

ARISE & BUILD

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THE ORGANIC NATURE OF SCRIPTURE

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A weak conception of Scripture will make for a weakened, compromised faith.

There are numerous ways in which one's conception could be weakened, and most would think of a defect in our understanding of one of the six or seven¹ primary attributes of Scripture. And while there is no doubt that failure to grasp the clarity of Scripture, or the sufficiency of Scripture, or the inspiration of Scripture, etc., will cripple one's Christian walk, there is another aspect of Scripture that, while often neglected, is no less important than the attributes listed in books about systematic theology.

Our concern at this point is to look at a fairly common way in which Scripture is depreciated, even if unconsciously. Part of the reason for this is due to the influence of studies in systematic theology, which analyze Scripture from the point of view of its attributes. Analysis requires cutting something into pieces to study its parts. It is the application of the scalpel that introduces the problem, although there are ways to guard against it if one knows in advance the vulnerability of the human mind when handling the things of God.

The primary issue is that such analytic study (even if done informally in the course of personal Bible study or via church sermons) treats Scripture, by default, as an abstraction—as not unlike studying the things covered by general

revelation but different only in degree. We may not consciously think it, but that only makes the problem more difficult to detect, diagnose, and correct.

On the principle that early detection and diagnosis is the best approach to mental patterns that may lead to a degraded notion of Scripture, we are going to examine Scripture from a more holistic, organic point of view. We propose to peel back the depersonalized views we may harbor about Scripture and arrive at the doorstep of Him with whom we have to do.

We must insist upon seeing Scripture in organic terms, not in the piecemeal fashion that comes so easily to us by dint of habit of mind and long-established patterns of use. We won't climb out of the rut until we first realize that we've worn a rut in our minds.

SCRIPTURE IS REVELATIONAL AND ORGANIC

It might seem obvious to say that Scripture is revelational. After all, we call it special revelation for a reason (because it is a written record). But it is precisely here that the first holes in the dyke appear. Van Til quotes Warfield approvingly in this context, countering the later positions of Barth and others who have imposed dangerous distinctions that weaken the bulwarks of our faith.

Thus Scripture is not merely a *record* of revelation. *It is itself revelational.* [Warfield writes that] "scripture is conceived, from the point of view of the writers of the New Testament, *not merely as the record of revelation, but as*

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*itself a part of the redemptive revelation of God; not merely as the record of the redemptive acts by which God is saving the world, but as itself one of these redemptive acts, having its own part to play in the great work of establishing and building up the kingdom of God...*² [italics after *record* added by MGS]

Van Til illustrates that Hermann Bavinck, “as well as Warfield, holds to an organic view of Scripture.”³

For Bavinck *the Scripture constitutes the climax of the redemptive work of God through Christ and his Spirit. The purpose of this redemptive work of Christ is that the world which has fallen into sin may be cleansed from sin and in spite of that sin reveal the glory of God. Mankind is not an aggregate of individuals. Mankind is an organism. Revelation, in redeeming mankind, works organically.*⁴ [e.a.]

Working organically in accordance with the laws of creation, God’s redemption in Christ may also be said to be through and through “personal.”⁵

According to Bavinck and Van Til, Christ’s work was finished by appointing His apostles to complete the inscripturation of the living Word of God. This brings to a climax God’s work of redemption.

But the danger of treating the Scripture in an abstract, analytical, fragmented manner persists because of preconceived notions that are hard to shake. We could acknowledge all the various technical attributes of Scripture and still fall short of understanding its organic, living nature. We’ll need to explain this idea first so that it will be easier to understand the danger that arises from not cleaving tightly to this crucial truth.

SCRIPTURE AS AN ORGANISM, AS AN INDIVISIBLE WHOLE

When we speak of an organic view of Scripture or its inscripturation (the process of God’s revealed will taking shape in scriptural form), we mean to say that Scripture is itself an organic, indivisible whole. It should not be treated like any other sample of written language. It must

not be dealt with on rationalistic principles that discard its organic nature at the outset, reducing it to abstract words on papyrus, vellum, or stone tablets.

Moreover, we cannot reason our way to Scripture as if it were the destination at the end of an analytic road. Rather, Scripture is the starting point for every analytic journey, as Van Til has argued: “For the believers, Scripture is the principle of the-ology. As such it cannot be the conclusion of other premises, but it is THE premise from which all other conclusions are drawn.” Human writings are derivative, but Scripture is not, and therefore it must not be treated as a derivative work.

