The Centrality And Priority Of The Risen Christ

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There are many truths in Scripture that are important. And there are many truths within Christianity that merit our attention. But there is one truth that is the essential foundation of the Christian faith, because it contains within itself the message of the gospel, as we explained here. The gospel is the revelation of God whereby we are saved. It is the message about what Christ has done in history, and who he is. And that one truth is *the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ in history.*

The Risen Jesus Is The Absolutely Central Tenant Of The Christian Faith.

The Apostolic Witness

The essential nature of the Apostleship was that of witness to *the resurrection* in history. We might think of them as preachers of Scripture (and eventually, writers of Scripture). And this they surely were. But this wasn't their *primary* function. Their primary qualification was that they had to have seen the gospel *happen*. The gospel is the story of how Jesus of Nazareth declared himself to be King of the promised Kingdom, demonstrated that this Kingdom had come in his preaching and mighty deeds, who ruled not by force, but by dying an atoning death for sin, and then who conquered sin, death, and the grave, by rising bodily from the grave. Thus, if one was to be an Apostle, the qualification wasn't, "sign our statement of faith about every detail of bibliology and cosmology. Agree on every point of soteriology. Have exactly the same understanding of the role of circumcision, the place of the Jews, the offer to the Gentiles, etc." There would in fact be a great deal of debate about these issues, as they were being worked out (see Acts 10, 15, Gal. 1-2, etc.), and at times Peter, James, and Paul would find themselves taking different positions on such things (at which point Paul would point back to the thing that grounded them – the gospel). Rather, to be an Apostle, what one had to be was a witness to the gospel events and the Person they told of. One who had been with the Lord in his ministry, and, more importantly, seen him alive after his death (Paul didn't witness the ministry of Jesus, but explained in I Cor. 9 that he had seen the Risen Jesus, and been commissioned by him, and this was the essential qualification). Thus, when the disciples sought to appoint a replacement for Judas, they explained, that they could only choose (or seek who God had chosen) from the company of men who had seen these things happen. What were they being chosen to be?

> *"A witness with us of his resurrection" (Acts 1:20 KJV).*

The Function Of Witness

This explanation of gospel ministry as "Witness" to the resurrection is the most common description of the evangelism to which we are called. Jesus commissioned the disciples as witnesses,

> *"And ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning. (Jn. 15:27 KJV),"*

> *"And ye are witnesses of these things. (Lk. 24:48 KJV),"*

and, in the famous Great Commission,

> *"But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. (Acts 1:8 KJV),"*

This is the primary way they conceived of their evangelistic ministry (Acts 3:15; 5:32; 10:39; 26:16; 13:31; 22:15; I Pet. 5:1). We might suggests that the NT almost never uses this language of post-apostolic witness, so that we today are technically witnesses of *their* witness. Our message isn't, "I have seen Jesus alive." It is that the apostles have done so, and that we have believed their report.

When Luke summarized the preaching of the apostles in Jerusalem, what was the content of their preaching?

> *"And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all. (Acts 4:33 KJV)."*

Of course in Jewish contexts, like synagogues and temples, they usually began with the Hebrew Bible. It would be silly not to work already with what revelation is accepted, just as Jesus, when talking with the Samaritan woman at the well who only accepted the Pentateuch, didn't try to convince her of *The Writings* being inspired – he worked from what she accepted (which included Deut. 18) and pointed to himself, the Person of the Gospel. In contexts where there wasn't an acceptance of the Hebrew Bible, they built usually from the revelation in Creation, and jumped right from there to, you guessed it, the Resurrection.

Paul's preaching in pagan Athens is a great example. In the synagogue, surely he was using the Hebrew Bible as normal (17:17), clearly pointing to the resurrected Christ. But as he began to converse with those who didn't accept the Hebrew Scriptures, what did he preach?

> *"He preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection. (Acts 17:18 KJV)."*

In fact, Luke give us the low-down on his speech (Acts 17:22-31). Not a single mention of a single text of Scripture (though surely, as always, the theology Paul preached is in line with the Scriptures). But what was he driving at? What conclusion was he preaching towards? And how did he ground this message, and claim that it was vindicated by God? Because "the Bible told them so?" Not quite. Just read the conclusion of his sermon,

> *"Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead. (Acts 17:31 KJV)."*

Jesus loves you, this you know. And this you've been assured of. In fact, this all men have been assured of. How? *"In that he hath raised him from the dead."*

When Paul explained his preaching ministry to Agrippa, he naturally presents it as the fulfillment of prophecy. But what is the ultimate message Paul preached?

> *"That Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people, and to the Gentiles. (Acts 26:23 KJV)."*

When Paul wrote to the Romans, in what did he believe their faith to be grounded? Certainly, they've been steeped in the Jewish Scriptures, and so he quotes and appeals to them often. But where do we find the *definitive* declaration that Jesus is God? Not in the Bible. In *the Resurrection*.

