

What is the Bible?

I've asked some pretty fundamental questions over these past few months about myself and about my faith. So, as a 'Bible-believing Christian', what more fundamental a question could I ask than 'What is the Bible?'

But if we believe the Bible is in any sense 'God-breathed' (inspired), then we have to base our understanding of the Bible on the nature of the God who breathed it. So what is this God like who inspired the scriptures?

The church has always seen God as a communicating God, one who speaks. We see God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, eternally existing, three persons in one God, each in communication with the other – so it is God's eternal nature is to be in communication, in relationship, in love: God is love.

How then does this communicating God communicate with us?

*In the past God **spoke** to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has **spoken** to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. (Hebrews 1:1,2)*

*In the beginning was the **Word**, and the **Word** was with God, and the **Word** was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. (John 1:1-3)*

God is a communicator, indeed God **IS** communication: God is **the Word**.

So with that as our firm basis, let's ask again, what is the Bible? First off, is it **the word of God**?

I looked this up on Google (as you do!). The first hit (apart from a JW website) is from *biblestudytools.com*, a huge resource of Bible materials, and I can't find anything to suggest it was set up by some wacky, extreme sect, yet it says:

What does the Bible say about the **W**ord of God? Since the Bible is often considered the "**W**ord of God" there is much to find about this topic in scripture. **The Bible is referred to as the Word of God** meaning it can be considered a **direct line of communication** from the Lord, interpreted by the authors of the respective books. (*my emphasis*)

Really?! In my NIV New Testament, 'the **W**ord of God' occurs only once, and that's in Revelation and refers to Jesus; and then there are 37 occurrences of 'the **w**ord of God'. I've looked through them all, and I can't find even one that can be read as 'the Bible'; they all seem to me to refer to 'communication about God' (by whatever means), or 'the communication **of** God'.

Does the Bible say **anything** about 'the Bible'? How about: *All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. (2 Tim 3:16)*

But what did Paul mean by ‘all scripture’? Does he mean ‘the Bible’ (as we have it today)? No, he couldn’t have meant that, because some of it hadn’t yet been written! So unless you think it was a prophetic statement, then it must have been a more general statement: all holy writings are inspired by God and can be useful. (Which holy writings? And are they *totally* inspired or *partially* inspired? That’s a whole other question, maybe for another time!)

But don’t worry! I’m not in **any** sense rubbishing the Bible; indeed, the Bible is more important to me now than it has ever been – I’ve certainly never, ever studied it as intensively as I have recently. But I think that **over-claiming** things for the Bible actually brings it into **disrepute**, and stops outsiders taking it seriously.

I’m involved in what one of my authors calls ‘faithful questioning’: because I have come to know and love God so much more of late, and because I trust him more than ever, I am happy to go to God and ask, ‘Abba, what **IS** the Bible?’

In one sense, the Bible is just words on a page, and those words were written by a huge range of different authors, in different languages, at different times in history. Were those authors perfect? No. Were their writings dictated word for word by God? No. Well, I don’t believe they were.

Can we read what they actually wrote? No, we can’t – well, I can’t, because all I can read is my English NIV (or other translations). So, by what process, through what chain, does the information pass, on which I feed my soul as I have my quiet time this morning?

Original authors – write – **Greek/Hebrew texts** – copied– **theologians/translators** – translate – **English text** – Paul Bev. interprets – **feeds his soul**. As a purely mechanical process, is that correct? If so then that doesn’t seem to me to be a very ‘direct line of communication’.

Again, don’t worry. I’m a man of faith, and I’m faithfully questioning, and God is, by nature, a communicating God. So let’s look at this **chain** of communication again, and this time, let’s add God’s input by his Holy Spirit...

HS inspires...	Authors	write...
HS inspires...	Gk/Heb texts	copied...
HS inspires...	Theol’s/Trans.	translate...
HS inspires...	English text	interpret...
HS inspires...	Paul’s soul	

This picture might be a bit simplistic, but although I do not believe that the Bible infallible†, I have **complete** confidence in the **communicating God** who has used the efforts of fallible humans to provide us with such a wonderful document to point us to **the Word** of God.

As an enquiring Cambridge student who had recently come to faith and had discovered real love for the first time (coming from a dysfunctional family), I met an elderly gentleman (who was probably aged 50 or 60!) at a Christian conference centre. I said that I could see that the Christian message was good, but I realised that it could only be true if the Bible was true.

‘Would a God who loves you that much give you an **unreliable** document on which to base your faith?!’ And that response has stuck with me for 50 years.

So yes, I **can** have confidence in the Bible only because I can have complete confidence in the **Person** who inspired the process by which that Bible has touched my heart. Yes, I know that's a circular argument; I know it doesn't **prove** anything, but neither can you prove that someone loves you – you just **know**.

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Next time: How then do we **interpret** scripture, based on our relationship with God?

Paul Bev. 15.2.19

†The note-writer in my NIV Study Bible claims that the Holy Spirit's involvement is '*so powerful and pervasive that what is written is the infallible and authoritative word of God*'.