

# The Sufficiency of the Word of God

*The 25th Anniversary Sermon, May 23, 1993, by Dr. James Montgomery Boice*

*But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus—2 Timothy 3:14, 15.*

On a morning like this it is a temptation to reminisce over the quarter century of ministry I have had at Tenth Presbyterian Church. And I would do it, except for the fact that others have been doing it all weekend and in a much more complimentary way than I could myself—at least if I were to be honest. I could reveal a lot of things that the others are not aware of, including the disappointments and failures. But that would spoil things, and it is not what this weekend is about. It is certainly not what a worship service such as this should accomplish.

I remember that when John, the author of Revelation, fell at the feet of the angel of God to worship him, the angel replied, "Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God!" (Revelation 19:10). So I remind you and myself that this is what we are about this morning.

And I direct you to God's Word.

Our text is 2 Timothy 3:14, 15. "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."

## **The Priority of God's Word**

I want to talk about the most important thing that Tenth Presbyterian Church has stood for over the one hundred sixty-four years of its distinguished history, and that is the priority of the Bible as the Word of God. That priority has been both doctrinal and practical. It is doctrinal because we believe the Bible to be the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice, and it is practical because we believe the Bible must be the treasure most valued and attended to in the church's life.

This has been a factor from the very beginning—from the days of Thomas A. McAuley, the first pastor (1829-1833), and Henry Augustus Boardman, the first minister to serve a long pastorate (1833-1876). But it is best illustrated by an incident from the early days of the ministry of Donald Grey Barnhouse (1927-1960), who had a profound and personal influence on my own idea of what the ministry should be.

A week or two after Barnhouse became pastor of Tenth Church, he entered the pulpit one Sunday morning and opened the great pulpit Bible to a point near the middle, where he then placed his sermon notes, his Bible and a hymn book. As he looked down he noticed that the words on the pages of the Bible were part of a curse upon those nations that do not know God. It occurred to him that he would like to have before him a passage containing words of a great promise.

He opened the Bible to Isaiah 55:10, 11, which says,

As the rain and the snow

come down from heaven,  
and do not return to it  
without watering the earth  
and making it bud and flourish,  
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread  
for the eater,  
So is my word that goes out from my mouth:  
It will not return to me empty,  
but will accomplish what I desire  
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

To his surprise he discovered that for decades his predecessors had apparently done the same thing. The edges of the Bible were worn in half circles curving inward from the bindings at that text, and the pages were torn and mended. As he later observed, those pages "containing the great fifty-fifth chapter of Isaiah and the preceding page with the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah concerning the Lord Jesus Christ as God's Lamb, give mute evidence that the men who have stood in the pulpit of Tenth Church for more than a century were men of the Living Word and the written Word."<sup>1</sup>

Later Barnhouse discovered that there was another section of the Bible that was similarly worn. It was the great psalm of the Bible, Psalm 119. Evidently, his predecessors, finding it difficult to keep their notes on the Isaiah pages, looked for another passage that would remind them of the power and priority of God's Word.

Barnhouse told this story in a memorial booklet marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of his pastorate at Tenth Church, concluding this way: "It is my prayer that no man shall ever stand in this pulpit as long as time shall last who does not desire to have all that he does based upon this Book. For this Book does not *contain* the Word of God, it *is* the Word of God. And though we may preach the Word with all the stammering limitations of our human nature, the grace of God does the miracle of the ministry, and though human lips speak the divine Word, and the hearts of the people are refreshed. There is no other explanation for the continuing power of a church that is poorly located, that is without endowment, but which continues to draw men and women to the capacity of its seating arrangements, morning and evening, summer and winter, and which sends its sons and daughters by the score to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ throughout the world."<sup>2</sup>

### **The Inerrancy of God's Word**

About ten years into my pastorate, at the end of 1977 and the beginning of 1978, I helped start an organization that was also concerned with the priority of the Word of God but which focused its efforts on the important matter we perceived to be under attack at that time, namely, the Bible's inerrancy. Our organization was called the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, and it had within it such outstanding evangelical leaders as Francis Schaeffer, J. I. Packer, A. Wetherell Johnson, R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner, Roger Nicole and many others. It had as its purpose the task of "elucidating, vindicating and applying the doctrine of biblical inerrancy as an essential element for the authority of Scripture and a necessity for the health of the church of God."

