

Editorial: The Importance of Biblical Authority for the Life and Health of the Church

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Historic Christianity has always affirmed that Scripture is authoritative because it is God's Word written, the product of God's sovereign action through the Word and by the Holy Spirit whereby human authors freely wrote exactly what God intended to be written and without error. Why has the church affirmed this view? What is meant by the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture? And why is this vitally important for the church to continue to affirm today?

The church has affirmed biblical authority because of Scripture's self-attestation. When one evaluates a worldview, we must begin with the specific claims of that worldview. This is why if we are to evaluate Christianity we must begin with Scripture's own testimony to itself. We do *not* confer on the

Bible an authority alien to it; instead, we let Scripture speak for itself. And when we do, we discover that Scripture claims to be nothing less than God's Word written and thus authoritative, sufficient, and reliable. For example, 2 Timothy 3:16 describes OT Scripture as "breathed out by God" (an allusion to creation, where God speaks the universe into being) and thus fully authoritative. So, in relation to Scripture, our triune Creator and Lord has spoken again and given us his Word through the agency of human authors (2 Pet 1:20-21). And it is precisely because *he* stands behind his Word—the God who plans and knows all things (Eph 1:11), who cannot lie and change his mind (Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29; Heb 6:18)—that we have an authoritative Scripture.

It's important to note that Scripture's view of itself is not found in merely a couple of texts; it's pervasively taught throughout the entire canon. From Genesis on, God presents himself as the one who speaks with all-authority (Gen 1:1-2:3). As he enters into a covenant relationship with Israel, he gives them his Word which is to be believed and obeyed (Deut 5:22, 32; 29:9; 30:15-16; Josh 1:7-8). As redemptive-history unfolds, the covenant-making and keeping God continues to disclose himself through the prophets, which ultimately reaches its fulfillment in Christ (Heb 1:1-2). In our Lord Jesus—God the Son incarnate—God's final Word is spoken (John 1:1-3, 14-18). Jesus not only fulfills the OT, he also views it as God's Word—the standard by which we are to live and evaluate everything, alongside his Word (e.g. Matt 4:4; 5:17-19; John 14:6; 10:35 cf. 2 Tim 3:15-16). In fact, our Lord puts his stamp of approval on the authority of the OT as God's Word, and he prepares us for the writing of the NT through his apostles by the sovereign agency of the Spirit (see John 16:5-15; Eph 2:20). This is why, as the NT is being written, NT authors already view their own writings as authoritative, parallel to the OT (1 Thess 1:5; 2:13). Specifically think of 1 Timothy 5:18 (which quotes from Deut 25:4 and Luke 10:7) and 2 Peter 3:16 (which refers to Paul's writings), both of which view NT writings as "Scripture." There is no question that Scripture views itself as authoritative because it is *God's Word*.

Inspiration is a theological term which explains the relation between God's speech and the words of the human authors of Scripture. To speak of the "inspiration" of Scripture is to affirm two truths simultaneously: Scripture is God's Word due to his action in and through the human authors (2 Pet

1:20-21) which results in a “God-breathed” (*theopneustos*) text (2 Tim 3:16-17). Hence, a working definition is as follows: Inspiration is the extraordinary or supernatural work of the triune God in and through the Holy Spirit on the human authors of Scripture so that their freely composed writings are what God intended them to write in order to communicate his truth, and as such, they are completely authoritative and trustworthy.

What is important about this definition is that it seeks to account for the Bible’s teaching that *all* of Scripture, not just parts of it, are simultaneously human words and God’s Word. This truth is illustrated by how the NT quotes from the OT. Some have estimated that the NT quotes some 300 texts and makes at least 1,500 allusions to the OT. This is significant because it is not merely some parts of Scripture which are God’s Word but the entirety of it. Theologians have sought to capture this *all-ness* of inspiration by the words *verbal* and *plenary*. Plenary stresses the fact that *all* of Scripture is God’s “breathed-out” Word. Verbal emphasizes that inspiration is not limited to Scripture’s teaching or moral truths but extends to the very words and sentences. Scripture perfectly reflects, through human authors, what God intended to communicate.

For this reason, Scripture teaches and the church has affirmed the inerrancy of Scripture. In fact, inerrancy is the consequence of its verbal-plenary inspiration. Scripture, in the original autographs and properly interpreted, is entirely true and never false in all that it affirms precisely because it’s the product of the sovereign God who cannot err. Also, inerrancy is not limited merely to matters of faith and practice but to all areas of knowledge that Scripture addresses. We cannot create a neat dichotomy between the theological and the factual given that God acts to bring about redemption in history.

Why is it vitally important for the church to continue to affirm biblical authority today? Many reasons could be given but the most significant is because without it we would have no basis to affirm that God has spoken definitively and objectively. Without an authoritative Word, we could hypothesize about God and the world, but none of our hypotheses would be properly grounded. Without Scripture we have no objective foundation on which to warrant our beliefs since any statement of Scripture could be false. But if this is so, then we would need an *independent* criterion to warrant which statements of Scripture are true or false. But this only compounds the problem. Not only would Scripture *not* be able to be used as a sufficient ground of

epistemological warrant, we must also have to ask what the independent criteria are by which we judge Scripture true or false? Human reason? Religious experience? Although many affirm these so-called “standards,” the problem with them is that they ultimately reduce to subjectivity. This is why, without a fully authoritative Bible as the sufficient warrant for our theological beliefs, the possibility of doing theology and knowing truth in a universal, objective way is nigh impossible.

In fact, this is precisely the problem today. On every side, our society faces an authority crisis. Whether in issues of morality, philosophy, or religion, we are surrounded by a secular pluralistic age which has no ultimate grounds for saying, “This is right and that is wrong,” or “This is true and that is false.” Not surprisingly, we have witnessed a huge loss of truth from the academy to the street, and even in the pew. We have lost any sense that “God has spoken” authoritatively and definitively. But we need to be reminded: Scripture says the opposite: The God who is there has spoken, and as such, there are universal, objective grounds for morality, human thought, and theology, rooted in Scripture as God’s authoritative Word written.

But with this said, it’s not enough simply to affirm these important truths, we must also apply them to our lives. On this point, the church needs help in applying biblical authority to a whole host of issues. This is why this edition of *SBJT* is seeking not only to teach and affirm a correct and orthodox view of Scripture, but also to apply biblical authority to a number of key issues in our day. In all of our articles, our authors are seeking either to expound a proper view of biblical authority or apply it to areas in which it’s being undermined and compromised. My prayer is that the church will not only have the correct doctrine of Scripture but also to learn anew how to live under biblical authority for the good of the church and to the glory of our glorious triune God who has so graciously not left us in the dark but spoken so that we may truly know him.