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Question 18 - What is meant by the authority of the Bible?

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101 MOST ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BIBLE

18. What is meant by the authority of the Bible?

Theologian Millard J. Erickson writes:

“By the authority of the Bible we mean that the Bible, as the expression of God’s will to us, possesses the right supremely to define what we are to believe and how we are to conduct ourselves . . .

“We should be careful not to confuse authority with force. While ideally the right to prescribe and the ability to enforce belief and action should coincide, in practice they do not always do so. For example, the rightful heir to a throne or a duly elected official may be deposed in a coup. An impostor or a usurper may function in the place of another. In the case of veracious authority, there is really no force except an implicit ultimatum: ‘Follow what I tell you, and you will be led into truth; disregard it, and confusion and error will result.’ The physician who prescribes a course of action to his patient really has no power to enforce his prescription. He is in effect saying, ‘If you wish to be healthy, then do this.’

“In this connection, the distinction between authoritativeness and authoritarianism is also important to maintain. An authoritative person, document, or institution is one that possess authority and consequently has the right to define belief or prescribe practice. An authoritarian person, on the other hand, is one who attempts to instill his opinions or enforce his commands in an emphatic, dogmatic, or even intolerant fashion. The uninitiated or impressionable are often easily induced to follow an authoritarian person, sometimes more easily than they can be persuaded to follow a more authoritative person.

“It is also important to distinguish possession of authority and recognition of it. If they are too closely associated, or the former is measured by the latter, the matter of authority becomes quite subjective. There are persons who do not accept rightful authority, who do not heed traffic laws, or who reject the viewpoint of experts. For whatever reason, they prefer their own opinion. But their failure to recognize authority does not abrogate it . . .

“Another question arises at this point: How does God exercise this authority? Does he exercise it directly or indirectly? Some would maintain that he does so directly. Here we find the neo-orthodox. To them, the authority of God is exercised in a direct act of revelation, a self-manifestation which is actually an immediate encounter between God and man. The Bible is not God’s Word per se. It is merely an instrument, an object, through which God speaks or meets people. On those occasions, the authority is not the Bible but the self-revealing God. No permanent quality has been attached to the Bible or infused into it. There has been no delegation of the authority.

“There are others who understand the authority of God to be exercised in some direct fashion. Among them are various types of ‘spiritists,’ both ancient and modern. These are persons who expect some direct word or guidance from God. In their view God speaks to individuals. This may be apart from or very much supplementary to the Bible.

“Some extreme charismatics believe in a direct special revelation from God. It is not simply charismatics, however, who are found here. One of the questions posed in a 1979 Gallup poll was, ‘If you, yourself, were testing your own religious beliefs, which ONE of these four religious authorities would you turn to first?’ The options were: what the church says, what respected religious leaders say, what the Holy Spirit says to me personally, and what the Bible says. Of all those polled, 27 percent indicated they would turn first to the Holy Spirit; 40 percent indicated the Bible. Among persons between eighteen and twenty-nine years of age, however, a greater percentage chose the Holy Spirit (36 percent) than chose the Bible (31 percent). While a considerable number of Christians would certainly regard the direct work of the Holy Spirit as a means of guidance, 27 percent of the general public and 36 percent of young adults regard it as the major criterion by which to evaluate religious beliefs.”

(*Christian Theology*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1986, pp. 241-245.)

In essence it may be stated that the Bible has supreme authority over the following areas of the believer’s life:

- A. Over Human Reason – God gave us our minds and desires that we should use them! This is seen in two classic passages, one directed to the unsaved, the other to the saved. *“Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool”* (Isa. 1:18). *“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God”* (Rom. 12:1-2).

However, there are times when God desires us to submit our human reasoning to him. Note the following admonition: *“Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths. Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the LORD, and depart from evil”* (Prov. 3:5-7).

Often our reasoning is as the thinking of Naaman, who when asked to take a sevenfold bath in Jordan’s muddy waters, angrily replied: *“But Naaman was wroth, and went away, and said, Behold, I thought, He will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the LORD his God, and strike his hand over the place, and recover the leper”* (2 Kings 5:11).

But Elisha did not do so! Often God’s ways are different from our ways. *“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith 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” (Isa. 55:8-9).

B. Over the Church – The New Testament abounds with passages which declare Christ is the Head of the church. (See Eph. 1:22; 2:19-20; 4:15-16; 5:23-30; Col. 1:18; 2:9.) The Savior, it must be remembered, gave birth to the church, and not the other way around. (See Matt. 16:18.) Thus the Christian must look to the Bible and not to any earthly church for final instruction. Sometimes even those local churches mentioned in the Bible itself were grievously wrong. Note the following description of New Testament churches, some of which were started by Paul himself.

1. The church at Ephesus – *“Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent” (Rev. 2:4-5).*
2. The church at Pergamos – *“But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes, which thing I hate. Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth” (Rev. 2:14-16).*
3. The church at Thyatira – *“Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols” (Rev. 2:20).*
4. The church at Sardis – *“And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee” (Rev. 3:1-3).*
5. The church at Laodicea – *“I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth. Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent” (Rev. 3:15-19).*

- C. Over Tradition – In this atomic and space age in which we live today where change occurs at rocket speed, it will doubtless cause many to appreciate even more some of our beautiful traditions of the past. And rightly so. But traditions, like changes, can be wrong. If a thing was in error when it began, it is still in error regardless of the centuries that separate it from us today. Often in the past, hurtful “traditions of the fathers” have crept into the church of the Living God. Our Saviour himself was grieved over some harmful Jewish traditions. Note his words: *“And honour not his father or his mother, he shall be free. Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition”* (Matt. 15:6). Later Paul would warn also of this. *“Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ”* (Col. 2:8).
- D. Over Religious Leaders – *“Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation. . . Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you”* (Heb. 13:7, 17). As important as these verses are, they do *not* teach spiritual leaders are to become our source of authority. While godly pastors are indeed called to serve as role models (1 Cor. 11:1; 1 Tim. 4:12; 1 Pet. 5:3), the Bible alone must be our ultimate guide and standard.
- E. Over Feelings and Experiences – At times Christians fall unto error because they “felt led” to do or say certain things. However, we must learn that at times our feelings can be treacherous and totally untrustworthy. The psalmist often spoke of this: *“I had fainted, unless I had believed to see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living”* (Psa. 27:13). *“Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted in me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance”* (Psa. 42:5).

“I cried unto God with my voice, even unto God with my voice; and he gave ear unto me. In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord: my sore ran in the night, and ceased not: my soul refused to be comforted. I remembered God, and was troubled: I complained, and my spirit was overwhelmed. Selah. Thou holdest mine eyes waking: I am so troubled that I cannot speak. I have considered the days of old, the years of ancient times. I call to remembrance my song in the night: I commune with mine own heart: and my spirit made diligent search. Will the Lord cast off for ever? and will he be favourable no more? Is his mercy clean gone for ever? doth his promise fail for evermore? Hath God forgotten to be gracious? hath he in anger shut up his tender mercies? Selah. And I said, This is my infirmity: but I will remember the years of the right hand of the most High” (Psa. 77:1-10). *“I said in my haste, All men are liars”* (Psa. 116:11).

This is not only the case with our feelings, but also our experiences. One of Job’s three “friends,” Eliphaz, based all his advice to the suffering Job on experience

(Job 4:12-16). He is later severely rebuked by God himself for doing this. (See Job 42:7).

Thus as valuable as personal experiences may be, it is no substitute for the revealed Word of God.