Introduction – The Question(s)
We are engaging in a challenging task this morning and you are as much a part of the success of this enterprise as I am. It is not for the faint-hearted. In fact, in the space of 35 minutes, we are going to cover what I spend several weeks addressing in one of my classes. It has been my prayer that this will be neither soporific nor simplistic but I need you to stay with me. You may be interested to know that we are addressing this issue today primarily in response to students’ concerns expressed over the last year or so.

Let’s get right to the substance of the issue: “On what basis do we appeal to the Bible as our authoritative rule of faith and conduct as opposed to any other vaguely inspirational text?” or “How can I trust the Bible to be the truth, especially when it says things I don’t happen to like?”

The answers to these questions are essential to our understanding and dynamic exercise of moral imagination (our convocation theme for the term). As you know by now, imagination is a gift that allows us to see differently and respond in ways that are creative. At the same time, this creative thinking needs boundaries. That is precisely what the Word of God does in all its perfection, purity, and power. While this is particularly significant as we prepare to engage with both compassion and conviction our guests in the coming week, it has life-long implications as we live out our calling to be salt and light in a rotting and darkened world.

Furthermore, to be painfully blunt, this issue has eternal implications. It is not a matter of a spiritual smorgasbord where we pick a little here and choose a snack there without much consequence other than a bit of existential indigestion. On the contrary, what we do with the Scriptures is a matter of life and death, as unseemly as that may sound in our current environment. I am particularly troubled when I hear the glib affirmation that, oh yes, we accept the authority of God and of Scripture and then discover that the speaker really hasn’t a clue what Scripture says on issues of profound importance!

Now, let me initially put this to you as a story. I will confess to being a slow learner – true throughout the entirety of my life. These questions which you might be asking now did not hit me forcefully until I was well into my 30’s. I had come to Christ in those heady days in the early 70’s when I was an undergraduate at Cornell University – so even in that, I was well behind many of you. If you are unaware of the nature of the campus communities in those years, let me assure you they were very unsettled. Depending on where you were, there were riots, protests, and moratoriums and I was initially a part of some of that. As, however, I made my way haltingly toward the light of the Gospel, I was enfolded by the love and enthusiasm of the primarily student church that had embraced me in spite of my very rough edges and my basic biblical illiteracy. This was a vital and intellectually challenging Christian community; we discussed theology when we gathered on Sunday afternoons. We were clearly shaped by solid Reformed thinking in terms of the nature of Scripture. Inspired by the pastor, many of us, including a number of graduate students in the natural sciences, anticipated further seminary education once we finished at Cornell. I am forever grateful for that foundation as we did indeed
pursue graduate studies in seminary and subsequently in Israel. Those experiences were, of course, rich but another story altogether. Suffice it to say that when Perry and I returned from Israel and began teaching in a small college outside of Philadelphia, I had a wonderful background with which to continue my pursuit of biblical studies, both teaching and further study – which I did. And then one day, something exceedingly unsettling happened. In fact, I can tell you the exact circumstances of this experience. I was out for a run. It was a bright sunny day – crisp, invigorating, and I was about halfway through my three mile route. In fact I can still see the corner that I was rounding as I made my way through the Southeastern Pennsylvania countryside. I was probably mulling over a lecture that I had been preparing. Suddenly, the thought went through my mind – “What if none of this is true?” It was not a casual question; it felt like an attack on everything that I was. If nothing else, my very livelihood depended on teaching Bible. What if I no longer believed it? What on earth would I, could I do? It was a painful moment; in fact, I had a distinct visual impression of everything crumbling around me because I knew that I could not with integrity continue to teach something in which I had no confidence.

Perhaps that is how you might be feeling at this time; or perhaps there are people around you who have arrived at this point considerably earlier than I did in my delayed development. Or maybe you just have honest questions about the nature of the Bible.

