

TTS Foundations 2023-25: **[S17] “He Has Spoken” (P1/2)**

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[1] On the Nature of God and Divine Revelation

TODAY: "... Who Has Spoken Through the Prophets" – on Scripture.

BUT – who's the 'who' here? Who is the subject of this clause? The Holy Spirit:

- "We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father [and the Son], who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified, *who has spoken through the prophets*"

KEY POINT: Even as we think about our theology of Scripture, we're still in the realm of *Pneumatology*.

- Revealing the living Word by inspiring the written Word.
 - "For Scripture is the school of the Holy Spirit, in which, as nothing is omitted that is both necessary and useful to know, so nothing is taught but what is expedient to know" [Calvin – Inst. III.XXI.3]
 - "One cannot separate the voice from the breath" [Luther].
 - "The Spirit rides in the chariot of Scripture" [Spurgeon]
- Indeed, when we talk about the doctrine of Scripture, we're talking about nothing less than the very gift of God.
 - **LOOK:** Ps 84
 - "A day in your courts..." – to hear God speak is our privilege.

Our aim today is to come to a sound understanding of what Scripture 'is' – but to get there, we must return to some old foundations.

REFLECT: What do you remember from our Doctrine of God sessions?

- **←** The Government of God:
 - Sovereign over all things.
- The Incommunicable Attributes of God:
 - The Aseity of God
 - 'From self', independent, does not need us, etc.
 - The Transcendence of God
 - Incomprehensible, other, etc.
 - The Immutability of God
 - Cannot be changed or change himself, etc.
- I.e. the Creator / Creature Distinction:
 - God alone is unconditioned / God alone is eternal.
 - God alone is self-existing. / (**LOOK:** Ps 50:21)

These attributes are integral to Christian theology (esp in West).

- **BUT** when it comes to Scripture, there seems to be a conundrum.
 - **DISCUSS:** Can you spot what it might be?
 - (If GIGAWAN, whence the Bible?)
- **KEY POINT:** God does not belong to the Created order.
 - God is 'other' – above and beyond all created categories.
 - **How, therefore, can we use created language to describe him at all?**

[1A] 'Apophatic' Theology

- From the Greek ἀπόφημι (*apophēmi*) – "I deny".
 - Also called **the *via negativa***.
 - Emphasises that God defies creaturely description.
 - Often associated with the Eastern tradition.
 - Often associated with a focus on what God is *NOT*.
- Pseudo-Dionysius [c. 400s / 500s AD]
 - **LOOK:** Acts 17:34
 - Styled himself after Dionysius the Areopagite
 - (Long held to be pseudonymous – Aquinas, etc.)
 - "Once more, ascending yet higher we maintain, that It is not soul, or mind, or endowed with the faculty of imagination, conjecture, reason, or understanding; nor is It any act of reason or understanding; nor can It be described by the reason or perceived by the understanding, since It is not number, or order, or greatness, or littleness, or equality, or inequality... [We] apply not unto It either affirmation or negation, inasmuch as It transcends all affirmation by being the perfect and unique Cause of all things, and transcends all negation by the pre-eminence of Its simple and absolute nature – free from every limitation and beyond them all" [*The Mystical Theology* V]
 - NOTE: how P-D goes beyond even negation.

[1B] 'Cataphatic' Theology

- **REFLECT:** What do you think of apophatic theology?
 - Do you think it's the end of theology?
 - (And if not – why not?)
- **We must hold two truths in tension:**
 - **FIRST:** the basic instinct of apophaticism is correct.
 - All creaturely language fails. (Rev + the ineffable.)
 - **SECOND:** God's in the business of speaking about God.
 - "Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, 'Now I have put my words in your mouth'" [Jer 1:9] (Incredible...!)
 - The Indescribable One has described himself.
- **This is the basic premise of Cataphatic Theology:**
 - From the Greek κατάφασις (*kataphasis*) – "affirmation".
 - Also called the *via positiva*.
 - Says we can arrive at a sound knowledge of God through description and proposition.
 - The Indescribable One has described himself, and charges us with following his lead!
 - "Why then look for something when you have comprehended the incomprehensibility of what you are looking for, if not because you should not give up the search as long as you are making progress in your inquiry into things incomprehensible, and because you become better and better by looking for so great a good *which is both sought in order to be found and found in order to be sought? It is sought in order to be found all the more delightfully, and it is found in order to be sought all the more avidly*" [*De Trinitate* XV Prologue]

God makes the impossible task, possible – we can speak about him!

