



A Lack of Biblical Authority

It is an immense irony that a generation that has access to the best in biblical exegesis is, even among the so-called "educated clergy," so largely indifferent to it.¹

—Eugene Peterson

THE MOST IMPORTANT decision that a church or individual can make is deciding what to believe about the Bible. This is a strong statement, and some readers will disagree. Some will argue that the most important decision that a person will ever make involves their relationship with Jesus Christ. I certainly agree that this decision is the most important decision a person can make as it relates to eternal life, but I would counter that until a person first decides what he or she believes about the Bible, that person cannot make a proper decision about what to do with Jesus Christ.

Our postmodern society wants to include the Bible with the books of other religions. They see Christianity as just one of many religious options to choose from, and they are all equally valid. Jesus Christ is viewed as a great prophet, teacher, or religious leader, but many in today's postmodern society do not believe he is any different from the leaders of other religions. The problem with this view is that Christ does not give us that option. In John 14:6 Jesus exclaims, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." C. S. Lewis explained what this means to us.

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God.

But let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.²

Lewis clearly explains that considering all the Scriptures say about Jesus Christ, we are left with a trilemma. Either Jesus Christ is Lord, a lunatic, or a liar. What we believe about the Bible will determine which of the three we consider Christ to be. Is the Word of God given to us in order to reveal God and his purposes for our lives? Or is it merely a book about God that was written by human beings to teach ethical and moral truths that lead to a better society?

What Does the Bible Say?

Christians approach the Bible differently. Some believe it is without error in every detail, while others affirm it to be without error in all things necessary to salvation. There are also Christians who hold variations of these views. But no matter which opinion you accept, the issue at stake is the Bible's authority. We may disagree about how a certain passage of Scripture should be understood, but once the meaning is determined, we are obligated to conform to it because it is God's revelation of himself to us. A Christian ought not respond, "So what?" when confronted by the teachings of Scripture.

With that said, let's look at two passages that reveal the apostles' view of Scripture. In 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Paul claims, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." The phrase "given by inspiration of God" literally means "God-breathed."

I personally do not hold to the dictation theory that says God dictated the Bible word for word to the various writers. I believe the writers wrote from their experiences with God, and that God inspired their writings in such a way as to reliably convey the truth

about himself. This will be seen more clearly in the next passage, but before we go there, notice the purpose of the Scriptures. The apostle Paul clearly explains that they are given to us to enable every believer in Jesus Christ to grow in his or her faith. The words of Scripture are profitable to each of us as they reveal God's purpose for our lives, and they give us practical guidance for how we should live our lives. If Scripture comes from God and is meant to serve the purposes mentioned above, it is clear that they are intended to be authoritative for our belief and practice.

The second passage is 2 Peter 1:20-21. "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit."

In this passage, Peter teaches us that the writers of Scripture did not simply write down words; they wrote as they were inspired by the Spirit of God. There is also a helpful word picture here. In New Testament times, boats were moved by the wind blowing on their sails. Similarly, the words of Scripture we read today were inspired by God as he moved in the hearts and minds of its authors. Ultimately, according to these passages, God is the author of the Bible.

There are other scriptures we could look at, but for some people there could never be enough scripture to convince them that God is the author of the Bible. They have convinced themselves otherwise, and they are highly resistant to changing their mind. Unfortunately, as we will see later in this chapter, a large number of Christians, including many clergy, have decided the Bible is not the Word of God, but merely a collection of stories designed to teach moral truths.

What About the Errors in the Bible?

It is not the purpose of this book to present a defense of the Bible, but we will briefly address one common question that causes people to doubt the authority of the Bible. People who do not want

to accept the Bible as the authoritative Word of God usually speak of errors or contradictions in the text. The next time someone says that to you, get out your Bible and ask him or her to point out one to you. Very few people will ever be able to do so because they've never studied the Scriptures for themselves; they have just accepted what someone else told them.

It must be admitted that there are variations in some of the ancient manuscripts, but the vast majority of these involve grammatical construction, the spelling of words, and other trivial differences.³ Frederic Kenyon states emphatically that "no fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith rests on a disputed reading."⁴ We should also note that not one archaeological discovery has ever proven the Bible wrong.⁵ However, archaeology has often proven the skeptics and critics wrong.