In the 1970s the evangelical church was drifting from its roots, and professors in prominent evangelical institutions were teaching that the Bible contains errors of historical and scientific fact but that it does not matter that it does. We believed that it does matter and tackled this deviation head on.

We held three gatherings of prominent evangelical scholars to hammer out three documents of "affirmation and denial." They became nearly creedal in some quarters. The first was on inerrancy itself ("The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy"), the second on principles of interpretation ("The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics"), and the third on application ("The Chicago Statement on the Application of the Bible to Contemporary Issues"). We also held two large lay conferences, the first in San Diego in the spring of 1982 and

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<sup>1</sup>Donald Grey Barnhouse, "Isaiah 55:11" in  *Holding Forth the Word: 1927-1952* (Manuscript Collection of the Tenth Presbyterian Church).

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

the second in Washington in the fall of 1988.

In the early days we were often asked why inerrancy was important since "it should be enough merely to believe that the Bible is trustworthy in areas of faith and morals." But it is not that simple. To begin with, the Bible is an historical book and Christianity is an historical religion. So if the Bible errs in matters of historical fact, Christianity itself is affected. One hundred years of German "historical Jesus" research proved that. The scholars involved in this movement wanted to separate the Christ of faith from the Jesus of history, finding out who the true Jesus was. But as Albert Schweitzer proved in his classic study, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, all they succeeded in doing was making Jesus into the scholars' own images. Rationalists produced a rationalist Jesus, socialists a socialistic Jesus, moralists a moralistic Jesus, and so on. The attempt to have Christianity without its historical base was a failure.

Besides, if part of the Bible is true and part is not, who is to tell us what the true parts are? There are only two answers to that question. Either we must make the decision ourselves, in which case the truth becomes subjective. The thing that is true becomes merely what appeals to me. Or else, it is the scholar who tells us what we can believe and what we cannot believe. We argued that God has not left us either to our own whims or to the whims of scholars. He has given us a reliable book that we can read and understand ourselves.

The inerrancy of the Bible is what I wrestled with during my seminary years. It is not that I questioned it. Anyone who had been raised with the teaching of Donald Grey Barnhouse and others like him could hardly doubt that God has given us an inerrant revelation. My problem was that my teachers did not believe this, and much of what I was hearing in the classroom was meant to reveal the Bible's errors so students would not depend on it too deeply. What was a student to do? The professors seemed to have all the facts. How were professors to be challenged when they argued that recent scholarship has shown that the old simplistic views about the Bible being inerrant are no longer valid and we have to admit that the Bible is filled with errors?

As I worked on this I discovered some interesting things. First, the problems imagined to be in the Bible were hardly new problems. For the most part they were known centuries ago, even by such ancient theologians as Saint Augustine and Saint Jerome. They debated problems of apparent contradictions in their correspondence.

I also discovered that results of sound scholarship have not tended to uncover more and more problems, as my professors were suggesting, still less disclose more and more "errors." Rather they have tended to resolve problems and show that what were once thought to be errors are not errors at all. Let me give some illustrations.

Second Kings 15:29 speaks of a king of Assyria named Tiglath-Pileser. He is said to have conquered the Israelites of the northern kingdom and to have taken many of them into captivity. A generation ago liberal scholars were saying that this king never existed, because they had no independent record of him, and that the fall of the northern kingdom to Assyria was mythology. But then archaeologists excavated Tiglath-Pileser's capital city and found his name pressed into bricks which read: "I, Tiglath-Pileser, king of Assyria, . . . am a conqueror from the Great Sea which is in the country of Amurru as far as the Great Sea which is in the Nairi country," that is, the Mediterranean. In other words, archaeologists have found evidence not only of Tiglath-Pileser's existence, but even of the very campaign 2 Kings describes. The English reader can find accounts of these battles in James B. Prichard's *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*.

Here is another example. A generation ago scholars were saying that Moses could not have written the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, because, so the argument went, writing was not known in Moses day. That seemed irrefutable at the time because, if writing was not known in Moses day, Moses could not have known how to write, and if Moses did not know how to write, he could not have written the Pentateuch. But in this case, it was the underlying premise that was wrong. As it turns out, not only was writing known in Moses day, there were actually many written languages. Today we know of at least six different languages from the very area of the world in which Moses led the Israelites for forty years.

