

# Characteristics of Scripture

## 1 INTRODUCTION

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Having discussed the concept of biblical inspiration, we now have an appropriate foundation to understand the numerous qualities or characteristics that flow out of that process. Inspiration, after all, indicates that the Bible comes from God himself. In the text, we find the very words of God. Therefore, the character of God informs the character of Scripture, and the various characteristics of Scripture discussed in this section are based on that premise.

## 2 AUTHORITY

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If God is authoritative, then Scripture must be authoritative as well. That is a fundamental conclusion we must draw from the doctrine of inspiration. If Scripture is, in fact, God's written word, then it carries the weight of divine authority.

Most theological discussions of scriptural authority subjugate inspiration under the broader category of scriptural authority. That is, they treat inspiration and authority as essentially one and the same. But as we already discussed, it's better to think of inspiration as the process through which Scripture was produced. Authority, on the other hand, is a quality or attribute of Scripture. It cannot carry the authority it does if it was produced by any other process because it would not be God's word.

But since it is God's word, it is absolutely authoritative. God is, after all, the ultimate authority in the universe. No one has a higher authority than him, nor did he derive his authority from anything or anyone else. His authority is ontological—it derives from the very nature of his being (Ps 62:11; 2 Chron 20:6). We see this fact plainly in the fact that God created all things (Gen 1-2), and therefore owns all things (Ps 24:1), and will ultimately consume all things (2 Pet 3:10). Any power held or exercised by someone on earth has been divinely delegated to them from God (Rom 13:1). While this authority is real, it is not ontological. They possess it because it has been given to them. But God's authority is not derived but inherent.

Thus, to speak of the Bible as the very words of the all-authoritative God means that what it says carries the full weight of his authority. We must read the Bible as if they are God speaking directly to us, because they *are* God speaking directly to us! The conclusion we must draw from the Bible's authority is that "to disbelieve or disobey any word of Scripture is to disbelieve or disobey God himself."<sup>1</sup> This applies to the individual as well as to the church, and has practical implications for personal spiritual life, evangelism, and preaching (2 Tim 4:2).

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<sup>1</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 81-82.

MacArthur and Mayhue give a helpful summary of God's authority in Scripture:<sup>2</sup>

1. It is *not* derived authority bestowed by humans; rather, it is the *original* authority of God.
2. It does *not* change with the times, the culture, the nation, or the ethnic background; rather, it is the *unalterable* authority of God.
3. It is *not* one authority among many possible spiritual authorities; rather, it is the *exclusive* spiritual authority of God.
4. It is *not* an authority that can be successfully challenged or rightfully overthrown; rather, it is the *permanent* authority of God.
5. It is *not* a relativistic or subordinate authority; rather, it is the *ultimate* authority of God.
6. It is *not* merely a suggestive authority; rather, it is the *obligatory* authority of God.
7. It is *not* a benign authority in its outcome; rather, it is the *consequential* authority of God.

## 3 TRUTHFULNESS

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The Bible continually affirms the truthfulness of God. He is called “the un-lying God” (Tit 1:2) who is faithful and incapable of denying himself (2 Tim 2:13). The writer to the Hebrews writes that “it is impossible for God to lie” (Heb 6:18; cf. Num 23:19). If God is true, trustworthy, and without error, then Scripture must be true, trustworthy, and without error as well.

We see throughout the pages of Scripture an explicit trust in the truthfulness and trustworthiness of the Bible:

- “Now, O sovereign Yahweh, you are God, and your words are truth” (2 Sam 7:28)
- “The words of Yahweh are pure words; as silver tried in a furnace on the earth, refined seven times (Ps 12:6)
- “Every word of God is tested; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him” (Prov 30:5)
- “Forever, O Yahweh, your word is fixed in the heavens” (Ps 119:89)
- “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Matt 24:35)
- “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17)

That final passage is particularly revealing, in that it asserts that Scripture is very much the *ultimate* standard of truth. Had Jesus simply said, “Your word is true,” he would be saying that the Bible conforms to a higher standard. It is true because it conforms to the truth—something *outside* the Bible. But Jesus, rather, calls it “truth”—it is the very standard by which we know what is true.<sup>3</sup>

### 3.1 INERRANCY

Scriptural inerrancy refers to that quality of Scripture whereby, “when all facts are known, the Scriptures in their original autographs and properly interpreted will be shown to be wholly true in everything that

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<sup>2</sup> John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Biblical Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 107.

