

“Living As Bereans” Part Two Making The Bible Central

One of the main causes of the 16th century European Reformation was the teaching of justification by grace through faith in Christ alone. Yet, closely connected was the doctrine of scripture known as *Sola Scriptura*. Commenting on this phrase R. C. Sproul (What Is Reformed Theology? 42) writes:

The [Latin] term...means 'by Scripture alone.' This slogan declared the idea that only the Bible has the authority to bind the conscience of believers. Protestants did recognize other forms of authority, such as church offices, civil magistrates, and church creeds and confessions. But they saw these authorities as being derived from and subordinate to the authority of God. None of these lesser authorities was deemed absolute, because all of them were capable of error. God alone is infallible. Fallible authorities cannot bind the conscience absolutely; that right is reserved to God and His Word alone.

Certainly Christians recognize that there are authorities to whom they must submit. For example, children are to submit to parents (Eph. 6:1-3); Christians to leaders in the body of Christ (Heb. 13:17); and citizens are to submit to governmental authorities (Rom. 13:1; 1 Peter 2:13-15). What is true, however, is that we submit to these authorities because a more ultimate authority tells us to do so: our Lord. There will be times when we must disobey such merely human authorities in order to obey God (cf. Acts 5:29). The reason is because our infallible sovereign God is the only one who deserves unqualified absolute submission. The place at which this impacts us the most is to see that His Word is our only ultimate and absolute authority.

As we saw in our previous reading, the believers in Berea demonstrated this principle when they searched the scriptures to test Paul's teaching (Acts 17:11). They did this because the scriptures are inspired of God, infallible, and inerrant. Yet, there are also three other characteristics behind the principle of *Sola Scriptura* and the actions of these saints. We want to look at these with a view toward being like the Bereans, i.e. people who make the scriptures central in all we are and all we do.

Canonicity

First, we must see that the 66 books of the Old and New Testament comprise the only divine revelation that God has inspired to be recorded as His ultimate binding authority. To put

Westminster Shorter Catechism “Q. 33. What is justification?
A. Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardon[s] all our sins, and accept[s] us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.”

Westminster Shorter Catechism, “Q. 2. What rule ha[s] God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him?
A. The Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.”

“The word ‘canon’ comes from the Hebrew word *qaneh* and the Greek word *kanon*. Both words originally signified a reed or measuring stick. Just as a reed could serve as a measuring standard, so the biblical canon was a measuring standard for faith and practice.” -Bill T. Arnold, Bryan E. Beyer, Encountering The Old Testament

this in other words, the “canon” of scripture contains these books and only these books. As such, we should not look to anyone or anything else (including any other sacred writings) for this infallible absolutely binding authority.

Some (e.g. Muslims, Mormons) have suggested that newer scriptures have been given since the New Testament was completed. There is a problem with this thinking for the following reasons.

To begin with, Christ is the center of all true inspired scriptures and the standard by which they must be judged. The Old Testament scriptures spoke of Him from beginning to end (Luke 24:27) in such a way as to point to and prepare people for His coming (Acts 10:43; Col. 2:16-17; Heb. 11:26). Once this foundation and preparation were completed, the Old Testament canon was closed. Traditionally both Jews and Christians have affirmed the 39 books of the Old Testament as we know them today.

Acts 10:43: “To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

What is more, the New Testament flows out of the central figure of Christ in that the material therein tells of His coming, His works, and explains and applies His significance (cf. John 16:15). This is why the author of Hebrews could speak of two key bodies of revelation: that in which God spoke to the fathers by the prophets—i.e. the Old Testament revelation—and then the new and superior revelation of God’s Son, Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:1-2). This Living Word (John 1:1) is the center and embodiment of the New Covenant or New Testament scriptures. As such, the New Testament was inspired by God through the foundation of the Apostles and their associates (e.g. Eph. 2:20; John 16:15; 2 Peter 3:16) in such a way as to reveal Christ. Once that body of revelation was given through them, we could expect it to come to a place where it was completed. This is exactly what we find happened: “I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for ***the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints***. (Jude 3, emphasis added)

“At the end of the fourth century...the Jewish canon, or the Hebrew Bible, was universally received.... In the Western Church the canon of both Testaments was closed at the end of the fourth century.... The New Testament canon is the same as ours.” Philip Schaff, History Of The Christian Church, 2: 608-9.

Based upon this testimony, the Church historically has viewed the canon as “closed”. Nothing can or will be added to it and, as such, the Judeo-Christian scriptures are the complete Word of God and comprise the only infallible ultimate absolutely binding authority on the believer.

Perspicuity

Another reason the Bereans searched the scriptures as the only infallible absolute authority had to do with the reality that the scriptures could be understood. They did not need a special class of persons (such as priests or scholars) to interpret the scriptures for them or to tell them what it says. This is what is meant by the word perspicuity. Noah Webster's 1828 dictionary defines the term this way: "Clearness to mental vision; easiness to be understood; freedom from obscurity or ambiguity; that quality of writing or language which readily presents to the mind of another the precise ideas of the author." This does not mean that every part of the Bible is easy to understand, that there is not a benefit to be had in listening to teachers who are specially gifted and trained (cf. Rom. 12:7), or that care and hard work must not go into understanding the Bible (2 Tim. 2:15). Bible students have used this term to communicate the following:

The knowledge necessary unto salvation, though not equally clear on every page of Scripture, is yet conveyed to man throughout the Bible in such a simple and comprehensible form that one who is earnestly seeking salvation can, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, by reading and studying the Bible, easily obtain for himself the necessary knowledge, and does not need the aid and guidance of the Church and of a separate priesthood. (Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology)

Certainly it was expected that the people of Israel could understand the words of Scripture well enough to be able to teach them to their children (Dt. 6:6-7). What is more, Jesus expected people to understand His words which stand at the heart of the New Testament (Mt. 7:24). Finally, Paul expected the "common man" to understand his epistles (cf. Phil. 1:1; Col. 4:16).

If the Bible was a closed obscure book, it would be practically impossible to approach it as our authority. What would end up happening is that a special class of person—the only ones who could somehow "decode" the book—would be our ultimate authority. Yet, that is not the case. The Bible's basic message can be understood by the average believer.

Sufficiency

In addition to obscurity, another deficiency of the Bible that would call into question its ability to serve as our ultimate authority would be its incompleteness. Some people think that the Bible does not teach us enough for salvation, for trusting God, and for obeying Him. Yet, that is not the case. The scriptures are sufficient for bringing us to Christ (Rom. 1:16;

Westminster Confession Of Faith, 1, 7: "All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them."

"The sufficiency of Scripture means that Scripture contained all the words of God he intended his people to have at each stage of redemptive history, and that it now contains all the words of God we need for salvation, for trusting him perfectly, and for obeying him perfectly." -Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology

James 1:18), for equipping us to obey and love God (2 Tim. 3:16), and for growing us (John 17:17).

Conclusion

So, the Bible is all from God (inspiration), it does not lead us astray (infallibility), it is without error (inerrancy), it is complete and all the message from God we need (canonicity, sufficiency), and we can understand it without having a special class of people who must tell us what it says (perspicuity). In other words, all the characteristics necessary for the scriptures to be our only infallible absolute binding authority are realities. This gives us confidence not only to believe the Bible, but to make sure that we gage all other alleged truth and every other authority by its message.

Family Discussion:

1. Name the three characteristics of the Bible we discussed and explain what each one means.
2. Why is each one of these characteristics important? Give specifics.