> *"And declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead: (Rom. 1:4 KJV)."*

(Note that there is some discussion about how to translate the word the KJV translates "declare" in this verse. BDAG notes that it means, when used of persons, "appoint, designate, declare," and lists Romans 1:4 as such an example. Others would translate it "designate" or "appoint," though the emphasis upon Christ's resurrection remains the same either way).

In Paul's personal desire to conform to Christ, he sought to conform to his death, and, you guessed it, his resurrection;

> *"That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; (Phil. 3:10 KJV)."*

How did Peter think he had been born again? By the Gospel of course. The gospel that declared what? You guessed it. The resurrection;

> *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...(1 Pet. 1:3 KJV)."*

What did Jesus explain concerning himself? That he would die and rise again, and that this would vindicate him as God's Son,

> *"And he began to teach them, that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders, and of the chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again (Mk. 8:31; 9:31; 10:34; Luke 18:33; 24:7; KJV)."*

When would powerful proclamation of the gospel be appropriate for those whom Jesus had showed himself to? After the resurrection.

> *"And as they came down from the mountain, he charged them that they should tell no man what things they had seen, till the Son of man were risen from the dead. (Mk. 9:9 KJV)."*

When Jesus after his passion and resurrection explained the new way they were to read Scripture, he explained that it all pointed to him, and his resurrection (not meaning there were specific predictions of his resurrection in the OT; but rather that the Resurrection is the fulfillment of everything God has always been doing with Israel, which they would come to understand meant that the broad themes of the OT pointed to his resurrection, John 20:9, etc.),

> *"And said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: (Lk. 24:46 KJV)."*

What did Peter preach at Pentecost? This Jesus,

> *"Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it. (Acts 2:24 KJV)"*

and to what did he witness?

> *"This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses. (Acts 2:32 KJV)."*

When Peter spoke before the crowd that gathered after the healing, what did he preach, and to what did he bear witness as its vindication? God had glorified his son, who they killed,

> *"whom God hath raised from the dead; whereof we are witnesses. (Acts 3:15 KJV)."*

How can we know God kept his promise to the patriarchs and declared Jesus the Son of God?

> *"God hath fulfilled the same unto us their children, in that he hath raised up Jesus again; as it is also written in the second psalm, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee. (Acts 13:33 KJV)."*

When Paul entered Thessalonica, since it was a Jewish synagogue there, he naturally began in the Jewish Scriptures. And what did he seek to prove?

> *"Opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ. (Acts 17:3 KJV)."*

In what did Paul ground the belief that we could look beyond this life to a future one?

> *"For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. (1 Thess. 4:14 KJV)."*

Some Wise Voices

The Resurrection of Jesus is the core event of the gospel, and the center of Christian theology and practice. Note a few marvelous statements from men who have thought through the gospel carefully. Gary Habermas wrote;

> *"For the writers of the New Testament, Jesus' resurrection was the focal point of their teaching. Peter wrote that we have in indestructible inheritance awaiting us in heaven, made available, 'through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.' Paul wrote that belief in Jesus' resurrection from the dead is required for eternal life."*
> *- The Case For The Resurrection Of Jesus, pg. 26.*

And further that;

> *"The Ramifications of Jesus' resurrection go beyond the realm of the theological into the practical. When God seems silent and far away, Jesus' resurrection encourages us. Although we may not understand why God is being silent for the moment, we can have the assurance given in his Word that he loves us and knows our situation. We can know that our sufferings are temporary, since we have in indestructible inheritance in heaven. We can know this because if Jesus rose from the dead, Christianity is not just a nice story like Santa Clause; Christianity is true."*
> *- The Case For The Resurrection Of Jesus, pg. 28-29.*

The astute N.T. Wright argued that;

> *"The Resurrection, in other words, declares that Jesus really is God's Son: not only in the sense that he is the messiah, though Paul certainly intends that here, not only in the sense that he is the world's true lord, though Paul intends that too, but also in the sense that he is the one in whom the living God, Israel's God, has become personally present in the world, has become one of the human creatures that were made from the beginning in the image of this same God."*
> - *N.T. Wright,* (explaining Rom. 1:3-4, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, pg. 733.)

And argued that;

> *"The point is that one cannot say, 'Jesus of Nazareth was bodily raised from the dead' [with minimal involvement, since it is a self-involving truth.]... If it happened, it matters. The world is a different place from what it would be if it did not happen. The person who makes the statement is committed to living in this different world, this newly envisioned universe of discourse, imagination and action."*
> - N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God,* pg. 714.

Asking The Hypotheticals To Find The Core

But perhaps the fact that the resurrection stands as the center of our faith is most clearly revealed when we begin to think through what could be lost, and still allow our faith to stand. Take a pair of scissors, and cut out of your New Testament everything that mentions Mary the mother of Jesus. You will end up with an impoverished New Testament, but one which still proclaims a decidedly Christian message. Or choose instead to cut out every mention of eschatology. Your Bible will be sadly lacking, but it will still be a Christian book, proclaiming a decidedly Christian message. Now, take those scissors, and decide to cut out every thing in your New Testament that convinces you that the Bible is an inspired book. Gone is II Tim. 3:16, and the famous "inspiration passages." What are you left with? I would say your Bible is decidedly in a poor state. It is lacking so much. But it is still an undeniably *Christian* book, bearing a coherent *Christian* message.