Van Til illustrates the danger of not treating Scripture as an organic whole—the danger of introducing vulnerabilities that it actually does not have.

It is difficult to see how else the Scriptures can be presented as self-attesting. As soon as the elements of the special principle, such as the indications of divinity, the testimony of the Spirit, or the words of Christ, are set next to one another, as largely independent of one another, the natural man is given an opportunity to do his destructive work. He is then allowed to judge at least with respect to one or more of these elements apart from the whole. If he is allowed to judge of the legitimacy or meaning of any one of them, he may as well be given the right to judge of all of them ... For it is only if the Christ be taken as the Son of God that he can be said legitimately to identify himself. If he is not presupposed as such, his words have no power. Then they too are absorbed in what is a hopeless relativity of history.⁶

This tactic is perhaps more familiar to us under the name “divide and conquer.” When we yield ground on the unity of Scripture, we make ourselves a much easier target with the ensuing demotion of the Word.⁷ It is for this reason that Van Til and Bahnsen insisted that the faith be defended as a system and never in a piecemeal fashion.

Humanistic knowledge is fragmented, and glories in its fragmentation (“it’s not a bug, it’s a feature!”). And by

asserting that Scripture itself is fragmented (and not an organic whole), humanism places Scripture (at least initially) on an equal footing with human thought processes. Given an evolutionary outlook, however, later knowledge supersedes earlier knowledge: modern scientific humanism and deconstructionist philosophy displace Scripture by asserting that the Bible has exceeded its shelf life. Our modern pronouncements are trustworthy and Scripture can be discounted as the outdated words of men. This humanistic tactic continues in full force today.

This tactic succeeds by weaponizing the tools it uses to analyze Scripture. Humanists divert attention from the termites they've released into the foundations of our faith by claiming that it is actually faithful Christians who have weaponized Scripture against humanists.

The followers of Karl Barth don't hesitate to attack along such lines: "Therefore, Biblical Inerrancy weaponizes the Bible, because the Bible becomes a list of propositional statements that may be quoted to control others."⁸ In this way, *any appeal to Scripture* is rendered inadmissible, for the humanists understand that a two-edged sword like the Word of God (Hebrews 4:12) needs quick neutralization. They labor to convince Christians to lay down their weapons and disarm themselves while they hold their own weapons tighter still.

Because humanism holds to the environmental heresy (that utopia can be achieved if only we can suitably manipulate man's physical, social, and cultural environment), it has relied increasingly on narrative control, censoring competing narratives (the Bible being the foremost target in this regard). But from God's perspective, it's the humanist narratives that are the parasitic frauds standing on shaky ground.

THE LIVING CHRIST IN THE LIVING WORD

The organic indivisibility of Scripture is asserted in Christ's announcement that "the Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). The first step in attacking Scrip-

ture (whether by humanists or apostate Christians) is to slice and dice it into pieces, to openly reject the idea that it is an organic whole.

John Murray also draws attention to how crucial the organic relationship of all parts of Scripture is to its nature:

It should also be remembered that when speaking of verbal or jot and tittle inspiration, we are never thinking of words, or letters, or tittles in themselves or in abstraction. This would not be verbal inspiration, for the simple reason that no such words (or letters or tittles) occur in Scripture. They are always words in relationship, in clauses, sentences, paragraphs, books, and, in fact, relationship to the whole of Scripture. Their significance resides in this relationship and only in that relationship are they inspired.⁹

Geerhardus Vos, commenting on the opening verses of the Gospel of John, notes the tight connection.

It places at the outset the life-giving and the illuminating aspects of Christ's activity, or, to speak soteriologically, the redemptive and revelatory functions of His Work as Savior, in their proper relation to each other. It saves the Gospel from the charge of intellectualism ... The new-creation of all things in the sphere of redemption becomes, on this wider and more correct view, as truly a part of the Logos-function as the communication of supernatural knowledge.¹⁰

Vos appeals to John 5:25, 28 to underscore this idea:

... the resurrection is represented as taking place through the utterance of the voice of the Son of God, and where there is the same close association between the ideas of the omnipotent word and the idea of life as in the Prologue: "The hour cometh, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and they that hear shall live. For as the Father hath life in Himself, even so gave He to the Son also to have life in Himself."¹¹

Jack B. Rogers, in commenting on Van Til's position, acknowledges the same issue.

