

Mr. Roby: We resume our study of biblical theology today by continuing to examine why we should believe that the Bible is the Word of God. Dr. Spencer, last time you made the argument that the Bible itself claims to be the Word of God and, since the Bible is our ultimate standard, we must accept what it says. It seems that the real issue here is one of authority, wouldn't you agree?

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. Authority clearly is the key issue. And authority is a bad word in modern society.

Mr. Roby: It certainly is. I'm reminded of the bumper sticker you occasionally see that says "question authority".

Dr. Spencer: Yeah, I've seen that bumper sticker. I also remember a cartoon I saw once though. It showed a guy who had obviously just died and was in line waiting to see St. Peter at the gate of heaven. He had on a T-shirt that said "question authority" and the person in front of him in line looked at his shirt and said something like "bummer of a shirt to have on today."

Mr. Roby: That would be an unfortunate choice of clothing. And God is the ultimate authority imaginable.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. We should never approach him without fear and trepidation.

Mr. Roby: In fact, Proverbs 9:10 tells us that "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding."

Dr. Spencer: Yes, the Bible repeats that idea in a number of places. I think the key notion here is one of humility. As we discussed in Session 2, one of the most important things we need to grasp is the creator/creature distinction. God is the creator, we are just creatures. We are, to be sure, marvelous creatures. When you look at what a world-class scientist, or musician, or artist, or athlete can do it is truly amazing. But, rather than idolize the person to whom such gifts have been given, we should stand in awe of the one who gave him such amazing gifts.

Mr. Roby: But, sadly, man most wants to exalt himself and refuses, in his natural state, to willingly submit to the authority of God.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones has a wonderful short book on Authority¹ and I am going to draw from it in what we discuss today. He makes the point that much of what is wrong with the modern church is its lack of authority. He suggests, I think quite rightly, that one of the things that attracts some people to the Roman Catholic church, and to various cults as well, is that they speak and act as if they had authority.

It is somewhat paradoxical, but in spite of our natural aversion to being *under* authority, most people actually *desire* authority; at least in the sense that they desire an authoritative statement about the purpose of life and how they are to live it. We tend to not like uncertainty, but to have certainty requires authority.

¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Authority*, The Banner of Truth Trust, 2016

Mr. Roby: Of course, many people today would deny that objective truth even exists, but without objective truth, you can't have certainty.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. Although, such people often contradict themselves because they are quite certain of the absolute objective truth of the statement that absolute objective truth doesn't exist. In any event, Lloyd-Jones makes the point that people throughout history have been trying to find ultimate truth through their own efforts.

Mr. Roby: But, of course, they have miserably failed.

Dr. Spencer: Yes they have. And the Bible deals with this issue in the Book of Ecclesiastes. This is one of the most quoted and misrepresented books in the Bible because it deals with an honest attempt by the writer to figure out the meaning of life. He is called "The Teacher" in the book, and many think that it was Solomon who wrote it. But, independent of who wrote the book, it was someone who had achieved great success, fortune, power and fame in this world, and yet found it all unfulfilling without God.

Mr. Roby: I can relate to that feeling; there are many things in life that you look forward to and, then, when you achieve them, you find that they aren't nearly as wonderful as you thought they would be.

Dr. Spencer: I can second that comment. And the Teacher in Ecclesiastes states it very clearly at the start of the book. In Ecclesiastes 1:2 he says, "Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."² That word "meaningless" can also be translated, as it in the King James Version, as vanity. It can also be translated as breath, as it is, for example, in Psalm 39, verse 5, where we read "Each man's life is but a breath." So, the idea is clear. The Teacher is saying that life is like a breath, here one moment, gone the next. It is of no real consequence or significance. And then he goes on to explain why he says this. Beginning in verse 3 he writes, "What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun? Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises. The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course." And he goes on in this vein for some time.

Mr. Roby: Not exactly an uplifting passage, is it?

Dr. Spencer: No, it's not uplifting at all. And it isn't meant to be. It is, however, an accurate picture of the way things are if we imagine a world where there is no God. The Teacher goes on in the book to consider the meaning of gaining wisdom, or riches, or of indulging in every pleasure imaginable, and he concludes that none of it has any real deep, lasting significance. A phrase that is repeated nine times in the book sums it up well, he says it is all "a chasing after the wind".

² All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® (1984 version). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™.

Mr. Roby: Now that is a great image. You can chase the wind all day long and you'll never catch it.

Dr. Spencer: True. It's a fabulous image to have in mind. But, it also conveys a serious message. Life without God *is* meaningless. If the materialistic worldview were correct, and I argued in Session 1 that it is not, then we would be left with despair and depression. In fact, there is a great quote from Bertrand Russell, the great English philosopher and mathematician of the early 20th century. In his essay "A Free Man's Worship", he wrote about a materialistic view of life with unusual and insightful candor. Let me quote a few snippets to put in context the quote I really want to get to. He wrote, "That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving"³, in other words, we are result of blind evolution. And he went on to say that "no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; [] all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system", and then he concluded this passage with the quote I want to examine. He wrote, "Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built."

Mr. Roby: Wow. I hope you don't mind if I stay out of that building, it doesn't sound safe to me.

Dr. Spencer: You don't have to worry Marc. That building is only entered by those who deny the existence of God. But, as I said, he wrote with uncommon candor and insight. His statement lines up quite nicely with statements by the Teacher in Ecclesiastes. If you try to find meaning and purpose in life without God, you end up frustrated and in despair.