But now, take those same scissors, and decide to cut out every verse that mentions or depends upon the resurrection of Jesus. Be prepared - it's going to take a while. You are going to do a lot of cutting! And at the end, what are you left with, if you cut the resurrection out? You are left with snippets that have no meaning. There is no longer a coherent message. The whole plot is missing. And, most importantly, your Bible is no longer a *Christian* book. It no longer tells a *Christian* story. It is a story of one more failed messianic claimant, with no more hope than judaism. Why? Because *the resurrection isn't just something that the Bible teaches - it is <u>the climax</u> of what the Bible teaches.* God's love for us, as shown in a crucified and risen savior, is the message of the Bible. Leave that out, and you have gutted the entire plot.

I often ask the hypothetical question; *would I still be a Christian if X wasn't true?* I have found some people get very upset about this. "I don't do hypotheticals!" they tell me with angry voices. This anger gets especially strong when I ask them to consider, "Would Christianity still be true if the Bible wasn't an inspired book?" Some get very nervous at this question. They demand it cannot be asked. They demand Jesus and the Bible are equal, and such a question severs the indivisible. And that is revealing I think.

I remember a time when the Bible was the very center of my faith. And I remember conversations with numbers of other young Bible College students where we discussed our faith.

> "Why do you believe in the Trinity? Because the Bible says so. If the Bible taught that there were four members of the Trinity, I would believe that, because what we believe about God is dependent upon the Bible."

So we said, and other similar things. What we were ultimately saying was, "If the Bible taught me a different God, I would follow that God instead. My faith is in the Bible." Oh, we rarely said those exact words. But it was surely what we meant. Our faith was in *the Bible* - not *Jesus*. So I now regularly pose a simple question to friends - "If the Bible taught you a different Jesus, would you abandon the Bible, or abandon Jesus?" And that question helps us to get at the heart of our faith. Some get very angry at this question - "You can't separate these two! How dare you suggest that this is even possible! God Gave us the Bible!" (I rarely find them that upset about the other side of the question). "Hypothetical questions about things that we know are from God aren't allowed!" But of course they are. Such questions are essential to helping us find the center of our faith.

"If the Bible taught you a different Jesus, would you abandon the Bible, or abandon Jesus?"

Paul certainly wasn't afraid to ask them. When the Corinthian church came into all of its errors after Paul left it for a time, he wrote back to them to address the problems. At root, they had a misshapen view of what it meant to be "spiritual," as Gordon Fee has rightly emphasized. And this seems likely to have come from a kind of over-realized eschatology, which felt that the resurrection of the future had come already, in a spiritual manner. There was no future bodily resurrection for the believer to look forward to - he had already been raised spiritually, and that was his only hope. What they didn't realize was that in jettisoning belief in their own future bodily resurrection, they were denying the reality of the possibility of bodily resurrection. And to deny the possibility of bodily resurrection is to end up denying that Jesus was bodily raised. And this is the heart of our faith. They had, unintentionally, and perhaps unwittingly, cut the legs out from under the Christian faith. That's why of all their issues, Paul saves this one for the final climactic place. And he addresses it sternly. And he uses hypothetical questions to help them see what is and isn't the center of their faith.

After stating what the Gospel is (I Cor. 15:1-11), he begins to argue for the resurrection of the body, on the basis that denying the resurrection of the body is to deny the gospel, because the gospel finds its root in a bodily resurrected Christ.

> *"Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised." (1 Co 15:12–15 ESV).*
>
> *"For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. 17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied." (1 Co 15:16–19 ESV)."*

Note that, while some people might get very angry about "hypothetical questions," Paul found them extremely useful. If, hypothetically, Christ had *not* raised from the dead, would Christianity still stand? And Paul's answer to his own question is an emphatic *no*. The hypothetical question helps us to get at the difference between what is *true* in the Christian religion, verses what is both *true* and *central*. Paul wasn't claiming by the hypothetical that perhaps Christ wasn't risen - he was using it to point out that the bodily resurrection of Jesus is *central* to the christian faith in a way that not every Christian doctrine is.

What is odd is that Paul could build such a rhetorical construct that put a question mark after the resurrection of Jesus, but some demand that placing such a question mark after the Bible is illegitimate! That says worlds about their view of the Bible in relation to their view of Christ. Only by asking such questions can we ascertain the difference between the important and the central.

What is Truly Central To The Christian Faith?

