

Series: Five Timeless Values for Today's Church

Title: Biblical Authority

Text: Psalm 119:160; John 17:17

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Authority is nearly considered a dirty word by many nowadays. Since the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal that followed in the 1970's, it seems that many Americans have had a suspicion of anything with an authoritarian air. Many think of unruly abrasiveness, absolute control, and abuses of power when they hear any mention of the word authority. It is almost automatically assumed that the term is a negative one.

There are certainly abuses of power within our world. Because we live in a fallen world, there will be sinful uses of authority until the end of time. Ultimately, there will never be an absolutely pure form of government and leadership until King Jesus returns to Earth (Revelation 19:11-15). Authority can be represented in an unhealthy way, but such a reality does not do away with the place of authority in human society. The Bible is clear that earthly authorities are a God-given gift to humanity (Romans 13:1; Titus 3:1).

Discerning believers understand these things. Additionally, they know that authority has an important place in the Christian life. Prior to His ascension back into heaven, He told His disciples, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth" (Matthew 28:18). Paul recognized that he had a degree of authority as an Apostle in the church (2 Corinthians 13:10). Though authority may seem to have no place in spiritual things, the opposite is actually true.

Defining Authority

From studying Scripture, it is obvious that authority has an important place in the Christian life. Before we can consider what's involved with such a thing, we must define terms. The Greek word used in the New Testament for authority is one that was sometimes translated as "power" (Matthew 9:6; Acts 26:18; Romans 9:21). More specifically, the term represented the right one had to say or do something. For the purpose of our study, it is best to think of authority as "the right to determine a course of action."

Biblical Authority

To be spiritually strong, believers must have an appreciation for God's authority over their lives. More precisely, they must understand how God exercises His authority via His Word, the Bible. The Psalmist once sang, "The entirety of your word is truth, each of your righteous judgments endures forever" (Psalm 119:160). When Jesus prayed for His disciples, He prayed, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17). According to both the Psalmist and our Lord, the Word of God is a fixed and immovable standard of truth that has absolute authority over the believer's life.

At Tabernacle Baptist Church, we have identified "Biblical Authority" as the first of five key core values of our congregation. We have the conviction that the Bible is the standard for our faith. It calls the shots when it comes to what we believe and how we practice our faith. Personal experience, church traditions, culture, and more may

have a place in the church and the Christian life, but such things are ultimately subservient to Scripture.

One has remarked on the nature of Biblical authority by saying, “A man must make the Bible alone his rule. He must receive nothing and believe nothing, which is not according to the Word. He must try all religious teaching by one simple test — Does it square with the Bible? What saith the Scripture?”¹ At our church, we have articulated our commitment to Biblical authority with the following statement — “We desire to allow the Bible to dictate all our beliefs and actions.” Scriptures that shape this conviction are 2 Timothy 3:14-17; Hebrews 4:12; John 17:17; Matthew 5:17-19; and Psalm 119:105-106.

In a world in which many churches are slighting the sufficiency of Scripture by following after false philosophies, man-centered dogma, and entertainment-driven approaches to religion, we believe the Bible is sufficient to renew souls, enlighten minds, and build Christ’s church. Each ministry activity and every meeting of the body should center on the truths expressed in God’s Word. In what follows, we will consider the topic at hand by looking at three questions found in the pages of Scripture. Each question highlights the importance of Biblical authority in the lives of God’s people.

“Did God Really Say?”

Genesis 3 describes the downfall of the first man and woman. Though they were made to enjoy a forever relationship with God, Adam and Eve rebelled against the Lord’s will for their lives. The result was that spiritual death came upon the entire human race. The Lord displaced Adam and Eve from the paradise of the the Garden of Eden. They were left to roam the Earth and earn a living from laborious toil. Their only hope was in the promise of a coming Redeemer who would defeat Satan and reverse the consequences of sin (Genesis 3:15).

It is interesting to dissect the exact reason for Adam and Eve’s original sin. Many would rightfully note that Satan was an instigator in the episode. He appeared as a serpent in the garden and he coaxed Eve to eat forbidden fruit. The evil entity existed prior to the Garden of Eden. Scripture tells us angels witnessed the Lord’s act of creating the heavens and the Earth (Job 38:7).

Apparently a band of angels, now known as demons, rebelled against the Lord shortly after the Lord made man and woman. It seems they were driven by a jealousy of the crown of God’s creation — humankind (Psalm 8:5). In addition, they were motivated by a desire to snatch glory for themselves. They wanted to steal the renown reserved for the Lord alone. It was their desire to receive glory from other angels and humankind (Isaiah 14:13-17).

What was Satan’s tactic for duping Adam and Eve? He caused them to doubt God’s Word. The Bible says, “Now the serpent was the most cunning of all the wild animals that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You can’t eat from any tree in the garden?’” (Genesis 3:1). Notice that Satan called the revealed Word of God into question. Back in Genesis 2:16-17, the Lord gave clear instructions concerning what trees were good for food. In tempting Adam and Eve, Satan made the couple doubt the authority of God’s truth.

