectuals is still the issue of pride. Can you give up all the vaunted knowledge of our modern world and count it

as nothing in order to find rest in God, God whose wisdom exceeds your capacity? No, you cannot, nor can I. "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26). If by God's mercy we have come to know him through Christ, can we travel beyond the blanket rejection of modern ideas or blanket acceptance of them? Can we grow in God's wisdom through Christ in such a way that, with him as a foundation, we appropriate whatever genuine insights are found in modernity for the benefit of Christ's kingdom?

The task is important and is possible in principle because God is true, and all truth comes from him. On the other hand, it is fraught with peril because the differences between truth and its counterfeits may be subtle. And many people want to appear sophisticated and distinct from those whom the world despises for their faith.

Appendix

Human Authors of the Bible

What implications should we draw from the presence of human authors who wrote the various books of the Bible?[1]

Finiteness

No human author is infinite. His human conceptions will be finite, limited. He does not know God in the same way that God knows himself. We cannot require of him infinite precision in knowledge. In ordinary life we can see many illustrations of different degrees of precision. For example, a child seeing a rose for the first time may call it a flower. A knowledgeable adult may identify it as a grandiflora rose. The adult's identification is more precise. A specialist may become still more precise: the Scarlet Knight rose and the Honey Dijon rose are subvarieties of grandiflora rose. The specialist's and the adult's and the child's statements may all be completely true. And all allow room for some variation.

So what implications follow from the lack of infinite precision on the part of the human mind? Precision may become an artificial stumbling block in people's expectations about the Bible, partly because they have not absorbed the Bible's personalistic, God-centered worldview.

As we have stressed repeatedly, God is personal. His purposes are personal, not merely mechanical. No impersonal, mechanistic laws exist that would

[1]See also, e.g., D. A. Carson, "Recent Developments in the Doctrine of Scripture," in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 26–28.

constrain him or stand between him and his people. God's speech among the persons of the Trinity is personal. When God speaks to human beings, he speaks personally. The shape of his speech expresses the shape of his infinitely wise purposes. In wisdom his speeches take into account who we are (see chap. 21). It follows that we cannot require or even expect infinite precision in what we can grasp in the speeches that God makes to us, even if he speaks without a human intermediary, as he did at Mount Sinai (Ex. 20:18). God speaks truly, but he does not speak to us in such a way that we receive infinite knowledge. God has so made us and so made the world that we can receive truth without becoming infinite ourselves.

Let us consider an example. Mark 1:6 says that "John [the Baptist] was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist." That is true. That is actually how John dressed. If someone in those days had had a camera, or if someone had drawn a portrait that was preserved until today, we would have further confirmation that what Mark 1:6 says is in accord with how John dressed. If we are willing to believe what Mark 1:6 says, we have truth. We know some true facts about John. This is one of the ways in which we today talk about what is true, and it is one of the ways in which people talked about what was true in the time of the New Testament (see John 4:18, 37; 8:13; 3 John v. 12). I belabor the point because having truth does not imply that we have all truth about all things.

We can ask ourselves further questions about John. How wide and how long was the leather belt? If we are going to be "precise," we may want a measurement in millimeters or in tenths of an inch. We need also to know whether the belt was a millimeter or two wider at some points than at others. Give us exact dimensions. How thick was it? Did John wear more than one such belt? If so, what were the exact dimensions of each? Did John's camel-hair clothing have long sleeves? Did it go down to his ankles or only to his knees? How thick was it? How effective was it in keeping out the cold?

We do not have answers to these questions. We do not know everything about John, and we do not know everything about his clothing. That does not prevent us from accepting that he wore a leather belt and that we know some true things about what he wore. Truth is not to be equated with exhaustive precision.

If we cannot accept that, we probably are not accepting the Creator-creature distinction, which is a most fundamental part of the worldview given to us in the Bible. The Bible asks us to accept that God is infinite and we are not; yet we are still made in his image. God, having made us in his image, also made us in such a way that he could communicate to us, and communicate truly.

