



## “The Word of God” in Our Time

by Charley Dewberry

Prior to the nineteenth century, it was generally assumed in Western culture that the Bible was the inspired “Word of God.” This assumption entails at least two elements: 1) that the Bible is absolutely authoritative; and 2) that the Bible is without error. Today, the percentage of people in Western culture who believe that the Bible is the Word of God is probably the lowest in a thousand years. In this article, I will explain why I think that the Bible is the Word of God. (Throughout this paper I will use the terms “Word of God” and “authoritative” as synonyms).

In the Middle Ages and during the Reformation, Christianity dominated Western culture, and the Bible was universally viewed as the Word of God. In the seventeenth century and with the beginning of the Enlightenment, however, Western culture began to take on a decidedly secular character, moving the Bible out of its authoritative position. Philosophical skepticism began to erode the notion of the Word of God. By the twentieth century, truth itself became the focus of philosophical skepticism. Many held the view that the Bible could not be “true” because there is no truth other than the culture’s construct.

Intellectual and scholarly questioning of the Bible as the Word of God began early in the Enlightenment. The writings of Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), for example, helped erode the authority of the biblical text. In the nineteenth century, largely following Spinoza’s lead, several schools of German thinkers developed “higher-critical” methods and challenged the cultural assumption of

the Bible as the Word of God. While not explicitly ruling out the authority of the Bible, the higher-critical methods became a tool for many to further erode biblical authority. Today the methods of higher criticism have become the standard for intellectual and scholarly work on the Bible—part of the legacy of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Julius Wellhausen who helped develop them.

Because of these challenges, several modern Christian writers have raised the concern that the idea of the Bible as “The Word of God” is no longer plausible in our modern culture. To them, this is a major issue for the faith. If it is no longer plausible that the Bible is the Word of God, then how can the faith endure? While I am sympathetic to such concerns, I think they are misplaced. Let me explain by starting with my own experience.

For the first thirty-five years of my life, I did not believe that the Bible was the Word of God. In fact, I had little interest in Christianity. Yet there came a time when I changed my perspective on the Bible. I came to a life juncture where I had the opportunity to think about what I wanted my life to be. Periodically, I would pick up a Bible and read a little, mostly the Gospels. But I did not really see the connection between it and my life. Eventually, I came to believe that the eyewitness accounts were an accurate description of events, which convinced me that the apostles believed that Jesus was the promised Jewish Messiah. I found myself convinced that Jesus was who He said He was. I also saw these events that occurred over two-thousand years ago as the most



important events in human history, and they became the most relevant for my life.

If the Bible is the Word of God, then it gives me information about God and reality that I can get no other way. The Creator of the universe was telling me about Himself, how the world was structured, and how I should think about and pursue living life. An authoritative Bible also provides a check on my culture’s moral framework. When faced with two moral frameworks that disagree, a person clearly ought to follow the Word of God—that is, if it is authoritative.

Several people around me expressed grave concerns about the direction I was headed, while a few others were encouraging. To me, all of this was inexplicable. I could not give good reasons for my newfound interest in the Bible, but it was happening. My orientation towards the Bible had radically changed. In short, I experienced a conversion to faith. While I could not give a reasoned account to justify the claims of the Bible, I believed that they were rational, nonetheless. While this conversion to faith does not entirely explain my belief that the Bible is the Word of God, it marked an orientation towards that belief. What had shifted was my orientation toward God. Before this time, God was not relevant to the things I thought were morally valuable. After this time, God’s interaction in human history became of paramount importance to me. The Bible now played a predominant role in my life. Here was important information about God’s interaction in human history, and I saw all of this as a gift from God.



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## “The Word of God” in Our Time cont.

God had changed my heart. Formerly, I was a rebel against Him, and He changed my orientation to desiring the things of God. While my experiences are unique, God converted me in the same way He has converted every believer. He changed my desires at the core of my being. The cultural plausibility of the Bible as the Word of God did not limit Him in the least. And so I disagree with those Christians who worry about how the faith will endure in this culture where an authoritative Bible is no longer plausible. I am optimistic that faith in the authority of the Bible will endure in the people whom God has called.

One among many important elements that changed during my conversion was how I interacted with the Bible. Initially, I was skeptical about what the Bible was claiming and would only accept it if I could give reasons why I should accept it. (My skepticism reflected that of Enlightenment thinkers like David Hume, 1711–1776.) Further along, I was inclined to give credence to the biblical writers’ eyewitness testimony. Years later, I encountered a discussion about this sort of phenomenon in the “common sense” philosophy of Thomas Reid (1710–1796), who argued against Hume’s skepticism. Reid argued that it is foundational to the use of language that we believe what we are told. He used the example of children, who enter the world “hard-wired” to believe what others (their parents, for example) tell them, which in turn allows them to learn how to use language and gives them the basic knowledge of how to live in the world. Reid called this the “principle of credulity” (charity). We must believe that people are telling us what they think, that what they are saying is true, and that they use language consistently—until we discover solid evidence to the contrary. Without this principle, no one could even learn language. Reid’s principle helps me to understand what transpired during the Enlightenment.

A dominant theme in the philosophy of the Enlightenment, like that of Hume, is the notion that all our beliefs must be justified. We should be skeptical until we can give adequate reasons for our beliefs. Reid argues that this theme in Enlightenment philosophy

is destructive to language and the acquisition of language. Reid’s argument suggests that Enlightenment skepticism would undercut the grounds for believing that the Bible is the Word of God because we would not be inclined to believe the eyewitness accounts.

