

The Bible is the Supreme Authority

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Preacher: Steve Palframan

[0:00] Okay, let me pray for us and we'll start that way. Let me pray. Father in heaven, we've thought! about some great things already this evening. We've thought about your goodness and your love.

! We've turned our eyes to the Lord Jesus. We have looked to you and to what you've done for us. We pray now, as we think about your word to us, we pray that you might help us to think clearly and carefully and that you might be at work in us by your spirit for your glory's sake. Amen.

Amen. So we have been looking for these last few weeks about what the Bible says about the Bible, the Bible's claims for the Bible, with a bit of help from the Baptist Confession of Faith from 1689. If you have never seen one of those, you can get it on the internet. You can also buy a copy that looks like that. You can't have this one because that is my copy because it says Steve's copy on it, but you can get yourself one from Amazon or something. But it's really helpful just walking through core doctrines. So you might remember, if you were with us the first week, we started thinking about how the Bible claims to be God's word to us, God speaking to us, so that we might know things about God from the world around us, but we can only know him savingly through the message of the Bible.

And that's good news because it means we're not scrambling around in the dark wondering what God might be like, but he has spoken to us and revealed himself to us so that we can know him. In the second week, we were thinking, well, why would we trust the Bible? Why would you trust that what this word says about this word is true? And we thought that there might be any number of reasons why we might think that the Bible is true. We thought about how the Roman Catholic Church has said that you believe it's true because they say it's true.

But we realized ultimately, because of the help of the confession, that basically you believe the Bible is the word of God because it says it is. In other words, trust in the Bible is about faith. So the confession says, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority of the scriptures comes from the internal work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts.

[2:16] The best way to get to know how you can trust the Bible is to read the Bible. Last week, then we looked at how can you understand the Bible? How do you know that the Bible means something? How do you know that you're not just twisting it to your own ends and making it say whatever you want it to say? And then we decided that, well, we didn't decide. Actually, we were, the Baptist confession helped us in. We were saying that the Bible is clear, right? So the Bible claims clarity for itself. So just like you don't need to defend the Bible because the Bible is able to defend itself, you also don't need to excuse the Bible because the Bible can interpret the Bible. The Bible is clear on what it means to be saved, what salvation is, so that even as we were thinking, people who have had no education can hear clearly the message of salvation and believe and trust in Jesus by the Spirit.

Now, this week, we're kind of wrapping up this section and we're going to think about the authority of the Bible. How do we not only know that the Bible has authority, but what does that mean for us individually and also for us as a church? Now, we've come across this a little bit already, but it is worth thinking about some more. And firstly, it's worth noting that everybody wants to say that they believe in the authority of the Bible, right? This is a common and popular thing for evangelicals to say. So the Evangelical Alliance, they say this in their statement of faith, the divine inspiration and supreme authority of the Old and New Testament scriptures, which are the written word of God, fully trustworthy for faith and conduct. So anyone who wants to be part of the Evangelical Alliance has to agree with that statement. The FIC statement is a bit longer. It says this, God has revealed himself in the Bible, which consists of the Old and New Testaments alone. Every word was inspired

by God through human authors so that the Bible as originally given is in its entirety the word of God, without error and fully reliable in fact and doctrine. The Bible alone speaks with final authority and is always sufficient for all matters of belief and practice. So that's the FIC statement, that's the group of churches to which we belong. That's our statement of faith that we have in our church documents.

UCCF, the University and College's Christian Fellowship, doctrinal basis, as they call it, says this, the Bible as originally given is the inspired and infallible word of God. It is the supreme authority in all matters of belief and behavior. And you can see they all want to say, don't they, that the Bible is the supreme or final authority. I want you with the person next to you to say, what does it mean by supreme authority or final authority? What do they mean? It's not a trick question. So talk to the person next to you, come up with answer. Okay, what do we think?

What does supreme mean in this setting or final? Vi just ducked her head down behind Samuel so I can't see it.

Jeff, what do you think? Yes, the highest of the high. Yeah. Anybody else?

[5:55] Cannot be superseded. Yeah. You can't say the Bible says this, but because it's the final. Yeah. It's word goes. Yeah. What it says is what we will do because it is the final or supreme authority.

It has the last word. Now, I want to think just about what that works out like in church life. And to do that, let's time travel back to 1689 and to the Baptist confession of faith.

And let's read the final clause under the scriptures, which expands further on this idea of authority. So chapter one, clause 10.