As we have observed, God spoke directly to the people from the top of Mount Sinai. God's word from Mount Sinai already had purposes in accord with the finite capacities of the people to whom he spoke. For example, in giving the Ten Commandments, God did not enter into every detail of what counts as theft or murder. His instruction to the people did not need to convey infinite precision in order for it to be true and to have binding authority.

When the people heard God's voice, they pleaded to have Moses as their mediator, and God granted their request (Ex. 20:19; Deut. 5:22–33). The texts in Deuteronomy explaining Moses as a mediator imply that God's word, that is, God's speech, did not cease to have the authority of Mount Sinai just because Moses came in. God appointed Moses so that he would pass God's words to the Israelites: "Go and say to them, 'Return to your tents.' But you [Moses], stand here by me, and I will tell you the whole commandment and the statutes and the rules that you shall teach them, that they may do them in the land that I am giving them to possess" (Deut. 5:30–31). No substantial change appears when God appoints Moses to convey his words to the people. The words that Moses passed to the people had God's authority, but did not convey exhaustive precision.

Humanity as Prone to Error

What other limitations belong to human beings, in addition to being finite? We need to consider the issue of verbal deviation from the truth. We know from the Bible as well as from our ordinary experience that sometimes people deliberately lie.

> Everyone utters lies to his neighbor;
> with flattering lips and a double heart they speak. (Ps. 12:2)

In addition, sometimes without wanting to lie they state something that is not true because they are misinformed or poorly informed.

On the other hand, people do have contact with the truth and often state what is true. Consider an example chosen at random: Sir Edward Maunde Thompson states, "Several papyri containing books, or fragments of books, of Homer's *Iliad* have been recovered. One of the best known is the 'Harris Homer' containing a large portion of book xviii."[2] Mr. Thompson did not need to know everything, and did not even need to know with absolute certainty about these particular papyri, in order for him to say something true.

[2]Sir Edward Maunde Thompson, *An Introduction to Greek and Latin Palaeography* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1912), 96.

We conclude that people are not always in error at every point in their speeches. Being prone to error means that it is quite possible for people to err. It does not mean that they always err, nor does it mean that they actually err at any one point in their speech. Two distinctions appear here, over which philosophers have spilled ink: the distinction between possibility and actuality, and the distinction between "sometimes" and "always." Both distinctions are valid and useful in the world that God has made and governs.

If we grant that Thompson told the truth about the Homer papyri, what follows? He could have said many other things that were true. He could have written a long discourse, all of which was true. How long could such a discourse have become? As long as we please. It is theoretically possible that at any moment throughout the discourse he could have made some erroneous claim or implied some untrue conclusion. But what is possible is not necessary.

What applies to Mr. Thompson applies to all human authors. We can therefore conclude that even if a particular book like Thompson's is a purely human product, it could still have no errors. It is possible.

People today are debating whether the Bible always speaks truly or sometimes speaks erroneously. The mere fact that the various books of the Bible were written by human beings does not decide the issue one way or the other. That fact, taken by itself, leaves open the question of which parts are truthful.

But the Bible, as we have seen (chap. 31), indicates that God had it written, that it is the word of God in written form. Since God always speaks the truth (Ps. 18:30; 119:142, 151) and never lies (Num. 23:19; Rom. 3:4; Titus 1:2), and since the Bible is what he says, the Bible always speaks the truth.

The human writers of the Bible always wrote the truth for two reasons in harmony with one another. First, since they were human beings, they had the possibility open to them of speaking the truth; they were under no innate constraint, belonging either to their humanity or to their fallenness, *necessarily* to lapse from the truth. Second, God wrote, using their abilities; and his superintendence of them as full persons, the involvement of the Holy Spirit both in them personally and in their writing, and God's commitment to the truth assure us that what was possible for them became actual. They wrote the truth and did not fall into error.

