

## The Authority and Sufficiency of Scripture

Perhaps the most important issue facing the church today is the matter of authority.

Who or what has the right, the authority, to determine what we believe and how we are to live?

The answer to that question, not so very long ago, was quite uncomplicated -- at least to Christians.

The Word of God was the final authority over all areas of faith and practice.

But, for the most part, most today do not believe this. The authority and sufficiency of God's Word is being supplanted at every turn.

However, before we observe the modern church, let's back up and look at the recent past. What is transpiring today has a familiar ring to it. This has all happened before -- and not that long ago.

The issue of authority largely deals with epistemology, that is, how we discover and determine truth.

Without racing down philosophical rabbit trails of which there are many, the answer is that our knowledge of truth must come from a source. When reduced to "basic" possibilities the sources of truth are limited to three:

### Humans

If one believes that humans are the final source of truth we are still left with the question of how we discover this truth.

The person holding to human reason (or rationalism) believes he is his own final authority.

The question then is which method that individual will use in testing truth claims.

The options available to him can be grouped under three headings: rationalism, empiricism, and mysticism.

The rationalist believes he or she can determine what is true by reason alone, because of innate or natural abilities within the human mind.

The empiricist places confidence in experimentation and in the observation of sense phenomena, affirming as true only that which can be physically demonstrated.

Finally, there is the mystic, who rejects rationalism and empiricism because he

recognizes that the individual is not capable of arriving at ultimate truth either by reason or observation.

The mystic, however, believes that the individual does possess extra-rational abilities that enable him to discern truth. Truth, the mystic contends, cannot be known objectively; it can be encountered only subjectively.

No matter which of the three approaches are employed by human reason, they all have this in common: They make the individual the final arbiter of truth.

## **Religion**

Within the Christian tradition this is best represented by the Roman Church.

According to their theology, it is the Church that has given us the Bible and, therefore, final authority rests with the Church.

They would technically not claim to hold views contrary to Scripture, but it is the Church which interprets Scripture and is free to add to it.

Therefore, any apparent contradiction, say for example, praying to Mary or the saints, is resolved by Rome's claim to authority.

## **Revelation**

If God exists, it is not difficult to believe that He has communicated to mankind.

The Bible claims to be that revelation.

Conservative Christians throughout the ages, and especially since the Reformation, have recognized the exclusive claim of Scripture to be the complete and final Word of God for this age.

This is not to say that there have not been many usurpers to this claim.

One of the great challenges faced by Christians in the not too distant past drew from a number of sources:

German rationalism

Higher criticism

Enlightenment thought, etc.

...ultimately evolving into what we call Christian liberalism today.

The father of liberalism is usually recognized as Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), professor of theology at the University of Berlin.

Joining many popular philosophical systems with Christianity, Schleiermacher came

to distrust any form of authority.

But he did not want to reject Christianity, recognizing that mankind needs religion. He reasoned that propositional revelation about God may be faulty or even nonexistent but, since man needs religious experience, the outer shell of Christianity must be retained.

The Bible may be untrustworthy, shot through with error, unreliable for developing a living framework, but it is still possible to experience God through religious expressions.

The foundation may be gone, but somehow the walls are still standing!

Such people are convinced that they encounter God as they connect with the “divine spark” found in every human, or through mystical practices, or subjective experiences.

They are unconcerned with the authority of Scripture. To them the Bible is riddled with errors -- but that does not matter, as long as they can have an existential relationship with God (or at least, so they think).

Old liberalism has been waning in the last few decades, but certainly has not gone away. Rather, it has combined with other errant theological threads and morphed into a number of forms.

Taking a stand for the truth has long been out of vogue. John MacArthur makes the point, *“It is no longer deemed necessary to fight for the truth. In fact, many evangelicals now consider it ill-mannered and uncharitable to argue about any point of doctrine.”*

Liberalism has joined forces with postmodernism to challenge the teachings of the Bible.

Meanwhile, many in Christendom are sitting on the sidelines wanting to be tolerant and attempting to bully and intimidate any who advocate discernment.

It is little wonder then that a new wave of liberalism is sweeping over Christianity.

The “*seeker-sensitive church*” of a few years ago is seen by some as just old liberalism in disguise – but that is not entirely true.

The seeker-sensitive church fudged on many biblical truths, but it still embraced some of the cardinal doctrines and still sought to proclaim the gospel, even if its message was often out of balance with the New Testament.

But the “*seeker-sensitive church*” has given birth to a new movement being called the “*emergent church*.”

The emergent church is taking to logical conclusion what the seeker-sensitive church began.

All dressed up in post-modern religious garb the “*emergent church*” is rapidly rejecting and undermining almost all biblical theology.

In other words the emergent church is the new liberalism.

Christendom is reaping what it has sown.

But what about all the spiritual interest that seems evident?

Christian books and music top the charts.

Many Mega-churches are bursting at the seams.

Some are proclaiming that we may be in the midst of the greatest revival since Pentecost.

In response, I agree with a Gallup poll evaluation from a few years ago: *“We are having a revival of feelings, but not of the knowledge of God. The church today is more guided by feeling than by convictions. We value enthusiasm more than informed commitment.”*

If this is true why are so few noticing it?

1. Because the marketers of this approach to Christianity have become adept at giving people what they want.

Throughout their teaching we notice a common theme -- they tell the people what they want to hear.

They baptize it with God's name, and serve it up as God's latest word to His people.

2. Because the centrality of the Word of God has been subtly replaced with inferior but pleasing substitutes.

Systematic preaching and teaching of the Bible has been displaced in many churches with entertainment, drama, concerts, comic acts, and the like.

For a number of decades psychological theory has been usurping the authority of Scripture.

The purpose of many churches is no longer salvation and sanctification, but therapy.

And, increasingly, mysticism and extra-biblical revelations are superseding the Bible.

3. Because so many are drifting with the tide of worldly thought and opinion.

Pascal said, *"When everything is moving at once, nothing appears to be moving, as on board ship. When everyone is moving towards depravity, no one seems to be moving, but if someone stops, he shows up the others who are rushing on by acting as a fixed point."*

The fixed point in a shifting world is biblical truth and all that agrees with it.

We are told that Christians must shift their emphasis from objective truth to communal experience, from rational argument to subjective appeal, from doctrinal orthodoxy to relevant practices.

This move is nothing less than fatal to Christian integrity and biblical witness.

It is also illogical philosophically.

**We have something far better to offer!**

Peter informs us, *"His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness"* (2 Peter 1:3a).

How is this life and godliness found? *"Through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence"* (1:3b).

And where is the knowledge of Christ found? In the precious Word of God.

No wonder Peter encouraged us to be *"like newborn babes, [who] long for the pure milk of the Word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation"* (1 Peter 2:2).

Why feed at the trough of worldly wisdom or mystical experience when we have the final, complete, infallible revelation from God that is able to *"make us wise unto salvation"* (2 Timothy 3:15), *"and equip us for every good work"* (2 Timothy 3:17)?

**We Bible-believing Christians do have something better to offer!**