It took some time for my foundational confidence to be re-established and I will tell you now that it was not a matter of arriving at something radical and new. Instead, it was re-thinking and reaffirming what I already knew and what had been planted deeply in those earlier years of discussion and reading. That does not mean it was easy; it does not mean that I then had the luxury of ceasing to think about these issues. None of us do. In fact, as I have continued to teach, my students have taught me – raising their own generations’ questions and prompting me to visit and revisit and refine my own thinking in light of the questions from a world now rarely shaped by biblical language and thought.

So, let’s get started.

Revelation in Creation and in the Word
Our Objective is to explore a robust Trinitarian understanding of the doctrine of Scripture which is lodged firmly within our doctrine of revelation. The starting point for our understanding of revelation is “Word” and, for that matter, words. In the biblical world view that we affirm, creation by the Word is intrinsic to the whole fabric of our understanding. We see it initially in Genesis 1. God spoke creation into existence and that creation witnesses to His divine power and attributes (Psalm 19 and Romans 1:18-20). In fact, Psalm 19 uses remarkable language referring to “words” going forth from creation itself.

The heavens declare the glory of God; the firmament proclaims the work of His hands. Day to day he (or it) pours forth speech; night to night, it displays knowledge. There is no speech or words where their sound is not heard (Psalm 19:1-3).

The psalmist follows this with his affirmation that the law of the Lord (God’s word) is perfect, trustworthy, pure, radiant, and sure, and that it compels a response. “Forgive my hidden faults,” he prays and then continues “May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.”
Or Paul speaking in Romans 1 – “For since the creation of the world, God’s invisible qualities – His eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what is made, so that people are without excuse” (Ro 1:20).

“Now, wait a minute,” [an honest skeptic’s voice] Isn’t it, like, methodologically unsound to, like, base all of what we say on the Bible itself? You’re gonna be, like, arguing in a circle. Wouldn’t it be a much stronger case if we had, like, outside sources speaking of the Bible and its unique nature?”

My goodness! Your grammar is atrocious! We’ll need to work on that egregiously improper use of “like.” But for now, would you repeat the question, please?

Right. Aren’t there problems with basing all of what we say on the Bible itself? Wouldn’t it be a much stronger case if we had outside sources that talked about the characteristics of the Bible?

OK. Yes, it would indeed be marvelous to have extra-biblical written sources that affirm the revelatory and authoritative nature of the Bible. But, just for the sake of argument, name me another literary, historical, and theological text from antiquity for which we have such external affirmation. The truth is, according to none other than Aristotle [you might remember him from your core philosophy class], the benefit of the doubt is to be given to a document itself, not arrogated by a critic to him or herself. And so, not to address the claims of the text is actually to ignore the primary evidence. In fact, when we do study the text properly, we engage in a discipline that is not simply a circular exercise. Over time, we gain an increasing sense of the remarkable way in which this text, from beginning to end, does a much more masterful job of explaining and describing this world as we know it than any other text or religious system. It addresses the whole of reality and is not a reductionist presentation that we construct solely from observable and provable data. In other words, it lives up to what it claims to be. What we see happening in the world on a daily basis tragically makes sense in light of what Scripture says about human brokenness (both individual and systemic), separation from God, and desperate need for hope. The Scriptures both point ahead to and reflect on Jesus Christ in whose Person and work everything ties together. As one of my former students wrote, “we are in a sea of human suffering and Jesus has come into the waters with us.”

But now back to the foundation we want to establish!

As I said, according to Psalm 19 and Romans 1 (along with a host of other passages), everything from the heavens above to the minds of humankind indeed testifies to a Designer of limitless power, astonishing complexity, and immeasurable beauty.

Hold on [our skeptical voice says again]. Don’t tell me you are going to invoke that hot-button Intelligent Design phrase!

