

“GOSPEL” MEANS “GOOD NEWS”

A Four-Part Seminar on Reformed Theology

SESSION 2: SCRIPTURE

How Can We Know the Truth about God?

I. Understanding the Question

- A. The question “How can we know the truth about God?” has to do with the ultimate source of authority in the church
- B. Related questions:
 - 1. What is the supreme judge by which Christian beliefs are evaluated?
 - 2. How can I be certain that what I believe is true?
 - 3. Who is in charge?
 - 4. Who has the final say?

II. Other Ways of Answering the Question

- A. The church is the supreme authority
 - 1. In Roman Catholicism, the supreme authority resides in the infallible magisterium (the teaching role of the pope and the other bishops as the successors of Peter and the apostles), which purports to function as the infallible interpreter of Scripture and tradition¹
 - 2. However, if lineal succession did not guarantee sound doctrine in Israel, why should we think that it would be any different in the church?

John 8:39 They answered him, “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing the works Abraham did”

¹ See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraphs 85, 890-91.

Romans 2:28 For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical.

Romans 9:6 For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel

3. Also, Paul did not even view the office of apostle as infallible

Galatians 1:8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.

Galatians 2:11–14 But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

4. The only version of apostolic succession taught in the Bible is the succession of apostolic doctrine

Ephesians 2:19–20 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone

- B. Culture is the supreme authority

1. Some argue that the church needs to adapt its beliefs and practices to make them acceptable in the eyes of the surrounding culture

2. However, this is in direct conflict with the teaching of Scripture, which instructs us not to be conformed to the world

Romans 12:2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

C. The individual believer is the supreme authority

1. Says, 'I can decide what is true based upon whatever seems best to me' or 'I can interpret the Bible however I want to'
2. However, this results in each believer functioning as his own private pope
3. It is also indirect conflict with the teaching of Scripture, which warns us against those who make themselves the supreme authority for what they will believe

2 Timothy 4:3 For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions

III. **The Reformed Answer to the Question: Scripture is the Only Ultimate Authority**

- A. The Bible is the only source of divine revelation about the way of salvation

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 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, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. 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.

- B. The Bible itself warns us against setting aside the written commandments of God for the sake of the oral traditions of men

Deuteronomy 4:2 You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you.

Mark 7:8–9 "You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men." And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!"

Revelation 22:18–19 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.

- C. The sufficiency of Scripture (see Ephesians 2:20 on p. 2 above)
1. Because the church in the apostolic era did not have the full New Testament yet it needed new revelation to explain Christ's person and work
 2. There is no need for new revelation once the foundational, apostolic revelation about Christ and his work has been given in all its fullness
 3. "At first, the church's new 'canon' is the organism of God's Word being spoken and written by the apostles and prophets

(in addition to the Old Testament), and then, beyond the time of the apostles, the finalized, completed organism of the collection of twenty-seven books [of the New Testament].”²

4. “just as a foundation cannot be tampered with once it has been laid and the superstructure is being built upon it, so the New Testament foundation of the church is inviolable and cannot be changed by any additions, subtractions or modifications offered by teachers who claim to be apostles or prophets today. The church stands or falls by its loyal dependence on the foundation truths which God revealed to his apostles and prophets, and which are now preserved in the New Testament Scriptures.”³

D. The church and tradition have authority, but their authority is always subordinate to Scripture

1. The church’s ministry has been given by God to help Christians understand the Bible and to hold them accountable to what it teaches

Acts 20:28–32 Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

Hebrews 13:17 Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those

² Richard Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost*, 100.

³ John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, 107.

who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

2. The church is the servant of the Word; its authority is ministerial and declarative, not magisterial and legislative
3. The Bereans subjected the apostle Paul's teaching to Scripture

Acts 17:11 Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

4. Paul himself subjected his teaching to Scripture (see Galatians 1:8 on p. 2 above)

IV. The Bible is the Church's Lifeblood

- A. Faith is both created and nourished by the Word

Romans 10:13–14, 17 For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?... So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

1 Peter 1:23–2:2 you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever." And this word is the good news that was preached to you. So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation

- B. Jesus' sheep hear his voice when his Word is proclaimed

John 10:27 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.

- C. God's Word is to be publicly read and preached

1 Timothy 4:13 Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.

- D. God's Word is to be privately read, meditated upon, and applied

Psalms 1:1-3 Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.

- E. God's Word is powerful; it accomplishes the purposes for which it is sent

Isaiah 55:10-11 For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

- F. Robert Godfrey's reflections upon how the Bible was treated in the church he attended as a new Christian: "Our attitude was not that of those who stand over the Bible in judgment as to its truthfulness or as those who try to distinguish the Word of God from the word of men in the Bible. We believed that the whole Bible was true and completely reliable. We also came to the Bible expectantly. We knew that the Bible was profitable for God's people. We expected that as we studied, we would grow in grace and understanding of God's purpose for our lives."⁴

⁴ *An Unexpected Journey*, 33.