

What Does the Word Say?
Session 27: The Authority of the Bible
WhatDoesTheWordSay.org

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine the characteristics of Scripture. We introduced the acrostic SNAC, which stands for sufficiency, necessity, authority and clarity. We have discussed the sufficiency, necessity and clarity of Scripture in previous sessions, so today we move on to examine the authority of Scripture. Dr. Spencer, where do you want to begin?

Dr. Spencer: As always, let's begin with Bible itself. It clearly claims to be the authoritative Word of God. So, I like what Wayne Grudem says in his definition of the authority of Scripture. He says that "*The authority of Scripture means that all the words in Scripture are God's words in such a way that to disbelieve or disobey any word of Scripture is to disbelieve or disobey God.*"¹ Now we must be clear that he doesn't mean that God personally spoke every word in the Bible, but only that he inspired the writers in such a way that what they wrote is completely true. When we read the Bible, we find many things said by many different people, and even by some things spoken by angels and Satan. And the Bible was written by a number of different people, who used their own words. The classic biblical statement about the nature of Scripture is found in 2 Timothy 3:16, where we are told that "All Scripture is God-breathed"², and in 2 Peter 1:21 we read that "men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."

Therefore, although we are not given a detailed account of how God accomplished this, we know that everything that has been written was in some way guided by him so that Paul could truthfully say it is God-breathed, and Grudem is right to say that to disbelieve or disobey the Bible, is to disbelieve or disobey God.

Marc Roby: And, of course, there are many places in the Old Testament where something is prefaced by the statement "God said"; so, at least some of Scripture is made up of words that God himself spoke.

Dr. Spencer: That's true. We discussed the Bible's claim to authority in Session 4, and in that session I noted that Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said that the Old Testament uses sayings such as "God said" or "The Lord says" over 3,800 times.³ Also, in the New Testament we have many quotations of things said by Jesus Christ, who is himself God. But, it is important to note that even those things that are clearly *not* said by God, have his authority. Everything we read in the Bible is authoritative, we shouldn't make the mistake that many make of saying that it is only authoritative when it speaks about matters pertaining to salvation.

We must also be careful to point out however, that not everything you read in the Bible is good or true, because we have wicked statements of Satan and others recorded there as well. But, even

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 73

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³ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Authority*, The Banner of Truth Trust, 2016, pg. 50

when we are being told about a lie that Satan or some person spoke, the content of what they said is being truthfully relayed to us.

Marc Roby: Since you brought up Session 4, perhaps it would be good to remind our listeners that the old podcasts and their transcripts can all be found on the website, whatdoesthewordsay.org.

Dr. Spencer: That is a good reminder. And I don't want to go back and cover all that we said in that session, but we adduced a number of Scriptures to support the fact that the Bible itself, both the Old and New Testaments, presents itself, from beginning to end, as the very words of God.

Marc Roby: And the theological term used for that idea is the *plenary* inspiration of Scripture.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. The word plenary simply means complete, or including every member. So, the plenary inspiration of Scripture means that every single word is inspired by God.

Marc Roby: But, we should be clear that when you say *every* word is inspired by God, you don't mean the Bible was simply dictated by God.

Dr. Spencer: Of course not. Although some parts of it were. For example, the letters written to the seven churches in Asia, as recorded in Revelation 2 and 3, all begin with Christ telling John to write what he says. So, these letters apparently were dictated. And, in a number of places in the Old Testament prophets God tells a prophet to go and tell someone that the Lord says something as you noted a couple of minutes ago. So, presumably, those passages were also essentially dictated. But, the vast majority of the Bible is written by human authors under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Marc Roby: And you can tell that by their different styles and vocabularies.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, you can. And yet, the Holy Spirit "carried them" along as we saw earlier in such a way that what they wrote is exactly what God wanted them to write. And that is the main point. Since God is the Sovereign Lord of creation and history, and since he knows absolutely everything perfectly and exhaustively, and since he cannot lie or make a mistake, the Scriptures themselves must be infallible.

Marc Roby: Which also means, of course, that they are inerrant.

Dr. Spencer: It's good that you mentioned that since inerrant is a term you often hear. And yes, given that they are infallible, which means that it is *impossible* for them to be wrong, it also true that they are without error. I usually prefer the stronger word infallible since it is at least logically possible for man to write things that are without error, but given that God is the author of the Bible, it is *not* possible for it to have any errors in it.

Marc Roby: Now, you're of course speaking about the autographs, or in other words, the original manuscripts when you say that.

Dr. Spencer: Yes. But as we discussed in Session 7, given the science of textual criticism and the huge number of manuscripts we have available, we have a nearly certain copy of the original autographs. In addition, what small doubts remain do not affect any significant doctrine of

Christianity in any way. So, while there may be small errors here and there in our copies, and there can certainly be errors in our translations as well, we have great confidence that what we have is a reliable record of the very words inspired by God. And, therefore, with minor and non-critical exceptions due to copyist errors, or translation errors, or printing errors, the Bibles that we have are infallible. And that is why the Bible has intrinsic authority, meaning that its authority is an essential trait because of its very nature.

Marc Roby: In other words, it isn't authoritative because someone has declared it to be so.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. Whether I think the Bible has authority or not makes no difference. It *does* have authority. Whether I think it is infallible or not doesn't matter, it *is* infallible. The two ideas are inextricably woven together with the inherent infallibility and authority of God himself.

