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## **Doctrine of Scripture, Lesson 1**

### **The Self-Attesting Nature of Scripture**

Last week, we looked at the questions, “Why should we study theology, and how do we go about it?” Part of what I said is that we must always study theology while holding to two foundational principles as our guidelines: 1. We must accept the Bible on its own terms; 2. We must understand the Bible using the context, story, and categories that it gives us.

That means that our foundational authority for doing theology has to be the Bible. That’s why we’re beginning a series on the doctrine of Scripture. That is, we’re looking at the question, “What should we think and believe about Scripture - the Bible?” Over the next few weeks, we’re going to answer this question by looking at the *characteristics* of the Bible: namely, the authority, inerrancy (that it is completely true and without error), it’s clarity, necessity, and sufficiency. But we’re going to begin today with the *nature of Scripture* - specifically, with the *self-attesting nature* of scripture. In other words, today we’re asking the question, “What does Scripture claim for itself? What does the *Bible* tell us that the *Bible* is?” Well, let me start off by just answering the question, point blank: *The Bible claims to be the very Word of God*. Most all of the Church throughout church history has thought of the Bible as God’s very Word, but no one just decided out of their own minds to think of the Bible this way. The *Bible* tells us what it is. The Bible tells us that it is God’s very word; that’s what the Bible itself claims to be. In other words, the Bible *attests to itself* - it makes claims about what it is, about its nature *as Scripture*, and the Bible demands to be read *according to the claims it makes about itself* - it claims to be the holy, inspired, inerrant Word of God, and demands that we approach it that way. Or, to put it even more simply: I’m arguing that we must view the words of the Bible as GOD’s very own holy, inspired, inerrant, and authoritative Word to us because *that is exactly what the Bible claims to be*; the Bible is GOD’s Word because the Bible says so.

Now, as soon as I put it that way, there are going to be people who want to call foul and call this circular reasoning. In fact, there might be some of you this morning who are already feeling a bit of skepticism or hesitancy about this. You’re probably thinking, “I believe the Bible is God’s Word, but surely there’s a more solid reason for thinking of the Bible as God’s Word than that the Bible itself tells us that it’s God’s Word.” And I agree that in most situations when

we argue circularly like that, it's not a good idea. For example, when I taught English online to Chinese students, I once had a 5-year-old student claim that China is the best country in the world. Now, if I made the same claim today, and you then asked me, "Why do you say so? On what basis, on what grounds of authority, are you staking such a claim?" Well, if I answered, "China is the best country in the world because this 5-year-old Chinese student said so," you would probably say, "That's not good enough. Anyone can make that claim; that doesn't prove anything." In fact, even if I then said, "The government of China itself claims to be the best country in the world," my guess is you still wouldn't buy it. Any country could make that claim; that doesn't prove anything. It's circular, subjective reasoning.

But the fact that the Bible attests to what it is, saying that it's God's very Word, is different from either of those examples. In fact, I want to argue this morning that not only is the Bible's claim to be God's Word *not* a weak foundation to build our doctrine of Scripture (and all other doctrines) upon; it is actually *the most necessary foundation upon which we must begin*. Therefore, I want to argue this morning that because the Bible is indeed God's very Word to us, our starting point in believing the Bible to be God's Word can be nothing other than that the Bible claims to be God's Word. But let me put that a little differently: the Bible claims to be GOD's Word, and when it does so, *it is appealing to God as the highest authority to prove its own claims*. Let me explain why by considering a bit about God.

Actually I just want to look at one aspect of God's nature, namely, God's *aseity*. Now, I know that word is probably not familiar for most of us, but don't let it intimidate you - the concept is actually pretty simple. The word "*aseity*" comes from the Latin phrase *a se*, which simply means "*from or by oneself*." And when we say that God is *a se* or speak of the *aseity* of God, we are simply saying that *God has "from or by himself" all that he needs*. In other words, this means God is completely self-sufficient - He has everything He needs contained within himself. He has within himself all he needs to exist, to do anything he wants to do, and carry out any desire he has. Now, this is clearly not true of us, or anything other than GOD. We are dependent upon *so much* outside of ourselves - we need air to breathe, food to eat, water to drink, warmth, shelter, other people, knowledge and power outside of ourselves, a world to live in, etc. We are finite, dependent creatures. But God is not - He is the transcendent Creator. God is self-existent, self-sufficient, self-contained, and independent. He does not need or depend on

anything outside of Himself. There is nothing greater than him, nothing he needs, and nothing outside of him on which he is dependent for anything. That's what I mean by *God's aseity*.

Now, when we open our Bibles, we're not going to find the Latin phrase *a se* or the word "aseity" there. But the Bible reveals to us all kinds of things about God that lead us to confidently confirm the self-existent, self-sufficient, self-contained, independent nature of God. That is, we can affirm God's aseity. Let's look at some of the things that the Bible tells us about God that confirm that he is indeed *a se*. And I promise, by the end, I'll come by around to the implications of this for the claims the Bible makes about itself.

