

Why the Written Word?

Did you know that there are right around 50 times in the NT where it is said that the things that happened to Jesus, happened in order that the “Scriptures be fulfilled”. At least 15 of them come from the writer of Matthew’s Gospel alone.

What’s the significance of that?

Well here in the 21st century West, we have a somewhat overblown view of the literary. We’ve accentuated the the literary almost to the exclusion of inspiration.

Like most things, this phenomenon contrast exists on a continuum. On one extreme end of the continuum is the idea that God only speaks to humankind through His inspired, completed, written Word. On the other end of the continuum is the idea that God speaks through His Spirit, directly to the human, and the written Word is not necessary.

As with all continua, the extreme ends are always wrong.

So let’s ask the question. “Why should we pay such attention to the Bible when making decisions about life, faith, conduct, etc?” Here’s the short answer; because Jesus did... and whenever a man gets up from out of the ground and says something, after having been pronounced dead, I’m paying attention to Him!

The accounts of Jesus’ life tell us that He quoted Scripture all the time. Not only did He quote it, but He lent veracity to it by doing so. Additionally, before He left this world for His “natural” one as God, He set the precedent for the use of Scripture for all faith and practice.

So, while the GodMan Jesus said that He’d send us “another comforter”, the Holy Spirit who would “*guide you [us] into all Truth*” (John 16:13), He also instructed the use of the Scriptures, as we will discuss.

The Precedent

In the Lukan account of the resurrection of Jesus, we have unquestionable support for why the Christian Church reveres and follows the Scriptures, and it comes from Jesus Himself.

Most of us are familiar with the story in Luke chapter 24 of the two travelers who set out on the road to Emmaus, on the first day of the week after Christ was crucified. You’ll remember that Jesus caught up with them as they walked, and engaged them in a rather noteworthy conversation. First though, let’s see who these two people are.

Notice that no matter which Bible translation you read, in verse 13 of Luke chapter 24, the two travelers are referred to as “*two of them*”. The inquiring mind asks, “Two of whom?”.

This is a direct reference back to verse 9 of chapter 24, where we are told that the women who discovered the empty tomb and heard of Christ’s resurrection from the “*two... shining...*” angels,

returned from the empty tomb in order to “... *report[ed] all these things to the eleven and the rest*”.

Our two travelers were of “the rest”. They were disciples; followers of Jesus. No doubt they were in the same condition as “the rest”; crestfallen, downcast, disappointed. They’d been there to hear the report of the empty tomb from the women, and perhaps to hear of Peter’s and John’s findings after they had run to the tomb, only to find it empty. But Jesus, they had not seen.

For whatever reason, these two were part of Jesus’ plan for revealing His resurrected Self. He decided to reveal Himself to these two individuals, who would then go and confirm the reality of the resurrection for the others.

Counter Intuitive

What is interesting about Jesus’ revelation to the two is that Jesus did not give them His hands and feet that they would believe. He did not give them any signs or miracles that they would believe. Instead He gave them that which would remain, even after His corpus delecti had returned to His home in Glory. He gave them the Scriptures.

We are told in the story that when they finally recognized Jesus, He vanished from them. But as we will see presently, even with that supernatural occurrence, the thing that made their “hearts burn” with the reality of Jesus’ own Self was *not* the supernatural experience. In fact, the conversation they had as they were walking along with Jesus is notable in this regard. Jesus asked them why they were sad. With incredulity they asked Him, “*Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem, and have you not known the things which happened there in these days? ... the things concerning Jesus of Nazareth [who] we were hoping was going to redeem Israel*”. (Luke 24:18,21)

Naturally, they were referring to His crucifixion, death and burial, of which all in Jerusalem were aware. At first, Jesus mildly rebuked them for not knowing and “*believ[ing] in all the Prophets* (a euphemism for the Hebrew Scriptures) *have spoken*” (Luke 24:25) concerning Messiah... and then He said it...

“And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself”. (Luke 24:27)

In spite of the fact that they’d known Jesus personally, and had doubtless witnessed His miracles, what Jesus gave these two disciples as irrefutable and *suitable-for-bringing-back* to “the rest”, was what had been written in the Scriptures concerning the Christ. It is noteworthy that the Gospel writer Luke has no compunction to tell of Jesus *only* doing yet another miraculous thing to prove the resurrection. Instead, Luke tells us that the confirmation to them that what happened to Him before and after His death, was the Scriptures. What they got was the Word of God. I think it is safe to conclude from this that what they *needed* was the Word of God.

Indeed, for over three years many, many people in Israel had experienced the miraculous hadn't they? Was the miraculous enough for them to believe? Sadly, no; it was not. I am frequently amazed at Biblical stories of the religious leaders witnessing miraculous healings, and then trying to trap Jesus into doing something to convict Himself like performing a miraculous healing on the Sabbath. Really?

It is apparent that if one's heart is hard to the Word of God, then one's heart will be hard to the sensational... that which titillates and purports to satisfy the senses. God is not interested in our senses, but in our hearts?