Paul does not say, "If the Bible be not inspired, our faith is in vain" though he could have still made an argument from that angle, and some have acted as though that is what he should have said. He could have said, "You must believe in bodily resurrections, because the Bible teaches bodily resurrections." Surely, this is a sufficient authority. But he didn't, and never would have said, "If the Bible is not inspired, then your faith is in vain." Because the Christian faith simply isn't founded on the inspiration of Scripture. It is founded on the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and so Paul argues from the center to correct their misshapen eschatology. If Christ didn't rise, Christianity isn't true. But if Christ did rise, Christianity is true. If the Bible is inspired, and Jesus rose from the dead, then Christianity is true. But if the Bible is not inspired, and Jesus rose from the dead, Christianity is *still* true. The truth of the Christian message doesn't depend upon an inspired Bible. It *does* depend upon a Risen Lord. This isn't to claim the Bible isn't inspired. I believe it is, as have all orthodox Christians throughout Christian history. But it is to realize that this claim isn't essential to the christian faith. These questions help us see where our faith is grounded.

> *"Inspiration is not the most fundamental of Christian doctrines..."*
> *- B. B. Warfield*

Sometimes Fundamentalist have claimed inspiration as a "fundamental" of the faith, and acted as though this meant that without belief in it, one has no Christian faith. For example, Paul Chappell traces the fundamentalist/modernists controversy that gave rise to the title "fundamentalists," and lists as his first example of the "fundamentals" of the faith, "The Inspiration and Authority of Scriptures." He defines what he means by a "fundamental" just a little prior;

> "Even so, friend, these truths are central to the Christian faith—so much so, that when you alter them, vary from them, or reinterpret them, you no longer have true Christianity. You may have a variation that slightly resembles Christianity, but if you have lost the central principles, you have lost the truth." - Chappell, Paul. *What Is a Biblical Fundamentalist?* (Kindle Locations 192-194). Striving Together Publications. Kindle Edition.

That's a fairly common claim in fundamentalism today (or what I call Neo-Fundamentalism). Many have crossed the line between defending the authority of the Bible as important to a defense of the Christian faith, and moved to instead defending the inspiration of the Bible as a *sina qua non* of being a Christian. But this was *not* the position of the first fundamentalists. J. Gresham Machen, one of the great forefathers of Fundamentalism, explained well,

> "It must be admitted that there are many Christians who do not accept the doctrine of plenary inspiration. That doctrine is denied not only by liberal opponents of Christianity, but also by many true Christian men. There are many Christian men in the modern Church who find in the origin of

> Christianity no mere product of evolution but a real entrance of the creative power of God, who depend for their salvation, not at all upon their own efforts to lead the Christ life, but upon the atoning blood of Christ — there are many men in the modern Church who thus accept the central message of the Bible and yet believe that the message has come to us merely on the authority of trustworthy witnesses unaided in their literary work by any supernatural guidance of the Spirit of God. There are many who believe that the Bible is right at the central point, in its account of the redeeming work of Christ, and yet believe that it contains many errors. Such men are not really liberals but Christians; because they have accepted as true the message upon which Christianity depends. A great gulf separates them from those who reject the supernatural act of God [the resurrection] with which Christianity stands or falls."
> - Machen, J. Gresham, *Christianity & Liberalism*, 1923, Kindle Locations 977-986

Machen was as staunch a defender of the inspiration of Scripture as one could find. But even he understood that Christianity's basic message wasn't that "The Bible is inspired," but rather, that Christ, *God incarnate*, was crucified and raised from the dead. And thus, one can still be "a true Christian man," according to Machen, and not believe in the inspiration of the Bible. Because inspiration is *important* to the faith - but it is not *central* to being a Christian.

"We found the whole Christian system on the doctrine of plenary inspiration as little as we found it upon the doctrine of angelic existences."
- B. B. Warfield

Machen wasn't the only great theologian to note this. B. B. Warfield, that great Princetonian, and another forefather of Historic Fundamentalism, was as ardent a proponent of the authority of Scripture as one could find in history. He taught, wrote, and preached, extensively on the inspiration of Scripture. But he also knew this could lead to him being misheard. Such an emphasis on the authority of the Bible could cause a hearer to rest the Christian faith on the doctrine. So he regularly took pains to avoid this danger. He wrote,

> "Let it not be said that thus we found the whole Christian system upon the doctrine of plenary inspiration. We found the whole Christian system on the doctrine of plenary inspiration as little as we found it upon the doctrine of angelic existences. Were there no such thing as inspiration, Christianity would be true, and all its essential doctrines would be credibly witnessed to us in the generally trustworthy reports of the teaching of our Lord and of His authoritative agents in founding the Church, preserved in the writings of the apostles and their first followers, and in the historical witness of the living Church. Inspiration is not the most fundamental of Christian doctrines, nor even the first thing we prove about the Scriptures. It is the last and crowning fact as to the Scriptures. These we first prove authentic, historically credible, generally trustworthy, before we prove them inspired. And the proof of their authenticity, credibility, general trustworthiness would give us a firm basis for Christianity prior to any knowledge on our part of their inspiration, and apart indeed from the existence of inspiration.
>
> *The present writer, in order to prevent all misunderstanding, desires to repeat here what he has said on every proper occasion—that he is far from contending that without inspiration there could be no Christianity* [emphasis mine]. “Without any inspiration,” he added, when making this affirmation on his induction into the work of teaching the Bible—“without any inspiration we could have had Christianity; yea, and men could still have heard the truth and through it been awakened, and justified, and sanctified, and glorified. The verities of our faith would remain historically proven to us—so bountiful has God been in His fostering care—even had we no Bible; and through those verities, salvation."

