

The Doctrine of Scripture

Part One

As many of you will no doubt be aware, this weekend saw the release - at least in some areas of the country - of the movie adaptation of Dan Brown's book, The Da Vinci Code. And, due to the book's controversial subject matter it has, not surprisingly, received a great deal of press - both when the book *first* became popular - which was a couple years ago now - and then more recently in the weeks and months leading up to the movie's release.

And while the *latest* controversies have centered more on the author and whether or not he plagiarized the story from previously written materials, the main discussions have been related to the book's content and its alternative understandings of Jesus Christ, however fictionally they might be portrayed.

To be sure, as Dan Brown has said on many occasions, the book is a work of *fiction*, and ought to be *treated* like a work of fiction. And to a certain extent I agree with that. I think that perhaps in some circles way too much is being made of this book and the whole phenomenon surrounding it. There is nothing wrong with a good work of fiction and I enjoy reading such stories as much as the next person. If that was all Dan Brown had ever said about this book, I would have been quite happy to refrain from making *any* comments about it whatsoever.

The problem is, that *isn't* all that Dan Brown has said about this book. On a number of occasions now, as Darrell Bock has pointed out, when Brown has been interviewed either in the press or on the television and he has been asked about the book, he doesn't just say that it is a work of fiction and leave it at that. On the contrary, he has on different occasions *qualified* his remarks by saying that even though it IS a work of fiction, the various references and writings and dates and places and events upon which the story is built *are all historically accurate*.

In other words, when it has suited him to do so, he simply describes the work as a work of fiction. However, when he finds himself with a more sympathetic audience, he likes to emphasize that the book is based on historical realities and proven scholarship - thus lending an air of authority to this *allegedly* "fictional" work.

Indeed, someone as recently as this week told me in a conversation that while the book *was* fiction, there were many people that he knew whose attitude was, "Well, it's a fiction work, so it's not all true. But it's not far from the truth". How they came to such certainty from reading a work of fiction is puzzling and not a little bit alarming.

Now, if you haven't seen this movie or read the book - and you were planning on it - don't worry - I'm not going to reveal the plot and ruin it for you. However, what I *would* like to do over the next three weeks is deal with a subject that lies at the heart of Dan Brown's book. That subject is *The Doctrine of Scripture* and is very much relevant to the whole Da Vinci Code phenomenon since questions about ancient writings and how we are to regard them and how they relate to our knowledge of the truth - all those sorts of questions are raised by this book.

Even further, there are *pastoral reasons* for dealing with this matter since the *effect* of this book, for *some* younger believers, has been to shake their confidence and cause them to wonder about the trustworthiness of the things they believe as Christians.

Finally, there are *evangelistic* reasons for talking about these things since it may well be that you find yourself in a conversation with some of your family and friends who are relatively uninformed on these matters and so are fairly prone to just adopting the nearest viewpoint. Hopefully these brief studies will give you more to contribute to those conversations that may be used of the Lord in an effective manner.

Lord willing, while we will not get terribly far this morning, we will be able to at least make a *start* in addressing these matters. Before we go any further, let's pray together.....

Father in Heaven, please help us now as we turn to you, the Author and perfecter of our faith, and the Author of all that is true and right, including the Revelation that you have been so kind to give to us, your people. Use this time to enlarge our understanding, deepen our confidence, and remind us, again, of how utterly dependent we are upon you and, at the same time, how utterly faithful you are. In Jesus' name we ask this, Amen.

In the opening section of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, the well-known Reformed pastor John Calvin writes,

...Without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God. Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves....Man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself..

With those words, Calvin points to some of the most fundamental truths about human knowledge. As creatures who are made in the Image of God, we were created to be in relationship *with* God. Further, since he IS God, the nature of that relationship is one of *dependence*. We are dependent upon Him for everything, including our very existence. So, the way it's *supposed* to be is that we gladly recognize and embrace all this, and we look to him to be our sufficiency in all things - for life, for truth, for meaning, for understanding. That is how things are supposed to work. And because that is how things have been set up by God it means that *apart from the knowledge of God we are simply not capable of knowing anything rightly or truly* - not our world, not ourselves - nothing.

