

THE WORD OF GOD OR THE WORD OF MAN? 1 THESSALONIANS 2:13

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First Thessalonians 2:13 separates and distinguishes between the Word of God and the word of man. Such doctrine is not a biblical mystery; neither its origin nor terminus occur in 1 Thess 2:13. Also, the reception and continued working of God’s holy Word in the lives of the Thessalonian believers gave clear indication that they qualified as “the good soil,” of which Jesus had taught.

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Introduction

The question of what is or what is not God’s Word has instigated an age-old theological battle going all the way back to creation. Genesis 1 contains eleven times some form of “And God said” (Gen 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, 29).¹ Genesis 2 adds two more such references, “and the LORD God commanded the man, saying” (2:16), and 2:18, “Then the LORD God said . . .” Thus, thirteen times in the first two chapters, Genesis presents God as actively saying,² and in this context, also sets forth the efficacious nature of God’s spoken word.³ The Bible presents Him as God alone

¹ Unless otherwise stipulated, all Scripture references used are from the NASB 1977 edition. “Thee” and “Thou” are changed throughout to modern usage.

² In reference to the repeated use and striking nature of this phrase in Gen 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, 28, 29, Wenham states, “Though it is of course taken for granted throughout the OT that God speaks, אמר “to say” is used here in a more pregnant sense than usual. It is a divine word of command that brings into existence what it expresses. Throughout Scripture the word of God is characteristically both creative and effective: it is the prophetic word that declares the future and helps it come into being. But in this creation narrative these qualities of the divine word are even more apparent (Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC [Waco, TX: Word Publishing, 1987], 17–18).

³ Timothy Ward, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 21, notes the significance of this concept is picked up by subsequent biblical writers (cf. Pss 33:6, 9; 148:5; Rom 4:17; Heb 11:2; 2 Pet 3:5–7). It is particularly noteworthy that the writer of Hebrews places at the beginning of his definition of faith the recognition that God created ex nihilo by fiat.

who has no needs outside of Himself to validate His speech,⁴ with creation itself validating and bearing witness to the effectiveness of God's Word.⁵

Genesis 3:1 abruptly changes things in two significant ways. First, this is the first question recorded in Scripture ("Indeed, has God said?"), and second, it is also the first temptation recorded in the Bible from the one who will soon be disclosed as an archenemy of God and mankind. When Eve did not properly respond to this deceptive temptation by saying, God has said, the initial question digresses to a statement and a challenge: "You surely shall not die!" (Gen 3:4). From at first questioning whether God has said, when not properly responded to, becomes a formal denial of the truthfulness of God's Word.⁶ Now, for the first time in Scripture there stands two statements in total opposition to each other; both statements cannot be true, and if one of them is found to be a true statement, the remaining statement must be a lie.⁷ Both of the serpent's approaches, then, call into doubt the trustworthiness of God, first by the doubting of His word, and second, by doubting His Person. In both cases, the words are spoken from the focus of the attack, and they ultimately undermine the integrity of the One who speaks.

Later revelation given by God, such as John 8:44 and Rev 12:9, reveals that the enemy is an old and continuously active one. Jesus described Satan in John 8:44: "You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature; for he is a liar, and the father of lies." With the question of whether or not God has said improperly answered comes the acceptance of the lie that God has not said ("You surely shall not die"). From the devastating fall of man and the subsequent curse, the broader/larger picture emerges:

The Truth of God
vs.
The Lies [plural] of Satan

This battle that began in Genesis 3 continues to the present time and ultimately goes to the final rebellion in Rev 20:7–10. First Timothy 4:1 reveals an important subset of this attack on God's truth: "But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines

⁴ See John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, vol. 1, A Theology of Lordship (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002), 470–75.

⁵ The tight connection between the clarity and efficacy of God's Word can be seen in Huldrych Zwingli's sermon, "Of the Clarity and Certainty of the Word of God" (in *Zwingli and Bullinger*, ed. G. W. Bromiley, Library of Christian Classics, XXIV [London: SCM, 1953], 49–95).

⁶ Carl R. Trueman, "The God of Unconditional Promise," in *The Trustworthiness of God: Perspective on the Nature of Scripture*, eds. Paul Helm and Carl R. Trueman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 181.

⁷ Describing Satan's approach as the "hermeneutic of suspicion," Trueman writes, "By severing the words from God's intention, the serpent effectively makes the latter a hidden matter, ripe for cynical speculation, and thereby lays the foundation upon which Eve's disobedience is built. Eve's fall from grace is facilitated by the crisis in her belief in God's trustworthiness caused by the assault of the serpent upon the relation between who God is and the words he speaks" (ibid.).

of demons,” clearly showing that religious lies, deceitful spirits, and doctrines of demons exist and are constantly active. However, it should also be noted that they are never presented by those who propagate such false doctrine for what they truly are, and thus they comprise a major component of the overall deception that continuously comes forth from Satan.⁸

Obviously, with the overall battle being the truth of God versus the lies of Satan, two core questions result: (1) What is God’s Word? and (2) What is the ultimate source for what is presented as God’s Word? These questions directly relate to both origin and authority, and these two concepts repeatedly occur in Scripture. Perhaps one of the best known examples of the source and efficacy of God’s Word is Isa 55:8–11:

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,” declares the LORD. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth, and making it bear and sprout, and furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; so shall My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.”

While the greater context ultimately deals with wayward Judah and Jerusalem (Isa 1:1; 2:1), the immediate context is God’s offer of grace and forgiveness to Israel: “Seek the LORD while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near” (Isa 55:7). Using the contrast between His thoughts and the highest heaven being higher than the collective thoughts of fallen mankind, God established the basis for His comparison and for His declarative statement: “so shall My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it” (Isa 55:11). This last statement shows that this is very personal with God. He considers it “My word,” going forth from “My mouth,” shall not return “to Me” empty, without accomplishing what “I desire,” for which “I sent it.” Only the most brazen of skeptics could come to a text such as this and not accept that God with ultimate authority views and presents this as His Word (origin) and its divine power (efficacy). Also, one major deduction needs to be considered: Isaiah 55:11 is either one hundred percent true or one-hundred percent false. God offered no middle ground or third option; it is not “sort of God’s word,” it is not “sort of higher than the heavens are above earth.”