- **BUT NOTE:** this doesn't apply to all human language, at all times.
 - ONLY when we abide in his own self-revelation. (2 Tim 3)
 - (Think about Exo 17 – when Moses lifted his arms before the Amalekites, the Israelites prevailed; when he lowered his arms, they suffered. In the same way, only when we stay within the 'headlights' of Scripture, within the remit of God's self-revelation, can we hope to understand him properly.)
- **AND ALSO:** it's still an accommodation, a mediation.
 - Re: Luther and Exo 33 – the back of God.
 - A hiddenness even in the revealing – Scripture is indeed a true revelation, but we still don't see the fullness.
 - We await the final day, when we will behold him face to face.

"The LORD has made himself known..." [Ps 9:16]

Our God is a Revelator God! KEY POINT: This is what makes theology possible in the first place. ← (Re: putting God in a box – God has put *himself* in a box!)

God has revealed himself – and he has makes us his witnesses.

- **REFLECT:** What does his revelation look like? ←
 - He's revealed himself *generally*.
 - Nature, reason, conscience – re: Natural Theology.
 - But he's also revealed himself *specially*:¹
 - The Word living – "*God became flesh and tabernacled amongst us*" [John 1]
 - The Word written – Scripture.

When we come to build our theology of Scripture together, we must begin here.

- I.e. with the impossibility of theology! ←
 - Only made possible because of God's free, gracious self-revelation through the Word.
 - The living Word – born of a holy virgin by the HS.
 - The written Word – born of a holy bride by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

¹ Consider the following words of the 20th Century theologian, Karl Barth: "Dogmatics as an enquiry presupposes that the true content of Christian talk about God can be known by man. It makes this assumption as in and with the Church it believes in Jesus Christ as the revealing and reconciling address of God to man. ... In, with and under the human question, dogmatics speaks of the divine answer" [Barth – CD §1.2.1]. **Also:** "If this is true, then the place from which the way of dogmatic knowledge is to be seen and understood can neither be a prior anthropological possibility nor a subsequent ecclesiastical reality, but only the present moment of the speaking and hearing of Jesus Christ himself, the divine creation of light in our hearts" [Barth – CD §2.2].

[2] On Scripture – An Introduction

[2A] The Challenges of Thinking About Scripture

- **Again, our aim is to build a theology of Scripture together.**
 - **REFLECT:** What do you think are the possible pitfalls here?
 - (I.e. What challenges might we face addressing this subject?)
- **FIRST: the sheer scope of this subject.**
 - Think about the kind of subjects covered:
 - Nature of Scripture / Authority / Perspicuity / History / Canon / Hermeneutics / Translations / Principles of Exegesis. (Etc.)
 - (You can never exhaust this subject!)
- **SECOND: impoverished thinking about Scripture.**
 - In academic circles:
 - **[A]** The Bible as mere historical text. (Socio-historical – e.g. Caesar’s *Gallic War*, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Homer’s *Odyssey*.)
 - **[B]** The Bible as sacred religious text. (‘Phenomenological’ – like any other religion, comparable to the Upanishads, or the Qu’ran, etc.)
 - **[C]** The Bible as spiritually inspiring. (Modernist –mythological, but instructive.)
 - In Christian circles:
 - **[A]** The Bible as a rule of faith. (E.g. Roman Catholic – alongside tradition and the magisterium.)
 - **[B]** The Word as subject to the rule of the Spirit. (Pentecostal – lip service to Biblical authority, but not in practice [re: 1st person God prayers]).

Of course, one of the biggest challenges facing us?

That for so many, the Bible is authoritative – but it’s safe. (“Dreadful it is to fall into the hands of the living God. Yes, it is even dreadful to be alone with the New Testament” [Søren Kierkegaard])

In other words, we use it, we quote it, we revere it – and it just so happens to confirm everything we like.

(Re: Barth and the divine ‘Nein!’ + Spurgeon’s lion.)

[2B] The Scale of Biblical Influence

- **This sort of mindset is made easier by the sheer scale of the Bible’s influence on western society.**
 - History, culture, art, music, English trad of common law.
 - BUT – maybe this is our answer?
 - (I.e. ‘We should think about this because the Bible is an important text’.)
- **This would certainly be a true statement, regardless of faith.**
 - Consider the cultural juggernaut that is Harry Potter:
 - More than 500 million copies of HP titles sold.
 - Translated into 68 languages.

- NOW – contrast that with the Bible:
 - Over *five billion* copies (excluding Gideon's!)
 - Full Bible – 670 languages.
 - NT – 1,521 languages.
- On the cultural impact:
 - Politics / art / literature, etc.
 - (Also the KJV and its influence on the English language.²)
- **BUT – isn't there a problem here? Bible is so familiar, so available, so discussed, and it so saturates our society.**
 - AND YET – *we no longer know it as it really is.*
 - [[**VIDEO:** China House Church Video – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CkXDcdMNE-I>]]
- **What are we missing? After all, we in the West used to know some of this.**
 - Reflected in image I found browsing a photography blog:
 - “The Bible: What a grand old book this is, how beautiful every link fits in [with] each other. It may well be called the Book of Books. It is a library of 66 books and written by at least 39 authors. Some little men have tried to blow it to pieces with their little penny popguns, but like Gibraltar it stands unmoved and without a scratch!”
 - What a beautiful summary:
 - Spelling mistakes, not very academic, etc.
 - AND YET – like the Psalmist, a heartfelt outpouring of *affection* for (and *delight in*) the Word.
 - **LOOK:** Ps 119:11 → 25 → 28 → 105 → 162

