

Article: Authority in the Church and the Interpretation of Scripture

In the welter of confusion these days, when there are so many denominations each claiming to have the truth, it is a deceptive suggestion that what is needed is an authoritative church body that tells people clearly what they have to believe. This is dangerous.

The Word of God alone is the proper basis of faith, and no one else, no Pope, not even an angel, may usurp that role. Early in church history, Christ's authority to bind and loose, which He gave to His apostles, and to all public ministers who spoke in His name, were misinterpreted. Jesus meant the authority to open the door of heaven by the forgiveness of sins to the penitent, and the authority to close the door of heaven to the impenitent (John 20:23; Matthew 18:18). This was wrongly expanded to include the authority to impose satisfactions for those who came to confess sins, and the authority to define doctrine, and eventually even to declare new doctrines that the believers were bound to accept, for their souls' salvation.

For Jesus, one statement of Scripture settled any question in dispute. Often He said, "It is written," which meant, "Scripture has said." That is the only right procedure for any Christian. It is dangerous for any person to risk having to say to the Lord at Judgment Day, "Lord, that is what my Pastor, or my Pope, told me to believe." The Scriptures give to individual believers the responsibility of testing those who come claiming to speak in the name of the Lord (Matthew 7:15-16; 1 John 4:1).

We do not have to wait for proof after the facts for what we believe. We know the truth from the outset. By "from the outset" we mean that the Bible has made important statements about itself. It is like that with things that come from God. They are not proved or demonstrated by things human. Jesus also, who had come from the Father, did not accept testimony from human beings, because they are not thoroughly reliable. Jesus said, even about what John the Baptist said about Him, "Not that I accept human testimony; but I mention it that you may be saved" (John 5:34). Jesus appealed to divine things to attest His claims to come from the Father: the Father himself, His works, and the Old Testament Scriptures (John 5:31-47), and we have the on-going witness of the Holy Spirit to Him (John 15:26). Our witness to Jesus is based on the witness of His apostles. If you like, there is an inescapable circularity in this. But that is not all that can be said.

Off-hand, it might seem that to convince someone that Jesus is God you would first have to convince him that the Bible is God's Word. Actually, it works the other way round. Here is how. Suppose someone who is looking for the truth becomes interested in Christianity. Where do you begin with him or her? Certainly not by trying to show him or her that the Bible is God's Word. First we take the New Testament just as ordinary historical writings, to bring the person who is looking for the truth face to face with Jesus.

By presenting all the strong evidence that exists, we might get the inquirer to the point where he says, "All right, I admit: the facts certainly seem to show that Jesus rose from the dead, and that He must therefore be who He said He was." But is that faith? It need not be. Let us illustrate. I am told that there once was an acrobat who used to perform tightrope feats over Niagara Falls. After he demonstrated his incredible skill, he would ask the gasping spectators, "How many of you believe that I could take you across that tight-rope in a wheel-barrow?" All of them would put up their hands. "All right, then, who wants to go?" Nobody did!

They all had the mental conviction that he could do it, but they did not care to entrust themselves personally to his skill. That is the difference between dead theory and real faith. Real faith is not just an idea that something is true, but it is personal trust in Jesus. We trust Him as our God and our Saviour. And this trust only the Holy Spirit can give, through His Word. Faith is the same thing as trust, certainty, confidence. It is the opposite of all doubt. It is not for nothing that the Scriptures tell us not to put our trust in princes, or in any mortal man.

Once people believe in Jesus as God, who came as a human being, they will accept the Bible not just as historical writings, but as the very word and trust of the living God. Jesus, for example, argued from a single word in an obscure line of a Psalm, and said that it was beyond criticism or correction, because it was Scripture, "And the Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). He promised His apostles to give them His Spirit, who would teach them all things, and would remind them of everything He had told them (John 14:26).

That is why Christians gladly accept what Paul says about the Scriptures in 2 Timothy 3:15-16, that they are “able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”

The idea that Peter was the first Pope cannot be proved in history. Certainly, Peter is always mentioned first in lists of the apostles, and for a time he was the leader among early Christians in Jerusalem. However, he did not continue to be the leader of the church even in Jerusalem. At the synod of the church in Jerusalem, mentioned in Acts 15, it is James, the brother of the Lord, who puts to the assembly the decision that they have to make about whether Gentiles should be required to keep the Law of Moses, even though Peter was present and spoke at that meeting. What is important to say is that the apostles had a unique, unrepeatable role. Acts 1 shows that one of the qualifications for an apostle was that he had been an eyewitness of Jesus’ ministry and particularly of His resurrection. The preaching of the Gospel in the church is certainly rooted in the principal functions of the apostles. However, the office of apostle itself was not repeatable in the church and not transferable to successors. In any case of dispute about doctrine, the only sure test is not a claim to oral tradition, but written Scripture, the very Word of God.

When Jesus said, “The person who hears you hears Me, and the person who rejects you rejects Me. And the person who rejects Me rejects the One who has sent Me” (Luke 10:16), He was not giving a licence to His apostles and those who taught in His name to teach any notion that came into their heads. If they taught differently from Christ’s word, they were under condemnation as false prophets (See Jeremiah 23). Even the prophets of the New Testament were subject to other prophets (“Moreover, the spirits of prophets are subordinate to prophets” 1 Corinthians 14:32).

It follows that we must never give human reason a place over the Bible. Reason has its proper function in understanding the meaning of words, and their grammar and context. This is reason in service of the Word. However, human beings must never be allowed to say whether a teaching in Scripture is wrong, or that it can be disregarded, and reason must not be allowed to interpret what the Scriptures say in the interest of some predetermined logical scheme or tradition.

A very important principle results from this, which is basis to Lutheran teaching and practice. What is doctrine is simply a collection of the passages of Scripture that speak about particular subjects. As said elsewhere, they dare never be reinterpreted to fit some scheme of logic, or tradition. Even when we say that the doctrine of justification through faith is the doctrine on which the church stands or falls, we do not use that doctrine to create a system by making other doctrine agree with it logically. We do mean that no teaching of Scripture in fact disagrees with that vital and central teaching, salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, without works, for Christ’s sake.