<sup>3</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 83.

they affirm, whether that has to do with doctrine or morality or with social, physical, or life sciences.”<sup>4</sup> It is a topic directly related with the truthfulness of Scripture because it has to do with the Scripture’s reliability. If Scripture can be shown to contain errors in the original, then it directly impinges the character and nature of God.

The issue of biblical inerrancy did not arise to any great extent until the Enlightenment (ca. AD 1650-1815), when skeptical unbelievers began challenging the historical and scientific reliability of the text. Surveying the various literature from the past century gives us an idea of the various objections to inerrancy:

- Inerrancy is irreconcilable with the human nature of the biblical authors
- Modern science has definitely destroyed the old idea of a perfect Bible
- Mistakes made by copyists are evident from the variations in the different manuscripts
- The NT writers seem to have taken liberties with the OT text

Most of these have already been addressed in early portions of this series. The superintendence of the Holy Spirit makes the humanness of the biblical writers a moot point. The doctrine of divine accommodation answers the question of scientific inaccuracies. The fact that the process of inspiration applied only to the original documents settles the issue of copyist errors. The issue of the NT use of the OT is complex, but the charge of “taking liberties” with the OT simply reveals the presuppositions inherent in this argument.

In reality, the underlying objection of all of these is found in the limitations that inerrancy places on the freedom of bible critics. If the Bible is inerrant, then it has an authority over the critic—an authority that limits his autonomy. This is the true issue at hand. As Barrick observes, there are only three forms of spiritual authority:

1. The authority of the Lord and his written revelation
2. The authority of the church and its “infallible pope(s)”
3. The authority of human reason and its self-styled sovereignty

The great battles of church history have ultimately been over which authority truly reigns.

So once again, we return to the definition of inerrancy: *Inerrancy means that when all facts are known, the Scriptures in their original autographs and properly interpreted will be shown to be wholly true in everything they affirm, whether that has to do with doctrine or morality or with social, physical, or life sciences.*

The wording of this definition is critical to understanding inerrancy. Note the three factors involved in biblical inerrancy:

- **“When all the facts are known”:** when difficulties arise which seem to constitute biblical errors, the answer may just lie in information yet to be understood by us. There have, in fact, been countless instances in which supposed scientific errors in Scripture have turned out to be wholly factual with the revelation of more data.

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<sup>4</sup> Paul D. Feinberg, “The Meaning of Inerrancy,” in *Inerrancy*, ed. by Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 294.

- **“the Scriptures in their original autographs”**: The statement concerning the original autographs makes it clear that the claim to inerrancy does not apply necessarily to the copying process, and thus copying errors don’t constitute biblical errors, for they don’t actually reflect the original.
- **“and properly interpreted”**: Another important clause in this statement concerns the necessity of proper interpretation. It could very well be that the existence of errors in the text is actually the result of bad interpretation. The problem, then, is with *us* rather than the text.

When these factors are observed, the Scriptures will prove to be wholly without error in everything it teaches.

### 3.2 INFALLIBILITY

The basic definition of biblical infallibility means that the Scriptures are not liable to fail or mislead. In other words, divine inspiration assures us that Scripture will never fail us or mislead us. In short, it affirms that it true and reliable in all the matters it addresses.

However, in more recent decades, infallibility became the term of choice used by scholars who hold to “limited inerrancy.” As David wrote, “The Bible is infallible if and only if it makes no false or misleading statements on any matter of faith or practice.” In other words, limited inerrancy became a way of holding to the “essential” inerrancy of Scripture yet allowing for errors in historical and scientific matters. Such theologians held that these errors did not affect the truthfulness of Scripture, since inerrancy only applied to such matters as doctrinal and ethical issues. Infallibility became the way of affirming these positives while avoiding the buzzword of “inerrancy.”

Nevertheless, the term has its uses in understanding the characteristics of Scripture. For our purposes, we can distinguish inerrancy and infallibility in this way: inerrancy deals with the reliability and accuracy of Scripture while infallibility deals with its effectiveness. In other words, infallibility affirms that God’s word always accomplishes God’s purposes.