Well, in fact, now that you mention it, I would be so bold as to declare that we miss a good deal of reality if we ignore the implications of what we are capable of observing. There is indeed truly exquisite design that is intrinsic to every aspect of the created order, from quantum particles to cell structures to the far reaches of the universe, all of which hang together. And the design is not only observable in the natural sciences. What is it, for example, about good music (from any culture) that draws us upward and beyond ourselves, that transcends the mundane, that is also
ordered, and that, in many cases, makes us want to worship? George Steiner has said that aesthetic experiences, and notably music, are evidence of a Real Presence with whose Person we resonate at a deep level. We could rhapsodize on and on here (speaking of music!) but, having articulated these experiential “pointers” to a Divine Presence, we do need to return to some text to bring an Identity to the Designer who seems very clearly to be there. To be sure, I suppose you could leave “it” unidentified and ambiguous but that would be unsatisfactory. **Human beings seek something beyond ourselves, we are curious, we work at identifying not only the created realities around us but also the spiritual realities for which we long because of the intrinsic logic built into the entire created order.** As it turns out, the God presented in the *Bible* is both transcendent, having created all of reality, and personal, interacting in love and justice with His creation. This is a unique combination which avoids both pantheism and deism and it lays a foundation for our knowledge of universally accepted truths.

*Hmmmmph. And just how does that happen?*

**The Logos (Genesis 1 with John 1) as Foundation for Knowing and Communicating**

Oh good, you haven’t given up yet. But here it gets a bit more challenging – so hang on for the ride! From a biblical perspective, creation by the Word of God (with reference to both Genesis 1 and John 1 - we want to be thinking of the Greek word here, *logos*) has some important implications. First, because the range of meanings of *logos* includes not only “word,” but also “reason,” “relation” “correspondence,” and “logic,” we might infer that there is a fundamental correspondence between an observable object (say, a snowflake), its “reality” in the mind of God, and the language systems that enable humans to describe and interpret it. Furthermore, as creatures made in God’s image, it seems that we have the necessary apparatus to receive the truth presented in the media of words, language, and ultimately texts, all working together to transcend boundaries of time and place. Thus, we might say there is a universal basis both for knowledge of created reality and for knowledge of its Creator. Are you with me?

*Let me see if I’ve got this right. Claiming that God spoke creation into existence by His Word, implies, like, a built-in logic and correspondence between all of reality and our ability as creatures made in God’s image to, like, perceive and describe that reality.*

That’s pretty decent for the first go-round (and you only used “like” twice)! Please don’t be offended if I rephrase this once more. We may expect order within the created spheres, corresponding order in the language systems that represent reality, and a reasoned capability to have relationship with God. And it is based on the *Logos*. The human mind has been designed to interpret in that it has the capacities for perception of the external world, memory, and imagination. Got it?

*[Gentle Skeptic’s Voice returns] – Let me remind you again that you are basing this all on the doctrine of revelation as it is found in the *Bible*. *y*

Yep, I am. But let me push this matter just a bit further and suggest an analogy that could come from the realm of the natural sciences. It runs as follows - the data of the biblical text are our primary evidence for the nature and existence of God, right? Likewise the data that astronomers study in the universe are the primary evidence for such phenomena as black holes, dark matter and dark energy – which we cannot *directly* observe. Nevertheless, based on the evidence “written” in the universe, we claim that dark matter and dark energy are present and lest you
think they are inconsequential, they make up about 95% of everything that does exist with only 5% being the material that we directly observe! I would suggest the same logic can underlie our affirmation of the supernatural realms as we encounter them in the Scriptures. We study the Bible to gain knowledge of God and God’s will and purposes.

Hey, can I get on to talking about the biblical text?
Well, OK...

**Humankind as the “Vehicle” for Special Revelation**
With the creation of human beings, we have a “vehicle” for words (the primary way we communicate), for prophetic words, and ultimately for the Incarnate Word (in other words, God in flesh). Indeed, the verbal revelation of the Scriptures is profoundly shaped by the Incarnation. In the Old or First Testament, the written word points forward to the Incarnate Word (Jesus Christ) and then the New Testament interprets His life, death, and resurrection. These span the whole meta-narrative of redemptive history and interwoven throughout is the authority of God – authority in creation; authority in calling His people; authority through the prophetic voice; authority in conquering death; authority ultimately invested in Christ; and authority granted to His apostles who testified to His life, death and resurrection. Apart from verbal revelation, we would not even know of the intentions, motives, demands, and expectations of the divine Author/Creator who is our Father and our Redeemer.