¹ Ryle, J.C. *Practical Religion*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), 110

Note the source of all spiritual downfall. From the beginning of time, humanity's archenemy has cast doubt on the truthfulness of God's revealed word. To safeguard ourselves against spiritual ruin, we must develop a rock-solid confidence in the Lord's truth. To be spiritually strong and healthy, we should cultivate a high regard for the Bible. J. Gresham Machen, a well-respected theologian of the early Twentieth Century, once said:

Let it not be said that dependence upon a book is a dead or an artificial thing. The Reformation of the sixteenth century was founded upon the authority of the Bible, yet it set the world aflame. Dependence upon a word of man would be slavish, but dependence upon God's word is life. Dark and gloomy would be the world, if we were left to our own devices, and had no blessed Word of God. The Bible, to the Christian is no a burdensome law, but the very Magna Carta of Christian liberty.²

“What Will You Do At The End Of It?”

Jeremiah 5 proclaimed judgment on the nation of Israel. Because of their refusal to live according to God's covenant obligations, the Lord announced that He would send a foreign invader to ransack to Holy Land. He anointed Jeremiah as a prophet to bear such bad news. The man is often called “the weeping prophet” because of the devastating message he was summoned to preach.

Early in Israel's history, the Lord had warned about the prospect of foreign invasion. When He gave His Law for the nation, He described the consequences of sin for the nation by saying, “Your sons and daughters will be given to another people, while your eyes grow weary looking for them every day. But you will be powerless to do anything” (Deuteronomy 28:32). Captivity was a way of giving God's people what they wanted in order to bring them to their spiritual senses. If the nation rebelled by following after the customs of foreign nations, the Lord promised to send them as slaves to foreign nations.

Jeremiah was called to preach concerning such things. As he surveyed the sinful state of the nation in his day, the Lord moved him to say, “An appalling, horrible thing has taken place in the land. The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule by their own authority. My people love it like this. But what will you do at the end of it?” (Jeremiah 5:30-31). The prophets of Jeremiah's day didn't speak from the Lord's authority. Instead of preaching God's Word, they shared their own ideas. Jeremiah knew that such misplaced authority would lead to disaster and calamity for the nation; thus, he asked, “What will you do at the end of it?” Such a perversion of authority would ultimately result in captivity.

Jeremiah's question is a haunting one for believers of all generations. If we dismiss and despise the authority of Scripture, we can be assured that we will reap spiritual consequences. Our families, our churches, our communities, and our own lives will experience a sort of calamity and captivity. May we always stay mindful of the

² Machen, J. Gresham. *Christianity & Liberalism*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 67.

danger associated with departing from the plumb line of God's Word. One has rightly said, "We seal our destiny by our response to the Scriptures."³

"Have You Not Read?"

Matthew 22 contains an account of debates between Jesus and His religious opponents that took place during the week in which He was crucified. One such debate centered on the topic of the resurrection. A first-century religious group known as the Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead. Attempting to stump Jesus in a religious argument, they approached our Lord and presented an absurd hypothetical situation. Their intent was to prove what they thought to be the logical impossibility of the resurrection:

Now there were seven brothers among us. The first got married and died. Having no offspring, he left his wife to his brother. The same thing happened to the second also, and the third, and so on to all seven. Last of all, the woman died. In the resurrection, then, whose wife will she be of the seven? For they all had married her (Matthew 22:25-28).

Jesus gave a straightforward and stinging rebuke to His adversaries. He said, "You are mistaken, because you don't know the Scriptures or the power of God" (Matthew 22:29). Notice from our Lord's reply that He regarded the holy writings of God as the standard for truth. The Sadducees were mistaken because they relied on human logic and reasoning for truth, not Scripture.

As He continued His rebuttal, our Lord asked His opponents, "...haven't you read what was spoken to you by God: I am the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob?" (Matthew 22:31-32). Jesus' question — "haven't you read what was spoken to you by God" — cut to the heart of the Sadducees' problem. They looked to culture, tradition, and beloved religious leaders for truth. They bypassed the standard of Scripture in their zealous pursuit of knowledge and insight from other means.

Commenting on Jesus' interaction with the first-century Sadducees, Matthew Henry said, "Note, ignorance of the scripture is the rise of abundance of mischief."⁴ May we learn a lesson from Jesus' opponents. We will stumble and slide spiritually if we don't stand strong on the rock of Scripture. There is only one absolute source of absolute spiritual truth. It is God's Word alone that has the right to determine what we believe about doctrines like the resurrection. It is also God's Word that is invested with authority to rightly direct the entirety of our spiritual lives. May we pledge with the Psalmist, "Your word is a lamp for my feet and a light on my path" (Psalm 119:105).

³ Court, David. Honour, Disgrace, Restoration: An Exposition of Jeremiah 13:1-11. *The Banner of Truth Magazine: 707-708, Aug. & Sept. 2022*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2022), 11.

⁴ Henry, Matthew. *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), [CD-Rom].