

Why God
Gave Us
a Book

Basics of the Faith

How Do We Glorify God?
How Our Children Come to Faith
What Are Election and Predestination?
What Are Spiritual Gifts?
What Is a Reformed Church?
What Is a True Calvinist?
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Why Believe in God?
Why Do We Baptize Infants?
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Gene Edward Veith



P U B L I S H I N G

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HOW GOD COMMUNICATES WITH US

A friend of mine tells about a young woman she knew who had mistreated her parents, spurning their love and writing them out of her life. Later she became a Christian. But even after her conversion, she still never bothered to reconcile with her mother and father. My friend finally asked her about it. "I will," said the young woman, "when the Lord tells me to." As of yet, she explained, the Lord hadn't urged on her heart that she should make up with her parents. She was willing to do so, but only if God wanted her to do it. And if he did, she expected that God would make his will clear to her through the Holy Spirit.

"Do you want to know what God wants you to do about your parents?" asked my friend. "You don't need to wait for him to tell you his will. Let's see what he says about it." She opened a Bible to Exodus 20:12. "Honor your father and your mother," she read. "That's what God tells you to do," she explained. "That's God making his will clear to you through the Holy Spirit."

That exchange points out two completely different ways of relating to God. Many people expect God to inspire them directly. They cultivate a God within who gives them the right emotions, puts ideas into their heads, and communicates to them in a sort of nonverbal ESP.

Others believe God has revealed himself objectively—not in inchoate feelings or impressions but in human language. They do not look inside themselves to know God; rather, they look to his Word. They believe that God’s will, what he has done for us, and his personal involvement in our lives are expressed in a unique, inspired, supernatural book—one that is on nearly everyone’s shelves, making God accessible whenever someone wants to open its pages—a book known as the Holy Bible.

All Christians express some sort of allegiance to the Bible. But many Christians are uneasy about the Reformation insistence on *sola Scriptura*, “Scripture alone,” the notion that the Word of God is sufficient for us, the only revelation we actually need. The result is that many try to supplement the Bible with human reason, scientific scholarship, sociological research, or the findings of modern psychology. Still others try to supplement the Bible with mystical experiences, inner convictions, and personal revelations. We see a great deal of this in Christian circles today.

I understand that. What I cannot understand is Christians who maintain that subjective revelations offer a more personal and intimate relationship with God than is afforded by the Bible. I say this because a true personal relationship with God—that is, a genuine, person-to-Person interaction—is only possible through the means of language.

Language is the means by which human beings both communicate and commune with each other. To have a relationship with another human being involves talking to that person and listening to what the other person has to say. There can be no personal relationships without communication of some kind. Merely basking in each other’s presence is not enough. Merely feeling strongly or having strong affection for the other person

is not enough. A couple has to talk with each other; not one or the other, but both partners have to talk or the relationship will die.

Language is the means we have of conveying our thoughts, our feelings, and our very selves to someone else. Language imparts information, but it does more than that—it is the only way we have of getting to know another person. It is through language that we connect with another human being. Even small talk keeps the connection going. Without language we would be essentially alone.

Linguists point out how language is fundamental to nearly every human activity. Thought depends on language. Cultures consist of people who speak the same language, and that language binds, defines, and shapes the community. Law and science, governments and the media, the great ideas and the way we entertain ourselves—they all consist of words, words, words. In fact, in a sense what sets human beings apart from animals is the capacity for language.

Furthermore, the capacity for language is part of what it means to have been made in the image of God. From the very beginning God is described as someone who speaks. God's creation was accomplished when he spoke:

And God said, "Let there be light, and there was light." . . .

And God said, "Let there be an expanse between the waters. . . ."

And God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear." . . .

Then God said, "Let the land produce vegetation. . . ."

And God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky. . . ."

And God said, "Let the water teem with living creatures. . . ."

And God said, "Let the land produce living creatures. . . ."

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness." (Gen. 1:3–26)

Thus the universe itself was spoken into being.

God is no mere object but a Person—and in the mystery of the Trinity a relationship of Persons—who in an incomprehensibly transcendent way thinks, feels, reflects, and communicates. Moreover, just as one cannot separate one's language from oneself, God's Word—his language—is his identity. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made" (John 1:1–3). Then we learn that this Word is none other than the second Person of the Trinity, who was incarnate as Jesus Christ: "The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us" (v. 14).

God is a Person, and he made human beings to be persons also, which includes the capacity for language. As soon as Adam was created, God reflected that this human being needed relationships. "The LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone'" (Gen. 2:18). So he gave Adam the linguistic task of naming, first the animals (2:19–20) and then the woman he loved (2:23; 3:20).

Why should we be surprised that God speaks to his children in actual, concrete, verbal, readable language? God is so far beyond us, how could we know anything about him unless he chose to take the initiative and reveal himself to us? Would we expect this revelation to be mere feelings? Don't we need more

than that, actual knowledge about God, how he considers us and what he has done to restore our relationship? What better way could be conceived than that God should address us through language, that he should give us his Word?

This Word, if it is to be of any benefit to us mortals, must be in human language. How the Persons of the Godhead communicate with each other, what form God's Word assumed when he spoke the universe into existence, will be intrinsically unfathomable to the fallen, radically limited human mind. If God, in his amazing grace, deigns to communicate with us, it must be in terms we can understand. His language must be the language of actual human beings, historically and culturally situated, as all human language is, with grammar and syntax and vocabulary, capable of being translated and written down. God, as is his wont, works through means: "Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit," wrote Peter (2 Peter 1:21, NKJV). What they spoke was recorded. Christ's apostles wrote down his Word. Indeed, "All Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16).

Human relationships depend on communication in language, and this is also true of a relationship with God. Christians speak to God in prayer. God speaks to Christians in the words of the Bible.

People often say, "Show me God" or "If I could only see God, then I could believe." Many religions are based on visions. But for the people of the Bible, a god that one can see is not the true God. The pagan neighbors of the children of Israel had gods they could see. The sun that one can see in the sky every morning was a god; so were the stars, the sea—indeed, every quality of nature. Moreover, their gods were visible as carved images, adored in their homes and temples. The God of Abraham and Isaac, on the

other hand, was most emphatically not even to be represented in visual terms. He was to be known only in terms of his Word.

The Bible says little about “seeing” God, but it says a great deal about “hearing” him. To be sure, after death we shall see God (1 Cor. 13:12). But for now, we must *listen* to him, and what we must listen to is the Bible.

MEETING GOD IN THE BIBLE

I remember when I first began to read the Bible seriously. I had read theologians from Lewis to Tillich, but I had never read the Bible, except in little snippets. I resolved to read the whole thing from beginning to end, an enterprise that took me from the beginning of the universe to the end of time—from Genesis to Revelation. I suppose I began my Bible-reading project for literary reasons, but as I read I found that I was meeting God.

A Personal Narrative

From the outset I was drawn in by the majestic narratives of Genesis and Exodus. Parts of them—the creation, the Fall, the saga of Joseph, the redemption of the Israelites out of slavery—were unutterably sublime. Other parts—God’s seeking to kill Moses, hardening Pharaoh’s heart, insisting on elaborate ceremonies and bloody sacrifices—were charged with mystery.

By the time I got to the Promised Land along with the children of Israel, I was reading about whole people being put under the ban and totally slaughtered—men, women, children, even animals—all wiped out by the command of God. This was shattering. God’s people were given the Promised Land, but first Joshua had to take it forcefully and wipe out the existing