

HOW WE GOT OUR BIBLE And WHY WE BELIEVE IT IS GOD'S WORD

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CHAPTER FOUR

AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE

(Continued)

IF GOD has spoken, then obviously his word must be authoritative. This question of authority is vital, and touches us at every point.

A fundamental question is:

What is the ultimate and final authority in religion? What and where is the last and Supreme word concerning GOD, life, and eternity?

1. The Need of Authority - Authority is needed in every walk of life, and it is also essential in connection with religion. Man, even as man, needs a guide. But still more, man as a sinner needs an authority.

2. The Source of Authority - Where is this need to be satisfied? The answer, of course, is that GOD is the Source of all authority, and authority is expressed by revelation. For the present purpose it will suffice to say that CHRIST, as representing and revealing GOD, is our ultimate authority. So far, there will be no real difficulty. But at once the question arises: God is invisible. CHRIST is no longer visibly here. Where, then, can this divine authority be found? Where is it embodied?

And so we come to consider:

3. The Seat of Authority - There are three usual, perhaps only three possible answers. There are those who say that the seat of authority is in human reason. The word "reason" represents what is sometimes spoken of as human experience, including reason and conscience.

Some say that the consent of the mind is the condition and foundation of all certitude.

Let us be clear on this point. Reason is valuable and necessary.

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy . . . mind" (Matthew 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27).

The mind is essential as part of human nature, and is required to test the claims of any professed revelation, and then to receive the revelation thus tested. There can be no authority that destroys human reason; no authority that stultifies the mind that GOD has given us. The right of every man to verify is inalienable. **"Prove all things,"** said the apostle, as well as **"hold fast that which is good."**

But this is very different from claiming that reason is the seat of authority.

Man's faculties have been affected by sin. Besides, there is such a thing as reality, independent of reason.

What is truth? Truth is not what I trow; truth is fact, and is not dependent upon the changing opinions of men. Truth is true whether we accept it or not. A thing must be true before we can accept it as truth.

Truth is first objective - something presented - and only then is it subjective - something accepted.

So that reason is not originaive, not creative, it is only a channel. It is not a source, but a medium. It creates nothing; it only weighs data, and settles things as the result of weighing them.

Others say the Church is the seat of authority.

On this, we ask: What Church? Where is that Church to be found? The Church in the fullest sense of the word is best described as "the blessed company of all faithful people"; and as such it is the product of divine revelation.

The Church came into existence by accepting divine revelation.

As, therefore, the Church began through accepting divine revelation, it is difficult to see how it can be the seat of authority.

So we come to this, that the seat of authority is the Bible, and we believe this because the Bible preserves the revelation of CHRIST in its purest and clearest form.

Christianity is a historic religion, and what we need today is the very best form of that historic religion which we can find.

It does not matter where it is, or how it has come, so long as we can be sure that we possess the best available form of GOD's revelation in CHRIST.

Now Christianity is at once life and literature, and the life requires the literature for its nourishment. It is at least significant that all the great religions of the world have their books.

It seems as though a book were really necessary for the maintenance and continuation of all religion. Literature is the nearest possible approach to reliability.

Truth in literary form has four qualities which are preeminently necessary for a world-wide religion:

- (1) Durability. There is a character about a written form of communication which stands the test of time.
- (2) Catholicity. A universal element in a written form appeals, and applies, to the whole world.
- (3) Fixity. A permanence about the written Word makes it valuable and important for human life.
- (4) Purity. Purity is possible in connection with writing in a way that is impossible by any other method.

We cannot be sure of these four qualities in reason, because that is unsafe and variable. Nor can we be sure of them in any institution, for it is always uncertain. The written form of revelation is therefore the best available form.

If some one should say that this is what is called "*Bibliolatry*," the reply is that it is not.

We do not interpose the Bible between ourselves and CHRIST. We use it as a medium by which we come to CHRIST. If I desire to see the stars with the telescope, will that be an interposition? It will be a medium. It will not be a hindrance, but a help. And so Scripture brings us face to face with the Lord JESUS CHRIST.

4. The Nature of this Authority - It is a; spiritual authority.

It is a Book of salvation, it is a guide to spiritual safety. It reveals the Lord JESUS CHRIST as our Teacher, our Redeemer, and our Master; our Prophet, Priest, and King.

Then this authority is supreme. The Bible is supreme over reason. It is the light of reason and of human thought.

