

Jer. 36:2-4, 27-31; 51:60). In the New Testament, Jesus promises his disciples that the Holy Spirit would bring to their remembrance the words which he, Jesus, had spoken (John 14:26; cf. 16:12-13). Paul can say that the very words he writes to the Corinthians are "a command of the Lord" (1 Cor. 14:37; cf. 2 Peter 3:2).

Once again it must be noted that these words are still considered to be God's own words, even though they are written down mostly by human beings and always in human language. Still, they are absolutely authoritative and absolutely true: to disobey them or disbelieve them is a serious sin and brings judgment from God (1 Cor. 14:37; Jer. 36:29-31).

Several benefits come from the writing down of God's words. First, there is a much *more accurate preservation* of God's words for subsequent generations. To depend on memory and the repeating of oral tradition is a less reliable method of preserving these words throughout history than is their recording in writing (cf. Deut. 31:12-13). Second, the *opportunity for repeated inspection* of words that are written down permits careful study and discussion, which leads to better understanding and more complete obedience. Third, God's words in writing are *accessible to many more people* than they are when preserved merely through memory and oral repetition. They can be inspected at any time by any person and are not limited in accessibility to those who have memorized them or those who are able to be present when they are recited orally. Thus, the reliability, permanence, and accessibility of the form in which God's words are preserved are all greatly enhanced when they are written down. Yet there is no indication that their authority or truthfulness is diminished.

C. The Focus of Our Study

Of all the forms of the Word of God,¹ the focus of our study in systematic theology is God's Word in written form, that is, the Bible. This is the form of God's Word that is available for study, for public inspection, for repeated examination, and as a basis for mutual discussion. It tells us about and points us to the Word of God as a person, namely Jesus Christ, whom we do not now have present in bodily form on earth. Thus, we are no longer able to observe and imitate his life and teachings firsthand.

The other forms of the Word of God are not suitable as the primary basis for the study of theology. We do not hear God's words of decree and thus cannot study them directly but only through observation of their effects. God's words of personal address are uncommon, even in Scripture. Furthermore, even if we did hear some words of personal address from God to ourselves today, we would not have certainty that our understanding of it, our memory of it, and our subsequent report of it was wholly accurate. Nor would we be readily able to convey to others

¹In addition to the forms of God's Word mentioned above, God communicates to people through different types of "general revelation"—that is, revelation that is given not just to certain people but to all people generally. General revelation includes both the revelation of God that comes through nature (see Ps. 19:1-6; Acts 14:17) and the revelation of God that comes through the inner sense of right and wrong in every person's heart (Rom. 2:15). These kinds of revelation are nonverbal in form, and I have not included them in the list of various forms of the Word of God discussed in this chapter. (See chapter 7, pp. 122-24, for further discussion of general revelation.)

the certainty that the communication was from God, even if it was. God's words as spoken through human lips ceased to be given when the New Testament canon was completed.² Thus, these other forms of God's words are inadequate as a primary basis for study in theology.

It is most profitable for us to study God's words as written in the Bible. It is God's written Word that he commands us to study. The man is "blessed" who "meditates" on God's law "day and night" (Ps. 1:1-2). God's words to Joshua are also applicable to us: "This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, that you may be careful to do all that is written in it; for then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall have good success" (Josh. 1:8). It is the Word of God in the form of written Scripture that is "God-breathed" and "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16 NIV).

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. Do you think you would pay more attention if God spoke to you from heaven or through the voice of a living prophet than if he spoke to you from the written words of Scripture? Would you believe or obey such words more readily than you do Scripture? Do you think your present level of response to the written words of Scripture is an appropriate one? What positive steps can you take to make your attitude toward Scripture more like the kind of attitude God wants you to have?
2. When you think about the many ways in which God speaks and the frequency with which God communicates with his creatures through these means, what conclusions might you draw concerning the nature of God and the things that bring delight to him?

SPECIAL TERMS

decree
Word of God

personal address

BIBLIOGRAPHY

(For an explanation of this bibliography see the note on the bibliography to chapter 1, p. 38. Complete bibliographical data may be found on pp. 1223-29.) The subject of this chapter has not been treated explicitly in many systematic theologies, but similar material is often covered in the section on the authority of the Word of God; see the bibliography at the end of chapter 4 for that subject.

Sections in Evangelical Systematic Theologies

1. Anglican (Episcopalian)
1882-92 Litton, 9-10

²See chapter 3, pp. 54-72, on the canon of Scripture, and, for a discussion of the nature of contemporary Christian prophecy, see chapter 53, pp. 1049-61.