⁸ John A. Kitchen, *The Pastor Epistles for Pastors* (The Woodlands TX: Kress Christian Publications, 2009), 159 writes, “The Apostle launches in a new direction. He has spoken of the church as ‘the pillar and support of the truth’ (3:15), and then, through what was probably an early hymn, stated something of that Gospel truth (3:16). Now, in contrast . . . Paul speaks of the conditions in which the church must hold and protect that truth.” Kitchen likewise wisely states, “Till now in this letter Paul has been speaking in guarded terms about this spiritual warfare (1 Tim. 2:14; 3:6–7), but now states clearly the conflict we are in and the demonic influences that stand behind all false teaching (2 Cor. 4:4; 11:3, 13–14). Such a demonically inspired departure from the faith continued to be a grave concern of the Apostle Paul in his second letter to Timothy (2 Tim. 2:16–18; 3:13; 4:3–4)” (ibid.).

Jesus and the Word of God—A Brief Survey

Without time to address everything relating to Jesus and God’s Word, there are particular verses that are directly applicable to our study of 1 Thess 2:13. It should not be surprising that Jesus shared the same theology concerning the source and authority of the Word of God as found in Isaiah 55. For instance, centuries later, when He was tempted by the same evil one found in Genesis 3, Jesus responded perfectly, although Adam and Eve had not, and He cited a verse similar in doctrine to Isa 55:11, by quoting Deut 8:3: “For it is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God’” (Matt 4:4).

Later, in the Parable of the Sower and the Soils (Mark 4:1–12), Jesus interpreted His own parable and explained; “The sower sows the word [of God].” He further described the good soil as “the ones on whom seed was sown on the good soil; and they hear the word and accept it, and bear fruit, thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold” (Mark 4:20). Thus, “the Good Soil” must have three requirements: (1) they hear the Word of God, (2) they accept the Word of God for what it is—the Word of God, and (3) instead of being some mere mental affirmation, they bring forth fruit in their lives. All three components are required to meet Jesus’ criteria of what composed “good soil.” Hiebert adds:

“Those” [of Mark 4:20] instead of “these” [of the first three soils] makes the contrast to all the preceding classes. *Sown* here is aorist, indicating a successful sowing, accomplishing the sower’s purpose.

[These are they who] “hear the word, and receive it, and bring forth fruit”—three present participles, denoting continuing action, characterize them. They continue to have a listening attitude which welcomes the Word allowing it to work out its purpose in their lives. Their lives are characterized by their productivity. These three features distinguish them from all the preceding soils.⁹

Yet Scripture makes clear that not everyone has such a response as the Good Soil. When the Pharisees condemned Jesus by asking why His disciples did not “walk according to the tradition of the elders” (Mark 7:5), Jesus responded by strongly denouncing them, quoting Isa 29:13 in reference to such ones, stating, “Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME. BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN’” (Mark 7:6–7). Jesus further denounced them saying, “Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men” (Mark 7:8), followed by the summary statement that they were “invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that” (Mark 7:13). Jesus *clearly* made a stark contrast between “the precepts of men” [the word of man] versus the Word of God. They, whom Jesus rebuked, were repeatedly committing two different sins. First, they elevated the precepts of men (in their estimation only, not in reality) to the status of the Word of God. And second, they lowered God’s Word (in their minds and practice, but not in

⁹ D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Gospel of Mark: An Expository Commentary* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1994), 114 (italics in the original).

reality) to be on the same level as their traditions, namely, the precepts of man. The sins of elevating fallen man's word to be equal with God's Word and an attempt at debasing God's holy Word to their fallen level would not be limited only to the immediate setting; it is still just as sinful to do either or both sins today—and those who do so stand equally as guilty and convicted before Jesus as when it first occurred.

Another passage of extreme significance regarding God's Word is Mark 8:38, where Jesus forewarned: "For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels." The person of Jesus cannot be eradicated or removed from the words of Jesus; they are inseparable. Not to believe one is not to believe the other. Also, this sobering truth should not be neglected: everyone will believe someone or some thing, and eternal destinies literally depend on the reception or rejection of God's incarnate and spoken Word. As Hiebert writes on this passage:

"Whoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and my words"—the relationship is presented as undetermined, but it will be decided by the reaction of each individual to the claims of Christ. By refusing the demands of discipleship, he shows himself ashamed of Christ, fearing the shame and suffering involved. *Of me and my words* again unites the Person of Christ with His truth as determining ultimate destiny.¹⁰

One final passage needs to be examined before going to 1 Thess 2:13. After the mistakenly misnamed "Triumphal Entry" (Matt 21:1–11), the subsequent cleansing of His own temple (Matt 21:12–17), and the cursing of the fig tree (Matt 21:18–22), the following encounter took place:

And when He had come into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him as He was teaching, and said, "By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?"

And Jesus answered and said to them, "I will ask you one thing too, which if you tell Me, I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?" [Mark 11:30 adds the imperative, "Answer Me!"]

And they began reasoning among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Then why did you not believe him? But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the multitude; for they all hold John to be a prophet."

And answering Jesus, they said, "We do not know."

He also said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things" (Matt 21:23–27).

Jesus gave them only two options—not twenty—as to the source of John the Baptist's ministry. Was the source of John the Baptist's ministry God or man? "Answer Me!" Was John the Baptist a prophet of God, or did he appoint himself without

¹⁰ Hiebert, *Mark*, 240 (italics in the original).

God's approval? "Answer Me!" Did John the Baptist speak and teach the Word of God or merely the precepts of men? "Answer Me!"

Their reasoning in private shows that these religious leaders undoubtedly understood the core issue: "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Then why did you not believe him?'" It is evident that they did not believe John the Baptist originated from or spoke for God. They rejected the previous declaration that John the Baptist made in regard to himself as being the Messiah's biblically-prophesied forerunner of Isa 40:2–3, as seen in John 1:19–23:

And this is the witness of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?"

And he confessed, and did not deny, and he confessed, "I am not the Christ."

And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" And he said, "I am not."

"Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." They said then to him, "Who are you, so that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am A VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE STRAIGHT THE WAY OF THE LORD,' as Isaiah the prophet said."

None of these claims did the religious leaders believe, and so what should have been tremendously embarrassing to these Jewish academic elites was that after a lifetime of study, they could not collectively nor individually determine whether or not John the Baptist's baptism originated from God. Jesus appropriately would not answer their question concerning His own authority.

In summary, it should not be surprising that both God the Father and God the Son viewed God's Word the same way. Perhaps the best all-encompassing statement in all of the Bible of how Jesus viewed Scripture is His simple yet eternally profound prayer of John 17:17: "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth."

The Birth of the Thessalonian Church

In order to have a better understanding of Paul's letters to the Thessalonians, a few matters regarding Paul's arrival and reception at Thessalonica should be noted, as seen in Acts 17:1–10a:

Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ."

And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a great multitude of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women. But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and coming upon the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them out to the people. And when they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the

city authorities, shouting, "These men who have upset the world have come here also; and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus."