A prime example of this involves the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. For many years, some scholars questioned the accuracy of Luke's writings and pointed to numerous "errors." One mistake they believed Luke made is when he referred to Lysanias as a tetrarch in Abilene around A.D. 27 (see Luke 3:1). The scholars pointed out that Lysanias was actually the ruler of Chalcis five decades earlier, and Luke's writings became suspect. These critics insisted that if Luke was wrong about this he might be wrong about other things he recorded. However, archaeologists later found an inscription dated from A.D. 14 to 37 that named Lysanias as tetrarch in Abila. There had been two persons named Lysanias, and Luke's record was correct.⁶

Of course, archaeology can only prove whether something is correctly described or historically accurate. It cannot prove or disprove spiritual truths. Its value lies in challenging those who insist the Bible is historically inaccurate or that it contains errors. Each person still must decide for himself or herself whether to believe the Bible is the Word of God or that it is merely a book about God like any other book.

Why Is This Important?

Does it really matter if we believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God? I believe it does matter because it is from the Bible that the church receives its message. If we believe the Bible was simply written by a group of men with typical human frailties and motivations and is therefore unreliable and not authoritative, then how can we know that what the Bible says about salvation is accurate? John 3:16 assures us that "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." This tremendous promise has brought hope to millions of people who have decided to put their faith in Jesus Christ. But, if the Bible does not truly convey God's word to us, how do we know for certain that this passage isn't erroneous? Maybe salvation isn't for "whoever believes in Him" but is only for left-handed, blue-eyed people living in Europe.

This is a practical matter as well. If the Bible is not authoritative, then why should we obey it? Why should we follow its moral principles? Many who reject the full authority of Scripture do so precisely because they want to follow their own morality. However, without moral absolutes a society will soon find itself in utter chaos. Who is to say that murder or rape or stealing is wrong? Some will argue that our consciences will tell us that such actions are wrong, but can we trust our consciences? Read any newspaper and see how moral our society's behavior is when it just follows its conscience.

Our postmodern society claims it does not believe in absolute truth; therefore, the Bible cannot be true. To the postmodern thinker, the Bible is "true" for those who believe it is true, but its teachings should not be forced on those who do not accept it. This rejection of absolute truth confuses me. How can someone insist that something is true for one person, but another person can hold an opposite belief that must be considered equally accurate? In addition,

if one claims there is no such thing as absolute truth, is that not a statement of absolute truth? David Berlinski answers that question by saying, "If it is, then some truths are absolute after all, and if some are, why not others? If it is not, just why would we pay it any mind, since its claims on our attention will vary according to circumstances?"⁷

One of my favorite classes in college was logic, and one of the primary laws of logic is the law of noncontradiction. In simple language, this law states that a claim cannot be both true and not true at the same time. If I tell you there is a brown desk in my study, the statement is either true or it is not true. It cannot be both. I happen to be sitting in front of a brown desk in my study as I type these words, so I know it is true. If you doubt my statement, it is easy to verify. All you have to do is to come into my study. If you choose to not believe me or come to my study to verify my statement, that doesn't make my statement false and yours true. In fact, you would be wrong. Whether or not you believe it is immaterial to the truth of my claim.

Let's apply this same thinking to Jesus' statements in John 3:16 and in John 14:6, two scriptures we have previously mentioned. If one believes in an authoritative Bible, then one must believe that Jesus' statements in both passages of Scripture are true. As apologist Ravi Zacharias writes, "Jesus' absolute claim that He is the way, the truth, and the life means categorically that anything that contradicts what He says is by definition false."⁸ Two competing religious systems that contradict each other cannot both be true. They can both be false or one can be true and the other false, but both cannot be true. It is important to admit that if your religious beliefs are true and they are contrary to biblical teaching, then the Bible must be false, and the millions of people who have accepted its teachings have been deceived. However, if my beliefs are true, you are the one

who is deceived. There is no easy, middle ground where both can be equally true.

Now do you see why I say the most important decision you can make is what to believe about the Bible? It is the key to reliable information about who Jesus is and how we should live. I have staked my life and my eternal destiny on the truth and authority of the Bible.

The Bible was under attack long before postmodernism declared there is no absolute truth, and the reasons for those attacks has not changed. Though some people challenge the authority of the Bible for intellectual reasons, many do so primarily to protect the lifestyle choices they have made. If they admit that the Bible is true, then God does exist and the Bible's moral teachings must be obeyed. Their lives will have to change or they will face the judgment of God. These skeptics do not want the God of the Bible; they want a god created in their own image. They prefer a belief system that fits their lifestyle rather than subject their lifestyle to God and his Word. I can understand unchurched people wanting to do this. What I can't understand is why so many in today's church want to join in this self-deception.