The supreme judge for deciding all religious controversies and for evaluating all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, human teachings and individual interpretation.

And in whose judgment we are to rest is nothing but the holy scripture delivered by the spirit. In this scripture, our faith finds its final word.

[7:12] Now, you'll notice one of the things about 1689 is they want to say a little bit more than the FIC or the evangelical alliance, don't they? They want to actually spell it out. And they say to us that the Bible is above all councils, that is gatherings of church leaders together who are making pronouncements on various things.

Ancient writers, that is anybody writing theological treatises or books. Human teachings, that is teachings of any priest or pastor or Bible teacher.

And individual interpretations, that is, I think, private ideas or claims to other revelation or understanding. So you can't say the Bible says, but I think, or the Bible says, but they say, or the Bible says, but the church council says, or the Bible says, yes, but I've read in this particular book. Now, you might imagine that at a time that they are trying to distinguish themselves from the Roman Catholic Church and their idea that the church was supreme in its authority. Now, it's worth just kind of passing this out a little bit to make sure that we're really clear about the difference between the Roman Catholic Church and this statement or the Westminster Confession or the Savoy Declaration.

They are saying, so that the Roman Catholic Church and not saying that their scriptures are dependent upon the church in some sense, but rather it is the sense that you would only know that you were to believe the Bible because the church told you you were to believe the Bible, right?

[8:45] So, in other words, it's the church's attributing, attributing, that's the right word, isn't it? Attributing authority to the Bible that gives it the authority.

Does that make sense? So, you know, the church says, we say this book is authoritative, so you must go and read it, right? But obviously, the reformers are like, well, no, wait a minute, if that's what you're saying, then by definition, you have the authority and not the Bible, right?

And so they're saying, no, actually, the Bible itself must authenticate its own authority. It must be that the scriptures themselves claim to have authority, not that the church is giving it to the Bible or to the scriptures.

So the claim of the confession is to say, no, the authority of the Bible comes from inside itself, not from outside. And that is then, do you notice, a theme, right?

So this is why I've sort of notionally called this what the Bible says about the Bible. The Bible's authority is self-attesting, right? It comes from its own claims about itself, which are then established in experience as we read and engage with it.

[9:52] Now, it's worth then thinking about how that works. The claim is not that the Bible is authoritative because it reads like a book of law or rules, right?

That might be one way that a book could claim authority, couldn't it? You could read it and it looks like a list of rules, you know, do this, don't do that, do this, don't do that.

But it's not, is it? As you open God's word, it's not a command as much as it is an invitation. It's not so much a do this as it is a receive this. It's not so much a law as it is grace.

You know, the authority of the Bible is not like, it's not like a highway code, right? So Lucy is sitting her driving theory test in a few weeks' time, right?

So you've got to know the highway code, which is the rules of the road. And the highway code, I know most of you who drive have never read it, I'm sure. But it's written like a rule book, yeah?

[10:55] It's written as do this and don't do that. But that's not how the word of grace from a father comes to a child. And that means that, and the reformers talked about this, that often as you encounter God's word, it comes in description, not prescription.

So there is a description of what God is doing more than there is a prescription about what we are to do. So you get descriptions of what God is up to at a particular time, in a particular place.

Often a circumstance that's very unfamiliar to us, in a place that we don't know, with people with whom we have very little in common. But yet that word is authoritative to us.

In what sense? Well, in the sense that it is a description of who God is, what he's like, how he is at work in the world, how his covenant promises work out in the lives of people, how he is being faithful through history.

And their story then describes with authority who God is, what he's like, and what he's doing. And as we read it and understand it, we encounter God and submit to him and are shaped by him.

[12:04] And Bavinck, who we've encountered a few times over the last few weeks, describes it like this. Bible, it says, it asks for no one's assistance. It does not need the strong arm of government.

It does not need the support of the church and does not conscript anyone's sword and inquisition. It does not desire to rule by coercion and by violence, but seeks free and willing recognition.

For that reason, it brings about its own recognition by the working of the Holy Spirit. Scripture guards its own authority. Now, like I said when we were talking about why trust the Bible and how to understand the Bible, I hope you find that wonderfully liberating, right?

That actually, the claim to authority of the Bible is something that it authenticates itself. It's not something forced on us. And I want you just to think with the person next to you again.

What does it mean for you as a Christian and for us as a church to say that the Bible is authoritative? Write down just as many implications as you can think of for us to say that in our church life.

[13:13] Just, and there might be as small or as big as you like, implications of trusting the Bible's authority in our church life. Go for it. As many as you can think of.