The Holy Spirit brings men to Christ

through the Scripture. For the Westminster Divines, the Holy Spirit does not witness to proofs for the Scripture, but to the content of Scripture, Jesus Christ. The union of the Word and the Spirit is not just a formal principle of knowledge, but the means by which God works saving faith in men's hearts. The Westminster Divines are concerned to hold the Spirit and the Word together against the Roman Catholics and the Antinomians who would separate them.¹²

Dr. John Frame points out additional connections that unite the Word's attributes with its essential nature:

Here the clarity of the Word is nothing less than the presence of Christ in the Word.¹³

I have argued that there is no decrease in power, authority, or divine presence as we move from the divine voice, to the prophets and apostles, and to the written Word. The written Word, for example, is no less authoritative than the oral word of the prophets or than the divine voice.¹⁴

These scholars alert us of elements having an underlying unity and connection. Life, light, the Word, the Spirit, the Son, the Father: none of these can be understood by applying a reductionist, fragmentary approach, treating them in isolation. We will review these connections and explore their implications.

WHAT GOD HAS JOINED TOGETHER

We've already alluded to Vos's comments on the opening verses of John's Gospel and the connections the apostle puts forward between life and light. We note also Christ's comment that 'the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life' (John 6:63)—they are not mere words, they are also spirit and they are life. This rises above the natural to the supernatural. We must not shy away from this fact.

Paul also contrasts the words that men teach with the words that the Spirit teaches. Charles Hodge renders 1 Corinthians 2:13 as to bring out the fact that *active connections* are being made, that things and words are being *joined together*:

"Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; combining spiritual things with spiritual words."

The original word *synkrinoo* means not only mentally to combine and hence to compare, but also to join together; and also to explain.¹⁵

You may recall warnings not to add to or take away anything from Scripture. These warnings invite us to consider Scripture through the metaphor of a living body. We don't surgically add additional organs or limbs to a living body, or remove limbs or organs from it. To do so is to violate the integrity of the original body, which functions as an organic whole which mutilation can only weaken.

This is brought out most fully in Hebrews 4:12. The very first word is "living," which in Greek serves to emphasize this aspect of the Word of God. "Living is the Word of God, and active..." We go astray when we consider God's word an inert or dead letter, as an abstraction. It is living and active (powerful), and the verse goes on to proclaim the penetrating power of the Word of God.

Penetrating power is what marks the leaven that leavens three whole measures of meal in Christ's kingdom parable of Matthew 13:33. Leaven itself is a living thing and active, and the growth of the Kingdom is compared to the mode of operation of leaven. As Isaiah 55:11 teaches, the Word of God does not return to Him void but prospers in the thing for which it was sent.

Stephen declared that Israel received living oracles from God (Acts 7:38). Keener and others point out that the same term "living" is used of both God and the word received by Moses to transmit to Israel.¹⁶

The analogy of a living body can be further extended. The darkness of the human heart and the spiritual blindness of men and women¹⁷ is what drives apostate man to declare an unborn child "a clump of cells" and the Bible to be a mere clump of words.

The Bible is self-contained, despite its complexity. Robert Reymond appeals to Hebrews 6:13 to illustrate its self-authentication: “When God made his promise to Abraham, since there is no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself.”¹⁸ Scripture’s scope extends beyond the religious domain. “Scripture is intended for uses besides those pertaining to spiritual growth; it is fundamental to all Christian doctrine (see 2 Tim. 3:16-17).”¹⁹

Scripture is not only living, it is also accorded a status above God’s own name, as taught in the psalms.

I will worship toward thy holy temple, and praise thy name for thy lovingkindness and for thy truth: for thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name. (Psalm 138:2)

Considering how revered God’s name is, the psalmist’s claim here is actually quite stunning. If God is magnifying something over His own name, we ought to pay close attention. Nothing ranks above God, yet He magnifies His word over His own name. It would follow that those who would diminish God’s word will have much to answer for—especially those who depersonalize it.

IT’S PERSONAL

On the topic of authority, Dr. Rushdoony makes some important connections:

It should be noted that, in Scripture, authority is personal and is a person, the Lord ... In brief, God is man’s author and authority ... God is God, and His word is revelation. Because God is God, His word is as authoritative as He is.²⁰

It’s the bureaucrat who wants to function at an impersonal level, hiding behind process and procedure as dictated by the pertinent institution. It’s the statist who wants to inculcate fealty to the state as the highest expression of man’s utopian aspirations who prefers an impersonal state.