## 4 CLARITY

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Another characteristic that flows out of the doctrine of inspiration is the perspicuity or clarity of Scripture. If Scripture is God’s actual words, and if God is all-powerful and all-wise, then it follows that he is able to speak in such a way that he can clearly communicate with those to whom it addresses. Thus, we might say that at its root, the clarity of Scripture means that “the Bible accurately reveals and clearly communicates God’s message.”<sup>5</sup>

This is not to say that the Bible is always easy to understand, or that every time God speaks, we are guaranteed to understand him. On more than one occasion, Jesus spoke in such a way so as to conceal his message from the Jews on the basis of their official rejection of him as Messiah (Matt 13:3, 11). Instead, we find that diligent study is expected of any student of Scripture (2 Tim 2:15), and we find numerous

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<sup>5</sup> MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 105.

examples of biblical writers who applied themselves to the task of studying Scripture (e.g., Dan 10:12; Ezra 7:10; 1 Pet 1:10-12). Peter affirmed that Paul's letters were indeed difficult to understand (2 Pet 3:15-16).

Nevertheless, despite these affirmations, Scripture provides clear internal testimony to its clarity. Deuteronomy 6:6-7 instructs Israel to teach the commandments of the law to their children and discuss them regularly throughout the day, an instruction that assumes a level of competence that goes beyond mere memorization. Psalm 1:2 identifies the blessed man as the one who continually meditates on the law, and Psalm 19:7 indicates that the law is able to impart understanding so as to make the simple person wise.

Returning to 2 Peter 3:15-16, we find that while Peter did recognize the difficulty in some of Paul's letters, he did not say they were impossible to understand. Rather, the accountability fell on the false teachers who distorted his teachings. In fact, this was a standard practice for Jesus during his earthly ministry. Never did Jesus hold the Scriptures responsible for Israel's lack of faith. Rather, the blame rested on the people. Frequently, Jesus said phrases like,

- "Haven't you read...?" (Matt 12:3, 5; 19:4; 22:31)
- "Have you never read the scriptures?" (Matt 21:42)
- "You don't know the Scriptures" (Matt 22:29)
- "Go and learn..." (Matt 9:13)
- "If you had known what this means..." (Matt 12:7)
- "It is written..." (Matt 21:13)

These phrases make it clear that Jesus viewed Scripture as a clearly-communicated text which the people were able to understand and were thus accountable to obey.

Far from being a scholarly theology textbook, the Bible is a work written predominantly to everyday people. Even the majority of the NT epistles were written not to pastors but to congregations (e.g., 1 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:2; Phil 1:1), and their authors assumed that their readers would understand what was written. Thus, John states that the miracles of Jesus recorded in his gospel narrative are there so that they be believe, a response that assumes his readers will understand his writing and come to an accurate understanding of Jesus' identity (John 20:30-31). Paul instructs the Colossian church to pass on his letter to the church in Laodicea and to read the letter that is coming from them (Col 4:16). In fact, Paul intentionally wrote for his readers to understand (2 Cor 1:13; cf. Eph 3:4). We also must remember that Paul's letters were written to churches comprised of mostly Gentile Christians with little or no Jewish background or OT knowledge. Yet Paul still expected his readers to understand his teaching and respond in obedience (Rom 12:1; Eph 4:1; etc.).

So if Scripture is clear, then is there misunderstanding concerning Scripture's meaning? There are several reasons for this, the first and most critical being the spiritual and moral disposition of the reader. We must recognize that reading the Bible *with understanding* is not merely an academic endeavor—it is deeply spiritual and moral. While the Scripture is objectively clear, it will not appear to be so to the spiritually-closed. First Corinthians 2:14 notes that unbelievers are not able to "receive" (i.e., accept or assent to) the things of the Spirit of God and "cannot understand them." Their spiritual disposition is one of hostility, and they view God's revelation, particularly in the gospel, as foolishness (cf. 1 Cor 1:18-3:4), and they read the Scriptures with "closed minds" (2 Cor 3:14; cf. 4:3).

