

The School of Christian Theology

Lesson 2

The Doctrine of Scripture: How Do We Know God?

Objective: To understand and rejoice in the fact that God is a revealing God. To distinguish the various types of revelation. To understand what kind of revelation God has given us in the Bible.

I. What Is God Like?

He is a transcendent God

God is spirit (Jn. 4:24) and is invisible (Col. 1:15), which means he is not accessible to our senses. John tells us that “no one has ever seen God” (Jn. 1:18), and Paul tells us that God is the one “who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see” (1 Tim. 6:16). We often summarize these things by saying that God is **transcendent**.

Genesis 1:1, In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.



Matthew 11:25-30, ²⁵ At that time Jesus declared, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; ²⁶ yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷ All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and **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.** ²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (See also 1 Cor. 2:11)

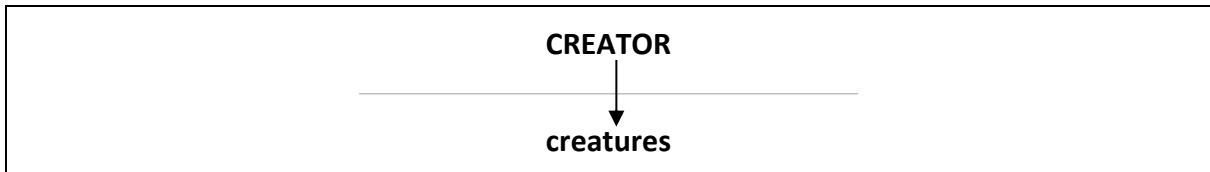
“If it is true that man can have knowledge of God then this fact presupposes that God on his part voluntarily chose to make himself known to man in some way or other. We cannot credit a knowledge of God to ourselves, to our own discovery, investigation, or reflection. If it were not given us by an act of free and unobliged favor, there would be no possibility that we could ever achieve it by exertion of our own efforts...Except he lets himself be found, we cannot seek him. Except he give himself, we cannot accept him.” – Herman Bavinck (1854-1921), *The Wonderful Works of God*

WCF 7.1, The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any

fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some **voluntary condescension on God's part**, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.

He is also an immanent God

He condescends in his actions, but he also condescends by revealing himself to us. He could remain hidden within himself, but instead he is a revealing God.



II. How Has God Chosen to Reveal Himself to Humanity?

- **General Revelation**

God reveals something of himself to everyone (i.e., *general* revelation). He does this through the physical world (Ps. 19:1-6; Rom. 1:19-20), his providential provision for all people (Acts 14:17), and the moral consciences of all people (Rom. 2:14-16). These things reveal the power, wisdom, and goodness of God. They also reveal something of what God expects of humans—to worship him (Rom. 1:21, 25) and obey his law (Rom. 2:15).

Romans 1:18-23, 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.

However, general revelation is not sufficient for salvation. Without special revelation there is no hope of salvation.

WCF 1.1, Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable; yet are they **not sufficient** to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is **necessary** unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers

manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing: which maketh the Holy Scripture to be **most necessary**; those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.

- **Special Revelation** (Ps. 19:7-14; Heb. 1:1-2; 1 Cor. 2:13-14; 1 Tim. 3:15-16)

Special revelation is God's self-disclosure concerning himself and his redemption. It is distinct from general revelation in that it is not given to everyone (i.e., special).

God's special revelation took on many different forms in biblical times—his perceivable presence to a human (theophany; Gen. 32; Ex. 3; 19), dreams (Gen. 28), visions (Is. 6), and casting lots (Num. 27:21; 1 Sam. 28:6). God's *actions* are also a form of special revelation, particularly his miraculous actions (Ex. 7-15; 1 Kgs. 18). But the way above all others that God has chosen to reveal himself is by *speaking*.

God is a speaking God

"Thus saith the LORD" appears about 1,900 times in Scripture. There are key moments in the Scriptures when it seems like what we *see* is dominating, but God very explicitly turns our attention to his *words* (Ex. 34:4-6; Matt. 17:5).

All of God's revelation—words and deeds—culminate in the incarnation of his Son.

John 1:14, 18, ¹⁴And 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... ¹⁸No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

Hebrews 1:1-2a, Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ²but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.

Those "many times and many ways" that God spoke to his people—including the incarnation, life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus—have been **written down**, "for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world." We call this written Word "the Scriptures" or "the Bible."

God has chosen to be a God who doesn't primarily reveal himself to us by feelings and impressions, or by inscrutable actions in the world (liver shivers, palm readings, the movements of the stars, etc.), but by *words*.

