What Exactly Is 'The Word of God'?

By Dr. Paul M. Elliott

From the TeachingtheWord Bible Knowledgebase

Scripture defines the term very specifically. It is a definition to which every Christian and church must carefully submit.

In the introduction to this series, we noted that in the post-evangelical church it is rare to find a pastor who is truly committed to a fully-formed doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture - that is, a position that fully acknowledges the supernatural character of the Book on which his ministry is supposed to be based.

Much of the visible church has lost any grasp it may have had on the correct answer to this essential question: Exactly what is the Word of God? We must look to the Scriptures themselves for the answer. Hebrews 4:12-13 sheds great light on this question, and these verses will form the anchor of the remainder of this series:

  For the Word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is adiscerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.

Today we will begin to look at these verses in detail.

"The Word of God"

The writer to the Hebrews describes Scripture as "the Word of God." We find this phrase over fifty times in the New Testament, and the equivalent phrase "the Word of the Lord" over 275 times in the Old Testament.
In the original language of the New Testament, the term is "the logos of God". The Greek word *logos* is a very significant one. The phrase that is here translated "the Word of God" introduces us to a number of vital characteristics of Scripture. First of all, the word *logos* signifies the fact that the Word of God is *revelation from God*. It does not have its origin in the mind of man. It is not what man decided is true or not true. It is revelation given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Also, the Word of God is revelation. It is the *revealed will of God*. It is the *revealed mind of God*. It is the expression of God's thoughts. Therefore, the written Word of God uniquely bears the authority of the holy God of the universe.

Jesus also said this, in John 6:63: "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit [that is, they are spiritual words, supernatural words], and they are life."

**Why Is the Bible the Word of God?**

The Apostle Peter under the Spirit's inspiration underscores this in his second epistle:

> 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. 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." And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain.

> 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; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:16-21)

Here Peter is giving us the only correct view of the Bible.
A Crucial Difference

Peter is making two points. His first point, in verses 16 through 19, concerns the witness and testimony of the apostles. They saw Jesus Christ with their own eyes. They saw all the Old Testament prophecies about His first coming fulfilled. Peter himself, along with James and John, was on the mountain and saw Jesus Christ transfigured before them, and they heard the voice of God the Father from Heaven saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

In other words, Peter is saying, the facts verify prophecy. But then he goes on to say, in verses 20 and 21, that there is something even more important - something we must understand first. And that is the nature of prophecy itself. And not only the nature of prophecy, but also the nature of Scripture as a whole.

Notice how Peter says it: "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture..." The word translated prophecy is the Greek prophetia, which signifies not merely prophecy as the foretelling of events, but also any "forth-telling" - any word - from God. In this sense, all of Scripture is "prophecy". Peter declares that we must "know this first" - it is the foundation of what follows: "No prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit."

How you look at those two verses determines what kind of religion you are going to have. Will it be God-centered, and therefore true, or man-centered, and therefore false? Throughout church history, these two verses have been at the center of every division that we encounter between the orthodox and the heretic. It remains so today. The great division between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism hinges on these verses. These are key verses in the Word of God.

Many churches, and many cults, look at verse 20 by itself and lift it out of context. Rome looks at verse 20 and says that it means that it is wrong for anyone to interpret the Bible for himself. Only the church can interpret the Scriptures. "No prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation." Period.

Protestantism claims the universal priesthood of all believers, not just a certain class of men who
are called priests. But Rome says, based on verse 20, that Protestantism is simply wrong and must be condemned. Rome believes that it is dangerous for church members to try to understand the Bible for themselves. So there is only one safe thing to do. Go to the church. Go to the priest. And the ironic thing is that when men go to seminary to become priests, the one thing they do not study very much is the Bible. Instead, they spend years studying church tradition.

These two verses throw the spotlight on the critical difference between the Roman Catholic position and the Protestant position. Here is the crux of the issue: Do you believe that the church has to interpret the Bible according to its traditions or some other standard, or do you believe that the Bible itself is the final authority? Do you believe that the church, rather than standing in judgment over the Word of God, must be judged by the Word of God?

The Roman church, Eastern Orthodoxy, and many cults, quote verse 20 by itself as an alleged proof-text of the authority of their ecclesiastical leaders. "No prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation." Period. They stop there. But that is not the complete thought in the text. Verses 20 and 21 form a single thought, and verse 20 is incomplete without verse 21.

**Scripture Is Not Man's Ideas**

The word "for" at the beginning of verse 21 links the two verses together. "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit." Verse 21 explains verse 20.