And they stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things. And when they had received a pledge from Jason and the others, they released them. And the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea; and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews.¹¹

As seen in previous elements of this article, God's Word—not man's word—is at the heart of what Paul preached to the Thessalonians:

Paul's synagogue message centered around two points. He used the Old Testament Scriptures to set before the hearers the great facts concerning the promised Messiah. These Scriptures proved that it was necessary for the Messiah "to suffer, and to rise again from the dead." This emphasis upon the suffering and death of the expected Messiah would be a strange new note for Paul's audience. The traditional teaching in the synagogue did not associate suffering with the Messiah but rather proclaimed His coming as the champion and deliverer of Israel.¹²

Marshall writes concerning the accusations made against the missionaries:

Luke has no vivid conversion stories to tell from Paul's visit to Thessalonica, and he has already indicated at some length the kind of discourse that Paul would give in a synagogue setting (13:16ff.). He therefore contents himself here with a general summary of Paul's evangelism. It was based on the Scriptures, the common authority accepted by Jews and Christians, and it was conducted by means of argument. He opened up the meaning of the Scriptures (Luke

¹¹ Stanley D. Toussaint, "Acts," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 401, writes regarding Paul's limited stay at Thessalonica: "The reference to three Sabbath days does not mean the missionary band stayed only three weeks in Thessalonica. Paul carried on the work with a Jewish emphasis for three Sabbaths and then turned to Gentiles and ministered to them for some weeks after that. This was the situation for three reasons: (1) The Philippian church sent money to Paul at least twice during this visit (Phil. 4:15-16), implying a longer lapse of time than three weeks. (2) In addition, Paul supported himself by manual labor (1 Thes. 2:9; 2 Thes. 3:7-10). This may indicate that considerable time elapsed before the aid from Philippi arrived. (3) Most of the converts at Thessalonica were not from the synagogue but were Gentiles steeped in idolatry (cf. 1 Thes. 1:9)."

¹² D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles: A Call to Readiness* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), 15. Further, "Having established this teaching concerning the Messiah by his skillful expounding and comparing of the scriptural teaching on the subject, Paul next recounted to his synagogue audience the story of the sufferings, death and resurrection of Jesus in exact fulfillment of these prophecies to prove that He "is the Christ." The fact that He is Christ, of course, implies that He will also fulfill the prophecies concerning His coming reign. This naturally led on to the teaching concerning the return of Christ as expected King" (ibid.). Richard N. Longenecker, "Acts," in *Luke-Acts*, vol. 10 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary Revised Edition*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 974, adds, "In portraying the extension of the gospel to the main cities bordering the Aegean Sea, Luke lays emphasis on the fact that Paul's preaching consisted of both proclamation and persuasion—interlocking elements of the one act of preaching."

24:32) and brought forward what they said as evidence for his case. Probably to the great astonishment of the Jews he claimed that it was *necessary* for the Messiah to *suffer* (i.e. to die, 1:3 note) and thereafter *to rise from the dead*, and then he argued that since Jesus fulfilled these conditions he was the Messiah. The necessity lay in the will of God, as accepted by Jesus (Luke 9:22) and revealed in the Scriptures (Luke 24:26f.). Since Paul makes essentially the same statements about the Messiah in 1 Corinthians 15:3–5, a passage which is based on early Christian tradition, it is clear that he was not pushing a line of his own here, but was simply repeating what was commonly accepted Christian teaching. We can be reasonably sure that the Scriptures used would include Psalms 2, 16, 110; Isaiah 53; and possibly Deuteronomy 21:23 (see 26:23 note).¹³

Six Substantial Truths from First Thessalonians 2:13

With this background we come to 1 Thess 2:13 and can consider its importance: “And for this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received from us the word of God’s message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.” When viewed with the previous information of this article, six substantial truths emerge.

Substantial Truth #1:

*Strongly differentiating between the Word of God and the word of man is not a biblical mystery in the sense of some previously undisclosed biblical truth, such as the church (Eph 1:17; 3:2–10; Col 1:24–27), or the rapture (1 Cor 15:50–53); rather it is a continuation of a doctrine that God has repeatedly revealed time after time—from Genesis 1 up (to this point) to (at the point of its composure) 1 Thess 2:13.*¹⁴ Paul fully knew and readily acknowledged the ultimate source as to what he had both preached and taught to the Thessalonians, and he knew the divine origin of what he preached:

To accentuate the word’s ultimate source, Paul bluntly states that the Thessalonians were not accepting “the word of men” (the NIV’s “as” is not in the Greek text), but what it “actually” was—“the word of God.” Their appraisal of what they heard was accurate. Here is an indication of Paul’s consciousness of his

¹³ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 293–94 (italics in the original).

¹⁴ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 256, comments concerning biblical mysteries: “In the NT it always has theological significance, referring to the unveiling of those things which were hidden in God and unknown to humans. It is ‘not the impartation of knowledge, but the actual unveiling of intrinsically hidden facts.’ Therefore, revelation is some hidden thing or mystery of God that is unveiled by God and cannot be disclosed by human investigation.” Further, “In the NT it has the theological significance of the unveiling of that which was previously hidden in God and unknown to humans. It is not the acquisition of knowledge by diligent searching but the unveiling of facts intrinsically hidden” (ibid., 426). See also in same work, “Excursus 6: Mystery” (428–34).

own divinely imparted authority (cf. 1Co 14:37). His preaching was not the outgrowth of personal philosophical meanderings but was deeply rooted in a message given by God himself (cf. *logos*, 1:5–6, 8). What had been delivered to him through others (1Co 11:23; 15:1, 3) and from the Lord directly (1Th 4:15), he passed on to others.¹⁵

As to the ultimate source of Paul's preaching, Morris concurs:

The reason for the welcome and for Paul's thanksgiving was that the Thessalonians received the message as truly *the word of God*. Twice Paul insists that what the Thessalonians heard was *of God*. The second time is particularly emphatic, as we see from Findlay's rendering, 'you accepted no word of men, but, as it truly is, God's word' (*CGT*). Paul could preach with certainty and power, for he had the profound conviction that what he said was not of man's devising; it was the word of God, a conviction at the heart of the church's message.¹⁶

Concerning this boldness of the statement that Paul spoke the actual Word of God that concords with the previous revelation of God's progressive divine revelation, Hughes concludes:

Although this is a grand statement, it is a statement that can invite abuse because some preachers think that whenever they preach they are preaching God's word. Only an apostle could say that, as Paul certainly did in 1 Thessalonians 2:13: "We also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God." At the same time, it is gloriously true that when a preacher is faithful to the text and does careful exposition, insofar as it is true to the Word of God, God speaks, and very often his preaching is the very Word of God. When he speaks he fulfills Peter's charge that "whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God" (1 Pe 4:11).¹⁷

In summarizing and harmonizing the Word of God with other biblical passages, MacArthur adds:

A careful study of the phrase . . . (*logos theou*, "the Word of God") finds over

¹⁵ Robert L. Thomas, "1 Thessalonians," in *Ephesians–Philemon*, vol. 11 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary Revised Edition*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 257.