III. Which Words Are from God? The Question of Canon¹

WCF 1.2, Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the books of the Old and New Testaments, which are these... (the 39 Old Testament books and 27 New Testament books). All which are given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life.

WCF 1.3, The books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are no part of the **canon** of the Scripture, and therefore are of no **authority** in the church of God, nor to be any otherwise approved, or made use of, than other human writings.

WCF 1.4, The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.

WCF 1.5, We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the church to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture. And the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God: yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.

IV. What Is the Content of God's Revelation in the Bible?

WSC Q. 2. *What rule has God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him?*

A. The Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.

WSC Q. 3. *What do the Scriptures principally teach?*

A. The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.

V. What Kind of Bible Did God Give Us?

¹ For more on the formation of the canon and its reliability, see Michael Kruger's article: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-biblical-canon/> and his book, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origin and Authority of the New Testament Books* (Crossway, 2012).

God has chosen to speak to us in many different ways in the Bible itself—historical narrative, direct teaching, laws, poetry, songs, proverbs, parables, letters, and prophetic explanation, prediction, and promises.

The Bible is God’s inspired Word, and so it is inerrant and infallible. And as we look at what God says about the Bible in the Bible, he tells us that it is necessary, sufficient, perspicuous (i.e., clear), and authoritative. These are the classic attributes of Scripture.

VI. Verbal Plenary Inspiration

2 Timothy 3:15-17, “From childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God (θεοπνευστος; θεος + πνεω) and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”

2 Peter 1:19-21, And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, ²⁰ knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. ²¹ 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.

The words of Scripture are the very words of God (Heb. 3:7; Matt. 19:4-5). **Verbal plenary inspiration** specifically means that God superintended the writing of Scripture down to the very choice of words, not merely to overarching themes or concepts.

“The whole of Scripture and all its parts, down to the very words of the original, were given by divine inspiration.” – Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978), Article VI

Included in this understanding (as seen in 2 Pet. 1:21) is the fact that God used human authors to write the Scriptures. This is sometimes referred to as “concurative operation” and sometimes as “organic inspiration.” What is intended in both these terms is that God did not typically dictate his words to the human authors, but rather worked through their particular styles and life experiences. The text is truly the work of the human authors but is just as much God-breathed as a dictated Scripture would have been.

“It is with the traditional doctrine of the Reformed Churches, however, that we are concerned; and that we understand to be simply this: Inspiration is that extraordinary, supernatural influence (or, passively, the result of it,) exerted by the Holy Ghost on the writers of our Sacred Books, by which their words were rendered also the words of God, and, therefore, perfectly infallible.” – B.B. Warfield (1851-1921), “Inspiration and Criticism”

“[Inspiration is to be defined as] a supernatural, providential influence of God’s Holy Spirit upon the human authors which caused them to write what he wished to be written for the communication of revealed truth to others.” – J.I. Packer (1926-2020), *“Fundamentalism” and the Word of God*

VII. Inerrancy & Infallibility

These terms were the battle ground in 20th Century debates on the nature of Scripture, beginning with the writings of Benjamin B. Warfield (1851-1921), professor at Princeton Seminary, and culminating in the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, which was drafted by evangelicals such as R.C. Sproul, Francis Schaeffer, James Montgomery Boice, D. James Kennedy, J.I. Packer, and John MacArthur.

“The idea that the bible is ‘infallible’ means that it does not deceive. To say that the Bible is ‘inerrant’ is to make the additional claim that it does not assert any errors of fact: whether the Bible refers to events in the life of Christ, or to other details of history and geography, **what it asserts is true.**” – Timothy Ward (living), *Words of Life*, 130

“We affirm that Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit. We deny that Biblical infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious, or redemptive themes, exclusive of **assertions** in the fields of history and science.” – Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978), Article XII

“A... clarification about inerrancy is important. Belief in biblical inerrancy naturally takes account of a number of features of Scripture that flow from the fact that it is written in ordinary human language, using the everyday features of ordinary language. These include the use of round numbers and colloquial approximations; loose and free quotations (especially of Old Testament in the New); some unusual (and, strictly speaking, wrong) grammatical forms; and figures of speech such as metaphor, parable, hyperbole and so on. None of these features counts against the claim that Scripture does not err in everything it affirms. Rather it is by taking full account of these features that we shall be able to discern what in fact God is and is not **asserting** in Scripture.” – Timothy Ward, *Words of Life*, 133

