

## **Critical Comments on the Concepts Surrounding the Word of God and Holy Spirit**

By: Dan Mages

It is commonplace within mainstream Christianity to call the Bible the 'word of God'. This type of language is rarely questioned and brought under scrutiny partly because of the fear that is associated with seeing the 66 documents contained in the Protestant canon as just another, ordinary, human set of texts filled with errors. If the Bible has errors, it is then reasoned that ultimately we can be sure of nothing. The promise of everlasting life through Jesus is seen as utterly unreliable and impossible to believe. This reasoning is based on the assumption that truth cannot be established upon human, errant documents. I think this way of thinking is faulty in that we know many things about history from errant documents. Historians do not need a perfect text in order to establish confidence about certain events within history.

In light of this, there are certain bottom line facts that the majority of scholars see as reliable and probable saying of Jesus. One of these is the theme of the kingdom of God and the ideas associated with the kingdom in the first century. The death of Jesus on the cross is another rarely contested event of history. Just as we can be sure that Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon based on documents that are not perfect, we can also be confident of various events as described in the Hebrew Bible and Second Testament documents. There is a general consensus that both of these texts are generally reliable for the history contained within. Again, even if there are sections or events that should be doubted and questioned and possibly discarded, this does not necessarily mean that everything is falsified.

This way of looking at ancient texts allows for the intellectual freedom to question authenticity, be driven by truth, and still allows the possibility of retaining a trust in the promises of God that are understood as authentic. This narrow road of following the evidence seems to be a rare path taken, as many just want to "believe," regardless of the evidence. This 'conviction following research' approach is juxtaposed to a blind leap of faith, that then tries to justify the blind leap after the faith decision. This way of going about things seems to be backwards. Research, study, and thought should precede a decision, not follow it. There is nothing honorable about trusting the first person that we walk into on the street, yet this is how religion is usually approached. People typically assume that their birth religion is the right one and the others are mistaken.

So what type of claims does the Bible make for itself? Does it claim to be the inspired, inerrant, authoritative word of God? Some evangelical writers have and continue to question these high claims. It is pointed out by some, that the Bible never makes these claims for itself. In fact, the most commonly used term applied to the Bible by Christians, “word of God,” is principally used within the Bible to refer to a specific message to a specific people, not as a reference to our modern collection of texts. John Goldingay remarks, “The expression ‘word of God’ refers to particular divine promises, commands, or messages, oral or written, and in the Second Testament characteristically to the gospel message itself, but it is not a scriptural term for scripture itself.”<sup>1</sup> It seems clear enough that the Second Testament documents make a distinction between the Scriptures, which are the Hebrew writings, and the ‘word of God’, which was the spoken gospel message, not generically the Bible as commonly supposed. (see Acts 17:3,11,13; 1Thes. 2:13).

Related to this discussion about the word of God, is the method many use to come the conclusion that the Bible truly is God’s word. Often, appeal is made to the Holy Spirit in order to discern the truthfulness of the claim that it is of God. I am surprised how often this takes place within the Christian community when these same people typically scoff at Mormons when they say they know the book of Mormon is true because of the burning they experience in their bosom. Is this not the same claim? Mormons claim to know that their text is true because of a feeling they have in their hearts, while Christians call this same feeling, “knowing by way of the Holy Spirit.” Is there a real difference here?

It must be asked, what is the Holy Spirit and what is the role of the Spirit in the life of the believer. It is not often understood by the common churchgoer that the word spirit is a transliteration of the Latin word *spiritus*, which is derived from the Greek word *pneuma*, and the Hebrew word *ruach*, both which mean, “breath” or “wind.” With this in mind, we can begin to see why Jews have a close connection between the concepts of word and spirit. God’s breath is either literal or a metaphor for speech, language, words, messages, and promises. It then becomes clearer why Paul could say in Col 3:16, “Let the *word* of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom and as you sing psalms, hymns and

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<sup>1</sup> John Goldingay, *Models for Scripture*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 3.

spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God”<sup>2</sup> and in Eph 5, “...be filled with the *spirit*. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (18-20 NIV Emphasis mine). The spirit in this context, is synonymous with the words of Christ. Testing the *spirits*, would be testing the *words*, or messages of the prophet. Therefore, if we possess God’s mind, God’s words, God’s promises, then, in this manner of speaking, we are in possession of God’s spirit. Unless the claim is being made that God personally spoke and said that the Bible, is true in all of its parts, appeal to the Holy Spirit does not make sense. Appealing to a promise made in the text should not be used as a confirmation that any particular book or all of the books in the Protestant, or any other Bible are from God.

Just as Dr. Colin Brown encourages students to read each book of the Bible on its own terms, it can be said that individual statements within each biblical text stands for falls on its own terms as well. Even though I do not necessarily agree with Martin Luther that James should be rejected because James apparently taught a gospel of works salvation, I do think that he had the right idea of evaluating each text on its own merits.

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<sup>2</sup> Emphasis mine.