Then what do we do with difficulties in the Bible and apparent discrepancies? I would say that we deal with them in ways such as what I have attempted in this book. We try to exercise patience; we ask the Lord to help us to understand; we try to reckon with the fact that the world we live in is God's world, over which he rules personally. We also should trust that God is faithful, even in cases where we do not yet understand.

Alternative Approaches to the Bible

Some people do not agree. Some would say that the Bible is merely a human book, nothing more. Others might want to alter the expression "nothing more." They might say that the Bible is a human book, which falls short of truth in places—it is not the word of God. But it contains religious ideas or mystical channels or something special because in some indirect way God uses it from time to time as a medium through which we can meet him (chap. 36 discussed this alternative). But what do we in fact find out about God when we meet him? People with this kind of view balk at saying definitely what we can know about God. Maybe nothing. People might allow that we can have "personal communion" with God, but we do not know particular truths about him. These people might *say* that the Bible is the word of God. But for them that is a symbolic way of expressing something else, namely, that it is a pathway to some wordless spiritual communion. In reality, they are bypassing what the Bible actually says and using it superstitiously.

Still other people might say that the Bible contains errors and yet remains the word of God, because errors were inevitable if God condescended to communicate to us through human beings. But that kind of reasoning is faulty. The argument has fallaciously moved from the thesis that it is *possible* for human beings to err to the conclusion that they have *actually* erred in this particular case. It has moved from possibility to actuality. And it may also have neglected to distinguish between "sometimes" and "always." That people *sometimes may* err does not imply that they will *always* err when they write a book.

Other people might admit that in principle a whole book can be written without error, and yet they allege that God allowed human authors in the Bible sometimes to fall into error in what they wrote. Would these erroneous pieces still be the word of God? In spite of much ink spilled, discussions of this type frequently remain unclear. If God is speaking some of the errors, it compromises his truthfulness. If he is not, the errors are not really what God speaks. In this latter case the errors are not the word of God, except perhaps in some redefined, indirect, or confused sense.

These alternative routes do not work. When we follow the Bible's own view of God, we expect his speech through human agents to possess his truthfulness at every point.

The Sinfulness of Human Beings

Let us now consider briefly the effects of *sin* on human writings. Jesus Christ was without any sin (Heb. 4:15). But he is unique in this respect. All other

human beings since the time of Adam come into the world with a sinful nature. As they grow, they commit actual sins. And the sinfulness of their hearts affects the motives with which they speak or write. Hence human communication is contaminated by sin.

The human writers of biblical books were true servants of God. God had fundamentally worked in their hearts and converted them from rebellion against him to service for him. But in their lives and in their hearts they still fell short of absolute sinless perfection.

Ordinary human beings can still speak or write what is true, even if their motives are not absolutely sinless. Often we can understand what they say, and if we are aware of any imperfection in motive, we may in charity ignore it in order to concentrate on what they say, which in many cases will still be true. When God raises up human spokesmen to speak on his behalf, God's motives are perfectly pure. Human motives are not, but the foundational human motive for his servants is to point us to what God is saying. So the remaining sin within the human agent does not create difficulties at a practical level. God, as it were, bypasses the indwelling sin of the human author and reveals his own meaning without utterly abolishing the presence of sin within the heart of the human agent.

Sin, however, *is* sometimes a serious difficulty when it actually crops up and dominates a human utterance. People can utter slanders, lies, and blasphemies. These things are *possible*. But they are not *necessary*. The distinction between what is possible and what is necessary runs parallel to what we said about truth and error among human beings. Once again we should distinguish between possible and actual, between sometimes and always, between "might lie" and "must lie."

What Is the Difficulty?

Various people want to persuade us to give up the idea that what the Bible says is completely true. Quite a few of these people tell us that if we do not give that up, it is because we have not "taken seriously" the "humanity" of the Bible. I do not see how these arguments can ever achieve serious traction.