“Many disagreements, even on the question of inerrancy, have turned on the **scope** of Scripture. It is beside the point to argue that the mustard seed is not the smallest seed known to botanists today. Jesus’ example was fit for its intended purpose and the scope of his parable (Mt 13:31-32). We have to attend to the point being made—noting what Jesus is doing with his words, not what we want to do with them, namely, to turn them into statements of botanical science that should be refuted or defended. Scripture is clear only to the extent that we recognize its **scope**, both in its parts and in its whole teaching... The scope of Scripture, then, is God’s commands and promises—law and gospel—centering on the unfolding plan of redemption in Jesus Christ. It is crucial to recognize this point, because we can easily turn the Bible into a ‘handbook for life,’ an answer book or manual of supernatural information on anything that interests us. When we go to the Bible with

our questions, demanding that it speak to whatever we find important or relevant, we force it to speak about things that it does not actually address... So we must allow Scripture itself to identify its **scope** and **purpose**. We come to Scripture with humility, allowing it to give us its own questions as well as answers.” – Michael Horton (1964-Present), *Pilgrim Theology*, 58, 60, 61

VIII. Attribute #1: Necessity

1. Knowledge of God is **necessary** because we were made for God

“Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” – WSC 1

“You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.” – Augustine (354-430 A.D.), *Confessions*, 1.1

2. God’s revelation is **necessary** because we cannot access God on our own (see section I above)
3. God’s special revelation is **necessary** because general revelation is not sufficient to give us knowledge of God’s salvation (see section II above)
4. Written Scripture is **necessary** because God has chosen to commit his special revelation in history to writing (i.e., he has ceased to reveal himself in the same way he did in former times)

WCF 1.1 (continued), ... and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing: which maketh the Holy Scripture to be **most necessary**; those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.

WCF 1.6, The whole counsel of God concerning all things **necessary** for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture...

IX. Attribute #2: Sufficiency

WCF 1.6, The whole counsel of God concerning **all things necessary** for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and that there are some

circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.

There is no revelation of God outside of the words of Scripture that is necessary “for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life” (WCF 1.6). God’s word is enough.

Sufficient for what?

- Baking a cake?
- Eating healthy?
- Raising children?
- Building a house?
- Leading a city council?

God’s glory, man’s salvation, faith and life.

“If you want to know what will ‘thoroughly equip’ you for salvation, for faith, or for life, you will find it in Scripture (2 Tim. 3:15-17). If you want to know what God considers essential for his own glory, you will find it in the Bible. In fact ‘the whole counsel [or plan] of God’ concerning all these necessary things is revealed in God’s Word.” – Chad Van Dixhoorn (1971-Present), *Confessing the Faith*, 16

However, the written record of God’s word is not sufficient for salvation without “the inward illumination of the Spirit of God” (WCF 1.6). Notice that this is not additional revelation, but a turning on of the light, to both understand and trust in the objective revelation of God in Scripture.

“It should be clearly noted here that the key issue at stake in the Protestant doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture is the nature of the Holy Spirit’s ongoing activity in relation to Scripture.” – Timothy Ward, *Words of Life*, 111

“There was no debate during the Reformation over the nature, authority, and inerrancy of Scripture. This was accepted on both sides. Differences turned on the sufficiency of Scripture—particularly the relationship between Scripture and tradition.” – Michael Horton, *Pilgrim Theology*, 65

The Confession says what it is arguing against in the area of sufficiency—the Holy Spirit speaking to the church outside of Scripture. “Nothing [i.e., no revelation] at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit [this was held by Anabaptists], or traditions of men [this was held by Roman Catholics]” (WCF 1.6).

“We are assailed by two sects, which seem to differ most widely from each other. For what similitude is there in appearance between the Pope and the Anabaptists? And yet, that you may see that Satan never transforms himself so cunningly, as not in some measure to

betray himself, the principal weapon with which they both assail us is the same. For when they boast extravagantly of the Spirit, the tendency certainly is to sink and bury the Word of God, that they may make room for their own falsehoods.” – John Calvin (1509-1564), “Reply to Cardinal Sadeleto”

X. Attribute #3: Perspicuity (i.e., clarity)

WCF 1.7, All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so **clearly propounded**, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

The Confession is arguing that Scripture is not fundamentally obscure, but clear and able to be understood. However, note the nuance. It is not equally clear in every part (2 Pt. 3:15-16). It is also not equally clear to every person. But please understand that the people who are able to understand Scripture better are not those infused with a secret knowledge or code, but those who make especially good use of the ordinary means, i.e., the learned (Acts 8:31; 17:11; Lk. 24:27). This must be held together with “the inward illumination of the Spirit of God” (WCF 1.6).