Now, thankfully, because our God is a good and kind and merciful God, he placed us in a universe in which we *could* know him. He placed us in a world with his fingerprints all over it, where the very nature and design of things points us beyond itself to something higher and someONE higher. But we don't just know about God through nature and design. God also chose to reveal Himself in other ways - in more personal and *supernatural* ways - manifesting himself through various means all in order to provide us with additional revelation of who He is and who we are and what he expects of his people. We call this additional revelation, *special revelation*.

And this, really, is the place we have to start if we are going to talk about something like “the Doctrine of Scripture.” Because this is what the Scriptures fundamentally are - they are one form of this “special revelation” that I’m talking about and by which God has revealed to us things that we need to know.

Now I have described the Scriptures as *one form* of special revelation because they are not the only means by which God has specially revealed himself to his people. You may remember how in the Garden of Eden, before the Fall of humankind into sin, *God himself was with and among his people*, and his special revelation to them at *that time* was not through written Scriptures but was *immediate and personal*. He would simply talk to them. And it was by this means that Adam and Eve learned things **that they could not have known otherwise** - such as, for example, the instructions regarding the two trees in the center of the garden. If God had not made a special effort to explain to them about staying away from these trees, they certainly would never have just figured that out from simply looking at them.

Now, as you know, in spite of God’s instructions regarding the two trees, the man and the woman took matters into their own hands and did partake of one of them and, in so doing, crossed a line, with disastrous consequences. And so they fell into sin and, as we know, *their fall was our fall*.

However, in spite of that Fall, and its consequences, God’s purposes continued. To be sure, they took a dark and complicated turn, but the turn was not unforeseen and was, in fact, part of those overall purposes.

Well, subsequent to these events, a plan was set in motion that would take many, many years to prepare, and would require not only the personal intervention of God - in the form of his Son - but also the combined voices and writings of both prophets and apostles to anticipate this intervention, and then, after it occurred, to look back upon it and explain and preserve its significance for his people - for all time.

Now, it needs to be said at this point that the Fall of Mankind not only rendered God’s *intervention* a necessity (through the cross), and then the *recording* of that intervention a necessity (through the Scriptures), but it also had the effect of rendering people incapable, in their natural state, of rightly reading and understanding his *special* revelation. To be sure, they still continued to be God’s image bearers, but the radical effects of sin caused that image to be distorted and affected their entire being - including their minds.

And so, along with intervening on his people’s behalf, and providing them with revelation *about* what he had done, He had to take this additional step of giving his people “eyes to see and ears to hear” so that they could understand the revelation preserved for them in the Scriptures.

Now, of course, apart from God’s gift of seeing and hearing that comes by the Holy Spirit, there is a *certain* kind of understanding - what might better be called an awareness of God - that IS possible to men and women in their *natural* state. This sort of limited “awareness” of

God is what Paul is referring to, for example, in the opening chapter of Romans 1, where he writes,

Romans 1:18-20 ¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

What is Paul saying? He's saying that there is enough convincing evidence of God's existence and power in the universe that people who claim that they do not see any evidence are *not telling the truth*. They are, in fact, suppressing the truth, whether they admit it or not. To quote James Boice,

Paul is not saying that there is enough evidence about God in nature so that the scientist who carefully probes nature's mysteries can be aware of him. He is not saying that the sign is there but hidden and that we are only able to find it if we look carefully. Paul is saying that the sign is PLAIN. It is a BILLBOARD.... There is enough evidence of God in a flower to lead a child, as well as a scientist, to worship [and acknowledge] him....

Think about it like this, Boice says: Imagine that you are driving down a street and come to a sign that says, "Detour- Turn Left Here". But you ignore this and drive on. It happens that there is a police officer present, who then stops you and begins to write out a ticket. What excuse might you use? You can claim that you didn't see the sign. But that makes no difference. As long as you are driving the car, the responsibility for seeing the sign and obeying it is yours. Further, you are responsible if, having ignored the sign, you recklessly plunge over a cliff and destroy both yourself and your passengers.