God controls what he writes and takes moral responsibility for what he writes—or he is not really the author. God by his sovereignty controls, in absolutely thorough detail (Psalm 139), the very constitution and activity of all human beings he has created. So when he uses human beings as his agents, and when he decides to speak through them, he has no hindrances to his truthful speech. I suspect that some people may stumble here because they

do not accept that kind of thorough control by God.[3] They would say that it makes human beings mere puppets, and that it nullifies human freedom. I believe that it does not, but I must leave that discussion to other places.[4] If we are to consider an argument based on the humanity of the Bible, we must ask what we have in mind by "humanity." The personalist worldview of the Bible contrasts with modern impersonalism at this point also.

Desires

I suspect that people have another reason motivating them, a reason that helps to explain why poorly formulated arguments about "humanity" can nevertheless be attractive. We all experience intellectual, moral, and spiritual tensions during this life. I have discussed a few of them within this book. Many of those tensions arise from sinful influences on the dominant modern worldview. But tensions do come from other sources. Some of the psalms show the personal struggles that people have when God does not answer prayers immediately and when the wicked triumph for a time (see, for example, Psalms 44 and 73). We do not know everything, and so we cannot supply a definitive answer to every hard question.

Within our own experience in this life, not all tensions are going to disappear. In the midst of finite knowledge, and in the midst of sins and spiritual

[3]Some modern discussions about the authority of the Bible have insinuated that some people who think the Bible is inerrant hold a "dictation" theory of inspiration. What does a dictation theory mean? According to the common meaning, a Bible produced by "dictation" would involve human secretaries who wrote down word by word what God dictated to them. Such a process or production would then imply that the human secretaries did not need to exercise any significant mental or spiritual ability and that they essentially had no active mental role. All that they needed to do was correctly recognize the words they heard and write them down correctly.

We can raise questions about this kind of claim. First, in a case of ordinary human communication, would dictation eliminate the possibility of human error? Suppose that a businesswoman Julie dictates word for word to her secretary Ellen. If Ellen is compliant, dictation eliminates the possibility that she will deliberately introduce an idea of her own, or that she will consciously and purposely change the character of the communication. But Ellen may still mishear a word, or write down a homonym, or have a lapse of attention and fail to include a word, or reverse the order of words. It is possible that Ellen's unwilling failures may be serious enough so that the result is botched and miscommunicates to its recipients. Dictation in and of itself does not eliminate such possibilities.

What would it take to eliminate the possibility of failure? It would take the involvement of someone who sets himself not to fail and also has the full capability of never failing when he sets himself to succeed. Those features are characteristic of God, but not of any mere human being. God's control is such that he succeeds, whatever means he uses. The means could in principle be dictation or could involve (as is usually the case in the Bible) using the full mental, emotional, and spiritual capabilities of human beings whom God has raised up for the task. Dictation—or any specific means—is essentially irrelevant to the question of truth and error. On the other hand, God's commitment to speak the truth, along with his full control over the product, is decisive.

[4]Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), chap. 13; Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), chaps. 5–6 and appendix J.

temptations in the mind, we may find some things in the Bible problematic. We then may look for an escape in dealing with the Bible's claims about itself. If we do not look too critically at the conception of humanity, an argument based on the humanity of the Bible can seem attractive. All the problematic pieces in the Bible can just get dumped under the label of "humanity."

But that is not really much of an answer if you believe, as I do, that the so-called problematic pieces, along with all the other pieces, express the voice of God. I prefer to counsel myself and others to trust that God knows what he is saying even when we do not yet grasp it.

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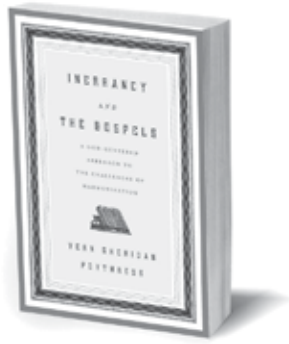

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VERN SHERIDAN POYTHRESS is professor of New Testament interpretation at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. He has six earned degrees, including a PhD from Harvard University and a ThD from the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa. Poythress is the author of eleven books on aspects of biblical interpretation and on science.

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