

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

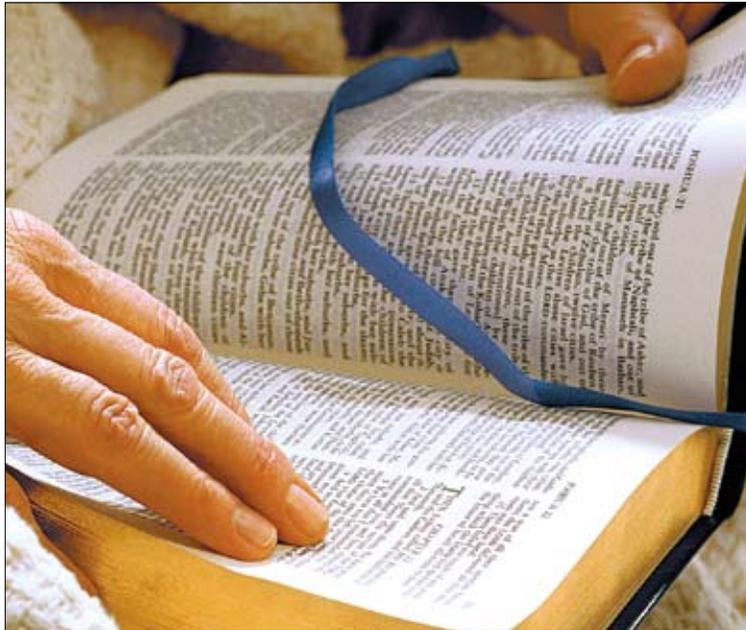
The Word, in its own words

By Carmen Fowler
The Layman

A foundational and therefore essential tenet of the Reformed faith, *sola Scriptura* (by Scripture alone) is being actively undermined. The Bible is considered but one voice among many in the debates plaguing our denominational and cultural life. Further, the voice of the one true God who graciously reveals Himself and His will through the Word, is considered by many to be but one voice on par with all others. When the authority of the Scriptures is undermined, so too is the authority of the Author of them. Where then is the authority for personal and corporate decision making?

The effort here is to understand what the Bible says about itself and to come to terms with our own position in relationship to the God of the Bible. Those who come to the place of fully acknowledging that the God revealed in the Bible is really real and really serious, will then be invited to come to terms with and repent of our failure to submit to God's revealed will. Those who arrive at the place of admitting that they do not submit to what the Bible says because they do not sincerely believe in the God self-revealed therein, will have little reason to continue pursuing the remainder of the study.

If your truth springs from somewhere other than the Bible and from someone other than the God self-revealed therein, please be considerate of those who desire to plumb the depths of what they receive as God's authoritative revelation for faith and life. The attempt here is not for one person to convince by worldly arguments another person of their position, but for each and for all to mutually submit to the power of God's Holy Spirit to renew a deep understanding and acceptance of God's ultimate authority in our lives. This is a study in which God does the work. Our task is to sit with the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and trust that the Author of them will speak through them to His peo-



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Hebrews 4:12-13

ple by the power of His Holy Spirit at work both in the living Word and in the people in whom Christ dwells.

Each of us has people in our circle, friends and family, who do not believe nor receive the Bible as God's self-revelation. That also means that they do not sincerely believe in nor follow the God of the Bible. There is no separating these two points. The desire to understand what the Bible says about itself and to be able to communicate those truths to others is not about “us” but about those who are living in the context of a lie and do not even know it. If you know the truth and the truth has set you free, out of love you use that freedom not for your own licentious living, but in thankful service to the One who set you free, seeking to invite other captives into His train.

Do not be bullied by those who have exchanged the truth of God for lies and actively seek to suppress the truth in this generation. This is not about some people being “right” and others being “wrong.” This is not about hate. To the contrary, this is about love. This is about God's revelation in the Scriptures of the Old and

New Testaments that God is holy and God is love. And yes, that God divides people both on earth and for eternity. For those who believe that the Bible is the Word of God and contains the revealed will of God, this is a heartfelt and gut level motivation to share the good news of God's grace in Jesus Christ with the world. Evangelism is not motivated out of hate or intolerance, but by a genuine desire that none would be lost.