Go on...

**The Doctrine of Inspiration**
It is, however, with the doctrine of inspiration that we begin to get into the waters that have been muddied by lots of dispute among the people of God. In fact, almost 100 years ago, Warfield, an eminently astute Princeton theologian, noted that the term “inspiration” unfortunately suggests an instantaneous event whereby Scripture is suddenly puffed into existence. Instead, a more proper understanding acknowledges extensive and intricate providential preparation as a whole complex of events unfolded and our sovereign God perfectly shaped persons, often over long periods of time, to be part of the process.

Nevertheless, we do need a starting point and for the purposes of this presentation, we’ll use the familiar term *inspiration* and define it as:

*a special act of the Holy Spirit by which He guided the writers of Scripture so that their words should convey the thoughts He wished conveeyed, should bear a proper relationship to the thoughts in the rest of Scripture, and should be infallible in thought, fact, doctrine and judgment.* Frankly, this is a definition you should know.

Aha! Gotcha here. You guys at Gordon sign a statement every year that says, like, “free from error,” don’t you?

You are correct and it is, of course, the assertion “free from error” that has engendered a hearty discussion among evangelicals who have wrestled with definitions of infallibility and inerrancy and the implications of those definitions. Sadly, that dispute has overshadowed the declaration, most forcefully evident in the definition, of the unity of God’s revealed truth and the moral authority and efficacy of His Word. But let’s start with what the text says. Note that the key New Testament passages that affirm the doctrine of inspiration are talking about the copies of the
Old Testament that were in use in the first century of the Common Era. That’s centuries after the original writing and yet hear what Paul and Peter say.

**In II Timothy 3:14-17**, Paul exhorted Timothy to continue in what he had learned and become convinced of because the Scriptures [and I quote] “are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. **All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable** for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness so that the person of God may be fully equipped for every good work.” “Scripture” refers to the sacred texts that would have been available to those who taught Timothy (2 Tim 3:15), notably his mother and grandmother (2 Tim 1:5), as well as to Timothy when he was a young man. Paul is saying that *all* Scripture – both the originals and the subsequent copies – has its Source in God and accomplishes God’s purposes. In relation to this passage, I would suggest that it is not a mere poetic accident that Psalm 33:6 declares that “the heavens were made by the word of the Lord and their starry hosts by the breath of His mouth”; that when God created humankind, He *breathed* into His creature the breath of life (Gen 2:7); and when He produced His Word, it is described as “God-breathed” (II Tim 3:16). We tend to neglect the *power* behind the *breath* and Word of God because we frankly often conceive of these words solely as atrophied or dead artifacts.

**II Peter 1:19-21**

The **writers were carried along by the Holy Spirit.** Among other things, this verse tells us that the initial impulse to record both the mighty acts of God and interpretations of those events in the history of revelation came from the Holy Spirit of God. In the minds of the apostles, this work of God’s Holy Spirit meant that God’s speaking and Scripture speaking were inseparable. Don’t let the astonishing nature of that slip by you.

In one sense, **the individuals who wrote Scripture did not write from themselves;** they “spoke from God.” God “breathed” His Word and “carried along” the human recipients in this process of communicating truth. Because these activities were entirely His, the resulting products must be deemed perfectly truthful.