The "Word" is a Person

After Jesus had left them and they were recounting their memory of the event, our two travelers remarked, "*Did not our heart burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures?*" (Luke 24:32)

Regarding His identity, why didn't Jesus just "prove it"? Why did He take the time to "take them to school", so to speak, in what had been written? Were I God, I'd not have done it this way! I'd probably have given humankind what he was asking for... some sensory signs... some sensational thing or things that they could hang onto and then recount as needed.

Ever play telephone? You know, that game where you tell someone something, and then they tell it to someone, and then they tell it to someone, etc, etc, etc... By the time you get to the fifth or sixth rendering, a scalpel and a syringe have become a walrus and a plum. Sam coming in has become Lois dying, and bad news is very likely to have become good... except you can't rely on any of it!

Jesus gave these two disciples something upon which they could rely, and something they could bring back - reliably - to "*the rest*". Quite literally, He gave them Himself. Jesus gave them His Word, which is indeed, Himself. From the time the Scriptures were given by God to humankind, they were the literary embodiment of God Himself.

Then and Now

When Jesus referred to the Scriptures, naturally He was referring to the Hebrew Scriptures; that which we know as our Old Testament (We still consider those Old Testament, Hebrew Scriptures to be inspired, by the way!). Our New Testament, the writings of those men who knew Jesus and/or walked with Him, are also considered Scripture. The Apostle Peter refers to his own writings and Paul's writings as Scripture. As God grew His church under the New Covenant (the words covenant and testament are interchangeable), He gave us our New Covenant, our New Testament Scriptures.

Many think that a bunch of men sat in a smoke filled room someplace, conspiring about what the contents of the New Testament would be... what books would be "in" and what books would be

“out”. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Spirit of God, over the course of 3 centuries, revealed to the Church which of the writings that were circulating throughout the evangelized world, were to be included in the canonⁱ of Scripture. Bruce Milneⁱⁱ in his fine work “Know the Truth”, says,

*“The church’s concern was to ensure that the canonical books bore direct and authentic testimony to the great central realities of the faith. So the danger was that of excluding canonical books, not of including the non-canonical.” ...“It is important to understand that in the process of canonization, the church did not aspire to impose its own authority on certain of the many documents circulating among the Christian groups. **The church no more created the NT canon than Isaac Newton created the law of gravity.** In these writings, and in these alone, the church, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, heard and continues to hear the authentic tones of the Good Shepherd.” [emphasis mine]*

No Playing Telephone With God

When we speak, there can be undoing, change, uncertainty, error, etc. Not so with God. When God Himself decides to speak, what human force, error, agenda, whatever, can silence Him? We are assured in Scripture by God Himself that no “... *Word that goes forth from My mouth will return empty or without fruit; but that it will accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it*”. Isaiah 55:11

One of the things that Jesus revealed to His followers is that He Himself is the Word of God (John 1:1) , and that He has accomplished the thing for which He was sent. (John 19:30) Therefore there is no more changing in the Word than there is in Him. Those of us who study the Scriptures and are familiar with the science of textual criticism, have gained great respect and even awe for the way in which God has preserved, through careful and deliberate recreation, the words that He Himself has inspired.

Not a Panacea

But let’s not deceive ourselves. Unless God is involved in the conversation, having made a *divine appointment* with the person with whom we’re sharing, when we share the Gospel with another person we can’t expect that just quoting the Bible, the Word, is going to miraculously change that person. The Bible doesn’t change anyone. Only God changes people, and *sometimes* He will use His Word, the Bible to do it. But it is only when He begins to turn on the lights about who the Word is, His Son Jesus, that the Word becomes miraculously powerful, or can do anything at all. Once God Himself has regenerated that human heart, turned the lights on and enlivened it to the Truth that he/she is a sinner in need of forgiveness, and then applies the good news (the word Gospel means Good News) that we have shared, then the Word of God becomes miraculously powerful in that life. It is the Word of the God who just saved them. It is Spirit and it is Life. (John 6:63)

There for our Good and God's Glory

While the Word may have no miraculous power in the unregenerate, it is however, miraculously powerful for we who've had the lights turned on by God, and by it we should "*be transformed by the renewing of [y]our mind[s]*" (Romans 12:2), and "*conformed to the image of His Son*". (Romans 8:29)

As the Apostle Peter was signing off, so to speak, knowing that he would not be much longer in this world in his physical body, he left us these words... inspired by God... approved by Jesus... regarded as Scripture and as the means knowing God's will in faith and practice...

¹³ Yes, I think it is right, as long as I am in this tent, to stir you up by reminding you, ¹⁴ knowing that shortly I must put off my tent, just as our Lord Jesus Christ showed me. ¹⁵ Moreover I will be careful to ensure that you always have a reminder of these things after my decease. ¹⁶ For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. ¹⁷ For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." ¹⁸ And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. ¹⁹ And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; ²⁰ knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, ²¹ for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.

ⁱ Canon: a list of the works of an author that are accepted as authentic: a list of writings, esp sacred writings, officially recognized as genuine : World English Dictionary, *Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition*.

ⁱⁱ Milne, Bruce 1982, *Know the Truth*, Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.