Let me take some of your feedback and ideas. So who wants to start us off?

We were saying that if we have feelings that are different for our sins, then we don't have to have to not be so strong in this and trust that we are going to be.

Yes. Yes. Yes. So not relying on our feelings. Yes. But relying on God's word. Yes.

I think you can practically tell, can't you, that you believe in the authority. But how can you tell that you believe in the authority of the Bible? Let me ask you this question. How can you tell you believe the authority of the Bible? I'll tell you how you can, right?

[14:27] Because none of you know. You can tell you believe the authority of the Bible because you believe something to be true for the sole reason that you have read and understood it from God's word. And it is not something that you have intuited yourself.

If everything you believe is something that you have just come to yourself and intuited and you find comfortable and easy, then I would suggest to you that your final authority is yourself and your feelings and not God's word.

You would not believe in the eternal conscious punishment of those outside of Christ unless God's word taught it to you, right?

And you would not want to believe it unless God's word taught it to you. And you can tell that you believe the Bible is true because you believe it because you read it there, not because you feel it here, right?

Yeah. Brilliant. Thanks, Daisy. Anything else? Criteria for testing all church teaching.

[15:33] Yes. Brilliant. Criteria for testing all church teaching. Yeah. So we want people in the church to be like the Bereans that we met a few weeks ago who are testing what they hear. Yeah.

Yes. Understanding the way of behaving. Yeah. Yeah. Yes.

Yeah. Yeah. Yes. Yes. Yeah. Yes. So in the new covenant, in the new Testament, it's how do we expect believers to behave is written for us in, in God's word.

Yeah. Yeah. I mean, that's what we're talking about this morning. Our sanctification doesn't lead to our justification, right?

But you can see your justification in your sanctification. So you know that you are born again Christian because you have a desire to live to please the Lord. And so if the Lord says in his word to live a certain way, I would expect you as a Christian to want to live that way.

[16:46] And I would expect if it was pointed out to you by your brothers and sisters in church that you are not living. I'm not pointing at anyone. Sorry. I mean, if you are not living in that particular way, if it was pointed out by your brothers and sisters, you are not living in that way.

I would expect you to want to submit to God's word in that particular area of your life. Mike, it feels like you've got more, right? So have you got more? Yes.

Yes. Okay.

Okay. Okay. Yes. Yeah. Interesting. Yeah. Can I just say, so you use the Bible to resist illegitimate claims to authority.

That is so important, right? So abuse of authority and power is often when individuals or churches claim for themselves authority which really only belongs to God's word.

[18:08] Your conscience should not be captive to me, but to God's word, right? And it would be an abuse of my authority as a teaching pastor here to ask you to submit to me rather than the scriptures.

Yeah. That's really important, isn't it? And that works out. So you should only submit to your church leaders as far as you are able to tell that they are themselves submitting to God's word.

Right? So in some senses, the authority that a church leader has or that a husband has or a parent has or a youth leader has or whatever, is their authority is on the grounds of their submission to God's word.

If they will not submit to God's word, they will not have authority. Great. Any more, Mike? Yes.

Yes, yeah. Okay.

[19:41] Right. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Yes. Yeah. Yeah. Okay. Wow.

Yeah. Yes. Yeah. So the authority of the Bible helps to determine and see what is a true church and what is not.

Yeah. Great. Anybody else? Yes. Yes. Yes.

Yes. Yes. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Great. Yeah.

[20:42] So we emphasize what the Bible emphasizes. Yeah. Clifford, your habit of pointing to the person next to you to say they said is that's kind of spreading. That's right. Yeah.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. So the sufficiency of the scriptures. Yeah. Yeah. Great. I've just got three things that I want to end with and we've got like seven minutes.

So that's two minutes on each and a minute to pray at the end. Hopefully you've begun to see this theme, right? That the Bible is self-attesting, self-authenticating. The Bible claims authority for itself. The Bible claims clarity for itself. The Bible claims inspiration for itself and it claims belief in itself.

Okay. So as we finish, let me give you three practical implications of that for our church together.

Firstly, we want to be Bible-driven and not just Bible-based. It's common to hear, isn't it, that churches want to be Bible-based. It's obviously a good thing, but it's not good enough just to sort of base ourselves on the Bible and then spring off and go and do a whole load of other things that we'd quite like to do and then just coming back every now and again to check that we might not have gone too far off.

Actually, the Bible claims for itself more than just being a launch pad for what we want to do ourselves. It claims to be in the driving seat of our church life. It's put like this, isn't it?