We also need to more closely examine some of the words that are used in this passage in English Bibles. In some cases, it is difficult for translators to find a concise way of saying in English all that is said in the original. 2 Peter 1:20-21 is one of those places.

The Authorized Version and the New King James both use the word "is" in verse 20. "No prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation." Some other versions render it "comes" or "came about." Those words are closer to the original, but still not quite enough. In the
original language, the word actually speaks of how Scripture "originated", or "came into existence".

Another word we need to understand more carefully in verse 20 is the word "interpretation". This is the only place in the entire Bible where this particular Greek word, *epiluseos*, is used. This word in the original language has to do with "determination" - the way in which something is determined to be true or not true. Therefore the main thrust of verse 20 is this: "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the Scripture originated as the result of a human writer's personal determination of what is true or not true."

With this in mind, we can see better how verse 20 connects to verse 21: "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture originated in the human writer's personal determination of what is true or not true, for this reason," verse 21: "prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit."

This connects closely to what Peter has already said in verse 19: "And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed..." Why should we pay attention to Scripture? Why should we study it? Why should we meditate on it? Why should we base our lives, and the life of the church, and our hope for eternity, on this Book?

**A Book Written By "Driven" Men**

The answer is that Scripture is not a mere collection of the words and ideas of men. It did not originate in man’s understanding of the world, much less of things unseen. The Bible is not the record of man's views, perspectives, or interpretation of events. Man did not decide what is true and what is not true. God has *revealed* what is true.

"Prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were *moved* by the Holy Spirit." Some Bibles render it as "carried along," and that is closer to the original. But it is still not the full force of what is being said. The word translated "moved" (*pheromenoi*) is better yet translated, "driven along by an outside force".
The same word is used in Acts 27, where we read the account of the shipwreck of the Apostle Paul and those who were with him. While they were on their way through the Adriatic Sea, a huge storm came up and continued for over two weeks. The ship was so badly beaten by the wind and waves that it was ready to break up and sink. The captain and the crew made desperate efforts to save the ship. They took down the sails. They ran cables under the ship to try to keep it from breaking apart. Finally, they threw the cargo overboard to try to lighten the ship and keep it from sinking. They did everything they knew how to do in order to save the ship. But still the storm raged on.

When there was nothing else left to do, Luke tells us in a very graphic way, they stopped trying to steer the ship. He says, "we let her drive" (verse 15) and "we were driven" (verse 17). They surrendered themselves to whatever the wind might do. The very same word is used Second Peter 1:21 - "holy men of God spoke as they were driven along by the Holy Spirit."

Here is the essence of Peter's declarations: We must never think of Scripture as a collection of the thoughts and ideas of men. Moreover, when we read the Bible we must always keep in mind the fact that the men who wrote the words of the Bible were driven by the Holy Spirit. He came upon them, took hold of them, and gave them His thoughts. Without obscuring their personalities in the writing, He gave them the very words to write. He drove them along as they wrote them down. Scripture is, therefore, always "thus says the Lord" - "the burden of the Lord" - "the word of the Lord came to me" - and so on.

Often, we find that the Spirit's penmen actually wrote the message against their own will, as in the case of Jeremiah. And sometimes, Peter tells us in his first epistle, they did not entirely understand what they were writing, because they were writing something for a later time. But they were, nevertheless, driven to write the Word of God and surrendered themselves to whatever the wind of the Spirit might direct.
Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. To them it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven - things which angels desire to look into. (1 Peter 1:10-13)

**God's Word Defined**

In Second Peter chapter one, the Holy Spirit gives us a concise statement of the two great doctrines concerning the nature of Scripture. The first great doctrine is that the text of the Bible, the content, the very words, are revelation - they are from the mind of God, not the mind of man. The second great doctrine is that the way in which the Spirit of God used men to record the words is inspiration - men driven by the Holy Spirit.

Revelation and inspiration - these are the two great words that tell us the nature of the Book; these two terms define "the Word of God." It is God's revelation, given by inspiration.

The Bible is absolutely unique. It is almighty God speaking directly to man. Every other book in this world is the word of sinful man promoting his conflicting opinions. But the words of the Bible are the very words of the God of Heaven. Holy Scripture is a supernatural book from beginning to end - and it is the only supernatural Book.

**Next: The Word of God Is "Alive" - What Does This Mean?**
We also suggest that you include a direct hyperlink to this article for the convenience of your readers.