Christians and the Bible

George Barna reports that 79 percent of born-again American adults believe that the Bible is accurate in all the principles it teaches. That means 21 percent, over one-fifth, believe that the Bible teaches principles that should not be followed. Only 40 percent of born-again adults believe that Satan is a real force, despite all the Bible teaches about him. Although the Bible teaches that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth, only 62 percent of born-again adults strongly believe that teaching.⁹ These are frightening statistics. The teachings of Scripture are at the very heart of the Christian faith. If people claiming to be born-again Christians reject the truth of biblical teachings, they reject or distort the heart of the gospel message.

The figures become even more alarming when we look at how clergy in the mainline churches view Scripture. In a 2008 survey of mainline Protestant clergy conducted by Public Religion Research, 67 percent responded they did not believe the Bible was the inerrant Word of God in matters of faith and in historic, geographical, and other secular matters.¹⁰ The word *inerrant* is a loaded word that may have affected the responses to the question, but it is still significant that two-thirds of the ministers who responded to this survey lacked confidence in Scripture to some degree. Unfortunately, the view of Scripture that is in the pulpit will likely be the same view held in the pew.

The apostle Peter warned the church that false teachers will rise up, bringing destructive heresies that would lead many into error (see 2 Pet. 2:1-3). These false teachers will be successful because some in the church will prefer false teaching over sound doctrine. Those with “itching ears” will seek out false teaching (see 2 Tim. 4:3-4) because it does not threaten their moral and ethical choices. There is no danger of being convicted of sin because such teachers never speak of sin or judgment. They assure their listeners that God is only interested in blessing them. As a result, we see little difference in the lives of many Christians compared to the lives of those who do not claim to be Christians.

A Watered-down Gospel

Christians do not know how to live because they don't know what to believe, and they often don't know what to believe because of the messages they hear each week from their pulpits. When pastors have a low view of Scripture, they are unlikely to present a strong, biblical message. They may discuss the current issue of the day or share from an article they have read in a secular magazine, but they have nothing authoritative to say.

A friend once shared with me about a time when he struggled with alcohol. He knew he needed help to conquer his problem and decided to talk to a pastor. Since he didn't personally know a pastor at that time, he made an appointment with the pastor of one of the larger churches in his community. After his appointment, his wife asked how it went. He responded that the pastor really didn't say anything to help him overcome his drinking problem, but he did try to make him feel better about himself. He laughingly told me later that the pastor did everything he could to make him feel better about being a drunk!

It wasn't until a later meeting with another pastor who showed my friend from the Scriptures how much God loved him and provided forgiveness and salvation through Jesus Christ that he was able to conquer his problem with alcohol. The first pastor did not allow Scripture to speak authoritatively to the problem. This reflects a low view of Scripture. The second pastor did not hesitate to take my friend directly to the Scriptures. Because of his confidence in them, and because he believed what he read in the Bible, my friend experienced victory through the power of Christ.

Some churches believe they need to water down their gospel presentation in order not to offend people or in an effort to attract new people to their services. There are few references to the Scriptures in their worship services, and some subjects are avoided completely. Their pastors fear that if they present a sermon based too strongly on the authority of the Bible that they would lose their congregations. Yet, if that was the case, how did Billy Graham consistently fill up stadiums night after night? Time after time in his sermons he would begin a statement with, "The Bible says . . ." And he said it with an audible conviction that proved he believed what the Bible said. Millions of lives were changed because Billy Graham confronted people with the truths found in Scripture.

The fear of losing people is completely unfounded. Thom Rainer's research of formerly unchurched people found that "we should never dilute biblical teaching for the sake of the unchurched."¹¹ He found that 91 percent of formerly unchurched people reported that doctrine was one of the important factors that attracted them to the church they eventually joined.¹² Journalist Colleen Carroll's year-long study of young adults led her to report that a number of them are turning to orthodox Christianity because "they have been exposed to 'watered-down' religion, moral relativism, or atheism, and they crave its opposite."¹³ She states that these young adults "embrace challenging faith commitments that offer them firm guidelines on how to live their lives."¹⁴

Churches do not have to dilute the gospel in order to attract people. In fact, one reason that some avoid going to church is because its message is so diluted, it's not worth getting out of bed to hear it. People want to hear what God has to say about the issues that trouble them most. The Sunday after September 11, 2001, many churches reported large crowds of visitors. People were frightened and confused. For many of them, it was the first time they had entered a church in years. In their fear and pain, they attended a worship service to hear if God had anything to say about the recent events. Within a few weeks, most churches reported that their attendance had returned to pre-9/11 numbers. Why did this happen? Perhaps people decided that God could not help with the fear, pain, and confusion they were feeling. Perhaps it reinforced what many believed: the church is irrelevant to their lives. The church needs to seize golden opportunities like this to reach people who are hungry for words of hope and encouragement from Scripture, but too many churches miss it because they dilute the Word of God.