My favorite example is a personal one. At the end of 1974 *Time* magazine ran a cover story entitled "How True Is the Bible?" It surveyed the liberal attacks on the Bible's reliability and concluded, somewhat as I did after my study of what the evidence in this area has proved, that the credibility of the Bible has actually grown in recent decades. *Time* wrote,

The breadth, sophistication and diversity of all this biblical investigation are impressive, but it begs a question: Has it made the Bible more credible or less? Literalists who feel the ground move when a verse is challenged would have to say that credibility has suffered. Doubt has been sown, faith is in jeopardy. But believers who expect something else from the Bible may well conclude that its credibility has been enhanced. After more than two centuries of facing the heaviest scientific guns that could be brought to bear, the Bible has survived—and is perhaps the better for the siege. Even on the critics' own terms—historical fact—the Scriptures seem more acceptable now than they did when the rationalists began the attack.<sup>3</sup>

I found it interesting that the Bible was being defended by a secular magazine. But I said to myself, "I'm going to have to wait two weeks to see the letters that come in reaction to this, because I can't believe that the liberal scholars will ignore it." Sure enough. Two weeks later there were two strong letters from two of the most prominent critics: Martin Marty, a regular writer for *the Christian Century*, and Harvey Cox of the Harvard Divinity School. One of them ended—I do not remember which one—"The faith of your Bible believers is the opposite of biblical faith!"

I was offended. I said to myself, "That's terribly unfair. *Time* has presented a balanced article. It hasn't even claimed inerrancy, only historical reliability, and these men can't even stand to have the Bible called reliable." I got so angry, I had to stop and pray. I think the Lord answered me by saying, "Don't worry about it. It's not bothering me, why should it bother you. Go on and read the magazine."

So I did. The letters were on page 38, and I read on to page 65, which turned out to be the section on science. On that page there was a report of an archeological expedition in the southern area of the Sinai Peninsula under the direction of a Jewish archeologist named Beno Rothenberg. He had been working at a place called "Solomon's mines" because an ancient smelting operation had been there, and he wanted to find out if the area had really been worked by Jews, and who had begun it.

Rothenberg discovered that the area had been occupied by Jewish workmen at the time of Solomon. So it may truly have been where Solomon melted down his gold for the temple. But then he pushed back through the strata at the site and discovered that this ancient foundry had been developed originally by the Midianites. Midianites? *Time* knew that few of its readers would have any idea who the Midianites were. So the writer explained, ". . . the Midianites, a little-known people who dwelled in the area and are identified in Genesis as the first metal workers."<sup>4</sup>

At that point I began to understand why the Lord was urging me to go on and read the magazine. Because of all the places where that little bit of Bible verification could have appeared, it was in the very issue in which the liberal scholars were objecting, "The faith of your Bible believers is the opposite of biblical faith."

The Holy Spirit really does have a sense of humor.

### **The Sufficiency of God's Word**

I want to say here, however, that important as I believe the matter of inerrancy is—and I do believe it. I believe churches will flounder and die if this is forgotten. Important as this is, I do not think it is the most critical issue about the Bible facing the American church today. The issue I would pinpoint today is the *sufficiency* of God's Word.

I would ask the questions: Do we really believe that God has given us what we need in this book? Or do we think we have to supplement the Bible with other man-made things? Do we need sociological techniques to do evangelism? Do we need psychology and psychiatry for Christian growth? Do we need extra-biblical signs or miracles for guidance? Is the Bible's teaching adequate for achieving social progress and reform?

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<sup>3</sup>*Time*, December 30, 1974, p. 41.

<sup>4</sup>*Time*, January 13, 1975, p. 65.

The reason I believe this is important is that it is possible to believe that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice, and yet neglect it and effectually repudiate it just because we think that it is not great enough for today's tasks and that other things need to be brought in to supplement the revelation. I think this is exactly what many evangelicals and evangelical churches are doing.

Have you ever realized that this is the point of each of the three great passages about Scripture that were read this morning. These three passages (Psalm 19, Matthew 4 and 2 Timothy 3) are probably the three most important passages in the Bible about the nature of the Word of God. The first contrasts it with God's general revelation. The second shows how Jesus used the Bible to overcome temptation. The third is Paul's advice to Timothy in view of the terrible times he saw coming. But notice. Each passage stresses that it is the Word of God alone that is sufficient for these challenges.