¹⁶ Leon Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 13 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 63 [italics in the original]. Along the same line of reasoning Hiebert, *Thessalonians*, 109, writes "This addition ["of God"] stands in close connection with what has gone before to round out the concept that the message which the missionaries brought was in reality God's message . . . the unexpected addition at the end of the statement emphasizes the counterbalancing truth that the gospel preached by human lip is of God. It is God's message; the missionaries were the medium."¹⁷

¹⁷ Kent Hughes, "The Anatomy of Exposition: Logos, Ethos, and Pathos," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3:2 (Summer 1999): 49–50.

forty uses in the New Testament. It is equated with the Old Testament (Mark 7:13). It is what Jesus preached (Luke 5:1). It was the message the apostles taught (Acts 4:31; 6:2). It was the word the Samaritans received (Acts 8:14) as given by the apostles (Acts 8:25). It was the message the Gentiles received as preached by Peter (Acts 11:1). It was the word Paul preached on his first missionary journey (Acts 13:5, 7, 44, 48, 49; 15:35–36). It was the message preached on Paul’s second missionary journey (Acts 16:32; 17:13; 18:11). It was the message Paul preached on his third missionary journey (Acts 19:10). It was the focus of Luke in the Book of Acts in that it spread rapidly and widely (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20). Paul was careful to tell the Corinthians that he spoke the Word as it was given from God, that it had not been adulterated and that it was a manifestation of truth (2 Cor 2:17; 4:2). Paul acknowledged that it was the source of his preaching (Col 1:25; 1 Thess 2:13).¹⁸

Williams wholeheartedly agrees:

Emphasis is laid on the fact that what they received was the word of God. That phrase is repeated (at least, as NIV understands it; see note on 2:13) and Paul further underscores his point by stating that it was not the word of men (cf. Gal. 1:11f.) but was actually “just as” (*kathoæs*) he had described it. Paul could not have expressed himself much more strongly than this. The strength of his conviction about the gospel explains his commitment to preaching it.¹⁹

Thus, the Word of God was central to Paul and all others teaching who truly wanted to honor God.²⁰ In regard to the inspiration of God’s Holy Word, Mayhue reasons:

Carl F.H. Henry put forth this truth of the divine inspiration of Scripture in the clearest possible way: Inspiration is that supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit whereby the sacred writers were divinely supervised in their production of Scripture, being restrained from error and guided in the choice of words they

¹⁸ John F. MacArthur, “The Mandate of Biblical Inerrancy: Expository Preaching,” *Master’s Seminary Journal* 1:1 (Spring 1990), 8.

¹⁹ David J. Williams, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, vol. 12 of New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992), 45. See also Richard L. Mayhue, “The Impossibility of the Impossible,” *MSJ* 12:2 (Fall 2001), 213–14, who addresses the tension between the human authors versus the ultimate divine source of such revelation so that the final work is exactly the work that God wants in His Scripture.

²⁰ Richard L. Mayhue further notes, “For helpful discussions on this subject see Robert Strimple, “What Does God Know?,” in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis* 139–51, and idem, “God’s Sovereignty and Man’s Free Will,” *Modern Reformation* (January/February 1993): 3–7. Also D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty & Human Responsibility* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981). See also, Douglas F. Kelly, “Afraid of Infinity,” *CT* 39/1 (January 9, 1995): 32–33 (ibid.). Along the same line of reason, Mayhue challenges current and future preachers: “The bottom line is simply this: Will we seek to be fruitful in ministry by depending on the power of God’s Word (Rom 1:16–17; 1 Cor 1:22–25; 1 Thess 2:13) and God’s Spirit (Rom 15:13; 2 Tim 1:8) or on the power of man’s wisdom? Consider how Paul instructed the Corinthian church, whose curious preoccupation with their culture paralleled the contemporary evangelical church’s comparable fascination” (and then quotes 1 Cor 1:26–31) (ibid.).

used, consistently with their disparate personalities and stylistic peculiarities. God is the source of Holy Scripture; Christ Jesus is the central message; and the Holy Spirit, who inspired it and illumines its message to the reader, bears witness by this inscripturated Word to the Word enfleshed, crucified, risen, and returning.

Since the origin of Scripture can ultimately be explained by divine inspiration (Zech 7:12; 2 Tim 3:14–17; 2 Pet 1:20–21) as defined above, then the authority of Scripture is directly derived from the authority of God. Those who do not take God's authority in Scripture seriously are condemned (Jer 8:8–9; Mark 7:1–13). On the other hand, those who rightfully honor and submit to God's authority in Scripture are commended (Neh 8:5–6; Rev 3:8).²¹

With Paul presenting God's Word to the Thessalonians, he understood that he was simply continuing the succession of others whom God used over the centuries to reveal and present His Holy Word.

Substantial Truth #2:

*Closely connected to the previous truth: 1 Thess 2:13 and other similar verses is not some minor, insignificant, non-consequential doctrine. Literally, the eternal destinies of the Thessalonians were contingent on them receiving, believing, and accepting God's Word as God's Word.*²² This does not mean that those individuals cannot be saved who do not believe in inerrancy. However, they must at least receive the truth of Gospel message sent from God in order to be saved. If they continue this way they will be, regardless of degrees granted where applicable, babes in Christ, and they will have to give an account to the Judge. Those who teach or preach to others will receive a greater condemnation (James 3:1).

There are a few samples of many other passages that demonstrate the disastrous results of people who did not properly receive or obey the Word of God. For instance, God stated through the prophet Isaiah in Isa 1:4: "Alas, sinful nation, people weighed down with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, sons who act corruptly! They have abandoned the LORD, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they have turned away from Him." Later God pronounced judgment on His vineyard saying in Isa 5:24: "Therefore, as a tongue of fire consumes stubble, and dry grass collapses into the flame, so their root will become like rot and their blossom blow away as dust; for they have rejected the law of the LORD of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel." The two passages go hand-in-hand and are similar to Jesus' words in Mark 8:38 ("Me and My words"). When Israel despised the Holy One of Israel (Isa 1:4), they also despised the Word of the Holy One of Israel (Isa 5:24).

²¹ Richard L. Mayhue, "The Authority of Scripture," *MSJ* 15/2 (Fall 2004): 233–34. Mayhue quotes Carl F. H. Henry, "The Authority and Inspiration of the Bible," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 25.