But the revelation of a personal God is itself personal, speaking directly to us, penetrating to the deepest parts of man so

that there’s nothing hidden. Man wants to hide, but when Scripture is seen as an organic whole, as being personal, man’s pretenses are soon dissolved by either self-awareness or by judgment.

THE NATURE OF A PERSONAL, ORGANIC RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD’S WORD

Dr. R. J. Rushdoony illustrates how one’s relationship (and he means personal relationship) with God’s written revelation should be shaped:

The strength of the psalmist who wrote Psalm 119 is simply this: his unreserved devotion to and love of the revealed will of God. And this love shines through in every verse.

Let’s consider this matter of love briefly. When two people are in love, they not only enjoy being together but they also enjoy talking with one another. Good friends can stand in a doorway, unwilling to say goodnight, and talk for another hour and enjoy every minute of it. It’s not the subject matter alone. The same topic can be deadly dull with someone else; it’s the sense of communion that is a part of all talk with people we love.

It is this sense of delight in every word of God which rings out in Psalm 119. “Thy testimonies,” the writer declares, “also are my delight and my counselors” (v. 24).²¹

Notice once again that there’s an almost conversational element between the psalmist and the Scriptures he is engaged in magnifying. There is nothing abstract here, but rather a concrete awareness of the Person who is speaking to the psalmist in the Scripture.

We must concede that there is a mystery in respect to in-scripturation, no less so than there is a mystery about the Incarnation. Just as it is a mystery that the Word became flesh, so too it is a mystery that flesh became the Word. But Christ’s redemptive work, insofar as its application, was not finished on the cross, or He wouldn’t have sent the apostles into the world nor set in motion the writing of the New Testament. It is this last step that forms the climax of redemption in terms of setting it in motion.

THE WORD OF POWER

It wasn't long after Christ told His disciples that His words were spirit that He declaimed "Lazarus, come forth!" This is more potent than our Lord's question, "which is easier to say, take up your bed and walk, or your sins are forgiven?"

We know that Lazarus emerged from the tomb when Christ's words penetrated to the dividing of soul and spirit, of bone and marrow. But few Christians understand that this same power has been invoked in an even more powerful divine command, one compounded by an oath in God's name and in current process of fulfillment.

While Christ's word called Lazarus out of the grave, we usually think that there is "dead air" on God's radio channel today. But the idea that God's Word is on some kind of staycation until eschatological events heat up is both shallow and erroneous.

Isaiah 45:22-23 puts forward a command that is perhaps even more startling than "Lazarus, come forth!" Let us consider the Word that God here utters—and which He backs up with an oath.

Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else. I have sworn by myself, the word is gone out of my mouth in righteousness, and shall not return, That unto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear. (Isa. 45:22-23)

The entire world is commanded to be saved, and the agency by which it is saved is the word that has gone out of God's mouth. The oath confirms that the entire world will be saved, for His Word will not return unto Him void. Many Christians rationalize this verse evasively, claiming that unsaved people will be forced to bend the knee and swear, but this is inconsistent with the context as well as what "swearing unto the Lord" means elsewhere in Isaiah (e.g., in Isaiah 19:18 when Egypt will be fully converted to the Lord).

The Word is living and powerful and penetrating. When Paul describes the conversion of the world to Christ, he again focuses on the Word and its agency:

And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. (2 Cor. 5:18-19)

As Warfield says of this passage,

Every word here must be taken in its full meaning. The ministry that Paul exercised, and which everyone who follows him in proclaiming the gospel exercises with him, is distinctively the ministry of reconciliation. It has as its object, and is itself the proper means of, that actual reconciliation of the whole world.²²

Once we grasp that only an organic Scripture can be the living, personal, penetrating power that represents God's hands at work, we will be on guard against reductionisms, fragmentations, and abstractions that sap the strength of Christian resolve regarding His Word. We'll push the implications of the idea of Scripture being God-breathed in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (which trains for righteousness) and the deep psychological work touched on in Hebrews 4:12. We have here what one observer calls "a dramatic and powerful view of the inspiration of the Scriptures," the neglect of which is both puzzling and harmful.

