

How We Approach the Bible

The manner in which we approach the Bible will have a significant impact on our understanding of it. The two basic ways of looking at scripture can be summed up in Jesus' question to the chief priests and elders who were seeking to entrap Him:

Now when He came into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people confronted Him as He was teaching, and said, "By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?" But Jesus answered and said to them, "I also will ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things: The baptism of John—where was it from? From heaven or from men?" And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus and said, "We do not know." And He said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things (Matthew 21:23–27).

The only two possible sources for the authority by which Jesus spoke were heaven (that is God) or men. We can ask the very same question concerning all of scripture, as it is the end result of the authority that was exercised by Jesus (Hebrews 1:1-4).

There are many people who believe that the scriptures are nothing more than the invention of men. In an article entitled *21 Books You Don't Have to Read*, GQ Magazine printed this concerning the Bible:

The Holy Bible is rated very highly by all the people who supposedly live by it but who in actuality have not read it. Those who have read it know there are some good parts, but overall it is certainly not the finest thing that man has ever produced. It is repetitive, self-contradictory, sententious, foolish, and even at times ill-intentioned.¹

The authors/editors of GQ have clearly made the decision that the Bible is nothing more than a book produced by men. Their recommendation was to scrap the Bible and read something else, of their choice, instead. Most people today (even many who claim to be religious) follow this same line of thinking. They may even believe (contrary to GQ's assessment) that the Bible is a good book, and makes good suggestions for living a good life. But they do not believe the Bible is the word of God, and therefore they do not believe that it really has any authoritative value. It cannot, they believe, command them to change the way they live their lives in any way.

The second way of looking at the Bible is to see what it claims for itself. In our previous lesson, we talked about the claims made by the apostle Paul in Ephesians 3. The word written down by him, as he claimed, was the mind of God, delivered through the Holy Spirit. This claim is repeated in other places in scripture:

For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

You will be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be

¹ The Editors of GQ, April 19, 2018: <https://www.gq.com/story/21-books-you-dont-have-to-read>

given to you in that hour what you should speak; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you (Matthew 10:18–20).

It is beyond the scope of this study to delve into evidences for the Bible being the word of God. However, we do need to recognize the distinction between these two views, and realize choosing one view over the other will impact our understanding and implementation of the things that we find in the scriptures. Paul’s encouragement to the Thessalonian brethren was hinged upon their willingness to accept the things that he wrote to them “as...the word of God.” He was very clear that what he wrote did not come from his own mind, but rather from the mind of God. If we approach scripture from this standpoint, we are compelled to view it as authoritative. That is, we come to the conclusion that it has the authority to instruct us in belief and practice.

Recognizing Authority...

Before going very far into this study, we must examine the concept of *authority*. What is authority? What does it mean to have authority? What obligations are there toward those who are in a position of authority?

In Matthew 8, Jesus encountered a centurion in the army who had a sick servant. He asked Jesus to heal his servant, and Jesus agreed to accompany him to the place where his servant was sick. However, the centurion had enough faith in Jesus that he knew Jesus did not need to travel to his servant in order to heal him. The centurion explained his view like this:

The centurion answered and said, “Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof. But only speak a word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes; and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” (Matthew 8:8–9)

This man understood the idea of *authority*. The word that is translated as *authority* in the New Testament is the Greek word, ἐξουσία (exousia /ex·oo·see·ah). This word means:

1 power of choice, liberty of doing as one pleases. 1A leave or permission. 2 physical and mental power. 2A the ability or strength with which one is endued, which he either possesses or exercises. 3 the power of authority (influence) and of right (privilege). 4 the power of rule or government (the power of him whose will and commands must be submitted to by others and obeyed). 4A universally. 4A1 authority over mankind. 4B specifically. 4B1 the power of judicial decisions. 4B2 of authority to manage domestic affairs. 4C metonymically. 4C1 a thing subject to authority or rule. 4C1A jurisdiction. 4C2 one who possesses authority. 4C2A a ruler, a human magistrate. 4C2B the leading and more powerful among created beings superior to man, spiritual potentates. 4D a sign of the husband’s authority over his wife. 4D1 the veil with which propriety required a women to cover herself. 4E the sign of regal authority, a crown.²