[2C] The Bible – God's Kind Self-Revelation, Our Treasure

- **Again, the Bible is not just 'a' book; it is the “Book of Books”.**
 - We're not here because the Bible is culturally significant.
 - Homer's *Iliad* or *Odyssey* / Virgil's *Aeneid* / Caesar's *Gallic War* / Milton's *Paradise Lost*.
- **We're here because God – our joy + treasure – has spoken!**
 - “*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God*” [Matt 4:4]
 - We savour it as if our lives depended on it.

² Be fruitful and multiply / Am I my brother's keeper? / The mark of Cain / Coat of many colours / The fatted calf / Burning bush / A land flowing with milk and honey / Let my people go / An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth / The apple of his eye / I am escaped with the skin of my teeth / Leviathan / To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose / A voice crying in the wilderness / No peace for the wicked / See eye to eye / Cut off out of the land of the living / Can the leopard change his spots? / The parting of the ways / Man shall not live by bread alone / Get thee behind me Satan / The salt of the earth / Hide your light under a bushel / Turn the other cheek / Go the extra mile / Wolf in sheep's clothing / Sign of the times / Den of thieves / I wash my hands of it / Suffer the little children / the Prodigal son / physician heal thyself / cast the first stone / Jesus wept / Doubting Thomas / Road to Damascus / A law unto himself / Through a glass darkly / The root of all evil / Fight the good fight / Armageddon.

[3] How Ought We To Think About Scripture?

All that said – what *IS* our theology of scripture? Our doctrine of Bible?

We're not primarily concerned here with defending the Bible – i.e. apologetics.

We're more asking how we (as Christians) should view the Bible.

Let's think about how the Bible is handled *BY* the Bible.

[3A] How did Jesus approach Scripture?

- **LOOK:** Matt 4:1-11
 - *"It is written..."* [v4/6/7/10]
 - (1) Authoritative, final.
 - (2) Memorised, cherished.
 - *"... by every word that comes from the mouth of God"* [v4]
 - Sufficient.
 - *"Away with you, Satan! For it is written..."* [v10]
 - Spiritually living and useful – e.g. resisting Satan.
 - (BUT ALSO – Mark 14:26, *hallel* psalm. Jesus **sang** Scripture!)
- **LOOK:** Matt 22:23-46
 - *"You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God"* [v29]
 - (1) Holds them accountable for lack of knowledge.
 - (2) Associates Scripture with God's power.
 - *"... have you not read what was said to you by God..."* [v31]
 - Scripture as perpetual oracle of God.
 - *"... they were astounded at his teaching"* [v33]
 - A worker approved! Re: 2 Tim 3.
 - Capable of bringing out from the storehouse treasures new and old – cf. Luke 24:27.
 - *"And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question..."* [v35]
 - Casuistry – applied teaching, re: young man, cf. Lk 18.
 - *"David said by the Spirit..."* [v43]
 - Authorship both human and HS.
 - *"If David thus calls him Lord..."* [v45]
 - Ultimately testifies concerning him – cf. John 5:39.
- **The ultimate summary of Jesus' approach:**
 - *"The Scriptures cannot be broken"* [John 10:35]
 - Scripture is authoritative, final, sufficient, alive, divine and human.
 - Scripture is to be cherished, to be memorised, to be used, to be engaged with, to be applied.
 - **DISCUSS:** Do you think Jesus' approach differs from what is common today? In what way?
 - (**NOTE:** the traditional, Evangelical view of Scripture is today regarded as 'simplistic' – 'oh-so-nuanced'.
 - AND YET Jesus seems to have exactly the same view.)

[3B] How did the Apostles approach Scripture? – In Peter

- **LOOK:** 2 Pet 1:20-21 / 2 Pet 3:1-2 / 2 Pet 3:14-16
- **DISCUSS:** What's the significance of these passages?
 - [a] Shows us early views of Pauline corpus.
 - [b] Scripture did NOT just mean OT.
 - [c] Nature of Scripture:
 - 2 Pet 1:20 – dismissing need to engage? No, re: Paul.
 - 2 Pet 1:21 / 3:1-2 – instead, affirming its true nature.
 - **A pneumatological utterance of God himself.**
 - “So Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God. This, therefore, is a special gift, where God, to instruct the Church, not merely uses mute teachers but also opens his own most hallowed lips” [Inst. I.VI.1]
 - **REFLECT:** What's the significance of this?
 - ‘Verbal plenary inspiration’ – from *verbum* (‘word’), *plēnus* (‘full’), *inspirāre* (to breathe into). plenary (full) inspiration.
 - Two necessary consequences of this doctrine:
 - (1) Scriptures possess divine authority.
 - (2) Divine authority expressed through humanity – i.e. it's not dictation.