In the words of the Word:

“For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.” Hebrews 4:12-13.

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Week I: Putting the Bible on the witness stand in its own defense

What the Bible says about itself:

Jeremiah 1:9 says, “Then the LORD reached out His hand and touched my mouth and said to me, ‘Now, I have put my words in your mouth.’” Old Testament prophets were literally the mouthpieces of God. Here, Jeremiah, the prophet of God confirms that the words he spoke and the words he subsequently wrote, were not his own. These words are the very words of God.

2 Samuel 23:2 says, “The Spirit of the LORD spoke through me; His word was on my tongue.” When King David spoke these words he was at the end of his life. As God’s anointed one, King David not only lived his life under God’s authority, but as God’s viceroy, with derivative authority to shepherd the people of God.

2 Peter 1:21 says, “For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” This is a clear statement of the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures (at that time, what we have as the Old Testament), not as the words of mere men but penned by the hands of men whom God used to communicate His presence, character and will.

The nature of inspiration is twofold: verbal and plenary. The verbal inspiration of Scripture means that the VERY WORDS used were specifically chosen by God. Consider 1 Corinthians 2:13, “This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.” The words that are used are used for a specific purpose. The plenary inspiration of Scripture means that ALL OF THE WORDS used were chosen for a specific purpose. Remember 2 Timothy 3:16-17: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

So why is inspiration important? Scripture itself testifies to the God-breathed nature of what it says. God’s Word will never lead you into error. Nor will it ever fail.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 is likely the most well known passage from the Bible about the Bible. The Greek word for “God-breathed” is *theopneustos*. *Theopneustos* is a combination of *theos* (God) and *pneuma* (breath). It is a word that Paul created in order to describe what Scripture is. The unique nature of the Bible required its own unique word in order to describe! Scripture sees itself as the self-revelation of the only true God.

For study and discussion

1. Both David and Jeremiah spoke God’s Word. Are they both prophets? What makes a prophet?
2. Are there passages of Scripture in which you find it hard to see an important specific purpose? What is a faithful way to handle those sections: Ignore them, discount them, pray more over them, or put them on the back burner until God gives you more understanding?

EDITOR’S NOTE:

Carmen Fowler is the author of the equipping section that appears in the center of each issue of *The Layman*. Your feedback is greatly appreciated as future studies are planned.

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Week II: Derivative Authority

A person's view of Scripture reveals their view of God. If someone dismisses the commands of the Bible, they are essentially dismissing the authority of God. The Bible possesses no authority in and of itself. All of the Bible's authority is derived from its author.

The first chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith (*Book of Confessions* 6.001-6.010) is instructive here. 6.004 reads, "The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself), the author thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God."

6.006 reads, "The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word; and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed."

6.009 says that "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture, is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it may be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly."

6.010 "The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture."

In a world of competing claims, merely saying that you are something doesn't prove it to be so. As we turn to the proofs and reasons, we confront the same naysayers that have existed throughout human history. God still graciously offers His Word in response.

In 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 God says that He confounds the wisdom of the world with His ultimate wisdom. God's thoughts and God's ways are not the thoughts or ways of the world. In fact, the world sees God and those who believe in God as fools. It should come as no surprise that the Bible is often under attack by those who do not believe in God. If the Author has no authority, neither does His Word.

1 Corinthians 1:22-24 says, "Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." The first century Jews wanted "proof" and the Greeks wanted "reasons" but only those whom God has called to Himself can make sense of the Gospel. To oth-

ers it is a stumbling block and utter foolishness.