## **I. The Biblical Witness to God's Aseity**

### ***A. God Created All Things***

God is presented in the Bible as the one who created all things. Apart from the triune God, before this world or any other created thing existed, there was nothing. Before all created things there was simply the triune God – God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, the one God existing in three persons. And that God created everything. Therefore, he is rightly called the Creator. And we can see this in a number of texts throughout the Bible, but for the sake of time, I'll just refer you to Genesis 1-2, which confirm that God created everything.

### ***B. God Owns Everything***

Now, we can also say from that, just using logic, that God owns everything that exists (since he created it). But we need not use logical deductions only, do we? The Scripture actually explicitly tells us that God own everything.

For example, considering the following texts:

*Psalm 24: 1* – “The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and all those who dwell therein.”

*Psalm 50:10-12* – “For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine.”

And this last statement that God would not tell us if he were hungry points us to another truth affirmed in Scripture, namely, that God has no needs.

### ***C. God Has No Needs***

We see this again, for example, in a text like...

*Acts 17:24-25* – “The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth [i.e., he created all things and owns all things], does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.”

Furthermore, as one who created all things, owns all things, and has no needs, we can more specifically say that God is counseled by no one and owes no one.

### ***D. God Is Counseled by No One and Owes No One***

Again, the Bible explicitly says this. Consider, for example:

*Romans 11:34-36* – “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.”

But if God is counseled by no one, how does he arrive at determining what he should do? The Bible answers this question for us as well, telling us that God does everything that he does, directed by his own will.

### ***E. God Does All that He Does, Directed by His Own Will***

*Psalms 115:2* – “Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.”

*Jeremiah 9:23-24* – “Thus says the Lord, ‘Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts

boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord.”

*Ephesians 1:11* – “In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will.”

Finally, we can add that God, by his very nature of being God, is *a se*.

### ***G. God, by his very nature of being God, is a se***

Now, what do I mean by this? Well, consider, for example, how God mocks the idols in Isaiah 40-48. He makes clear that he alone is God, saying (among other places) in Isaiah 45:21-22, “There is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none besides me. Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.” Interestingly, the very next phrase is verse 23 is God saying, “By myself I have sworn.” Just hold on to that declaration for a second, and we’ll come back to it.

God makes clear that he alone is God, but one reason he points to in order to illustrate that there are no other gods is that the “gods” of other nations need something. They need to be created. They need to be transported. They can’t do things by their own power. That is, they are not self-existent, self-sufficient, self-contained, and independent, and God by nature is.

*Questions?*

Now, this understanding of God as one who is *a se* has some implications for us. Let me name a few.

## **II. Some Implications of God’s Aseity**

I’m going to list three specifically that John Frame has laid out in his excellent work simply titled, *The Doctrine of God*. These three are:

### ***A. God Is Self-Existent***

If God has everything within himself that he needs, then he needs nothing outside of himself to exist. He is self-existent. This one is pretty obvious, so I'll move on.

### ***B. God Is the Standard of Right and Wrong***

Again, if God needs nothing outside of himself, then he needs nothing outside of himself to serve as a standard for right and wrong. He himself is that very standard. Now, let's flesh this out a bit. What makes something right or wrong? The answer is not that there is some universal law *outside of God* that He and we all take our cues from. If that were the case, then God would be bound to a greater moral authority *outside of Himself*. But that can't be. The answer is that something is right or wrong because it either does or does not correspond to God's nature. He declares murder to be evil because it is not in accord with his nature. He declares loving one's neighbor to be good because it *is* in accord with his nature. So, good in our world is simply a reflection of God's good character and evil is a picture of which is not in accord with God's good character.

You can see then that it is silly to ask if what God does is *good*. By definition, everything God does is good because his character is the standard for what is good. Goodness doesn't exist as some reality outside of God that God is dependent on to make sure his actions are in accord with goodness. He always does what is good simply by acting in accord with his own good and perfect nature.

### ***C. God is Self-Attesting (or Self-Justifying)***

Finally, we can affirm that God is self-attesting (or self-justifying). Often times in our own experience we rightly point to an authority that is greater than we are in order to justify or attest to what we are saying. So, for example, if I were to make a controversial scientific claim, I would appeal to a credible scientist or scientific study, since I myself do not have any scientific

authority or credibility. If I were to make a claim about a theological point, I might point to some well-known theologian in order to attest to what I'm saying. After all, for me to say that I think a text means something might carry a little (perhaps very little) weight, but to say that what I'm claiming this text means is attested to by Martin Luther, John Calvin, Charles Spurgeon, D.A. Carson, and John Piper carries a lot more weight.