The Bible Is Relevant to Real Issues

As mentioned in the introduction, people are hurting due to the overwhelming social and financial pressures they are facing. America is facing the worst financial situation since the Great Depression, and it's not just America that is hurting. Virtually every economic system in the world has been impacted by this financial meltdown. A number of causes for this crisis have been identified: greed, excessive credit, lack of savings, and poor loans made by lending institutions are among the most commonly cited. Where do people turn for answers to problems like these?

Walk into any bookstore and you will find an array of books to help people through this economic downturn. They will tell you how to avoid foreclosure, what to do if you lose your job, how to invest in bad economic times, how to live on less, and how you can become rich. There is nothing necessarily wrong with most of these books, and one could assume the theories in each book worked for its author. However, there is one ancient book that contains great wisdom about finances that won't be found on the shelf with the others, and that book is the Bible.

In 1991, the late Larry Burkett warned that America would soon encounter a serious financial crisis.¹⁵ As he wrote, the country was in a recession, but he believed that the economy would go through at least one more cycle and possibly two before encountering a major meltdown. The factors he believed would cause this crisis were consumer debt, federal debt, a banking crisis, business failures, and a denial by leaders that anything is wrong. Does any of this sound familiar?

Near the end of his book, Burkett asked, "Will Christians be a part of the solution . . . or a part of the problem?" As of this minute I would say that most Christians in America are as much a part of the problem as anyone else. There is basically no difference in how

the average Christian handles his or her finances compared to the average non-Christian.”¹⁶ Burkett went on to say that many Christians consistently violate biblical principles in the areas of finances, observing that they overspend their earnings, fail to save for the future, and so on.

Those who claim the Bible is irrelevant to their lives have simply never heard what the Bible says about finances, and the reason they haven't heard is that many churches haven't taken the time to teach the financial principles found in the Bible. Some who claim to do so teach a “prosperity gospel” that is far removed from what the Bible actually teaches. For years, Larry Burkett and Ron Blue provided resources that could be used in churches to teach biblical principles on finances, but few churches ever used them. Dave Ramsey now offers his Financial Peace University, and a number of churches are now using that program to teach biblical principles to their members and to the larger community. Let's pray that more churches do so in the future.

Of course, the Bible speaks of more than just finances. It contains God's instructions regarding family life and marriage. It addresses racism, sexism, and ageism. The Bible warns against exploiting the poor and defenseless and insists that all people are to be treated justly and with compassion. It helps us make decisions that are ethically and morally sound. In short, it teaches us how to live, and the world would be a much better place if the teachings found in the Bible were practiced by each of us. Far from being irrelevant, the Bible contains the only way of life that is worth living.

The Bible Speaks to the Church

An authoritative Bible gives purpose and meaning to the church. Many churches today operate without any clear sense of mission and purpose. They develop programs, fill up their calendars, and accomplish very little. They chase fads instead of focusing on the ministry God has given them to do. This issue will be addressed

in detail in chapter 3, but for now we can say that the root cause of many churches' failure to understand their purpose and mission is because of their weak view of the Bible.

The mission of the church is very clear. We find it in the Great Commission (see Matt. 28:19-20) and the Great Commandment (see 22:36-40). The church is to be engaged in evangelism and in serving those in need. Unfortunately, we see little effective evangelism done in churches today. Too many of them are only interested in meeting the needs of their members, not in ministering to those outside the church. Such churches take neither the Great Commission nor the Great Commandment seriously because they do not take the Bible seriously. Former Southern Baptist president James Draper said it well: "There is no example in history of a church or a denomination which became more and more zealous for genuine biblical evangelism and missions while at the same time becoming less biblical in its theology and moving away from the authority of Scripture."¹⁷

If the Bible is true, then people without a personal relationship with Jesus Christ are lost and will be eternally separated from God when they die (John 14:6). If the Bible is really true, then we are all sinners who need forgiveness from our sins (see Rom. 3:23). We are not sinful because we sin; we sin because we are sinful. There is a difference, and the Bible teaches that we are all born sinful. Furthermore, the Bible teaches that our sins have separated us from God. However, the good news is that anyone who wants to receive God's forgiveness and become a child of God is invited to do so (see John 3:16). All of these things are taught by Scripture. If we regard the Bible as authoritative, we are not free to replace these things with ideas that are more appealing. We must believe that the biblical description of the problem of sin and its remedy is true. This makes sense of Jesus' commands to engage in evangelism. If a church is not involved in evangelistic outreach, it can only mean that it does not believe what

the Bible says about man's condition without Christ. It has made some other source of theology more authoritative than Scripture.