In another sense, **those who wrote Scripture **did** write from themselves; this is the process of inscripturation.** In other words, at this stage revelation began to be entrusted to humankind and we recognize normal human intellectual activities in operation, enhanced by the work of the Holy Spirit. Luke researched very carefully; Paul responded to theological and practical issues and questions; the prophets, psalmists, and authors of the wisdom texts raised questions; Ezra (7:11-26) quoted archives. While the Holy Spirit was the operative force (2 Pet 1:19-21) and the Word was God-breathed (2 Tim 3:15-17), each author had his own talents, limiting chronological and cultural sphere, distinct purposes, and audience. The writers of Scripture displayed varied styles, indicating their social, cultural, educational, and vocational backgrounds. Amos was a shepherd and tender of sycamore fig trees, possibly a migrant worker. They employed varied vocabularies, used different grammatical constructions, preferred distinct types of discourse (narrative, descriptive, explanatory or argumentative), and even displayed differing degrees of psychological and emotional depth. Read the anguish of Jeremiah. Thus their writings reveal something of the human authors, as well as the intentions of the divine Author of Scripture. That is one of the aspects that make the study of Scripture so rich and inviting and challenging. We need to give careful consideration to each of these aspects as we begin to apply the text to our own lives.
Of exceedingly great importance for our thinking is that the writers of Scripture were wholly affirmed by Jesus. He gave credence to the First Testament as He declared in Matthew 5 that not one tiny bit of the Torah would disappear. Instead, He came to fulfill it. His upper room discourse to the band of apostles gathered around Him just prior to His crucifixion promised them the presence of the Holy Spirit to teach and remind them (John 14:25-26). Their written words would become the apostolic testimony. Therefore, if we affirm our belief in Jesus and His ministry (which we do pretty easily – it seems the “easy” thing to do), then we also take at His word the full authority of both Old and New Testaments. Furthermore, the apostles Paul and Peter put the entire apostolic testimony on an equal footing with the prophetic word (Eph 2:20 and II Pet 3:2). If indeed God raised Jesus from the dead (by the way, never to die again in contrast to the other recorded resurrections, whether mythological or biblical), that miracle shatters all human notions that presume to pass judgment on the Scriptures. Thus, a good deal hinges on the historicity of the resurrection for which a rather good case can be made, contrary to the media frenzy several weeks ago about the supposed ossuary of Jesus. The evidence for the resurrection is another hour’s worth of material.

These truths of Scripture will be understood by those who are “taught by the Spirit” (I Cor 2:10-16). In I Corinthians 2, Paul assures his readers that the Spirit who searches the deep things of God, being in intimate relationship with God, is also the Spirit who has taught the apostle Paul and will give understanding to those who have the mind of Christ. We have then the convergence of the indwelling Spirit, the indwelling Christ, and the indwelling Word of God.

You’re pretty quiet; are you sleeping?  
Not quite, but what about errors and discrepancies?

Let me put it to you this way. Those texts that the apostolic witness (Paul and Peter) declared to be God-breathed maintain, even in their transmitted and translated states (which, again, was what they had in the first century), the quality of inspiredness so that truth is preserved and effectiveness assured. This last point is essential. In the processes subsequent to God’s breathing out His word, increasing responsibility lies with human beings. Such issues as lack of modern technical precision, literary conventions, cultural “locatedness” of the author, copyist errors, and potential mistranslations are part of that picture. Nevertheless, the definition addresses not these matters but “thought, fact, doctrine, and judgment,” in other words, that which is historically, theologically, and morally the substance of our faith. It might just be God’s providential control especially here that allows for sufficient disagreement to nudge us toward a healthy humility that seeks Him for wisdom and repeatedly drives us back to a more thorough study of His Word as we work at the task of interpretation.

Are you still there?

Mmm-hm. Just processing... This is rather a lot to throw at me, y’know.

OK. So, I’ll pose a rhetorical question: What Does This Mean? How does it all come together?

Our biblical doctrine of the Scriptures affirms a powerfully Trinitarian engagement in the processes of revelation. God the Father created by virtue of the Word; the Word became flesh in the second Person of the Trinity and that Living Word affirms the written “living word”; the word was inscripturated by the working of the Holy Spirit. And it is in the Body of Christ, the Church, that the Holy Spirit dwells and brings to fruition His Word.
Well, the truth is, I’m really more interested in the existential questions of meaning, those that are more personal and subjective, and create space for more ambiguity.