We are in entire harmony in this matter with what we conceive to be the very true statement recently made by Dr. George P. Fisher, that "if the authors of the Bible were credible reporters of revelations of God, whether in the form of historical transactions of which they were witnesses, or of divine mysteries that were unveiled to their minds, their testimony would be entitled to belief, even if they were shut up to their unaided faculties in communicating what they had thus received."

We are in entire sympathy in this matter, therefore, with the protest which Dr. Marcus Dods raised in his famous address at the meeting of the Alliance of the Reformed Churches at London, against representing that "the infallibility of the Bible is the ground of the whole Christian faith." We judge with him that it is very important indeed that such a misapprehension, if it is anywhere current, should be corrected. What we are at present arguing is something entirely different from such an overstrained view of the importance of inspiration to the very existence of Christian faith, and something which has no connection with it.

We do not think that the doctrine of plenary inspiration is the ground of Christian faith, but if it was held and taught by the New Testament writers, we think it an element in the Christian faith; a very important and valuable element; an element that appeals to our acceptance on precisely the same ground as every other element of the faith, viz., on the ground of our recognition of the writers of the New Testament as trustworthy witnesses to doctrine; an element of the Christian faith, therefore, which cannot be rejected without logically undermining our trust in all the other elements of distinctive Christianity by undermining the evidence on which this trust rests. We must indeed prove the authenticity, credibility and general trustworthiness of the New Testament writings before we prove their inspiration; and even were they not inspired this proof would remain valid and we should

> give them accordant trust. But just because this proof is valid, we must trust these writings in their witness to their inspiration, if they give such witness; and if we refuse to trust them here, we have in principle refused them trust everywhere. In such circumstances their inspiration is bound up inseparably with their trustworthiness, and therefore with all else that we receive on trust from them."
> - Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield: Revelation and Inspiration*, 1929, 1:209–212.

"We do not think that the doctrine of plenary inspiration is the ground of Christian faith, but if it was held and taught by the New Testament writers, we think it an element in the Christian faith; a very important and valuable element..."
- B. B. Warfield

Warfield was adamant that the doctrine of inspiration was not the ground of the Christian faith - the historicity of the Resurrection was. And this wasn't something he said once on accident, but, as he notes, something he repeats "on every proper occasion" because of the extreme dangers to people's faith should they misunderstand this point.

Carl Henry's "God, Revelation, And Authority" is one of the most sustained and informed defenses of the authority of God's Revelation ever produced in Evangelicalism. But Henry too was careful to explain that the Apostles didn't ground the faith on inspiration, but rather on their witness to the Resurrection. Just before citing Warfield's passage above and affirming it, he too chimes in to explain that the apostolic foundation for the faith was not built upon inspiration of the Bible, but of eyewitness to the resurrection;

> "The apostles, to be sure, did not rest the case for Christian realities wholly upon divine inspiration, that is, upon the Spirit's supernatural guidance in articulating their oral and written teaching. First and foremost they were *eyewitnesses* of the historical facets of Jesus' life and ministry. Even before the risen Lord designated them as authorized verbal witnesses on a full-time global mission, they were persuaded of the crucified Nazarene's bodily resurrection from the grave. Their eyewitnessing of the risen Lord preceded their apostolic authorization; the resurrection realities illumined other opaque facets as well of Jesus' earlier teaching (John 2: 2). During the risen Lord's postresurrection appearances, he committed a worldwide mandate to those to whom he had earlier also vouchsafed the Spirit's guidance and recollection of what he had done and said (John 14: 26). Without the resurrection eyewitnessing there would have been no commission for world witnessing. Without the Spirit's guidance there would have been no divinely authoritative teaching."
> - Henry, Carl F. H., *God, Revelation and Authority* (Set of 6): 1-6, Kindle Locations 42828-42835.

He goes on later to take up the problems of what he calls an "unbalanced preoccupation with inerrancy";

> "Unbalanced preoccupation with inerrancy can be a costly evangelical diversion. Some evangelicals concentrate so much on "the defense of Scripture" that they neglect serious theological exposition. Instead of "uncaging the lion" to sound its roar in the world, they become liontamers. Biblical inerrancy even becomes a promotional device for attracting financial support, or a polemical tool for impugning rival institutions which, while holding mediating views of Scripture, are often left to carry the major scholarly initiative in wrestling with the Gospel's theological, apologetical and social concerns. Whenever unbalanced preoccupation with inerrancy preempts the energies of evangelical institutions to the neglect of comprehensive exposition of the Christian revelation, and of a powerful apologetic addressed to the world, subevangelical and nonevangelical spokesmen take over and objectionably fill these theological vacuums. Such detouring of responsibility to others for the intellectual tasks entrusted by the Bible to the Christian community and of academic duties inherent in Christian commitment encourages doubts about both the vitality and the validity of the evangelical faith. Its high view of the Bible must spur evangelical Christianity to exemplary and superlative theological engagement and productivity.