[3C] How did the Apostles approach Scripture? – In Paul

- **LOOK:** 2 Tim 3:14-17
 - **REFLECT:** What's the significance of this?
- **Two important Greek words:**
 - θεόπνευστος – *theopneustos*, God-breathed (v.16).
 - Scripture is **supremely authoritative**.
 - The supreme court!
 - Infallible – authorial intention incapable of error.
 - Inerrant – authorial intention not possessive of error.
 - ἐξαρτίξειν – *exartizein*, to be equipped (v.17).
 - Scripture is **supremely sufficient**.
 - Perfect, finished.
 - *Sola Scriptura* – “Thus saith the Lord!”
- **The Reformed confessions are helpful commentaries here:**
 - Authority:
 - “The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not on the testimony of any man, or Church; but wholly open God (who is truth itself) author thereof” [West. Conf. I.4 (1647)]
 - Necessity & Sufficiency:
 - “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” [I.6 (1647)]
 - Perspicuity:
 - “All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known,

believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly expounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or another, that not only the learned, but the unlearned... may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them" [I.7]

[3D] How did the Church Fathers Approach Scripture?

As the generation of apostles passed into glory, we find the early Church talk in the same terms. Yes, they were creative, and clever.

• **BUT – they also regarded Scripture as the v oracle of God:**

- "Look carefully into the Scriptures, which are the true utterances of the Holy Spirit. Observe that nothing of an unjust or counterfeit character is written in them" [Clement – *First Epistle XLV*]
- "The word of truth is free, and carries its own authority, disdainful to fall under any skillful argument, or to endure the logical scrutiny of its hearers. But it would be believed for its own nobility, and for the confidence due to him who sends it" [Justin – *Fragments I*]
- "[The books of Scripture] are fountains of salvation, that they who thirst may be satisfied with the living words they contain. In these alone is proclaimed the doctrine of godliness. Let no man add to these, neither let him take ought from these" [Athanasius – *Festal Letter XXXIX*]
- "For concerning the divine and holy mysteries of the faith, not even a casual statement must be delivered without the Holy Scriptures; nor must we be drawn aside by mere plausibility and artifices of speech. Even to me, who tell thee these things, give not absolute credence, unless thou receive the proof of the things which I announce from the divine Scriptures. For this salvation which we believe depends not on ingenious reasoning, but on demonstration of the holy Scriptures" [Cyril of Jerusalem – *Catechesis IV.17*]
- "I beg of you, my dear brother, to live among these books, to meditate upon them, to know nothing else, to seek nothing else. Does not such a life seem to you a foretaste of heaven here on earth?" [Jerome – *Letter LIII.X*]

[4] Conclusion

Three final observations.

FIRST: *the Scriptures are a work of the Triune God, and our use of them is a participation in the Triune life of God.*

- He loves to hear his own Word spoken back at him.
 - Through the Spirit who inspired the written Word and united us to the living Word.

SECOND: *the Triune God has placed his Spirit-inspired Word into the hands of his Spirit-filled people – and he promises to use IT to speak through THEM.*

- **LOOK:** Ps 119:11 / 25 / 28 / 105 / 162
 - *"The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life"* [Ps 14]
 - *"Let him who speaks, speak as though God himself is speaking"* [1 Pet 4:11]

THIRD: *the Triune God has made the Scriptures necessary, authoritative, sufficient, and perspicuous – but he's also made them KIND.*

- The Bible isn't just a sacred book that happens to talk ABOUT your situation.
 - It is also the very proof of God speaking TO your situation.
 - Just knowing that he has spoken about your circumstances can be enough to bring tremendous comfort.
 - When we struggle with anxiety and doubt, sleeplessness:
 - AND THEN you find: *"You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your record?"* [Ps 56:8]
 - (I'm not alone, he's told my story!)
 - When we struggle to have children:
 - AND THEN you find: *"I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons of daughters"* [Isa 56:5]
 - (I'm not alone, he's told my story!)
 - When we're alienated from our biological family:
 - AND THEN you find: *"If my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will take me up"* [Ps 27:10]
 - (I'm not alone, he's told my story!)
 - When we're grieving or afraid of death:
 - AND THEN you find: *"The cords of death encompassed me... the snares of death confronted me"* [Ps 18:4-5]
 - (I'm not alone, he's told my story!)

God tells our story – and so kindly accommodates to our weaknesses.
("His eye is on the sparrow")

NEXT TIME: the Bible is Word of God – so how should we handle it?