So, the ability to see and understand the basic revelation that God is THERE and that he is POWERFUL and ought to be acknowledged and sought - that ability is resident within everyone and therefore everyone is held accountable by God for what they do with *that* knowledge.

But saying that all people have the ability to grasp a *basic awareness* of God through his *creation* is not the same thing as saying that all people, in their natural state, have the ability to understand what God is saying through other, more special, forms of revelation - such as the Scriptures. It is one thing to be *aware* of God but that awareness will not, as we have seen, tell you very much about what this God is like, or what he is doing, or why, or what any of that has to do with you. That sort of thing belongs to the realm of special revelation which, as I have said, requires something more than a natural ability to be grasped. Regarding these sorts of things, the Apostle Paul writes, in his letter to the Corinthians,

1 Corinthians 2:12-16 ¹² Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. ¹³ And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those

who are spiritual.¹⁴ The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

What are these “words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the spirit of God” and which require the special enabling of the Spirit to be understood? They are the Scriptures. As Paul makes clear in the pastoral epistles,

2 Timothy 3:16-17 ¹⁶ *All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,* ¹⁷ *that the man of God¹ may be competent, equipped for every good work.*

The Greek word there for “breathed out” is theopneustos. I only tell you that so I can tell you this: that it contains the same root from which we get the word for the Holy Spirit - and indeed points to the fundamental reason *why* the Scriptures are so uniquely authoritative in a way that no other writing is: because they are the product of God’s Spirit working in and through the various human media that God employed to produce the 66 books that we know as “the Bible”. This is precisely the process to which Peter refers in his second letter when he writes,

2 Peter 1:16-21 ¹⁶ *For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.* ¹⁷ *For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son,¹ with whom I am well pleased,"* ¹⁸ *we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.* ¹⁹ *And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts,* ²⁰ *knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation.* ²¹ *For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*

And it is this idea of men “speaking” and then later writing down things that came to them *as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit* - that I want to draw your attention to in this verse. For reasons only entirely known to God, rather than just dropping completed manuscripts out of the sky, He chose to work through the agency of human writers to produce the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

The theological phrase that is used to refer to this is *organic inspiration*, as opposed to *mechanical inspiration*. In other words, it is not as if the authors of Scripture were just sitting there taking down dictation as it was given to them. Rather, God chose to work in and through the various personalities and abilities of the roughly 40 individuals that were involved in writing the different books. This is why when you read things written by Moses, you see a certain style that is entirely his. When you look at the words of Solomon, you see another style. When you read David’s words, you see still another - or John, or Peter, or Paul.

Nevertheless, even though God chose to work through this organic means, this did not mean that what was produced was a merely human product. This is Peter's point in the verse just read to you. The process of inscripturation came *through* men, but was not *of* men but rather, was fully overseen and superintended by God so that *what they wrote* was *what God wanted written*. And not just generally, but *specifically*. In other words, it is not just the ideas of Scripture that are inspired, the very words themselves are inspired.

And so these two concepts of revelation and inspiration really go hand in hand and are two fundamental components of "the Doctrine of Scripture". Revelation points us to the reality that God created us to know him and has seen to it that we do know him - in both general and specific ways, and this, in spite of the limitations that came upon us because of sin.

Inspiration speaks of the *process* by which God's self-revelation in the Scriptures took place - by the Holy Spirit's working in and through various human authors to produce an authoritative text by which we can understand who God is, what he has done, what he will do, and how we fit into that picture.

Now even though we have talked all morning about "doctrine" I hope you can see that there is great personal and pastoral value in understanding these things. Knowing both that God is *eager* for us to know him and that he has provided a reliable means by which that can be accomplished through the Scriptures - knowing those things ought to be a great source of encouragement and comfort. That's great news! And you don't have to be a genius or a rocket scientist to make sense of it. God is real. And he is not hiding away in some corner of the universe. He has not made his existence obscure but *plain*. He *can* be found. He is *not* far away. Listen, your God is speaking,

Deuteronomy 30:11-14 ¹¹ *"For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off.* ¹² *It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?'* ¹³ *Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?'* ¹⁴ *But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.*