The New Testament supplies no basis for elevating scriptural inerrancy to kerygmatic superprominence. The apostolic core-message does not inject inerrancy into every proclamation of Christ's incarnation and resurrection, and into the Bible's proffered alternatives of repentance or judgment. Still less reason exists to revise the Apostles' Creed by inserting inerrancy as its first article. The mark of New Testament authenticity is first and foremost proclamation of the crucified and risen Jesus as the indispensable and irreplaceable heart of the Christian message."
- Henry, Carl F., *ibid*, Kindle Locations 49731-49744).

When I Abandoned My Idol

I'll never forget the shift that took place in my own heart several years ago. My entire life, my faith had been built on the Bible as its center. I believed in and loved the Bible, and it just so happened to tell me of a risen Christ, and so I also believed in a risen Christ. But if the Bible had taught me a different God, I would have believed in a different God. My faith was in the Bible. And slowly, something changed. Something shifted. Not all at once. But there were decisive moments. I will never forget one such moment.

> *"Christ is before the Bible, and is the beginning and end of the Bible. Evangelical Christians believe in the Bible because they believe in Christ, and not vice versa."*
> *- Phillip Schaff*

I was setting in my car at work, in front of building 240, on a break of some kind. And I was messaging with a missionary friend who was serving at the time in India. And we were talking about what was and wasn't essential to my faith. (We also held to some absurd bibliolgical positions at that time, the foundations of which were being slowly revealed to be false). These questions had been much on my mind for some time. And as they were, I had been coming to reshape my faith. It was no longer built on the Bible, though I still believed, deeply, that the Bible was the word of God. But my faith was being reshaped around the gospel message and the living Lord it proclaimed.

> *"Would you still believe in Jesus if you found out the Bible was a merely human book?"*

The question haunted me. And I answered,

> *"Yes. I love Jesus. I follow Jesus, no matter what. And if I found out I was wrong about everything else that I ever believed (and I had been finding out daily that I was wrong about much that I believed), I would still follow Jesus. If I found out I was wrong about the Bible being the Word of God, I would still follow Jesus. If it cost me everything, I would still follow Jesus."*

I was floored. I began weeping. I was shocked. I had never said that out loud before! Never said anything like it. Something tingling at the back of my mind said that some of my friends would call my words blasphemy. And I would have too, for most of my life. And it's because a *book* had been my *God*.

I regularly encounter folks from that past life who get very uncomfortable saying "The Bible is not the Word" in reference to John 1:1, because they have always read the text as though it said just that. And it never bothers them in the slightest when John goes on to say "and the word was God." It never bothers them, because this is precisely what they believe - and they can't bear to admit that this is rank blasphemy of the worst kind. Blasphemy they are regularly guilty of. In fact, I can't count how many times, when a fundamentalists wants to tell he how important the Bible is, (feeling that I have denigrated it in some way) they have quoted John 1:1 to me, because after all, "the word [misread as, Bible] was God." How could I dare miss how important the Bible is, when the Bible says that the Bible is God?

Blasphemy. Rank *blasphemy*. And its common occurrence shows, I think, an extreme danger in groups whose bibliology outpaces their Christology.

I hear so often from some who claim that one cannot be saved if they didn't have the Bible quoted to them. "You didn't quote a Bible verse to them? Then they are not saved. Only the Bible can save." I have to respectfully, but strongly, disagree. And this evidences again a distorted bibliology. They will point to passages like Rom. 10:17, "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." Or James 1:21, or I Pet. 1:23, or any of a number of passages in Luke. But they have exalted the Bible to such a status in their minds that they can't even read it anymore. Those passages don't say faith comes from the *Bible*. Nothing of the sort. "The word" in such contexts is a clear reference to the message of the *gospel*. The gospel message brings faith (see Rom. 1:16). But their distorted bibliology keeps them from even really understanding the Bible that they claim to love so much.

On that day, in that parking lot, I realized I no longer loved an inspired book that happened to tell me about a Risen Savior. I instead fell in love with a Risen Savior, who I happened to have learned about from an inspired book.

And there is a world of difference between those two scenarios.

My chest heaved, and I sobbed as I had rarely sobbed before. See, I knew this feeling. I knew it well. This was what it felt like, time and time again in my life, when I had to crush an idol, admit that it was wasn't God, and put Jesus back in his place. And what I had displaced Jesus with, in this instance (as in so many), was a *good* thing. A great thing. Something that came from God's own hand.

