

Purpose of Our Study

With these notes, we want to learn some highlights of the Christian teaching regarding the Bible.

Outline of Study

I will outline the study using a chronological method where we start with the origin of the Scriptures and move forward until the present time, when our concern is translation and determination of the meaning.

1. A Problem
2. What is/is not the Bible?
3. Inspiration
4. Preservation
5. Canonization
6. Translation
7. Illumination
8. Interpretation

1. A Problem

Before getting into the study, there is a chicken-and-egg problem to think about. We want to discuss the Bible, but we have to do so from the Bible itself. Or, looking at it another way, if we want to know about God, we cannot do so apart from the Bible, which reveals God to us. So which do we study first—God or the Bible? Some would argue that we are reasoning in a tight circle and that such is folly.

The best approach to handle this quandary is simply to admit that you recognize it, and explain that reasoning in this way is simply a necessity by virtue of reality. When God is the ultimate starting point of all things, and has only revealed Himself in the Bible, there is no other starting point we can come from. We reason in a circle because our system of thought is consistent. Otherwise you don't really reason at all—you leap into the dark.

2. What is/is not the Bible?

The Bible is the 66 books of the Old and New Testament as commonly held by the Protestant church. It does NOT include the Quran, the apocryphal books, the book of Mormon, or any other religious material.

3. Inspiration

Inspiration refers to the miracle by which God superintended the writing of the Bible such that it is exactly what He wanted to communicate to mankind. As such, it is true, i.e. free from error or *inerrant*. It cannot fail, i.e. it is *infallible*. It is complete in that it is not missing anything God wanted to communicate. The Bible is all and only God's Words. 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:19-21 are the key texts backing up this doctrine.

4. Preservation

Once each book of the Bible was completed, God through good providence preserved the books in the original languages so that they would exist down to our day. He even preserved the books in other languages to which they were translated. There is no promise in the Bible of miraculous preservation, but there are indirect references to it in Psalm 119:152 and 160.

5. Canonization

This word is often a source of confusion for believers. The *canon* refers to the books of the Bible, or more technically to the list of the books recognize as being

in the Bible. If a book such as Nehemiah is in the list, it is said to be a *canonical* book. If a book such as Esdras is not in the list, it is said to be *non-canonical*. The process of *canonization* has to do with the corporate recognition of the church as to the canonical characteristic of the book. Note that men **recognize** the canonical books, they do not make them such. Possible oblique references to the canon might be 1 Thess. 4:2, 2 Thess. 3:6 where Paul appeals to the believers to recognize that what he is saying is from God.

When does this all take place? A book belonged in the canon immediately upon its composition. And with Moses' writings, it was recognized as such immediately, being placed with the ark of the covenant. Other books, such as Paul's writings, were collected and recognized as canonical early in church history, i.e. they were corporately recognized some time after Paul wrote. But among Protestants, there is really no substantial debate as to which books are Bible books and which are not.

6. Translation

What we have discussed so far is the Bible as it is in the Hebrew language (OT) and Greek language (NT). But we are thankful for the diligent and difficult work of godly men who translated the Bible out of the original tongues into our native English or Chinese or Spanish or whatever so we can actually read it! Nehemiah 8:8 refers to translation on a small scale; and there are several texts that offer a translation for us (Matt. 1:23; Mark 5:41, 15:22, 34; John 1:38, 41; Acts 4:36, Rom. 8:14, Gal. 4:6).

7. Illumination

In the introductory set of notes, we mentioned that the ability to study theology rests on help from God. We call this help *illumination*. We need God to "turn on the light" so to speak so we can accept the Bible as God's Word, and truly understand the Bible and its impact for us. Please refer again to 1 Cor. 2:6-16, as well as 1 John 2:20, 27.

8. Interpretation

Finally in this study, we need to think about whether it is possible to interpret the Bible and how best to go about doing it.

First, there is post-modern notion today that truth is not absolute, that it is just relative to what the reader wants to make of it. There is also the skeptical notion that you cannot understand what God has written. Contrary to these ideas, we believe we can understand the Scriptures because they are essentially clear. They are *perspicuous*. See Psalm 19:7-11, 119:105, 130; 2 Peter 1:19.

Second, the most natural way to go about understanding the Bible is in to understand it according to its plain, normal, or literal sense. To do so, we need to examine each passage carefully in its grammatical and historical context. To pull a verse out of a paragraph and study it standing alone would be wrong. Similarly, to forget the historical setting and audience of a verse would be wrong. Many good ideas might come of such poorly-directed study, but many bad ones would as well. The Scriptures often use figures of speech, and these convey a literal truth to us.

There is another false notion that the Bible (or any writing for that matter), can mean multiple things at the same time. Against this, note that there is one proper interpretation of each passage of Scripture, not many. There are potentially many applications or implications of a text, but there is only one meaning. MAP