

Digging for Gold – a Bible Study Course
‘All Scripture’ - its full and final authority

Introduction

The doctrine of inspiration (‘What Scripture says, God says’) necessitates an acceptance of its authority, which is directly derived from the authority of God, based upon His character (He cannot lie) and the content of the Book.

God’s authority in Scripture

Authority is the ‘power or right to enforce obedience; moral or legal supremacy; right to command or give a final decision’. There are many human authorities – parents, government, employers, teachers, church etc. which can originate in different ways (e.g. hereditary, democratic, oligarchic, ethnic) and be exercised by different styles (e.g. benevolent, despotic). God’s authority, however, is the original and permanent authority and therefore is the highest. It follows that Scripture is also the *supreme* authority, superior to all others.

Further, it is the *sole* authority, ‘the infallible, all-sufficient rule for faith and practice’ (AoG Statement of Faith). This needs to be firmly established because other ‘authorities’ can usurp its position – e.g. traditions, church leaders (whether Pope, creeds, councils, preachers, prophets, elders, commentators). Both modernism (the rule of reason) and post-modernism (experience) challenge Scripture’s authority. Our preconceived ideas and prejudices may be more influential and therefore more authoritative than we think.

Plenary (*full, complete*) inspiration

All Scripture is authoritative (2 Tim. 3:16), and cannot be changed, whether by addition, subtraction or alteration (see Matt. 5:18, Rev. 22:18-19). The doctrine of verbal inspiration emphasises that the words of the Bible, not just the thoughts and concepts, are God-given.

This has some practical implications:

1. We should not be limited in our doctrinal emphases but seek to explore and understand ‘the whole counsel of God’ (Acts 20:27). This means that we have open and humble minds: ‘The Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from his holy Word’ (a Puritan).
2. Books that are less accessible or even seem tedious and irrelevant (Leviticus? Chronicles? Nahum?), and those that are hard to understand (e.g. Ezekiel, Daniel, Revelation) should still be part of our Bible diet.
3. We should think books rather than verses, and context rather than just text. ‘Text-ism’ can result in misinterpretation.

Interpretation

However, we do have to ask whether divine authority makes all parts of the Bible equally relevant or applicable for us.

1. Which of the OT laws do we have to obey? There is a distinction between moral and ceremonial laws.

2. Which instructions are cultural? e.g. regarding women's head coverings (1 Cor. 11:2-16), is it justified to ignore the *practice* if we adhere to the *principle*? Is Sabbath observance obligatory?

3. We need to distinguish between matters that are *touched upon* and those that are *taught*. e.g. feet washing, breaking bread on the first day of the week.

Perspicuity (clarity)

The Bible is not a confusing Book – it gives light! (Ps. 119:105)

1. We need to distinguish between matters that are biblical (to be believed, obeyed or permitted), a-biblical (against Bible teaching), and non-biblical (not mentioned, therefore dependant on our judgement).

2. The Bible is absolutely clear about salvation and other great and essential doctrines. We have been given everything necessary for life and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3-4). We need to beware of gnosticism - private interpretations and obscure 'truths' (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

3. The Bible should be our prime resource and authority, so that we *think biblically*.

Conclusion

The main biblical issue is not one of understanding or interpretation but of *obedience* (e.g. Ps. 119:57, 67) - we need to live 'under God's Word'. This is not burdensome because it is based on love for God and His Word (e.g. Ps. 119:97, John 14:15, 1 John 5:3).

Suggested reading

How to read the Bible for all its worth, Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart (Scripture Union)

Why trust the Bible? Amy Orr-Ewing (IVP)

Understanding the Bible, John Stott (Scripture Union)

Nothing but the Truth, Brian Edwards (Evangelical Press)

Biblical Inspiration, I. Howard Marshall (Hodder)

God has Spoken, J.I. Packer (Hodder)

The Scripture Principle, Clark H. Pinnock (Hodder)