“Roman Catholics, ‘with the exaggeration that often accompanies an important insight’, tell us that we *need* the church to understand the Bible. Various cults tell us we need their literature. The truth is that while good guidance can be helpful in reading the Scriptures, the Scriptures themselves are clear in addressing every significant subject about which they speak. Therefore nothing must be more foundational than the Scriptures in our interpretation of them, and in our endeavor to establish doctrine.” – Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, 25

“The task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted **exclusively** to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ.” – Vatican II (1965), *Dei verbum*, II.10

“Behind the argument about the clarity of Scripture is an argument about whom Scripture belongs to and whether it is a means of control.” – John Goldingay, *Models for Scripture*, 345

Who has the ability and/or the authority to interpret the Scriptures?

- Follow up question: To what extent?

WCF 1.8, The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time of the writing of it, was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God, and, by his singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentic; so as, in all

controversies of religion, the church is finally to appeal unto them. But, because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God, **who have right unto, and interest in the Scriptures, and are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search them,** therefore they are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come, **that, the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship him in an acceptable manner; and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope.**

- Does it help to know Greek and Hebrew when studying Scripture? Yes.
- Does it help to have advanced understanding of syntax and grammatical constructions, like how different prepositional phrases function? Yes.
- Does it help to understand literary genres like poetry, irony, parable, etc.? Yes.
- Does it help to understand some of the historical context of Colossae when reading Paul's letter to the Colossians, or Ancient Near Eastern creation accounts when reading Genesis 1-3, or Canaanite religious practices when reading 1 & 2 Kings? Yes.
- Does it help to understand how the church has interpreted a particular passage throughout the ages? Yes.

- Are any of those things strictly necessary to understand the basic meaning of a passage of Scripture? No.

WCF 1.9, The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.

- In order to interpret a particular passage of Scripture correctly what is most important? Knowing what the rest of Scripture says.

XI. Attribute #4: Authority

WCF 1.10, The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.

XII. Excursus: Is Scripture the *only* authority? (Tradition 1, 2, and 0²)

Tradition 1—Tradition is a tool to aid in the faithful interpretation of Scripture. Scripture is to be interpreted in and by the church within the context of the *regula fidei* (rule of faith; the church’s summary of the basic message of Scripture, i.e., Apostles’ Creed), yet neither the church nor the rule of faith are considered second supplementary sources of revelation. Rather, Scripture remains the only source of infallible divine revelation.

Tradition 2—There are two distinct sources of divine revelation, Scripture and church tradition, with the latter being handed down either orally or through customary church practices.

Tradition 0—Scripture is not merely the only infallible authority but it is the only authority altogether. The true but subordinate authority of the church and the rule of faith are rejected altogether. According to this view, there is no real sense in which tradition has any authority. Instead, the individual believer requires nothing more than the Holy Spirit and the Bible.

*“Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And, I suppose I should add, it is traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name.” – Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (1984), 65*

*“Like it or not, we are heirs to this host of diverse and even contradictory witnesses. Some of their actions we may find revolting, and others inspiring. But all of them form part of our history. All of them, those whose actions we admire as well as those whose actions we despise, brought us to where we are now... When we read, for instance, that “the just shall live by faith,” Martin Luther is whispering at our ear how we are to interpret those words—and this is true even for those of us who have never even heard of Martin Luther. When we hear that “Christ died for our sins,” Anselm of Canterbury sits in the pew with us, even though we may not have the slightest idea who Anselm was. When we stand, sit, or kneel in church; when we sing a hymn, recite a creed (or refuse to recite one); when we build a church or preach a sermon, a part of which we may not be aware is one of the factors influencing our actions. The notion that we read the New Testament exactly as the early Christians did, without any weight of tradition coloring our interpretation, is an illusion. It is also a dangerous illusion, for it tends to make us so confident in our interpretation, that we begin to think of our interpretation as the Word of God.” – Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity, Vol. 1* (2010), 3*

² “Tradition 1 and 2” originally come from Heiko Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology* (1963). The inclusion of “Tradition 0” comes from Keith Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (2001). I came across all of these in *Words of Life*, Timothy Ward (2009). We will come back to this idea when we begin looking at Church History and how we relate to the church in Class 15, “The Story of the Church.”

Suggested Further Reading on the Doctrine of Scripture

Words of Life by Timothy Ward

Taking God at His Word by Kevin DeYoung

Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 1 by Herman Bavinck (or *Philosophy of Revelation*)

Readings for Next Class

Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 2

WLC 6-11; WSC 4-6

Horton, 73-88

Additional Readings for Next Class

“Whatever Happened to God?” By James M. Boice

“Reformed Confessions on the Doctrine of God”