THE DANGERS OF NEGLECT

Scripture is not general revelation, but when we treat it as such we then fight God's battles in Saul's armor.

We often hear that "Christianity is not a religion, it's a relationship with Jesus." But treating the Word as impersonal actually undercuts relationship with Jesus: you have dehumanized Him by denying His intimate connection with the Word. So closely united is the Word and the Christ that critical attacks on bibliolatry can veer into veiled attacks on Christ Himself.

Critics have deployed the caricature of the "paper pope" since the Roman Catholics attacked the Protestant New Testament. Karl Barth resuscitated the term in attacking inerrancy, while Jürgen

Moltmann decried the resulting “dictatorship of the exegetes.”²³ What would Moltmann replace this alleged dictatorship with? Does he want to dictate to us what Scripture is and what it means? An organic view of Scripture is an obstacle to these agendas.

If the Scripture is not organic, then it is an impersonal object for men to take dominion over and for the church to govern and rule on. But if it is organic, men are under it, never over it. Its voice cannot be subordinated.

Man’s knowledge is fragmented because he himself is fragmented. Whereas God is fully self-conscious and never slumbers nor sleeps, a large sector of man’s mental life is plunged into irrationality when he dreams. This irrational side of man is given attention in Dr. Rushdoony’s comments on the second chapter of Daniel, “The Terror of Dreams.”²⁴ Man is no competent judge over Scripture: not only is he unqualified, it is the Word that sits in judgment on *him*. This is illustrated by the flying scroll of Zechariah 5:1-4 that’s written front and back with God’s word of judgment, a scroll that flies into every man’s home to exact justice.

SCRIPTURE: PERSONAL, ORGANIC, UNIFIED, POWERFUL, PENETRATING

When Israel heard God speak in Exodus 20:18-19, they told Moses “speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die.” But the voice of Moses isn’t as loud as God’s, nor will Moses be around forever. How can Moses be heard, especially after he’s gone? Inscripturation is the answer, and God chose Moses to initiate the process. Sixteen centuries in the making but having only one Author, God speaks personally in and through His Word—and He thereby speaks to you. 🏠

1. The enumeration varies from scholar to scholar. For example, Dr. John Frame counts six while Dr. Robert Fugate counts seven.
2. Van Til, Cornelius, *The Doctrine of Scripture* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company/den Dulk Foundation, 1967), p. 24.
3. *ibid.*, p. 27.

4. *ibid.*

5. *ibid.*

6. Van Til, Cornelius, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1969), p. 234.

7. The importance of defending unity extends to the individual books as well as the whole. This is evidenced by Cassuto’s defense of the unity of the Pentateuch and Oswald T. Allis’s defense of the unity of Isaiah, among other examples.

8. <https://postbarthian.com/2017/04/17/errors-inerrancy-9-inerrancy-turns-bible-paper-pope/>

9. John Murray, “The Attestation of Scripture” in *The Infallible Word* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1946), p. 23, n. 9.

10. Vos, Geerhardus, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980), p. 66.

11. *ibid.* Vos adds a footnote explaining that “it is true that in John 5:25, 28 the representation differs in so far as the Son here has and utters the word instead of being the Word of God. But this is not fatal to the assumption that the writer connected both representations.”

12. Rogers, Jack B., “Scripture in the Westminster Confession” in *Jerusalem and Athens*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1971) p. 161.

13. Frame, John M., *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 2013), p. 612.

14. *ibid.*, p. 632.

15. Hodge, Charles, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976 reprint), pp. 40-41.

16. Keener, Craig S., *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), vol. 2, p. 1043.

17. Reymond, Robert L., *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Thomas Nelson, 1998), p. 81.

18. *ibid.*, p. 80, n. 44.

19. *ibid.*, p. 55 n. 1.

20. Rushdoony, Rousas John, *Systematic Theology in Two Volumes* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1994), vol. 2, pp. 1139-1140.

21. Rushdoony, Rousas John, *Good Morning, Friends, Volume 3* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 2018), pp. 73-76.

22. Warfield, Benjamin B., “The Gospel and the Second Coming” in *Selected Shorter Writings* ed. Meeter (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1970), loc. cit.

23. <https://postbarthian.com/2017/04/17/errors-inerrancy-9-inerrancy-turns-bible-paper-pope/>

24. Rushdoony, Rousas John, *Thy Kingdom Come* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, [1970] 1998), pp. 13-20.



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