Could it be that the methods or the practitioners of higher criticism also reject Reid’s principle of credulity? If so, that would explain why they appear so quick to point to multiple authors, multiple source documents, errors, or the evolution of documents over time in the Bible. I have not read enough higher criticism to know if the rejection of Reid’s credulity principle is inherent in the method or if it is rejected by the practitioners themselves, independent of the method. Reid’s principle of credulity is now my working assumption. I will accept eyewitness testimony until I conclude it is in error.

So far, I have been discussing the grounds for believing the biblical authors. Now I want to discuss why I think the Bible is the Word of God, first by addressing the New Testament and then the Old Testament (Masoretic text or Septuagint).

**The New Testament** was written by ordinary mortal men. No one seriously questions this. But how is it that ordinary men penned the Word of God? Here are a couple of options: 1) God literally pushed the pen in their hands; or 2) God literally put every word in their minds, and they wrote it down verbatim. Both these options are logically possible, but I see no evidence to show that either of these is the case. The writers of the New Testament each wrote in their own style, reporting what they saw, reporting their summary of eye-witness interviews, and clarifying the faith. I assume the authors were first-century Jews, not the transcendent author of all reality.

The New Testament itself tells us why we should believe that it is the Word of God. Here is my line of reasoning:

1. God Himself and Jesus, as the Messiah, know the Truth about the created order. They know if the Bible is the Word of God or not.

Jesus is in a unique position to know what is true. He speaks for the transcendent-creator God. Therefore, it would only stand to reason that I should conform my beliefs to His. This is the essence of being a believer.

2. Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, called each of the apostles to follow Him. He identified them as the men whom he selected to communicate the events of his life and teaching.

I believe this because I believe the eyewitness accounts and the accounts of those who interviewed the eyewitnesses. I see no reason to doubt their eyewitness testimony. This is the same standard that we use every day, and it is used in a court of law. This standard is based on the principle of credulity—that is, for communication to be possible at all, we must accept, at least initially, that the speakers are telling the truth.

Now I admit that eyewitnesses claiming that someone was raised from the dead is not an everyday event. But it is possible, and maybe they saw it. Not only that, but they also claimed to have seen and participated in other miraculous phenomena. If these things did occur, it was the most important event in human history. But if a group of people claimed to see such things, they would likely be met by extreme skepticism. Why, then, would they claim to have seen something that did not occur? These witnesses were met not only with skepticism but also with economic hardship; many were cast out of their families and society; some were beaten; and some killed. After all this, the fact that they still believed speaks volumes. Why would they go through such hardship if their testimony was not true? My point here is not that this conclusion is certain, but rather that I should not begin by doubting it.

3. Jesus told us that the apostles (I include Paul) were given a unique role to play in history. They were given the *paraklētos* (an intercessor, the Holy Spirit) who Jesus said would teach them all things and remind them of everything that He said and did; who would ensure that their understanding was correct; who would guide them into all truth; and who will reprove the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 14:1 through 16:15). I believe that this is the basis

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upon which we can trust the testimony and writings of the apostles.

On the basis of the true knowledge given to them, then, the apostles wrote the Word of God and authenticated as the Word of God what others wrote. And on this basis, I believe that the New Testament is the Word of God. But, now, on what basis do I believe that the Old Testament is the Word of God?

**The Old Testament** (Masoretic text or Septuagint) was believed by both Jesus and his Jewish opponents to be the Word of God. That's why I believe that the Old Testament is the Word of God. No Jew at the time of Jesus doubted that their Scriptures (our Old Testament) were the Word of God. There are no arguments about a variety of texts, multiple authors for the Torah, or variant readings. In all cases, their differences are differences in interpretation of the text. Again, I want to conform my beliefs to those that Jesus holds. That would seem to be the only position for a follower of Jesus. Therefore, I believe that the Old Testament is the Word of God.

Probably a lower percentage of people in Western culture believe that the Bible is the Word of God today than at any time in the last thousand years. During my conversion, however, I was drawn toward God and the belief that the Bible is authoritative. Furthermore, my reading of John 14:1 through 16:15 leads me to believe that Jesus communicated to the apostles that they had a special role to play in history, which included writing the New Testament. In Jesus' mind, the New Testament would join the Masoretic text and the Septuagint as the Word of God.

This is my current thinking about the Bible's authority, and I reserve the right to change my mind. If, for example, I became convinced that there were even one error in what the authors intended to communicate in the Old or New Testaments, I would reject the Bible as the Word of God. But until that time, I will continue to believe that the Bible is the Word of God.

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## New House Managers



Gutenberg welcomes **Gil and Erin Greco** as the new Residence Program house managers. Most recently, Gil and Erin hail from Kansas City, Missouri, where they have lived since 2013. While there, Gil taught at a Classical Christian high school, Erin started a photography business, and they had their two boys, Wendell (3) and Linford (10 months). Before that, Gil and Erin lived in Eugene, Oregon, where they both graduated from Gutenberg College in 2012 and 2010, respectively. They met in the Residence Program at Gutenberg College in 2008 and lived there until their marriage in 2010. Gil and Erin are excited to give back to the community that they were so thankful to be a part of.

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- Visit [www.workshops.gutenberg.edu](http://www.workshops.gutenberg.edu) for more information and to register.

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