Now, we must admit of course that the mere fact that life without God is meaningless does not in any way prove that God exists. There are many today who would say, in essence, that we just need to suck it up and deal with the unpleasant realities that when we die we're gone and that life has no intrinsic value or purpose. But, as I argued in Session 1, an atheistic worldview is, I think, intellectually untenable in light of all that we now know about the world we live in. And, further, as the Bible itself tells us, everyone knows that God exists, although many will deny that they know it. So, rather than building on the "firm foundation of unyielding despair" as Russell counsels, I prefer to build on the firm foundation of God's Word – which is why, by the way, the theme music for this series is the hymn, "How Firm a Foundation." The first line reads, "How firm a foundation, you saints of the Lord, is laid for your faith in his excellent Word! What more can he say than to you he has said, to you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?"

Mr. Roby: That is a great hymn. And Russell is a great example of what Paul tells us in Romans 1 – that men suppress the truth; and it seems that some, like Russell, are much better at suppressing it than others. But, how does this all relate back to the topic of authority?

Dr. Spencer: I think it relates very directly. You see, the issue is that man wants certainty, and he wants to believe in a benevolent and almighty protector and a wonderful life after this one and so on, but he does not want anyone telling him what to do, and he certainly does not want to be

³ *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*, Ed. By R.E. Egner & L.E. Denonn, Simon and Schuster, 1961

judged. So, he suppresses the truth he knows – that God exists – and searches for some kind of certainty apart from God, which drives him to Russell’s “firm foundation of unyielding despair”. I don’t know a great deal about Russell’s life, but I do know that he was divorced three times and married four times, so I’m going to hazard a guess that he wasn’t too thrilled about God’s view of marriage, to point out just one example of why people don’t like authority.

Mr. Roby: I’m reminded of the prophet Isaiah’s response to his vision of God on the throne, he cried out, “Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips”.

Dr. Spencer: That is a great verse. I also think of the apostle Peter. Remember the story in Luke, Chapter Five, where Peter had been fishing all night and caught nothing, and then Christ told him to lower his nets and all of a sudden he had such a huge catch that the nets began to break and the boat began to sink? He had some glimpse of who Jesus really is and his response was to say, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!”

That is the response of any reasonable person when he contemplates coming before a just, holy and omnipotent God. God knows everything I have ever done, said, thought or felt. And he will bring all of it to his perfect bar of justice. That is terrifying. It *should* be terrifying, because we are sinners who deserve God’s wrath.

Mr. Roby: And God is the one with authority, and power, to judge our sin. The Teacher in Ecclesiastes came to the right conclusion in the end, we read in Ecclesiastes 12:13-14, “here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.”

Dr. Spencer: That is clearly the right conclusion. So, authority is, as you said at the beginning, the issue of central importance. It is also why we are spending time in these podcasts to establish the authority of the Bible as the Word of God and why we are interested in then exploring what God commands us to believe and do in that Word. It is only in his Word that we find out that we can escape this terrifying judgement by placing our trust in Jesus Christ.

Mr. Roby: I think it is important to note that God does not request, or suggest that we do, or don’t do, certain things; he commands.

Dr. Spencer: That is a very important distinction. And to command requires authority. As I said early on, in his book on authority Lloyd-Jones points out that a major problem with the modern church is a lack of authority. And I think that, in large part, that lack of authority stems from a lack of faith in the Word of God, which is also one of the points Lloyd-Jones makes.

But, if we believe in the authority and infallibility of the Bible, and I do, then when we speak about what the Word says, we are speaking with authority. The modern church should not approach preaching as though we are just offering people one idea out of many, which they are free to examine and decide, with human reason as the ultimate authority, whether it’s right or not. We must preach the truth with conviction and clarity, and with authority. If God opens a person’s eyes to the truth, then they will respond. If he doesn’t, then they will not respond.

But, when we preach the Word of God we must speak with authority. The Bible tells us who God is, what he loves and what he hates, and it is filled with commands for his creatures to obey.

Mr. Roby: And Jesus sets the example for us, doesn't he? He spoke with absolute authority when he was here on earth.

Dr. Spencer: He certainly did. One of my absolute favorite passages of Scripture is in Luke 8, where we read about Jesus and his disciples heading out to sail across the Sea of Galilee. On the way, Jesus fell asleep, which is clear sign that he was fully human. But then, we are told that a squall came up, the boat was being swamped, and they were in great danger. So, we read in verses 24-25, "The disciples went and woke him, saying, 'Master, Master, we're going to drown!' He got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters; the storm subsided, and all was calm. 'Where is your faith?' he asked his disciples. In fear and amazement they asked one another, 'Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him.'"

I love that passage because, in addition to showing that Jesus was fully human, it also clearly shows his divinity. You notice that he didn't pray for God to quiet the storm, he simply rebuked the wind and the waves himself. Only God can do that! And so, it shows how Jesus spoke with authority, even authority over the inanimate creation.

Mr. Roby: I'm also reminded of the end of the Sermon on the Mount, where we read in Matthew 7:28-29 that, "the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law."

Dr. Spencer: And there are many other places too. In the Sermon on the Mount you just mentioned, Jesus gave authoritative interpretations of the Ten Commandments to show the people they were wrong in their understanding. For example, in Matthew 5:27-28, we read that he said, "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But *I tell you* that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." We see a number of places where Jesus says similar things, "you have heard", followed by "but I tell you". He is claiming the authority of God himself. He is making his own words and interpretations equal to the Old Testament.

Mr. Roby: When I read passages like the one you just quoted, I'm always surprised to hear people who call themselves Christians and think that Christ did away with the Old Testament law.

Dr. Spencer: So am I. It is relatively easy to not commit the physical act of adultery, but to avoid even a lustful look? That is much, much harder I'm afraid.

Mr. Roby: I agree. And yet, the Bible presents us with a holy God who commands us to live holy lives as well.

We are out of time for today, and we've taken a bit of a detour to discuss this issue of authority, but I think it is an important topic. I look forward to continuing our discussion next time.