²² See, for instance, chapters from Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), "The Southern Baptist 'Convention'" (89–105), and "The Strange Case of Fuller Theological Seminary" (106–21).

The young Thessalonian church did not respond to God's Word the way wayward Israel had responded:

The word of God that they received was not a meaningless idea or a doctrine to be maintained; it was a source of power in the lives of those who believed (ὁς καὶ ἐνεργεῖται ἐν ὑμῖν τοῖς πιστεύουσιν). Paul does not specify here how the gospel is effective, but undoubtedly the Thessalonians would have understood it in terms of the way in which they experienced the work of the Spirit (cf. 1:5–6), both at the time of their conversion and later in the life of their community (cf. 5:19f.).²³

In writing against the doctrine of the Emerging Church, which, in varying degrees, generally undermines the authority and veracity of God's Word, Mayhue writes:

McLaren is not alone in this low view of Scripture among “emergent” advocates. Any reader can see this — consider Doug Pagitt, Chris Seay, and Dave Tomlinson, as examples. One way to view “emergent” is emerging doubt, emerging uncertainty, and emerging error leading to emerging heresy and emerging unorthodoxy.

Paul certainly did not understand “the Word of God” in the manner of McLaren and his “emergent” conversationalists, nor did the Thessalonian church. “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers” (1 Thess 2:13).²⁴

To summarize the eternal importance of receiving God's Word as the major doctrine, here are some of the benefits that come with such a reception of God's grace and God's truth:

The Spirit's ministry in Bible interpretation does not mean He gives new revelation. His work is always through and in association with the written Word of God, not beyond it or in addition to it. The Holy Spirit and the Word operate together. The Bible, being God-breathed (2 Tim 3:16), has power to *generate faith* (Ps 19:7; Rom 10:17; 2 Tim 3:15; James 1:18; 1 Pet 1:23), to *sanctify and nurture* (John 17:17–19; Acts 20:32; Eph 5:26; 1 Pet 2:2), and to *enlighten* (Ps 119:105,130; 2 Tim 3:16). The Holy Spirit, along with the Word, is said to *regenerate* (John 3:5–7; Titus 3:5), to *sanctify* (2 Thess 2:13; 1 Pet 1:2) and to *enlighten* (John 14:26; 16:13; 1 Cor 2:10–15). “The written Word...is always indissolubly joined with the power of the Holy Spirit.” The Bible, God's Word,

²³ Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1990), 111–12.

²⁴ Richard L. Mayhue, “The Emerging Church: Generous Orthodoxy or General Obfuscation?” *MSJ* 17/2 (Fall 2006): 200–201.

is “living . . . and active” . . . “operative or effective” (Heb 4:12; cf. 1 Thess 2:13; 1 Pet 1:23).²⁵

Substantial Truth #3:

The manner by which the Thessalonians received God's Word showed themselves not to be “the rocky soil” of which Jesus explained in His parable in Mark 4:16–17, “who, when they hear the word they immediately receive it with joy, and they having no firm root in themselves, but are only temporary; then, when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately they fall away.” Having been forced out of town earlier than he hoped to have been, Paul wrote to the Thessalonian church to see how they were faring and to encourage this young church. All things considered, the church had fared well since his departure. Accordingly, he wrote to them, “knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thess 1:4–5a). Hiebert summarizes: “God works out His electing purposes through the preaching of the gospel. The way the missionaries were enabled to present the saving gospel at Thessalonica assures Paul that the Thessalonians were the subjects of God's efficacious grace.”²⁶

The writers' assurance is intimately connected with the way “our gospel came” to the Thessalonians. The designation of their message as *our* gospel indicates their personal commitment to this message. There is no suggestion that the message originated with them or that it differed from that of other gospel preachers. Rather it was a message which they have personally accepted as a trust and are now proclaiming to others.²⁷

Hiebert wisely summarizes the differences of the language chosen: “Paul's emphasis on the gospel itself, not the messengers, is further evident from the fact that he says ‘our gospel came . . . unto you,’ rather than ‘we came to you with the gospel.’ God's elective purpose for the Thessalonians was realized through the message rather

²⁵ Roy B. Zuck, “The Role of the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics,” *BSac* 141:562 (Apr 84): 122 (italics in the original).

²⁶ Hiebert, *Thessalonian Epistles*, 52. Hiebert also adds, “The simple identification of their message as “our gospel” expresses Paul's deep conviction that the message of Christianity was truly a message of “good news” . . . or “glad tidings” . . . The very heart of that message is the offer of God's free salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. The word *gospel* embodies the essential nature of the message as good news. Had Paul instead used the *kerugma*, “proclamation,” the emphasis would rather have been that the message was something committed to them to be officially proclaimed or heralded to others. Thus Paul's thought centers on the nature of the message itself rather than the manner of its communication” (ibid.).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, (italics in original). David J. Williams, *Acts*, vol. 5 of New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990), 37–38 reasons: “The authority of the apostles was confirmed by their ‘signs’ (2 Cor. 12:12), but it was not something arbitrary or automatic that made them infallible. Paul was conscious of a distinction between his own opinion and the authoritative word of the Lord. The conflict between Peter and Paul (Gal. 2:11ff.) shows that even an apostle could act contrary to his convictions (Gal. 2:7–9; Acts 15:7ff.). The authority embodied in the apostles was one to which the apostles themselves were subject. Their authority was that of God (1 Thess. 2:13), and they themselves were subject to God” (1 Cor. 4:1).”

than the messengers. The messengers apart from the message would have been totally powerless to achieve such a result.”²⁸ Not only had the Thessalonians received the Word, but had received the Word so resolutely that the entire area had heard of it: “For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything” (1 Thess. 1:8). Hiebert notes:

Paul designates that which has been sounded forth as “the word of the Lord.” This is a standard phrase in the Old Testament to denote a prophet’s utterance setting forth the revealed will of God. But here the Lord is Jesus Christ and the expression a synonym for the gospel. The expression also stresses the authoritative nature of the gospel message. It is a message which comes from Him and is delivered by His messengers under His authority.²⁹

Paul also knew that “our exhortation does not come from error or impurity or by way of deceit” (1 Thess 2:3). Paul had written to them, “You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory” (1 Thess 2:10–12). After writing our present text of 1 Thess 2:13 (“And for this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received from us the word of God’s message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe”), Paul additionally wrote: “For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews” (1 Thess 2:14). “The rocky soil” type of “believer” would have fallen away long before time. Wanamaker notes the importance of the reception of the Word of God by the young Thessalonian church in the midst of their suffering:

The main verb ἐδεξασθε (“you accepted”) is a synonym of παραλαβόντες but does not have the same connotation of the reception of an authoritative message. It is probably employed to emphasize the actual decision of the Thessalonians

²⁸ Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles*, 53. Further, “Finally, the missionaries keenly felt as they preached that the message was in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance. They well knew that only a power beyond themselves could accomplish the task of transforming spiritually benighted souls, and, they knew that the Spirit was working through them to that end” (ibid.). The gentle way in which Paul and his associates, while quite important in understanding the epistle, is not germane to this article. Still, Thomas R. Schreiner’s, “The Hope of the Gospel,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3:3 (Fall 1999): 2, statement about the tender way with which Paul dealt with the young church, is noteworthy: “How does Paul respond to this fledgling church? Does he emphasize their shortcomings? Does he give the church a statistical breakdown of the percentage of believers relative to unbelievers, leaving the church with the impression that they are failures? He expresses joy and confidence in what God has done in Thessalonica (1 Thess 1:3–2:2; 2:13–14; 2 Thess 1:3–4). He abounds with joy because the church has endured persecution with the joy that comes from the Holy Spirit (1 Thess 1:6; 3:1–10).”

²⁹ Hiebert, *The Thessalonians Epistles*, 64.

to accept the message that was declared to them. Paul points out that they accepted this message “not as a human message” (οὐ λόγον ἀνθρώπων), that is, as though it were merely a word spoken by fellow human beings, but “just as it truly is, the message of God” (καθώς ἐστὶν ἀληθῶς λόγον θεοῦ); that is, they accepted it because they recognized the divine origin of the missionaries’ preaching. In effect, Paul makes the implicit claim here that his and his coworkers’ preaching was the very word of God. The distinction that he makes by the contrast (note the contrastive conjunction ἀλλὰ, “but”) is of considerable importance in the context of the following verse. It implies that the suffering experienced by the Thessalonians as a result of receiving the message of the missionaries is in reality suffering on God’s account. What he says gives their suffering a profound meaning and is probably intended to enable them to endure it with confidence in God.³⁰

Substantial Truth #4:

The Thessalonian church’s receiving and accepting God’s Word as God’s Word was not limited to the initial point of their salvation. The Word of God “which performs its work in you” (present tense) “who believe” (present tense). By producing God works within them, the Thessalonian Christians were again proving themselves to be “the good soil” which Jesus described in Mark 4:20: (1) They heard God’s Word (“received the word of God’s message” 2:13), (2) they accepted it as God’s Word (“you accepted it” 2:13), and (3) they bore fruit, thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold as 1 Thess 1:2–3 shows: “We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father.”

The Word of God was not just the basis for the salvation of the Thessalonians, it also became the basis for their sanctification, as God had long intended:

*Also indicates that this message is not only divine but has the further characteristic of being active and dynamic. It worketh, is operative and productive, continually producing an effect in the lives of those who receive it. The thought of the activating power of God’s Word is common in the Scriptures (Is 55:11; Heb. 4:12; Ja 1:21; 1 Pe 1:23).*³¹

³⁰ Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 11. Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans Pub.; Apollos, 2002), 140–41, adds, “Although the founders of the church were absent from the Thessalonians, the *word of God* continued its work in them, the believers (see 2:10). Their initial acceptance of the message was an act of faith, and now, in the midst of their persecutions, they continued in the same faith as the word of God continued its work in them. This message was not a philosophical discourse on the means to the virtuous life (or a self-help seminar on how to overcome personal and social issues, as the gospel is frequently portrayed in our era). It was the *word of God*, which powerfully transformed their lives.”

³¹ Hiebert, *The Thessalonians Epistles*, 111. Knute Larson affirms, *I and II Thessalonians, I and II Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, vol. 9 The Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 26, “They received the word preached to them as the **word of God**. The proof

Hiebert adds:

In saying that this Word worketh “in you” Paul is reminding the readers that they personally know the operative power of it. The effect that it had wrought in their lives was widely known; it turned them to God from idols, committed them to the service of the living God, and gave them hope of the return of the risen Christ as their Saviour [sic] from the coming wrath (1:9–10). Such a transforming experience convinces every believer that what he has accepted is truly the Word of God. No humanly contrived message can produce such results . . . The added appositional articular participle rendered “that believe” (*tois pisteuousin*) not only defines *you* more closely but serves to indicate the condition under which the divine Word can operate in human hearts. Faith conditions its efficacy. There must not only be a hearing of the Word but also a continuing faith. The present tense marks their believing as an abiding characteristic. A genuine faith is a continuing faith. The participle is used absolutely, with no indication of what is believed, points to the fact that from the earliest times faith was recognized as central to Christianity.³²

Green concurs in writing:

The confirmation that this message was truly the *word of God* came from the way that it *is at work in you who believe*. Frequently biblical authors use the word *is at work* (*energeitai*) to talk about God’s activity in the human realm (Matt. 14.2; Mark 6.14; 1 Cor. 12.6, 11; Gal. 2.8; 3.5; Eph. 1.11, 20; 3.20; Phil. 2.13; Col. 1.29). The Thessalonians embraced the message as the word of God, and now this gospel brings about a divine work within their lives (cf. Heb. 4.12; 1 Cor. 1.18; Jas. 1.21). Paul does not specify what kind of activity they have in mind, but most likely he is thinking of the conversion of the Thessalonians from idolatry (1.9–10) and the production of the fruit of the Spirit in their lives (1.3).³³

Thomas adds, “Once received, this word of God becomes an active power operating continually in the believer’s life. When it is “at work in [those] who believe,” there is a change in behavior and a constant fruitfulness.³⁴ Williams concludes:

It was also the word which is at work in you who believe. Here another link is forged with the earlier thanksgiving, which spoke of the gospel coming to the

was in their changed lives, **which is at work in you**. The power of God is released through faith in his Word; it becomes an active, spiritual energy, cutting like a scalpel to the depths of the soul (Heb. 4:12) (emboldened words in the original). Paul Ellingworth and Eugene Albert Nida, *A Handbook on Paul’s Letters to the Thessalonians*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1976), 39-40, deduce, “When we brought you God’s message, you heard it and accepted it. The text expresses very concisely the following basic structures: (1) you received the word, (2) you heard the word, (3) we brought the word, (4) the word came from God, (5) you accepted the word. The logical order would appear to be (4), (3), (2), (1), (5) (italics in the original).

³² Hiebert, *Thessalonian Epistles*, 111.

³³ Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 140.

³⁴ Thomas, “1 Thessalonians,” 257.