Marc Roby: Which is why we have said a number of times that the Bible must be a Christian's ultimate authority.

Dr. Spencer: Mm-hmm. In the middle of Christ's High Priestly prayer in John 17, he prays to the Father for his followers and says, in Verse 17, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth." This is a very interesting statement and the English translation properly reflects what it says in the Greek. It does *not* say, "Your word is *true*", it says "Your word is *truth*", which is very different. As Wayne Grudem points out in his *Systematic Theology*,⁴ had Jesus said "Your word is true", it could be taken to mean that the Word of God has been compared with some external standard for truth and found to be in compliance with it. But, to say "Your word *is truth*" is a different statement. It implies that the Word of God itself, is the ultimate standard for what is true.

Marc Roby: And, of course, Jesus calls himself the truth in one of his famous "I Am" statements. In John 14:6 we read that he said "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Dr. Spencer: Very true. And Martyn Lloyd-Jones points out that in Luke 24:44, during one of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances, he told his disciples that "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."⁵ In other words, he was saying that everything written about him in the entirety of the Old Testament must take place. In Session 4 we noted that in John 10:35, Jesus said that "the Scripture cannot be broken", which is an even broader statement than he made in Luke 24. So, all of Scripture is the truth. All of it is infallible. It cannot be broken. Whatever it declares will happen will, in fact, happen. We just need to be sure that we are understanding it correctly.

Marc Roby: And that requires that we be born again. We've noted before that it says in 1 Corinthians 2:14 that "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the

⁴ Grudem, op. cit., pg 83

⁵ Lloyd-Jones, op. cit., pg. 46

Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that point deserves repetition. I think James Boice makes an interesting point in this regard in his book *Foundations of the Christian Faith*. He points out that the fact that the Holy Spirit is the author of the Bible and the one who enables us to properly understand the Bible gives us a great balance to help us avoid errors in interpretation. He wrote that “The combination of an objective, written revelation and its subjective interpretation to the individual by God’s Spirit is the key to the Christian doctrine of the knowledge of God. This combination keeps us from two errors. The first is the error of overspiritualizing revelation.”⁶ He then explains what he means by this first error of “overspiritualizing revelation”. It occurs when someone says that God has spoken directly to them by his Spirit, but fails to check and see whether what they think the Holy Spirit is speaking is in agreement with the Bible, which is the written word of the Holy Spirit. We don’t deny that the Holy Spirit speaks to people in various ways and at various times, but he will never contradict what is stated in the written Word of God. The second error that we avoid by needing both the written word and the illumination of the Holy Spirit is what Boice calls “overintellectualizing God’s truth”, by which he essentially means people who study the Bible without ever being transformed by it. When you come across a Bible scholar who knows a great deal about God’s word, but fails to understand it properly, you know that he has not been born again.

Marc Roby: As Jesus said, you will know them by their fruit.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. And the first fruit of regeneration is repentance and faith. But, without regeneration, you can study the Bible in the original languages for your entire life and you will never properly understand it.

Marc Roby: Alright. So, we have established, partly back in Session 4 and partly today, that the entire Bible is the authoritative, infallible Word of God. And that the authority and infallibility of the Bible go hand in hand. We have also noted that to disbelieve or disobey what the Bible says is to disbelieve or disobey God himself. And we have noted that a person must be born again to understand the Bible correctly and produce the fruit of repentance and faith. What else do you want to say about the authority of the Bible?

Dr. Spencer: I want to move on to discuss the delegated authority that God gives to people through his word.

Marc Roby: Very well. We discussed authority in Session 5 and noted there that it is something most modern people don’t like. So, what else do you want to say about it?

Dr. Spencer: Well, our modern egalitarian mindset is, in one limited sense, perfectly biblical. The Bible indicates that all human beings are made in the image of God and are precious in his

⁶ James Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Revised in One Volume, InterVarsity Press, 1986, pg. 56

sight. There is no inherent superiority in terms of worth of men over women, or of one race of people over another, or even of one individual person over another.

Marc Roby: Now, there are, of course, many undeniable differences in ability between different people, not all men and women are created equal in that regard.

Dr. Spencer: That is clearly true. And I have never met a person who denies that obvious fact. I dare say that no one would want to pay money to come watch me play basketball, or come hear me play guitar. When we spend our money on something like watching a sporting event or going to a concert or a play, we want to watch the best. And not very many people deny that there is a need for someone to have the authority to make decisions at a company, for example, either. And yet, for some reason people get very offended at the idea of authority in a family, or in the church.

Marc Roby: That is an interesting phenomenon. And yet, the Bible pretty clearly establishes authority in three different spheres; the family, the church and the state.

Dr. Spencer: Right, and the church and the state are, in a sense, an outgrowth of the family. In his book *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, John Frame refers to all of these as “spheres of society” and points out while discussing the Fifth Commandment, which is to honor your father and mother, that “*The family is the fundamental sphere from which all others are derived*. This is true historically, developmentally, and logically.”⁷ He then goes on to describe that, historically, Adam was the prophet, priest and king in his family. And, developmentally, parents of young children are “their authoritative source of teaching, discipline, employment, and religious leadership.” And, finally, he writes that, “logically speaking, rule in all spheres is similar to that of the family.”

Marc Roby: That is an interesting point, and I look forward to discussing these different spheres of authority, but we are out of time for today. I’d like to close by reminding our listeners to email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org.

⁷ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, P&R Publishing Company, 2008, pp 584-585