Psalm 19 speaks of the wonderful revelation of God in nature. But then it continues,

The law of the Lord is *perfect*,  
reviving the soul.  
The statutes of the Lord are *trustworthy*.  
making wise the simple.  
The precepts of the Lord are *right*,  
giving joy to the heart.  
The commands of the Lord are *radiant*,  
giving light to the eyes.  
The fear of the Lord is *pure*,  
enduring forever.  
The ordinances of the Lord are *sure*  
and altogether righteous.  
They are more *precious* than gold,  
than much pure gold;  
They are *sweeter* than honey,  
than honey from the comb.  
By them is your servant warned,  
and in keeping them there is great *reward*.

(vv. 7-11)

The revelation of God in nature is wonderful, but it is limited. By contrast, the revelation of God in Scripture is perfect, trustworthy, right, radiant, pure, sure, precious, sweet and rewarding. By what language would it be possible for the psalmist more effectively to emphasize the complete and utter sufficiency of God's Word?

In Matthew 4 we discover the sufficiency of the Word of God in times of temptation, for it was by quotations from Deuteronomy 8:3; 6:16 and 6:13 that Jesus withstood Satan. Jesus did not reason with Satan without Scripture. He did not resort to supernatural power or ask God for some special sign or intervention. He knew the Bible, stood on it and used it forcefully.

Second Timothy 3 is the same. Paul is warning his young protege against the terrible times coming in the last days. They will be days like ours, in which "people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God." And if that is not terrible enough, they will be days in which these vices will be found even in the churches. For they will be found among those "having a form of godliness but denying its power" (vv. 1-5).

What is Timothy to do when such days come? Surely Paul must have some secret new weapon, some unexpected trick for him to use. No, that is not what we find. Instead of something new, we find Paul recommending what Timothy has had all along—the Word of God—because the Bible is sufficient even for terrible times like these. "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise

for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:12, 15).

### **Sufficient in All Areas**

But it is not only that the Word of God is sufficient for all times, even times like ours. It is also sufficient in all areas, that is, it is able to do all we need it to do and are commissioned to do as Christians.

Let me list a few of these areas.

1. *Evangelism.* The Word of God is sufficient for evangelism. Indeed, it is the only thing that works in evangelism. Everything else—captivating music, personal testimonies, emotional appeals, even coming forward to make a commitment to Jesus Christ—all that is at best supplementary. And if it is used or depended upon apart from the faithful preaching and teaching of the Word of God, the "conversions" that result are spurious conversions, which is to say that those who respond do not actually become Christians. They become Christians in name only. The only way the Holy Spirit works to regenerate lost men and women is through the Word of God.

Peter said it: "You have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Peter 1:23).

2. *Sanctification.* I have been preaching on the book of Romans for seven years. I have discovered many interesting things in that time. But the most significant for me has been Paul's approach to sanctification, which is not at all what we would expect or what many people today desire. When we think of sanctification today, most of us think of either one of two things. Either we think of a method ("Here are three steps to sanctification; do this and you will be holy"), or else we think of an experience ("You need a second work of grace, a baptism of the Holy Spirit," or something). Paul's approach is to know the Bible and its teaching about what has been done for us by God in our salvation.

Paul makes this clear in the sixth chapter where he says, "In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus" (v. 11). This is the first time in the letter that Paul tells his readers to do something, and what they are to do is "count" or "reckon upon" the fact that God has done an irreversible work in their lives as a result of which they have died to sin (the verb is in the past tense, an aorist) and have been made alive to God in Christ Jesus. The only way they can understand what has happened to them is to know the Bible, which teaches them what has happened. But then, because they know it, they are to go on with God, acting on the basis of what has been done. In other words, they cannot go back to being what they were before. They are new creatures in Christ. So the only thing they can do is get on with living the Christian life. There is no way for them to go but forward.

That is the Bible's approach to sanctification, and it has nothing to do with either a method or an experience. It has everything to do with knowing and living by the sufficient Word of God.

3. *Guidance.* Not long ago we had Phillip D. Jensen, the minister of St. Matthias Church in Sydney, Australia, with us for the Philadelphia Conferences on Reformed Theology. It was his first time in the United States, and it was my privilege to introduce him to American Christians this way. Mr. Jensen has written a book called *The Last Word on Guidance* whose sole point is that this "last word on guidance" is the Bible. That is what God has given us to indicate how we are to live and what we are to do to please him. All we need is in the Bible. So if there is something we want or think we need that is not in the Bible—what job we should take, who we should marry, where we should live—it doesn't matter what we do as long as we are obeying what God teaches about living a godly life.