If we are going to try to "prove" the veracity of the Bible to an unbelieving world, we are embarking on an impossible task. The plan of God revealed in the Bible simply does not make sense to unbelievers. God must initiate a transformation in the individual before any "proofs" will make an impact and truth becomes unveiled. We must pray that God would work by the power of His Holy Spirit to illumine dark minds, open itchy ears, soften hard hearts and bow stiff necks. As we see God working in someone's life, we must then be ready to come alongside them, and help them to understand the glorious revelation of the Lord our God.

For study and discussion

1. Read Romans 1:16-23. Who is responsible for the dark minds and stopped ears?
2. Read John 16:5-15. Who is responsible for opening ears and bringing light to minds? How have you seen that happen?
3. Read Acts 8:26-39. List all those who are part of the scene and each step in the action. What does this model for us?
4. After reading Psalm 78 note some things God has done in your own life that you should "incline your ear toward the words of His mouth."

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Week III: Many Proofs

There are dozens of Old Testament prophecies fulfilled in the person of Jesus. God keeps His promises. Part of what is going on in the New Testament is the chronicling of God's kept promises revealed in the Old Testament. The following list is simply illustrative. An exhaustive list would take volumes. Jesus was:

- Born in Bethlehem: Micah 5:2 → Luke 2:4-7
- Sold for 30 pieces of silver: Zechariah 11:13 → Matthew 26:15
- Silent when accused: Isaiah 53:7 → Matthew 27:12-14
- Condemned with criminals: Isaiah 53:12 → Luke 23:32-33
- Crucified – hands and feet pierced: Psalm 22:16 → John 19:18
- Side pierced: Isaiah 53:5 → John 19:34
- Buried by a rich man: Isaiah 53:9 → Luke 23:50-53

The Bible was written over a period of 1,500 years, by 40 authors on three different continents. No other religious book comes close to these figures. Consider that these prophecies were spoken more than 500 years before their occurrence. These events were not general predictions such as “the sun will rise tomorrow.”

They were specific and unique forecasts. Leaving the question, what Biblical prophecies are as of yet unfulfilled: Jesus' return? The suffering and turmoil of the last days? A divine judgment? That only those who call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ will be saved? If God's past faithfulness is an indication of future behavior, we must take these things seriously.

But can we be confident that what we have in the Bible today is what was originally communicated? Yes, we can.

Writer	Date of Writer	Earliest Known Copy	Copies
Thucydides	460-400 B.C.	1,300 years AFTER he lived	8
Aristotle (Poetics)	343 B.C.	1,400 years AFTER he lived	5
Caesar (Gallic Wars)	58-50 B.C.	900 years AFTER he lived	9-10

This chart compares some famous ancient writers with the earliest known copies of what they wrote. In other words, Aristotle's Poetics was written in 343 B.C. Our earliest copy is from 1,400 years later (about 1000 A.D.). The last column refers to how many of these earliest copies we have.

Writers	Date of Writers	Earliest Known Copy	Copies
Paul, James, Gospel Writers	40-100 A.D.	40-100 A.D.	5,500+

People don't question whether we have what Aristotle originally wrote even though there were 1,400 years between when he wrote and the five extant copies. Why then do people doubt that the Bible has been accurately transmitted over the years? The proof must be insufficient, right? Wrong.

There were only 70 years between the time of the original writing of the New Testament letters and Gospels and the earliest manuscripts. There are not five copies, but more than 5,000. These numbers give good reason to believe that what we have in the Bible today is what was originally written.

For study and discussion

1. Make your own list of promises – for good or ill – God made and how He fulfilled them. Example Genesis 3: 12, 15, 37.
2. What promises of God do you especially treasure and anticipate? And ones you fear?
3. What promises has God kept in your life?

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Week IV: Dealing with the Naysayers

Two generations ago, acknowledging the Bible as the Word of God might have been seen as “mainstream” thinking in the United States. That is no longer true. As you more fully cultivate a Biblical worldview, you will begin to see all the things of this world that are incompatible with God’s revealed will.