There are many different meanings of this word depending on the context. The centurion in the context under our consideration said that he was a man “under authority.” He helped to define what he meant by declaring, “I say to this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes; and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” He had “ability or strength...endued, which he either possesses or exercises.” He had been given authority, or power to command the soldiers who were under him. However, notice that he said that he was “under authority.” He was not declaring himself to be the source of authority, but rather, that he had been granted certain power. He was in the military and had command over a certain number of men. As a centurion, there would have typically been 100 men in his company. But, the centurion’s men would be part of a larger group, a cohort,

² Strong, J. (1995). *Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon*. Woodside Bible Fellowship.

which in turn would be part of an even larger group, a legion.³

This explains why this centurion declared that he was “under authority.” Though he had been granted some amount of power, there were those who were over him in the chain of command. So, while he could command those under him and expect their obedience, he also was expected to be obedient to those who were above him.

This example provides some insight into how authority, as a general concept, works. We can look to our own society to see that the principle stands fast today. There are those who have been granted, for one reason or another, power over others. In the work place, a boss is given certain authority, or power, over his employees so that he can give the instructions needed to accomplish the business’ agenda. Teachers in schools are given a certain authority or power to control the learning environment and make it possible to educate children and young adults. Policemen and other law enforcement personnel are given certain authority to control the general populace in order to maintain order and keep the peace. But, in each of these cases, there is an amount of authority that is granted, and the recipients are restrained from exercising more power than they are granted. The sphere of authority is limited in scope to the specific area under consideration. The boss, for example, cannot exercise the same authority as that of the policeman.

Within the realm of their positions, authority gives a person the right to command. While we understand this concept in our day to day lives, it seems that many people don’t accept this reality in the spiritual realm. We want to look at how this idea, the right to command, is especially true in the spiritual realm, and through this study discover who has this right and how it is to be conveyed and applied.

The Need for Authority

When Jesus was teaching in the first century, there was something different about his demeanor and methods. In fact, many of the people who heard Him knew He was not like anyone they had ever heard before. Consider how they responded:

Then they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath He entered the synagogue and taught. And they were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes (Mark 1:21–22).

Jesus taught as “one having authority,” which set him apart from the scribes who usually did the teaching. The scribes taught from a conferred authority. That is, their authority came from somewhere other than themselves. They could only take what had already been given and seek to explain it. Jesus, on the other hand, spoke with an authority that emanated from himself.

This difference was significant to the audience in Mark 1. It reflected that they understood the need for authority in the religious realm. Jesus’ teaching had to be confirmed in some manner. He could not teach from His own authority unless He could show that He had the right to do so. This right was confirmed by the works that He did (John 10:24-25). He could not do the miraculous works that He did if He did not have authority to speak the words that He spoke. This is a basic fact concerning the working of miracles in the first century (Hebrews 2:1-4).

In fact, Jesus was given “all authority” by the Father, so that He could do His work, and bring His revelation to mankind. In the midst of what we have described as the great commission, Jesus declared His authority, as given to Him by the Father:

³ “centurion”. *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2015. Web. 07 Oct. 2015*
<<http://www.britannica.com/topic/centurion-Roman-military-officer>>.

And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18).

It was on the basis of this authority given to Him that Jesus commanded His disciples to go out into all the world to preach the gospel and make disciples (Matthew 28:19-20). It is this same authority that commands us in all that we believe and practice today! If we recognize Jesus' authority, then we will approach His word, recorded in scripture differently than if we do not recognize His authority. In fact, how we approach His word will reveal whether or not we recognize His authority. If we view the scriptures as merely suggestions, then we do not respect the authority of Christ. If we believe that we have a responsibility to follow the instructions of scripture, then we do respect His authority.