That doesn't mean that God does not have a detailed plan for our lives. He does. He has a detailed plan for all things, ordering "whatsoever comes to pass," as the Westminster Confession of Faith has it. But it does mean that we do not have to know this plan in advance and, indeed, cannot. What we can know and need to know is what God has told us in the Bible.

4. *Social reform.* The final area in which we need to be reminded that the Word of God is sufficient is for social renewal and reform. We are very concerned about this today and rightly so, because we live in a declining culture and we want to see the lordship of Jesus acknowledged and justice and true righteousness prevail. We

want to see the poor relieved of bitter want and suffering. How is this to happen? I want to suggest that what is needed is not more government programs or increased emphasis on social work, but first and above all the teaching and practice of the Word of God.

### **Geneva under Calvin: A Case Study**

I want to close with this important example, what happened in Geneva, Switzerland, in the sixteenth century through the ministry of John Calvin. In August of 1535 the Council of Two Hundred, which governed Geneva, voted to reject Catholicism and align the city with the Protestant Reformation. They had very little idea what that meant. Up to this point the city had been notorious for its riots, gambling, indecent dancing, drunkenness, adultery and other vices. People would literally run around the streets naked, singing indecent songs and blaspheming God. The people expected this state of affairs to continue, even after they had become Protestants, and the Council did not know what to do. The Council passed regulation after regulation designed to restrain vice and remedy the situation. Nothing they tried worked. Public discipline and morals continued their decline.

Calvin came to Geneva in August of 1536, a year after the change. He was practically ignored. He was not even paid the first year. Besides, as everybody knows, his first attempts to preach proved so unpopular that he was dismissed by the Council in early 1538, and went to Strasbourg. Calvin was happy in Strasbourg and had no desire to go back. When the situation got so bad in Geneva that public opinion turned to him again in desperation, he told his friend William Farel, "I should prefer a hundred other deaths than this cross on which I should have to die a thousand times a day."

Nevertheless, driven by a sense of duty, Calvin returned to Geneva on September 13, 1541.

Calvin had no weapon but the Word of God. From the very first his emphasis had been on Bible teaching, and he returned to it now, picking up his exposition of Scripture at precisely the place he had left it three and a half years earlier. He preached from the Word every day, and under the power of that preaching the city began to change. As the Genevan people acquired knowledge of God's Word and allowed it to influence their behavior, their city became almost a New Jerusalem from which the gospel spread to the rest of Europe, Great Britain and the New World.

Moreover, this change made other changes possible. One student of this historical period wrote,

Cleanliness was practically unknown in towns of his generation and epidemics were common and numerous. He moved the Council to make permanent regulations for establishing sanitary conditions and supervision of markets. Beggars were prohibited from the streets, but a hospital and poorhouse were provided and well conducted. Calvin labored zealously for the education of all classes and established the famous Academy, whose influence reached all parts of Europe and even to the British Isles. He urged the council to introduce the cloth and silk industry and thus laid the foundation for the temporal wealth of Geneva. This industry . . . proved especially successful in Geneva because Calvin, through the gospel, created within the individual the love of work, honesty, thrift and cooperation. He taught that capital was not an evil thing, but the blessed result of honest labor and that it could be used for the welfare of mankind. Countries under the influence of Calvinism were invariably connected with growing industry and wealth. . . .

It is no mere coincidence that religious and political liberty arose in those countries where Calvinism had penetrated most deeply.<sup>5</sup>

There has probably never been a clearer example of extensive moral and social reform than the transformation of Geneva under John Calvin, and it was accomplished almost entirely by the preaching of God's Word.

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<sup>5</sup>Marcellus Kik, *Church and State: The Story of Two Kingdoms* (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1963), p. 83. See pp. 71-85.

## **Conclusion**

I take you back to 2 Timothy. Paul encouraged Timothy to continue on the path of ministry he has been walking because "from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." Why is the Bible able to do that? It is because it is "God-breathed." That is, it is the very Word of God and therefore carries with it the authority and power of God. Yes, and it is useful too. It is useful for "teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (vv. 14-17).

That is exactly it. That is what we need. It is what everybody needs. And only the Word of God is sufficient for it.