In this way, the doctrine of illumination, which is so critical in bringing a person to recognize the inspiration and authority of Scripture, is also that which helps them affirm its clarity as well. Yet we must not misunderstand illumination. It doesn't refer to some act where Scripture "comes alive" subjectively, or to some new special revelation given, or even to a guarantee that someone will immediately understand the Scripture's meaning. Illumination has to do with giving the reader a *receptivity* to Scripture authority, a *conviction* of Scripture's truthfulness, and a *capacity* to discern Scripture's meaning under the aid of the Spirit.<sup>6</sup>

Likewise, Scripture's meaning can be obscured by an unrighteous disposition in the believer. While freed from the hostility and darkness that once marked their spiritual nature, believers nevertheless struggle against remaining sin. The author of the epistle to the Hebrews noted that he desired to discuss in more detail topics like Christ's priesthood but was unable to because of their spiritual immaturity. While they should have been well-versed in theology so as to accurately teach truth, instead they needed remedial instruction—"milk, not solid food." They were not able to understand the deeper, weightier doctrines concerning Christ and his ministries because they had not matured beyond the point of conversion (Heb 5:11-14). Thus, as Grudem remarks,

*Scripture is able to be understood by all unbelievers who will read it sincerely seeking salvation, and by all believers who will read it while seeking God's help in understanding it. This is because in both causes the Holy Spirit is at work overcoming the effects of sin, which otherwise will make the truth appear to be foolishness.*<sup>7</sup>

We see throughout the NT that both the disciples and the early church had times where they misunderstood Scripture. Sometimes this had to do with their hard-heartedness (Luke 24:25). At other times, misunderstanding resulted from the fact that the disciples and the early church were caught in a period of spiritual and theological transition in the redemptive plan of God. Thus, the early church had immense discussions over the relationship of Gentiles to the gospel (Acts 15), and these discussions reflected their engagement in the struggle to understand the changes happening in redemptive history.

Many times throughout church history and even in contemporary theology, there are doctrinal disagreements among God's people. Such instances don't negate the clarity of Scripture, for this doctrine doesn't imply that all of God's people will be unified over doctrine. ***What it does imply, however, is that when there is disagreement, the problem is with us and not with Scripture.***<sup>8</sup>

In reality, there are two causes for the disagreements believers have over Scripture. First, it could be that we are trying to make the Scriptures speak to issues where it actually is silent. Sometimes, we just have to admit that God has not addressed our question or topic directly. In such cases, the believer must be led by biblical wisdom and charity to those who come to different conclusions.

Second, disagreements can result from our failure to rightly interpret Scripture. This, we must honestly admit, is a very real possibility. Our distance from the historical, cultural, and linguistic contexts of the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>7</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 108.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 109.

Bible leave us increasingly vulnerable to misinterpretation. We may lack a critical historical detail of import, or a lack of familiarity with the nuances of the language, or an ignorance as to the theological or moral backdrop of the text. Principles of interpretation (hermeneutics) have been developed to aid the interpreter in reconstructing the meaning of the biblical text. Yet Bible study is a process in which believers grow and skill and maturity, and our theological and cultural presuppositions have a tangible influence on our interpretations. Recognizing this allows us to be generous with those who differ, while stand in conviction concerning those things to which we do agree. The encouraging reality is that, despite the numerous points about which Christians disagree doctrinally, there is amazing agreement over the core tenets of the faith.

Thus, in summary, we may define the clarity of Scripture in this way: ***The Bible is written in such a way that its teachings are able to be understood by all who will read it seeking God's help and being willing to follow it.***<sup>9</sup> It is an important doctrine, especially in light of the rise of postmodern thought and its influence in Christian theology, which has attached the doctrine of Scripture's clarity in order to promote a hermeneutic which accommodates and even celebrates doctrinal uncertainty.

## 5 SUFFICIENCY

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A fourth characteristic produced by inspiration is the sufficiency of Scripture. By that, we mean that Scripture provides all the revelation God intended for us to have for salvation and ongoing sanctification.

Believers recognize the exclusivity of salvation in Christ—that “there is no other name under heaven...by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). But we must also affirm that only in Scripture do we find the message of that gospel that saves. To this, Paul writes that in Scripture we find that which is “able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim 3:15). And Peter concurs that we “have been born against...through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Pet 1:23). Thus, we find that Scripture is **sufficient** to lead us to saving faith. There is no other revelation necessary and no subjective or mysterious spiritual experience required.