To be sure, I think people intrinsically enjoy questions more than answers – I wonder if that is because asking questions does not take as long and does not require the same attention that a thoughtful and coherent response demands. Just as an aside, we at Gordon often pride ourselves that we are learning to ask questions and that is eminently important. But shame on us if we do not also work together at constructing answers that point to truthful representation of reality. No matter what the generation, we are called to give a reason for the hope that we have (II Peter 3:16) and that may be no more important than now.

But to get to your point: What I have just said has profound personal implications. We have been assured by Peter that there is indeed everything we need for life and godliness in these great and precious promises (II Peter 1:3-4). He’s referring to the entirety of the Old Testament; that’s a lifetime of study and memory. We cannot rely on promises unless we know them because they are lodged deeply in our hearts and minds. The author of Hebrews (4:12) declares that the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword. It does major surgery on our sinful and willful ways of thinking, speaking, and acting. And we all need that surgery more than we know! But this does not happen if we merely talk about it or construct and critique elaborate theological systems. Scripture in its entirety is the living voice of God and we need to hear that voice. That will come only with the discipline of study of the text itself and our intent to apply the truths that we find therein. Scripture will accomplish what God purposes (Isaiah 55:11) and it is the truth “that sets us free” (John 8:32) as Jesus said to a somewhat hostile audience.

And that really brings me to the central issue. John 12 describes an incident that occurred shortly before the crucifixion of Jesus. Some Greeks (i.e., “outsiders”) came to Philip and said: “We want to see Jesus” (Jn 12:21). Jesus’ response made it very clear that seeing Jesus would mean seeing the cross (Jn 12:23ff). This whole presentation is relatively pointless unless in the Scriptures we come to see and know Jesus, the Incarnate Word of God, who in His Body on the cross, has taken our sins, completely freeing us from the dominion of the devil. It means seeing His suffering and taking up our own cross daily as we wage war against sin in our own lives. It means affirming (in this pluralistic age) that He alone is the Way, the Truth, and the Life and that His resurrection means our new life. It also means that we will see Him manifested in this age in the Church, the Body of Christ, both its corporate manifestation and individuals who have been redeemed and restored. There is no more dramatic testimony to the power and authority of God as we know Him in His Word than the lives of those who live consistently under the authority of the Scriptures, faithful to the revealed word, forgiving, selfless, truthful, loving God and loving neighbor – even when all these characteristics may cost us dearly. Are we among those who do so? It’s a sobering question. In choosing the life of faith we commit ourselves to an engagement with the text that will indeed transform us inside and out. As we determine to study and sit under its authority, we affirm that it represents God’s authority; our lives are never the same after we take seriously the challenge, posed by Jesus Himself, to take up our crosses daily and follow Him. We will not learn how to do that unless we are infused with the words of God.
It sounds almost like a postscript to say I still have lots of questions. Things like how we know that the Church got it right in regard to the canon; or the cultural barriers to understanding the truths of Scripture.

I’m sure you do. The issue of the canon merits a much longer discussion. We can have that some other time. As a very brief response to the latter question regarding cultural barriers, I would simply note that western culture itself is a testimony to the fact that the truths of Scripture transcend cultural barriers. The Gospel, after all, did not start out in London. In fact, we see paradigms for this already in the Bible itself. Canaanites such as Rahab and her family came to belief on the basis of testimony of God’s mighty acts for Israel. Let me remind you that Canaanites were quite different in their world view from monotheistic Israel. The Gentiles of the first century in their Greco-Roman culture hardly shared the world view of Palestinian Jews and yet the book of Acts records the movement of the Gospel message, empowered by the Holy Spirit, from Judea to the center of the Roman empire, Rome itself. Just as the truths of Scripture transcend language barriers, so also they transcend potential worldview barriers. It is still true today.

Think of what we have done today as laying the foundation. And let me invite you, if these are issues that you are seriously interested in pursuing to e-mail either Barry Loy or me. We promise to arrange for some time to pursue these questions further.

[introduced the Disembodied Voice at this point]

Please rise for the benediction: “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift His countenance upon you and grant you peace.” Amen.