Most of our idols are such things. But they are, in every case, *created* things, *distinct* from the Creator God Himself. And when we elevate a created thing to the place only the Creator God was meant to hold in our lives, we worship at a pagan altar. People sometimes push back when I say this. "You can't separate God and his Word," they tell me. "Show me one place in the Bible where it suggests that Jesus is higher than the Bible," they challenge (just think through the circularity of that challenge). But if they hadn't already put Jesus in such perverse relation to Scripture, they could answer their own questions, straight from their Bibles. The Bible clearly teaches that Creation is the word of God. It is God's revelation, by which he speaks his glories to the world (Ps. 19; Romans 1; Acts 14:17). Creation speaks the very words of God, and;

"Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world."
(Ps 19:4)

Yet no one would dare suggest that it is ok to regard creation and God as "equal" or "indivisible" or "both equally essential." This is pantheism.

Wayne Grudem asks at the very start of his systematic theology instruction, "What are the different forms of the Word of God?...What is meant by the phrase “the Word of God”? Actually, there are several different meanings taken by this phrase in the Bible." He goes on to lists The Word of God as speech by God, God's words as speech through human lips, God's written words in the Bible (which he explains as the special focus of theology), and in his footnotes notes non-verbal forms, "In addition to the forms of God’s Word mentioned above, God communicates to people through different types of 'general revelation'—that is, revelation that is given not just to certain people but to all people generally. General revelation includes both the revelation of God that comes through nature (see Ps. 19:1–6; Acts 14:17) and the revelation of God that comes through the inner sense of right and wrong in every person's heart (Rom. 2:15)." Yet he starts his list of definitions by explaining the first in importance (but rarely found) use, which is, "The Word of God" as a Person: Jesus Christ" (Wayne A. Grudem, Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine, 2004, pg. 47)."

We can clearly see when we think of the word of God in Creation, or the word of God in our conscience, that to claim that God's speech is somehow identical to his Person is rampant idolatry. And such examples makes clear that God speaks in many ways, but Jesus is God's *highest* revelation of himself. Jesus is both God's highest Word, and God himself in human flesh. That cannot be said about any other means by which God speaks. Thus, Jesus is regarded by the biblical writers as higher than every other means by which God has spoken, including the Bible. The author of Hebrews starts out by comparing Jesus and all prior revelation;

> *"Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power."*
> *- ESV, Heb 1:1–3.*

And goes on to argue that the incarnate Jesus is superior to every other form of Revelation. He's higher than the decrees that created the world, and higher than the world created. He's higher than the word given through angels. He's higher than the law of Moses, and higher than the Moses it was given through. Because other forms of revelation are *from* God and *about* God and point *towards* God - but Jesus *is God* in the flesh. Anything that is not God that becomes the center of our affections is an idol, which distracts of from the worship of God himself. Even if it's a very Christian-shaped altar. Even if it's an altar shaped surprisingly like a leather bound book that has come from the hand of God himself.

"They worshiped and served the creation rather than the Creator..."

I think this is a blasphemy we Protestants are probably especially prone to, due to the high view of Scripture contained in our doctrine of *Sola Scriptura.* And I think the danger increases, the "higher" the view of the Bible one holds. Which is why in KJVO groups, I regularly encounter folks who are convinced that the Bible they hold in their hand is equal to God. Don't get me wrong. I love the Bible. And I believe, deeply, that it is the Word of God. I hold to *Sola Scriptura* quite firmly (though not what is sometimes termed *Nuda Scriptura*). Yes, I believe with Augustine that *when the Bible speaks, God speaks.* But to say this is to say the Bible is God's *speech* - it should never be misconstrued to suggest that the Bible is equal to God *Himself.*

The Bible isn't where my foundation is found. The Bible isn't where I lay my insecurities, questions, doubts, and fears. The Bible isn't who I turn to when in need of love. The Bible didn't redeem me. The Bible is the place where I've encountered God a thousand times. I meet him in its pages everyday. And I will continue to do so. Biblical study consumes most of my time apart from work and sleep. Each wall of my bedroom is covered with biblical commentaries and exegetical works that help me to study the biblical text well. But this biblical study would be worthless if it didn't cause me to encounter the *Person* of the Risen Christ.

The Bible is as distinct from God as a love letter written by a man's wife is distinct from the person of his wife. No one who loves a woman can really confuse the two. No one who loves a woman thinks they are equal, or inseperable, as some adamantly claim Christ and the Bible to be. No one who loves a women gets angry at a hypothetical question like, "If you had to chose between having that letter and having your wife, which would you choose?" They know inherently that love for their wife means any other answer than the right one is a grotesque perversion which reveals that something in the relationship has gone terribly, terribly, wrong.

"Jesus and the Bible are not 'equals.' Anyone who says they are blasphemes."

I grow weary of people telling me that "Jesus and the Bible are equal." Or getting angry when I suggest that they are in no way "equal." I'm sorry - You have a perverse bibliology if you think that, and a hopelessly low view of Jesus. Jesus and the Bible are not "equals." The Bible is not a part of the Trinity (though I have had some assure me that it is!). Yes, the Bible and Christ are both important. But as in the old game we played as children, "One of these things is not like the other."