Revelation, because it comes from GOD, cannot possibly dishonor reason, which also is from GOD.

Reason is the judge of our need of revelation.

It examines the claims of revelation; but once those claims are accepted, reason takes a subordinate place, and revelation is supreme.

Reason examines, tests, sifts, inquires, but the moment it has become convinced that this or, that comes from GOD, then, like Joshua of old, it says: "**What saith my Lord unto his servant?**"

So, though revelation is supreme over reason, reason examines the credentials of revelation and then submits to them.

Since CHRIST is our Authority, what we need is the rational conviction that the Bible is the best form in which his Word reaches us, and then we submit to it, and it becomes supreme over our reason and life.

Again, the Bible is supreme over the Church.

But some one says: "How can this be? Surely it is impossible; the Church was in existence at least twenty years before a line of the New Testament was written."

The Church was certainly before the New Testament, but does it follow that the Church is above it? That is where a fallacy may creep in.

It is perfectly true that the Church had no part of the New Testament for more than twenty years, and there was no complete New Testament for a very long time after that. But while they did not possess the written Word they had the spoken Word from the first day onward.

The Church came into existence by believing the spoken Word; and as long as the apostles were at hand, the spoken Word was sufficient. But when they went from place to place, and afterward died, it was essential to embody the spoken revelation; and thus came the written form. It does not really matter whether it is spoken or written, so long as we can be sure it is a revelation from GOD.

If the apostle Paul were present at our meetings we should listen to him just as carefully as we should read one of his writings. The precise way in which the revelation comes does not matter so long as we can be certain that it comes from GOD. So that it is perfectly true that the written Word of the New Testament came after the Church, but the spoken Word came before the Church.

Did the Church at Rome write the Epistle to the Romans? Was the Church at Rome the maker of that Epistle? No; it was the apostle who wrote that Epistle to the Church of Rome, and it was Scripture to that Church from the moment they accepted it from his hand. It was not the Church, but the apostles representing CHRIST, who gave first the spoken and then the written Word of GOD.

The Church is "*a witness and a keeper*" of Scripture, but it is not its author or maker, and the reasoning employed in support of the latter contention is fallacious. The fallacy, of course, lies in attributing to a body in its collective capacity certain acts of individual members of the body.

The Church is not, and never was, the author of Scripture. The Scriptures are the law of GOD for the Church, delivered to it by the apostles and prophets.

So we say again that the Lord JESUS CHRIST is our supreme Authority, and we accept the Bible because it enshrines and embodies that authority.

Take away CHRIST from the Bible, and there is no Bible left worth having.

We do not bow down to the Book because it is a book; we do not repudiate reason because it is reason; we do not set aside the Church because it is the Church. We say that what we want is the best available form of CHRIST's revelation, and we believe we get this in the Bible and not in any other way.

The witness of the whole Church is very important, but still, when we have said everything for it, it is the work of a witness, not of a creator.

As Bishop Gore has said: "The Word of GOD in the Bible is the final testing ground of doctrine."

Church belief - what we call Church tradition - tends to deteriorate in the course of time. It never abides fixed. Tradition is so variable that we cannot depend upon it.

There is modification and subtraction. We find this in Jewish history: "**making the word of God of none effect through your tradition**" (Mark 7:13).

Bishop Gore wrote some years ago concerning the Jewish Church, and the Medieval Church, that they had "merged Scripture in a miscellaneous mass of authorities."

We must not do this, but keep it separate and Supreme.

The Bible is our final authority.

The Old Testament could not claim finality for itself, because it was a gradual growth; and for the same reason the New Testament could not claim finality for itself; but the whole tone of the Bible involves and implies finality.

The attitude of Scripture shows that it is final:

"To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isaiah 8:20).

“Behold, I have told you before” (Matthew 24:25).

“But have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully; but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God” (II Corinthians 4:2).

“And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Ephesians 6:17).

“For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe” (I Thessalonians 2:13).

“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (II Timothy 3:16).

“Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever” (I Peter 1:23).

Our Lord JESUS CHRIST himself in his life on earth bore testimony again and again to his own submission to that authority: **“The Scripture cannot be broken”** (See Matthew 5:18, and John 10:35).