Accepting Truth...

As Jesus was standing before Pilate, as a part of His mock trial, He declared that He was bearing witness to *the truth*. He also said that everyone who was *of the truth* would hear Him. In response to this, Pilate responded: "What is truth?"

Pilate's problem was the same as many who live today. He did not want to accept the idea that absolute *truth* could exist. He did not accept any absolute standard for truth. Therefore, when Jesus began to talk about truth, he was unwilling to accept His words.

Jesus claimed that the words that He brought from the Father comprised *truth*. We must determine whether we accept that truth. If we see what is written as absolute truth, it will impact the manner in which we approach scripture. Consider what Jesus claims for His words:

I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth (John 17:15–19).

As Jesus prayed to the Father, He made it clear that the word that He was proclaiming, that word that had come from the Father, was truth. Earlier, we saw how Paul described the revelation he received from the Holy Spirit. John recorded that Jesus identified the Spirit who would bring the word to the apostles as "the Spirit of truth."

"If you love Me, keep My commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you (John 14:15–18).

"But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me (John 15:26).

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you (John 16:12–15).

That which was delivered from God, through Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, was identified as truth. It is this truth that will lead to a relationship with God, and set men free from the bondage of sin.

Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." They answered Him, "We

are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can You say, 'You will be made free'?" Jesus answered them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed (John 8:31–36).

Jesus' claim for His own words, and the words revealed through the Holy Spirit (the scriptures) is that they are truth. That is absolute. If they are truth, then anything contrary to them, by necessity, cannot be truth!

Absolute Truth, Absolute Authority

How we approach the scriptures will impact how we apply them. If we do not believe there is any absolute standard of truth, then we will never come to agreement on faith or practice. All applications will be arbitrary, or subjective. We will have no objective way of taking what is written and putting it into effective practice. Anything we do not like is merely dismissed as unimportant. This is, it seems, the approach that many in the religious world take when studying and applying the scriptures. This approach, however, stands in contrast to the claims that we have seen Jesus Himself make concerning the scriptures.

If we approach the scriptures as being the absolute truth, we then perceive the message much differently. If the scriptures contain absolute truth as revealed from the mind of God, then they also bear absolute authority. If God exists, and if God has revealed His mind to His creation, then He has the absolute authority to command that creation. What other option would exist? Can the creation usurp the authority of the creator? Certainly not!

Woe to those who seek deep to hide their counsel far from the LORD, And their works are in the dark; They say, "Who sees us?" and, "Who knows us?" Surely you have things turned around! Shall the potter be esteemed as the clay; For shall the thing made say of him who made it, "He did not make me"? Or shall the thing formed say of him who formed it, "He has no understanding" (Isaiah 29:15–16)?

If we accept the scriptures as absolute truth, with absolute authority, then we must conform ourselves to what we find therein. It is foolishness to claim we accept their right command us, and then refuse to be obedient to the things we find in them! James addressed this very mindset:

Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does (James 1:21–25).

Our acceptance of the word of God as truth, and as authoritative will be made manifest through our actions. If we continue to rebel against the word of the Lord, refusing to be obedient to its instruction, we clearly do not respect its truth, or its authority. However, when we submit humbly to its every instruction, we show that we really believe it to be truth, and we really believe it has the right to command us. That is the approach to the Bible that will be beneficial to us, both in the present life and in the one that is to come!

Questions

1. What is *authority*? How is the concept of authority significant to our understanding of the scriptures?
2. Describe at least two ways that people today view the authority of the scriptures.
3. What does it mean that Jesus “taught as one having authority”? Why was it important for the people that He taught to recognize this?
4. How did Pilate view the concept of *truth* when he was trying Jesus?
5. What claims did Jesus make about the words that He presented?
6. What did Jesus call the Holy Spirit whom He would send once He ascended into Heaven? What did Jesus say the Holy Spirit would bring for the apostles?
7. If we accept that the Bible is true, and that it is authoritative, how are our reactions to its teaching impacted?