[22:06] That the Bible is the Word of God. Sorry, let me get it right. This is how it's put. The Word of God does the work of God by the Spirit of God among the people of God.

Okay. The Word... I can, yes. ...the Word of God does the work of God by the Spirit of God among the people of God.

And so the Bible needs to be in the driving seat. We're not just learning the Bible like we're learning a quiz so that we can pass some kind of test, but rather we are letting the Bible teach us who God is.

We're sitting at His feet. We're listening to Him as our Father. We're learning to love Him and submit to Him through God's Word. Secondly, expository ministry will be at the heart of the ministry of the church.

In a way, you know, it's not quite right, is it, because we don't have that power, but in a way, shutting your Bible is kind of shutting God up, isn't it? And we want God to be speaking in all of our gatherings and our meetings, and we want Him to be setting the agenda as well.

[23:10] So we let the content of God's Word set the agenda as we just take God's Word and read it and understand it. Not because we lack imagination, and not because we're not concerned about the time in which we live.

We are concerned about the time in which we live. Rather, it's because we recognize this is how we submit to God's authority, looking at the themes and topics that He sets out, not just the ones that we're interested in.

And, you know, here's the thing, it's mysterious to us, isn't it? But God in His wisdom thought it more important that you understand the tabernacle and the measurements of the temple and ancient Near Eastern history than it were that you did a study on just identity or relationships. Why? Well, because God's authority is delivered in part descriptively in an engaging story, helping us to learn about who He is and what He's like.

And that then might shape our understanding of our identity and our relationships with others, as we encounter the character of God in the story that He has written. And we should read it as the story He has written.

[24:15] Finally, we don't just look for what works, but for what is written. One of the things I wrote down on my list, we didn't get time to do it, but it's really it's in a sense, if the Bible is authoritative in the life of our church, our churches should be rightly historic.

We are not the first people to open the Bible, are we? We're not the first people to run church. Church has been running since the ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ. And so, really, we are looking to be faithful to what God says in His Word, not just to do what we think might work, right? Now, that doesn't mean that we deliberately make church difficult and unpopular, right? I'm not saying that. But we shouldn't just do something just because we think it might make us popular, or we might think it works.

So we do things that make no sense other than the fact that we find them written in the Scriptures. Let me give you a really concrete example, which you'll all have no problem with and you'll agree with, right? Someone becomes a Christian.

They believe and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, right? They've come from nowhere. They have no Christian background, no nothing. They come and believe and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, and they come and want to join our church. What do we do?

[25:29] What would you do if you were trying to just be popular? Well, you know, you'd welcome them in, you'd have them around for a meal, you'd invite them over for a cup of coffee and all those kind of nice things. Do all of that.

So, dunk them in water, right? Why would you do that? No one's going to want to do that, are they? Well, you do it because we're told to in the Bible, aren't we? We're told to baptize those who come to faith in Christ.

And all churches do that. Why would you, you know, why would we not just say to people, hey, just, you know, think about Jesus' death on the cross for a moment, right? I just want you to all think about that for a moment.

Well, that might be a good thing to do. We could sing some songs about it. That would also be a good thing to do. But would you give them a little piece of bread and a little bit of wine and tell them to do it? Well, no, you wouldn't, would you?

Because why would you do that? It's such a faff, right? Well, you do it because it's written in the Bible and we're told to do that. And so we submit to God's word and we do what's written, not what we just think will be popular.

[26 : 25] And that works out in other ways as well, doesn't it? Why would we have elders and deacons? Because the Bible tells us that what we should. And why do we choose the people that we choose to be elders and deacons? Because the Bible sets out the criteria, not us.

We're not picking a board of directors who are all really influential business people. We're picking a board of men who will be godly in character and who will model that to us and serve us as pastors and shepherds.

And so that's what we do. We don't just do what works, but we do what is written. There you go. I've left a minute to pray. So let me pray.

And then I can take some questions afterwards if you like. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we want to pray that you would give us just a sense of the joy that it is to know that we're not making it up on our own, but that you've spoken to us through your word.

I want to thank you so much, Lord, that I don't have to stand here and give these people my good ideas, but that we together get to listen to your ideas and your agenda, your word.

[27 : 34] We thank you that your word does your work by your spirit amongst your people. And we thank you for the way that we experience that week in and week out. Continue to bring glory to your name in our lives and our church, we pray in Jesus name.

Amen. Amen. Thank you. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.