So we believe that the substance of Scripture bears testimony to its finality; and the general tenor of the early Church is in the same direction. If we read the Fathers of the first three centuries, we shall find witness after witness to the supremacy and finality of the Word of GOD, and at the Council of Chalcedon the Gospels were placed in the center, as the final court of appeal.

Then, too, every heresy opposed to orthodoxy was alleged to be based on Scripture; ancient liturgies are simply; saturated with the Scriptures, and the most severe attacks of opponents have always been on Scripture.

Experience tells the same story.

It is clear from Church history that the Lord JESUS CHRIST has never fully revealed himself apart from the Bible. Where the Bible has been neglected, CHRIST has been neglected, and the light of Christianity has burned low. The oldest and truest view we have in ecclesiastical history is the supremacy of the Bible, and its finality in relation to the revelation of GOD in CHRIST.

There is a special reason today for asserting the authority of the Bible.

In many quarters the emphasis is placed on experience and this is said to be the test of truth. Everything else is said to be objective and external, and if different from or opposed to experience, it is to be rejected. But experience is variable and uncertain, and cannot possibly be the criterion of truth.

This modern tendency to fix the seat of authority within is liable to the fatal error of pure subjectivity, unless it is constantly safeguarded by the consciousness of a true objective element in knowledge.

The idea of the terms "*objective*" and "*external*" being identical is wholly incorrect, for since the ultimate authority is CHRIST himself, we can see at once that though CHRIST is dwelling in us, he is not thereby identical with us. He is the divine revelation mediated through Scripture and applied by the Holy Spirit, and as such he is at once objective and subjective, external and internal.

Years ago, Sabatier wrote a book entitled, "*Religions of Authority and the Religion of the Spirit*," a title which expresses an utterly false antithesis, because it is at least conceivable that a religion of the Spirit, in the sense of the Holy Spirit, can and will be a religion of "*authority*."

Such a position is involved in a serious fallacy, because our supreme authority is the Lord JESUS CHRIST, and while he is not "*external*" he is certainly our final authority. It would be well if we could at once and forever get rid of the antithesis so often stated between objective and internal, because CHRIST as our authority is at once our in-dwelling Master and our absolutely objective authority.

Even the Christian consciousness is inadequate and often defective, because for a safe, reliable, and constant standard we need to look away from Christian experience, however true it may be. The truth underlying this emphasis on Christian experience can be stated without any disregard of Scripture as our standard. GOD's revelation in CHRIST is our supreme authority.

Of this revelation the Bible is the divine authenticated record, and the Holy Spirit is the divinely authoritative interpreter, working on and in reason, conscience, and emotion, and producing an experience. It is thus that the truth without becomes the truth within and the subjective necessarily follows the objective. This makes our authority both external and internal and each fits the other.

- The Bible as an external authority alone would be without power in life.
- Our experience alone would be unsafe, unreliable, and independent of safeguards.

But the two together are all we need.

The Scripture tests experience and guards against the extremes of pure individualism, and the Spirit in our experience makes the truth of Scripture vital for life.

Thus, the Scripture as interpreted by the Spirit protects us against the sole external authority of the Church and also against the sole internal authority of reason. The light of truth in the Bible blends with and guards the light of the Spirit within, and therein we have our ample, infallible and satisfying authority.

Note - A fuller treatment of the points in this chapter will be found in the writer's booklet, "*Strongholds of Truth*," and a very valuable and conclusive presentation of the argument will be found in "*Is the Bible the Word of GOD?*" by W. Graham Scroggie. * It is one of the finest, freshest and most forceful statements.

QUESTIONS

1. Is authority needed in religion? Why?
2. What is the source of authority? What question arises at this point!
3. What three answers to the question, "What is the seat of authority?" are possible? Explain each.
4. State four qualities which make a written revelation essential to religion. Explain each. What answer may be made to the charge of Bibliolatry?
5. What is the nature of this authority? What is the relation of reason to revelation? What is the relation of the Bible to the Church?
6. What is the relation of CHRIST to the Bible?
7. Did the Old Testament claim for itself finality? Why? Did the New Testament make such a claim? What is the attitude of the whole of Scripture to this claim?
8. What does Church History show concerning CHRIST's revelation of himself apart from the Scriptures?
9. What special need is there today for asserting the authority of the Bible?
10. Is Christian consciousness sufficient for a guide? What is our ample, infallible, and satisfying authority?

* This book is posted on our site.

~ end of chapter 4 ~

<http://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/>