> Because one *is God*.
> The other is *not-God*.

And it is incredibly telling to me that so many seem to face such confusion in regards to the Bible. For some, they have fallen in love with the letter written, they have enshrined it in a glass case, and they make weekly pilgrimage to the place where they pay it homage. And I fear that in doing so, they may have missed the one they should love.
Blasphemy. Rank blasphemy.

Jesus is the one I worship. He is the one I serve. No one else. No *thing* else. And the Bible, precious and God-wrought and inspired though I believe it to be, is decidedly a thing. Jesus is God. Jesus being alive is absolute central to the Christian faith. Because he *is* the Christian faith. If He's not alive, we have nothing. Nietzsche's words (originally meant to say something quite different) would turn out to be right. God is dead.

"It is Christ Himself, not the Bible, who is the true word of God. The Bible, read in the right spirit and with the guidance of good teachers will bring us to Him."
- C. S. Lewis

But God is *not* dead, because *Jesus* is not dead. The Bible is a divine exposition of the gospel message that allows us to see all its contours and sides and manifold beauty. The Bible should be uplifted. It should be studied. It should be read and listened to and obeyed. But it exists only to point us to this risen Jesus. And if it did so as a merely human collection of merely human documents, this wouldn't change this fact in the slightest. Jesus would still be alive. And I would still be in him. It seems fitting to end with the words of Warfield (which he himself repeated so often). Words which exalt the Bible as God's revelation to man, in proper relation to Christ as the God-Man;

> "With this conclusion I may fitly close. But how can I close without expression of thanks to Him who has so loved us as to give us so pure a record of His will,—God-given in all its parts, even though cast in the forms of human speech,—infallible in all its statements,—divine even to its smallest particle! I am far from contending that without such an inspiration there could be no Christianity. Without any inspiration we could have had Christianity; yea, and men could still have heard the truth, and through it been awakened, and justified, and sanctified and glorified. The verities of our faith would remain historically proven true to us—so bountiful has God been in his fostering care—even had we no Bible; and through those verities, salvation. But to what uncertainties and doubts would we be the prey!—to what errors, constantly begetting worse errors, exposed!—to what refuges, all of them refuges of lies, driven! Look but at those who have lost the knowledge of this infallible guide: see them evincing man's most pressing need by inventing for themselves an infallible church, or even an infallible Pope. Revelation is but half revelation unless it be infallibly communicated; it is but half communicated unless it be infallibly recorded. The heathen in their blindness are our witnesses of what becomes of an unrecorded revelation. Let us bless God, then, for His inspired word! And may He grant that we may always cherish, love and venerate it, and conform all our life and thinking to it! So may we find safety for our feet, and peaceful security for our souls."

- Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield: Revelation and Inspiration*, 1:424–425.

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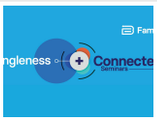

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6 Comments

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Timothy Berg

I've meant to add this interesting quotation from C.S. Lewis to the above post, but haven't yet. In a letter where a lady had written to him asking about the infalliblity of the Bible, Lewis responded, "

Dear Mrs. Johnson

I am returning your letter with the questions in it numbered so that you'll know wh. I am answering....

(5.) It is Christ Himself, not the Bible, who is the true word of God. The Bible, read in the right spirit and with the guidance of good teachers will bring us to Him. When it becomes really necessary (i.e. for our spiritual life, not for controversy or curiosity) to know w… See more

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Timothy Berg

Some additional very helpful thoughts can be found here;

Church History	Eschatology	Kingdom
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Homosexuality	Journal Of Travels	Kingdom Chronicles
Kingdom Of God	Kjvonly	Lewis
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Mattthew	Minimal Facts	Music
Nt	Oh My God	Omg
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Timothy Berg

"With this conclusion I may fitly close. But how can I close without expression of thanks to Him who has so loved us as to give us so pure a record of His will,—God-given in all its parts, even though cast in the forms of human speech,—infallible in all its statements,—divine even to its smallest particle! I am far from contending that without such an inspiration there could be no Christianity. Without any inspiration we could have had Christianity; yea, and men could still have heard the truth, and through it been awakened, and justified, and sanctified and glorified. The verities of our fait… See more

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"Let it not be said that thus we found the whole Christian system upon the doctrine of plenary inspiration. We found the whole Christian system on the doctrine of plenary inspiration as little as we found it upon the doctrine of angelic existences. Were there no such thing as inspiration, Christianity would be true, and all its essential doctrines would be credibly witnessed to us in the generally trustworthy reports of the teaching of our Lord and of His authoritative agents in founding the Church, preserved in the writings of the apostles and their first followers, and in the historical witn… See more

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"Christ is before the Bible, and is the beginning and end of the Bible. Evangelical Christians believe in the Bible because they believe in Christ, and not vice versa."

- Phillip Schaff
https://ref.ly/o/6.10.3/14417251?length=167

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