The Christian faith is just as counter-cultural in 21st century America as it was in first century Rome. Like ambassadors from another kingdom, the Christian’s practices will run counter to the ways of the world, impacting the education of our children, the use of our time and talents, the media we view, and yes, our view of sex and marriage. If what is espoused is contrary to the Bible then it is contrary to God. That is the test for those who believe that the Bible is the revealed Word of the real God.

How will believers judge such things? By the power of the Holy Spirit who inspired the Scriptures, illuminates the believer’s study of the Scriptures, and faithfully leads believers into all truth. There are other spirits actively leading people astray into lies. The challenge is to discern the Spirit at work within you and the spirits at work in the world.

When we read the Bible and seek to apply it to our lives we are not submitting to words on a page but to God, the Author of the words – we do not worship the Bible, we worship God; we do not follow the Bible, we follow Jesus Christ. The Bible reveals who God is and God’s desires for us. It is a rule book for the game of life. But it is not overly restrictive, instead, it helps us understand the boundaries, the purpose and the process of a life worth living.

This is admittedly a “high view” of Scripture. Taking such a view does not eliminate all the challenges we face as we study the Scriptures in the context of a skeptical scientific, information age. There are historical and even moral difficulties and some apparent contradictions as we read the Bible. You will find yourself asking, “Why is this passage in the Bible? What in the world was God thinking when He included this?!” There are alarming accounts of man’s inhumanity to man and utter depravity. Some of the difficulties can be explained by the context or translation, but many seeming conflicts remain.

- The love and power of God yet the persistent problem of human suffering;
- The character of God as He sends His people to annihilate other people yet sends His son in the self-sacrificing Christ;
- The absolute sovereignty of God yet the freedom of the human will;
- The eternal covenant with the Jews yet the New Covenant in Jesus Christ.

But just because we can’t get our minds around it does not mean we should abandon the effort. God calls us to work out our own faith with fear and trembling. This is supposed to feel like PT, strengthening warriors for battle. Tragically, many in the American mainline have become couch potatoes, unable to carry our own weight, let alone strong enough to snatch others out of the fire.

For study and discussion

1. Read Philippians 2:12-13. Who is working in the process of our being saved? How do we work together?
2. Read Romans 12:1-2; 2 Timothy 2:22; Philippians 4:8-9; Hebrews 12:1-2. How can these verses help you live counter-culturally?

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Read the Bible in 90 Days: It changes lives

By D. Wayne Bogue
Special to the Layman

Can reading the Bible through in a short time frame actually change lives? Talk to Ted Cooper Jr., founder/executive director of The Bible in 90 Days. By reading 12 pages of Scripture per day, Cooper not only read the entire Bible in 90 days, he also experienced the Spirit of God transform his and his family's lives.

Twelve years ago in 1999, according to Cooper, he and his wife were happy agnostics. Residing in Houston, Texas, the Coopers had a contented, successful life. Cooper was a businessman who specialized in computer consulting. The Coopers were busy raising three children, ages 11, 9 and 7.

As Cooper reported to Electa Draper of *The Denver Post*, "We were nice enough people. We just didn't happen to believe in any of this [faith in Christ] and didn't have time for it." But God, as He often does, brought faith into the family through its youngest members. The children, it turned out, had a curiosity about Christ and wanted to know more.

The Coopers believed their children should be able to make up their own minds about the spiritual direction of their lives. So Cooper began to take them to the Presbyterian church he had attended as a child.

All went smoothly. The family attended Sunday school and worship each week. Then questions began to rise – questions the children brought home to their parents, questions about God, faith and life that Cooper himself began to ask.

Cooper went to the Bible, albeit secretly, to find the answers. He began to read the Bible "undercover." In fact, he poured through the Scriptures at a fast pace, completing 12 pages per day for 90 days. He wanted to quickly put an end to the questions swirling around his household and his own mind.