Thessalonians with power (1:5). The changing lives of those who received it—the present tense of the verb *energeo*, “to be at work,” implies that the work is still in process—verifies that the gospel is the word of God. The description of its recipients as those who believe reminds us once again that faith is the key that opens the door (from the inside) to God’s word (cf. Acts 14:27; Rev. 3:20) and so puts us in the path of God’s salvation.³⁵

One quick note: Not being “rocky soil” does not necessarily equate with being “good soil.” Jesus’ strong denunciation and rebuke of the most theologically correct but cold and loveless church in Ephesus in Rev 2:1–7 sadly shows this to be true.

Substantial Truth #5:

Whereas 1 Thess 2:13 is not the origin of the biblical doctrine of starkly differentiating between the pure, holy Word of God versus the word of man, neither is it its terminus. Many correlating Scripture passages affirm this long past 1 Thess 2:13.

As before, just a sampling of verses will show this. For example, Paul three times refers to his gospel as “the word of truth” (2 Cor 6:7; Col 1:5; 2 Tim 2:15).³⁶ In Paul’s death-row epistle, Second Timothy, he writes, “Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you” (2 Tim. 1:13–14). Also, “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descendant of David, according to my gospel, for which I suffer hardship even to imprisonment as a criminal; but the word of God is not imprisoned” (2 Tim 2:8–9). Paul further states, “Remind them of these things, and solemnly charge them in the presence of God not to wrangle about words, which is useless, and leads to the ruin of the hearers. Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:14–15).

Paul continues, “But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God; holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; and avoid such men as these” (2 Tim 3:1–5). The all-important 2 Tim 3:12–17 comes from this same context:

And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. But evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them; and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom

³⁵ Williams, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 46.

³⁶ See also 1 Cor 1:18–2:16 for many contrasts between God’s word and wisdom versus fallen man’s wisdom.

that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

Hebrews 4:12 describes God's Word as "living and active." In 1 Pet 1:22–2:3 Peter describes the Word of God in similar but more detailed manner:

Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart, for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and abiding word of God. For, "ALL FLESH IS LIKE GRASS, AND ALL ITS GLORY LIKE THE FLOWER OF GRASS. THE GRASS WITHERS, AND THE FLOWER FALLS OFF, BUT THE WORD OF THE LORD ABIDES FOREVER."

And this is the word which was preached to you.

Therefore, putting aside all malice and all guile and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord.

Peter's death-row epistle, Second Peter, is similar to Paul's death row epistle in that both of them contain sections on God's Word and on future attacks against it. Second Peter 1:1–4 begins thusly:

Simon Peter, a bond-servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours, by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ: Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, in order that by them you might become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust.

In the last chapter of Scripture that Peter would ever write, he warns in 2 Pet 3:1–7:

This is now, beloved, the second letter I am writing to you in which I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, that you should remember the words spoken beforehand by the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken by your apostles. Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation.

For when they maintain this, it escapes their notice that by the word of God the heavens existed long ago and the earth was formed out of water and by water, through which the world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with

water. But the present heavens and earth by His word are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.

Substantial Truth #6:

Jesus' demand "Answer Me!" (Mark 11:30) regarding the source of the baptism of John the Baptist is still just as much in force today as when Jesus first required it—and ultimately everyone must answer and give an account to Him concerning this. Differentiating between the source of John the Baptist's ministry, and the source of other related passages, is not limited to the Jews in Matthew 21 or to the Thessalonians in Acts 17. Jesus ultimately forces *everyone* to confess, one way or the other, "The baptism of John was from what source, God or man? Answer Me!"—and as before, eternal destinies are literally at stake.

We return to Matthew 21 to see this further expounded. The religious leaders questioned Jesus concerning His authority to disrupt the Temple in Matt 21:23: "And when He had come into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him as He was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?'"

And Jesus answered and said to them, "I will ask you one thing too, which if you tell Me, I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?"

And they began reasoning among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Then why did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the multitude; for they all hold John to be a prophet."

And answering Jesus, they said, "We do not know."

He also said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things (Matt 21:23–27).

Jesus then took the initiative from this point onward, as Matt 21:28–32 shows:

"What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' And he answered, 'I will not,' but afterward he changed his mind and went. And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, 'I go, sir,' but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?"

They said, "The first."

Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him."

Matthew 21:32 is the core issue—both then and now, with the word "believe" occurring three times in this one verse: "For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and *you did not believe him*, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes *believed him*. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and *believe*

him.”

Two points are important here. First, Jesus substantiated the origin and authority of John the Baptist (“For John came to you in the way of righteousness”). Second, when the religious authorities had answered in Matt 21:27 that after a lifetime of study they could not determine the source/authority of the baptism of John the Baptist, they collectively lied before the Holy One of God. These were not agnostics; they were firmly entrenched skeptics who would associate neither John the Baptist nor Jesus with God. They knew—or thought they knew—that the baptism of John the Baptist was *not* sent by God, but they were too afraid to say publically at that time what they fully and completely did not believe.

It should also be emphasized that in earlier years, John the Baptist had refused to baptize them and many other religious leaders with whom Jesus was presently speaking. However, he reluctantly chose to baptize Jesus. So, in reference to many of the same ones who were arguing with Jesus, John the Baptist had denounced them accordingly:

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

“I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will clear His threshing floor and gather His wheat into the barn, but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire” (Matt 3:7–12).

Yet when Jesus came to be baptized, John the Baptist freely accepted and (reluctantly) baptized Him:

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented Him, saying, “I need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?”

But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, immediately He went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on Him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt 3:13–17).

In modern times and in the future, Jesus firmly places the same question and He forces *all* eventually to answer as to authority of the baptism of John the Baptist. This can be clearly understood by the cascading subsidiary questions and statements found in John 1.

First, Scripture presents John the Baptist twice saying that Jesus was pre-eternal: "John bore [and still bears] witness about Him, and cried out, 'This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because He was before me,'" (John 1:15), and "This is He of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because He was before me'" (John 1:30).

Is this true? ("Answer Me!")

Carson comments:

In a society where age and precedence bestowed peculiar honour, that might have been taken by superficial observers to mean John the Baptist was greater than Jesus. Not so, insists the Baptist: Jesus has *surpassed* him (lit., 'became before me'), precisely *because he was before* him. The peculiar expression means 'because he was first with respect to me'. It includes not only temporal priority (cf. NEB, 'before I was born, he already was'), which picks up the pre-existence emphasized at the beginning of the chapter, but also absolute primacy. That was the Baptist's proclamation before he knew of whom he spoke. Then, after identifying him, he could say, *This was he of whom I said, etc.* And by placing this summary of the Baptist's witness here, the Evangelist by anticipation is identifying Jesus with the Word-made-flesh: '*This was he of whom I spoke.*'³⁷

Second, John the Baptist claimed to be the voice crying out in the wilderness and thus fulfilling Isa 40:3 (John 1:19–23). Also, with this, not just "Make straight the way of Messiah," but "Make straight the way of the Lord":

And this is the witness of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" And he confessed, and did not deny, and he confessed, "I am not the Christ."