Denominations and the Bible

Doctrinal confusion is also one of the reasons why so many denominations are struggling today. Mainline denominations have struggled for years with two issues that have greatly divided their churches: abortion and homosexuality. Many of their national gatherings spend time addressing these issues with heated discussion from both sides. Those who hold to more liberal views on these subjects will claim that culturally defined social justice requires that women be given the right to an abortion and that same-sex couples should be allowed to marry. Conservatives point to various scriptures that speak against both practices. Which side has the strongest argument? Do the popular ideas of our current culture trump biblical authority? These are the questions denominations need to answer. For me, biblical authority is greater than cultural trends, autonomy of the local church, or any of the other arguments brought up in such debates.

The problem is that denominational leaders straddle the fence in an effort to please both sides. They are caught between wanting to be "relevant" or "current" and wanting to avoid discipline from denominational authorities. Or perhaps they are caught between wanting to have a bigger congregation and a desire to be faithful to the Word of God. If they are honest, they will recognize that fence-straddling only slows the problem, it doesn't stop it.

I serve in one of the denominations that has debated these two issues for many years. As a judicatory minister, I have met with numerous churches to explain our denomination's position on the issue of homosexuality. Few churches were satisfied with that position because it seemed that the denominational leadership was unwilling to resist cultural trends in favor of biblical teaching. Recently, an entire

region withdrew from the denomination over its failure to address homosexuality from a biblical perspective. Other congregations have decided to become independent or join other denominations. Fortunately, some of our churches still take a biblical stance on this issue. Their solution is to remain connected with our judicatory while distancing themselves from the denomination by reallocating their mission support. However, as a result fewer dollars are now going into the denomination's general fund. A number of people have lost their jobs and some missionaries are at risk of being recalled.

This is a great example of the way a rejection of biblical authority leads to another problem: the loss of ministry opportunities. We have spent enormous amounts of time, energy, and financial resources discussing these issues instead of investing those resources in opportunities to do ministry. These losses have occurred at both a national level and locally as well.

Missionaries whose funding is drying up as a result of these debates are distracted from the work to which God has called them. They are forced to spend valuable time and money on raising their own funds in order to remain in the field.

Finally, the ones most hurt by the doctrinal confusion that exists in many of our denominations are the people for whom Jesus Christ gave his life. They are consistently confronted with a weak, ineffective church that doesn't appear to know what it believes instead of having the opportunity to encounter the living Christ who could bring change into their lives.

Summary

Ed Stetzer and Elmer Towns list several core doctrines that are essential to Christianity, and one of these is the authority of the Scriptures. They write, "Take away the authority of the Bible, or the essential content of the Bible, and you no longer have Christianity."¹⁸ You may have a good organization or belief system that does

many good things, but you have something less than the Christian faith. Without an authoritative Bible, the church will be susceptible to a variety of popular, yet false beliefs. People will pick and choose which ideas to dismiss and which ideas to add until their “Christianity” is unrecognizable as the apostolic faith. Those who create their own version of Christianity in this way have no solid foundation upon which to offer truth because their source is considered unreliable and open to change with cultural trends. We are no longer anchored to truth when we believe one person’s theology is just as true as another’s no matter how those two theologies may disagree. We need Scripture to settle theological disagreements and provide a trustworthy foundation for belief. Someone has said the primary belief system in our postmodern world can be summed up in one word: “Whatever.” Without an authoritative Bible, the same will be true of the church as well.

The legitimacy of everything we preach and believe depends on its relationship to the Scripture. If we cannot believe that the Scripture is true, then we have no solid basis to proclaim its message. That is why I began this book by addressing the problem of doctrinal confusion, and it’s why I said the most important decision you or your church will ever make is what to believe about the Bible.

An authoritative Bible is at the heart of everything we do as a church. It informs our mission and purpose and provides direction for how we are to live our lives. When a church decides that the Bible is not the inspired Word of God and may be edited to suit current tastes, it undermines the source of its own authority as well. It has nothing to offer humankind but a repackaged mishmash of feel-good, secular humanism. It will drift along accomplishing little or nothing for the kingdom of God. For churches to effectively minister in the twenty-first century, they must deal with this doctrinal confusion and lack of agreement that is sending harmful mixed signals to the world.