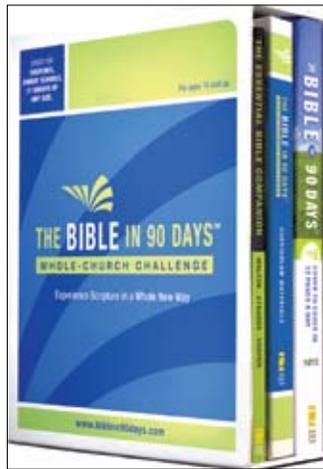
Cooper finally shared with his wife that he was reading the Bible. He read aloud to her the parts he found amusing. "We made a game of it," Cooper said. "After several days, I quit making fun of it. I found myself engrossed in it. About halfway through, somewhere in Isaiah or Jeremiah, I started to believe what I was reading."

Cooper went on to read the Bible three more times in 1999. The Holy Spirit changed his life, awakened faith in Jesus Christ and transformed his family from friendly agnostics to passionate, and still friendly, believers.

This is not only the account of one family's transformation in Christ, it is also the story of a man's call to form a brand new ministry based on his discovery of the power of reading the Bible through in 90 days.

In 2001 Cooper offered a class on reading the Bible in 90 days to his own congregation. In 2002 Cooper left his secular career and started his new vocation: The Bible in 90 Days.

Cooper is clear about what The Bible in 90 Days is and is not. What it is: "The Bible in 90 Days is a Bible *reading* curriculum. It helps people read attentively the entire Bible – from cover to cover – in 90 days." (emphasis in original)



What it is not: "The Bible in 90 Days is *not* a speed-read through the Bible. Rather, it's akin to reading the Bible like a novel."

To help make reading the Bible in 90 days a successful venture, Cooper and his team produced a curriculum to facilitate group participation. Cooper understands that making the program a group effort increases the support that many need to complete the reading and gain the spiritual benefits.

The Bible in 90 Days offers both leader and participant guides. The participants guide is linked to a DVD and helps group members discuss the joys and challenges of their weekly readings. It also serves as a friendly form of accountability.

The participant guide provides a schedule so that individuals can keep track of their daily reading. The questions provided in the guide help pre-

pare for the weekly group meeting, but participants may bring any question they wish to the group.

The leader guide makes clear that this is not a class that is "taught" in a traditional sense. Rather, the leader serves as a facilitator who encourages dialogue, keeps the group focused and supports the group in its goal of reading the Bible in 90 days.

An NIV translation of the Bible specially designed for the program is available, as are DVD and audio resources.

This program works, says Cooper, for the following reasons:

- **Time frame:** 90 days vs. a year (or more)
- **Readability:** large print, easy to read translation
- **Community:** weekly meetings for support, fellowship, accountability and knowledgeable insight
- **Support materials:** we provide just enough additional materials to keep participants engaged in reading the Bible, but no more. We don't want participants reading support material instead of the Word.
- **A lowering of barriers:** by tending to many of the *practical* aspects of reading the Bible, we foster an environment in which the participant is *more likely* to recognize the leading of the Spirit that he or she read and be transformed by the Word.

The program has been and is being used across the denominational spectrum. It has also been used in prisons, drug rehab missions, corporate Bible studies and neighborhood small groups.

Cooper states that recently, small towns have invited their residents to take part in the curriculum. As of today, groups have ranged from 2 people to 1,000 people, across 47 states and several foreign countries.

The entire Leader's Kit, which includes a Bible, Participant's Guide, Leader's Pack (Teaching DVDs) and the Essential Bible Companion (a supplementary resource book) costs \$79.99 plus shipping. Individual components of the curriculum may be purchased separately.

The Bible in 90 Days is located at 7111 Harwin Drive, Suite 130, Houston, Texas 77036. Cooper and his team may be reached at 713-526-6800. The website is www.biblein90days.org.