Similarly, Scripture also affirms that it provides everything the believer requires for living the Christian life. To this, the familiar words of Paul make their appearance once again: “All Scripture is God breathed and profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17). In particular, verse 17 uncovers the extent of Scripture's sufficiency. It provides teaching for how we must live, what we must believe, and what God expects from us. It offers reproof for those who are in sin, uncovering not only action but also intentions and heart motivations (cf. Heb 4:12). It offers correction to the wayward, showing him the correct attitudes, beliefs, and actions that he should put enact in the place of his sin (Eph 4:20-24). And it trains the believer in righteousness, illustrating the practical outworking of the doctrine it teaches.

The result of these effects are that the believer is “complete” and “equipped for **every** good work.” This means that there is no “good work” that is supplied to the believer outside of Scripture. As the opening verse of Psalm 119 makes clear, the “blameless” man is the one who “walks in the law of Yahweh” (Ps

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 108.

119:1). As Grudem aptly comments, “All that God requires of us is recorded in his written Word: simply to do all that the Bible commands us is to be blameless in God’s sight.”<sup>10</sup> Of course, there are aids to the believer in the sanctification process. The community of the church provides a structure grounded in grace and love, where believers edify each other through the exercise of spiritual gifts. Particularly, pastors and teachers offer divinely-ordained assistance in this process (Eph 4:11-12). However, we must recognize that their ministry is not in supplement to the Scripture, but rather is grounded in and informed by Scripture. Thus, Paul commands Timothy to “preach the word” (2 Tim 4:2) and Peter instructs those with speaking gifts to speak “as one who is speaking the utterances of God” (1 Pet 4:11). So even the teaching ministry of the church is one of Word-based ministry, yet another assent to Scripture’s sufficiency to equip the believer for godliness.

In summary then, we can affirm the words of Peter when he writes that God in his divine power “has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, ***through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence***” (2 Pet 1:3). While there is much more to this statement than a simple statement concerning Scripture’s sufficiency, it affirms no less. Thus, in summary, we must say that “between the Scriptures and the indwelling Holy Spirit, the believer needs no additional revelation to be informed on how to live the Christian life.”<sup>11</sup>

Attacks on the sufficiency of Scripture have been numerous throughout the ages, but the last century has given rise to two significant assaults. First, the birth of the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, with their numerous revelations, prophecies, visions, and dreams, have distracted believers from the necessity and sufficiency of Scripture. At a foundational level, the Charismatic movement suggests that God is not done speaking to his people, and that Scripture as it stands is insufficient to growing believers in sanctification. Christians, then, are encouraged look beyond the Bible for what God requires of them.

The second great assault on Scripture’s sufficiency came about with the rise of secular psychology. This movement suggests that the Bible is insufficient to deal with the issues of contemporary life. In other words, the Bible simply doesn’t address the problems that the modern person faces. This led great swaths of pastors and counselors to integrate secular psychological theories and approaches into their counseling efforts, and the net result with a loss in the church’s confidence in Scripture’s ability to sufficiently teach and train the believer for righteous living. The modern movement of biblical counseling grew up in direct response to the psychologizing of the church, and it has brought the doctrine of Scripture’s sufficiency to the forefront of the church’s Word ministry. Scripture, indeed, does address the problems that we face in life, and while some of these problems are organic in nature (i.e., medical), it nevertheless can equip the believer to respond and live righteously in light of life’s difficulties.

In summary, Grudem has provided some practice applications for Scripture’s sufficiency:<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>11</sup> MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 105.

<sup>12</sup> Summarized from Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 131-35.



1. The sufficiency of Scripture should encourage us as we try to discover what God would have us to *think...or do*. We should be encouraged that *everything* God wants to tell us about that question is to be found in Scripture.
2. The sufficiency of Scripture reminds us that we are to add nothing to Scripture, and that we are to consider no other writings of equal value to Scripture.
3. The sufficiency of Scripture also tells us that God does not require us to believe anything about himself or his redemptive work that is not found in Scripture.
4. The sufficiency of Scripture reminds us that nothing is sin that is not forbidden by Scripture either explicitly or by implication.
5. The sufficiency of Scripture tells us that nothing is required of us by God that is not commanded in Scripture either explicitly or by implication.
6. The sufficiency of Scripture reminds us that in our doctrinal and ethical teaching we should emphasize what Scripture emphasizes and be content with what God has told us in Scripture.