And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" And he said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No."

They said then to him, "Who are you, so that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?"

He said, "I am A VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE STRAIGHT THE WAY OF THE LORD,' as Isaiah the prophet said."

³⁷ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 130–31 (italics in the original). Gerald L. Borchert, vol. 25A, *John 1–11*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 122–23 adds, "Here the Baptizer witnessed to the traditional expectant messianic *ho erchomenos* ('he who comes') theme (cf. Matt 11:2–3; Mark 11:9; John 12:15; also cf. Ps 118:26; Zech 9:9). Moreover, he testified (*eipon*, "said") to his hearers that the one who came after him was actually set (established; *emprosthen*) before him because he was prior (*prōtos*) to him in the entire sequence of creation and time. This testimony is of such force for the evangelist that any reasonable person should consider the case closed. That the disciples of John apparently did not do so only confirms the maxim that "a person convinced against his will is of the same opinion still."

Is this true? “Answer Me!”

Carson adds:

John replies *in the words of Isaiah the prophet*, applying Is. 40:3 to himself (as the Synoptists apply it to him: *cf.* Mt. 3:3; Mk. 1:3; Lk. 3:4). The Baptist may refuse to identify himself with any expected eschatological figure, but that does not mean he is simply another itinerant preacher. He may not be the Messiah or the prophet, but he is the *voice* predicted by Isaiah, the *voice of one calling in the desert*, ‘*Make straight the way for the Lord.*’³⁸

Third, John the Baptist instructed his followers about Jesus, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

Is this true? “Answer Me!”

In response to those who claimed that John the Baptist would not have had such a high understanding of Jesus’ sacrificial role, here in the early ministry of Jesus, Carson reasons:

But this does not necessarily mean that John the Evangelist limited himself to this understanding of ‘Lamb of God’. Just as John insists that Caiaphas the high priest spoke better than he knew (11:49–52), so it is easy to suppose that the Evangelist understood the Baptist to be doing the same thing. It is not that he thought atoning sacrifice of his resurrected and ascended Saviour.³⁹

As Bouchert explains:

This Lamb-of-God concept in John is most probably a synthesis of two biblical motifs: the servant of the Lord theme as represented in a passage like Isaiah 53 and the theme of Passover. But this Lamb is a special kind of lamb—one that “takes away [*airōn*] the sin of the world.” The theme of taking away sin is directly related to the Hebrew *kpr*, which involves “wiping away” or getting rid of sin. Such “getting rid” is not merely done by “covering” it over and acting as though it were gone. The getting rid of sin in the Bible is done by the smearing of blood, the symbol of God’s “pardoning” of humanity through death and the consequent “reconciliation of humanity with God.”⁴⁰

Fourth, simply stated, John 1:34 has John the Baptist refer to Jesus as the second member of the Godhead: “And I have seen, and have borne witness that this is the Son of God”—not merely Son of Man.

³⁸ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 144 (italics in the original).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁴⁰ Borchert, *John 1–11*, 135–36.

Is this true? “Answer Me!”

This pericope thus provides in these four confessions concerning Jesus a magnificent summary of Johannine Christology: (1) he is the *Passover Lamb* who removes the sin of the world as confirmed on the cross; (2) he is the one who is able to accomplish this divine task because he is the *preexistent* one as affirmed in the Prologue; (3) he is the one who brings salvation not merely as a past historical event but as the living reality of God in life as witnessed by *his baptizing with the Holy Spirit*, the one who is our supporter or Paraclete; and (4) he is the one who as the *Son of God* has truly embodied God since he is the unique one (*monogenēs*) from the Father.⁴¹

Every one of these items points to Jesus; every one of these doctrines emerges from the preaching and baptism of John the Baptist; and every one of these biblical truths Jesus still constrains and requires people to give an answer to Him—in this lifetime or in the next.

Summary and Conclusion

At a minimum, six substantial truths emerged from 1 Thess 2:13: (1) proving that strongly differentiating between the Word of God and the word of man is *not* a biblical mystery in the sense of some previously undisclosed biblical truth, such as the church (Eph 3:2–10; Col 1:24–27), or the Rapture (1 Cor 15:50–53); it is a continuation of a doctrine that God has repeatedly revealed time after time—from Genesis 1 up [to this point] to 1 Thess 2:13. (2), First Thessalonians 2:13 and other similar verses are *not* some minor, inconsequential doctrine. Literally, eternal destinies were contingent on either receiving or rejecting God's Word as God's Word. (3), The manner by which the Thessalonians received God's Word showed themselves not to be “rocky soil.” (4), The Thessalonian church's receiving *and* accepting God's Word as God's Word was not limited to the initial point of salvation. The Word of God “which performs its work in you” (present tense) “who believe” (present tense), and thus they showed themselves to be “the good soil” of which Jesus described in Mark 4:20, who heard God's Word, and accepted God's Word, and bore fruit. (5), While 1 Thess 2:13 is not the origin of the biblical doctrine of starkly differentiating between the pure, holy Word of God versus the word of man, neither is it its terminus. (6), Jesus' demand “Answer Me!” (Mark 11:30) regarding the source of the baptism of John the Baptist is *still* just as much in force today as when Jesus first required it—and ultimately everyone must answer and give an account to Him concerning this. Thus two sides emerge in Scripture, namely, those who receive God's Word as God's Word and those who choose to reject it. These two sides transcend both time and culture; it still comes down to an issue of the heart in regard to both God and His Word.

It is fitting and appropriate to conclude by contrasting the first two Psalms, which, as with so many other places in Scripture, present two options and only two options. Beginning with Ps 2:1–3 that first reveals such brazen wickedness that is being committed by so many today:

Why are the nations in an uproar, and the peoples devising a vain thing? The

⁴¹ Ibid., 140 (italics in the original).

202 | The Word of God or the Word of Man?

kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers take counsel together against the LORD and against His Anointed: “Let us tear their fetters apart, and cast away their cords from us!”

Contrast this with the serene beauty and promises of Psalm 1:

How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night. And he will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers.

The wicked are not so, but they are like chaff which the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

While Psalm 2 begins with the nations attempting to tear apart “the fetters and cords” of God and His Messiah, the same Psalm ends with an encompassing statement and an offer: “How blessed are all who take refuge in Him [the LORD’s Anointed]!” (Ps 2:12). And thus, this likewise will be true and said about them: “And for this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God’s message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe” (1 Thess 2:13).