So, who is it that God points to in order to attest to, or affirm, or *justify*, what he claims? What authority can God appeal to in order to validate what He claims to be true? Well, the answer, of course, is that there is *no one above himself to whom he can point*. There is no one with greater knowledge than God about anything. After all, everything outside of the triune God didn't even exist until *He* created it. There is no great moral authority or Law or standard above *God Himself* - He is the highest authority, on any matter or subject! Therefore, God attests to Himself; He is self-attesting.

And we see this proved over and over again in Scripture itself.

In *Isaiah 45:23*, God says, "By myself I have sworn." We see this again in the book of Hebrews. The author of Hebrews writes:

*Hebrews 6:13* – "For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself."

Do you see what is going on there? God could not point to anyone greater than himself to attest to the truthfulness of his promise, so he just swore by himself. He attested to his own truthfulness. Again, he is self-attesting.

*Questions?*

And, this has implications for our doctrine of Scripture.

### **III. God's Self-Attesting Nature and Our Doctrine of Scripture**

Let's think for a second about the implications of God's aseity on our doctrine of Scripture. What is the Bible? It is God's Word. But how do we know it is God's Word? As we

started this lesson, we know it is God's Word because God tells us it is his Word. The Bible is GOD's Word because GOD says so. And where does God tell us that the Scripture is his Word? He tells us in the Scriptures themselves. The Bible makes a claim and points to itself as the authority to validate such a claim. It can do this because the Bible claims to be *God Himself speaking*; so God is making a claim - "THIS Bible is My Word" - and appeals to *Himself* as the highest authority to validate His claim.

You see, if God is *a se*, then he need not (and indeed *cannot*) point to anything outside of Himself to justify or attest to Himself or His claims. Therefore, if God's Word is *God's Word*, then Scripture need not (and indeed *cannot*) point to anything outside of itself to attest to itself. *If the Bible is God's Word, then by its very nature it must be self-attesting!*

In fact, we could say that if the Bible pointed to something outside of itself to attest to its truthfulness, then we should not regard the Bible as our final authority but put it down and go seek out that thing to which the Bible points. Therefore, what some might perceive as a weakness (i.e., our resting our belief that the Bible is God's Word in the Bible's own claims for itself) is actually a strength. The Bible must be self-attesting. All things that are considered a final authority must, by definition, be self-attesting, or they would not be considered a final authority.

*Questions?*

OK, so now let us turn to the Scriptures themselves and see what the Bible actually claims about itself:

### **The Bible Claims It Is Nothing Less than God's Word**

As we've acknowledged, the Bible claims that it is nothing less than God's Word. We could look to a few examples of this, but I'll point you to two:



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

When Paul writes that the Scripture is God-breathed, he is saying that each word comes from God himself. That is, when we say, “the Bible says,” we are saying, “God says.” When we read the Bible, we are listening to God speak. And Peter claims the same thing:

*2 Peter 1:20-21* – “Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. 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.”

Now, we could say that these texts are referring to the Old Testament, so what about the apostolic writings of the New Testament? Well, when we consider the New Testament, we should acknowledge a few things:

1) Jesus told the apostles that the Spirit would lead them into all truth, reminding them of what he said when he was with them and leading them into further truth that they were not ready to receive when he was with them.

*John 14:25-26* – “These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.”

*John 15:26-27* – “But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning.”

*John 16:12-14* – “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to

come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

2) The apostles understood themselves as speaking authoritatively from the Lord in their writings (whether they wrote themselves or someone else wrote according to their testimony)

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul notes that he is speaking about something that the Lord did not comment on in his earthly ministry. Nonetheless, what he’s saying, he expects to be treated as a command from the Lord. For example:

*1 Corinthians 7:12* – “To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her.”

In fact, he thought his words were so authoritative that no one who received a prophecy of the Spirit should even be regarded in the church if that person doesn’t acknowledge that what Paul writes is itself a command of the Lord. He writes,

*1 Corinthians 14:37-38* – “If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized.”

3) The New Testament writers call each other’s New Testament writings “Scripture.”

In 1 Timothy 5:18, Paul writes, “For Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,’ and ‘The laborer deserves his wages.’” Those two quotes are from Deuteronomy 25:4 and Luke 10:7, both of which Paul calls Scripture.

And Peter calls Paul’s writings “Scripture”:

*2 Peter 3:14-16* - “Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just

as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.”

So, throughout Scripture, the Bible’s claim for itself is that the writings of the Old Testament and the New Testament are nothing less than the very words of God. Scripture itself attests to this truth.

Because of this, if we are to do theology in a way that is God-honoring, we must do theology by first accepting the Bible’s claims for itself. We must do our theology by rightly recognizing that our Creator has revealed to us what we need to know for life and godliness. The Scripture is sufficient for us. Therefore, we will always seek to ground our claims in God’s Word, always seek to evaluate what we say against God’s Word, and always seek to study those issues which have been revealed to us in God’s Word. This is the only manner of doing theology that actually produces true doctrine.

*Questions?*