

Christian's Authority

by J. Edwin Orr

The sermon emphasizes the authority and inspiration of Scripture, highlighting its role as the ultimate guide for Christian doctrine and practice.

Duration: 19:26

Scripture: 2 Timothy 3:16

Topics: "Authority"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of searching the scriptures. He highlights that the Bible is not only a book of divine revelation but also holds immense human interest and influence. The speaker then focuses on the Gospels, explaining that they provide different perspectives on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. He argues that the diversity of these accounts actually strengthens their credibility. The sermon also briefly touches on the concept of sanctification and the interpretation of scripture, emphasizing the authority of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit in guiding believers.

Transcript

John Quincy Adams said, the first and almost the only book deserving of universal attention is the Bible. I speak as a man of the world, to men of the world, and I say to you, search the scriptures. Now, the Bible is not only a book of divine revelation, it's also a book of sublime influence, of human interest, of amazing accuracy, of perfect unity, and of universal challenge.

Let's consider first of all the Gospels, the good news of Jesus Christ, because they tell the story of his life and teachings. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are four accounts written from four different points of view. Matthew's Gospel is written from a Jewish point of view, and Luke's Gospel from a Greek point of view, with Mark's Gospel telescopic and John's Gospel retrospective.

Now, some people may think it's a weakness to have four different stories. Actually, it's a strength. If some were to take another to court and sue for damages, producing four witnesses who told identical stories of how some accident occurred, the judge would throw the case out of court upon grounds of obvious collusion.

In a street accident, a policeman sees things from a different point of view to the bus driver, and a passerby sees it quite differently to the pedestrian unfortunately knocked down. The Gospels were compiled from the stories of eyewitnesses written by those who witnessed events or who were interviewed

afterwards. If asked, was Jesus Christ really transfigured on the mountain, Peter and James and John could affirm that they had seen him.

The authority lay in these apostles' testimony, and the same witnesses and their associates wrote the epistles, letters to newly founded churches, explaining difficult doctrine, correcting wrong ideas. The New Testament includes also the Acts of the Apostles and the Revelation of John, vastly differing books by apostolic writers. The evangelical school of thought teaches that the final court of appeal regarding the life and teachings of Jesus Christ rests in the New Testament.

In fact, apart from New Testament authors, people would know very little about Jesus Christ, for contemporary historians dismiss him with a sentence or a paragraph. A student at California Institute of Technology challenged me once, Sir, is it not a fact that there is a Gospel of Thomas and a Gospel of Peter? Why then were such writings omitted from the New Testament? I added that not only were spurious books omitted, but also good books, such as the Shepherd of Hermas and the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles. For the simple reason they were not considered apostolic writings.

Is it not a fact, he asked again, that 300 years or so after Christ, the Church decided which books should be included in the New Testament? When I agreed that this was the case, quickly he suggested that such a procedure proved that the ultimate authority lay not in the scriptures, but in the Church continuing. From a conclusion such as this, I descended very strongly. Supposing, said I, World War III destroyed civilization as we know it.

After the year 2000, the children of the survivors emerged from the caves and decided to reconstitute civilization as they had heard about it from their parents. So they appointed a committee on law, a committee on education, a committee on politics, a committee on commerce, and a committee on religion. The committee on religion decided that the first business on hand was to collect the sacred writings of the Christian faith.

One man reported that he had found a book in the ruins of Los Angeles, the front pages burned, but the remainder indicating that it was a life of Jesus Christ and related material. Another man reported that he had found a book in the ruins of London, the back pages burned, but the title clearly stating that it was the New Testament of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Other copies in other languages were produced.

Another researcher produced a copy of the Old Testament, and yet another of the Old and New Testaments bound together. An enthusiastic youngster announced that he had found a missing book of the Bible, one entitled The Robe, by a prophet named Lloyd Douglas. Another wished to add science and health by a prophetess named Mary Baker Eddy.

Another proposed for inclusion in the Bible, the Book of Mormon by Joseph Smith. What method would the committee use to determine whether or not these books were what they were supposed to be, eyewitnesses, accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ? Well, the historical method could be applied. They could ascertain that The Robe had not been known before 1925, that science and health had not been known before 1875, and that the Book of Mormon was unknown to the press in 1825.

The committee could decide that these books could be read for what they're worth. But that they were not authentic apostolic writings. Now this was one of the methods employed by the early fathers in settling the New Testament canon.

The sum total of the accepted New Testament is quoted in the writings of the earliest church fathers, with the exception of eight verses from the Gospel of John. A cross-reference of such writings shows that the Gospels and the Epistles were accepted by the early church, and that the rejected writings were rejected after careful study. The Old Testament is an unfolding revelation of God, whereas the New Testament is a final revelation of God.

This does not mean that the Old Testament is not inspired. Rather, it means that while the Old Testament has been superseded in certain points as a revelation of God's will, the New Testament has never been surpassed. In a North African country, I found that an Arab who had lost interest in his wife need only to clap his hands three times and say before witnesses, I divorce thee.

The woman had no recourse, but was compelled to return to her father's house. This was the practice of the Jews in the days of Christ. But the master hated the system, and told his countrymen that this license had been allowed them by Moses because of the hardness of their heart.

And so he established the rules of Christian marriage, which are infinitely superior to the previous Old Testament standard. In the case of the law of retaliation, it was the same. The law said an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

But Jesus Christ superseded that with the commandment to love one's enemies. New Testament standards were unsurpassed and final. Why? Because Jesus Christ was the final revelation of God, unsurpassed, unique.

What then should one's attitude be to the Old Testament? For a Christian, the best example is Jesus Christ himself. He quoted it as having fullest authority. He said, it is written, man shall not live by bread alone.

And his quotations demonstrated his reliance on Scripture. The canon of Old Testament Scripture was established by the Hebrew rabbis, just as the canon of New Testament Scriptures was established by Christians. The Jews did not acknowledge the authority of the apocryphal books.

All of Christendom is united in considering the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments authentic. Some denominations add to the list the disputed books of the apocrypha. Most Christians profess to believe that the Old and New Testaments are inspired, but there's by no means agreement on what constitutes inspiration.

The New Testament itself contains a definite statement on inspiration. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished to all good works. Inspiration is a word of Latin derivation.

The Greek word essentially means God-breathed. It was my privilege once to address a student body at Gordon College in Boston. A foreign student stood to his feet to ask, may I say a word? The oldest translation of the Bible into a vernacular language is the Armenian.

I come from Armenia in Asia Minor. It is interesting that the title of the Armenian Bible was taken from a Bible text from which the verse which is translated in English, All Scripture, is inspired. In consequence, the Armenian translators called their scriptures as *dwadze shunch*, the breath of God.

So the Scripture itself claims that all Scripture is God-breathed. But what does it mean to be God-breathed or inspired? No one knows. The scriptures themselves say that only holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.

The scriptures declare that God breathed into man's nostrils the breath of life, and he became a living soul. No one knows by what method God breathed into the nostrils of man, but everyone, including the first avowed agnostic Thomas Huxley, can see that between man and the higher mammals there is a great gulf, a divergence immeasurable, practically infinite. Likewise, as a result of God breathing into the holy scriptures, there is a divergence immeasurable between the Bible and non-biblical literature.

One of our planes crashed at Westover Field in Massachusetts, at which I was base chaplain during the war, and it was her husband's death. Her father had died five months before, her mother had died at her birth, and her husband had been all she possessed. She wept.

As I wanted to comfort her, I began to read the 23rd Psalm till I came to the phrase, Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me. And she was comforted. Why did I not read a line from Omar Khayyam or William Shakespeare? No, I know the transforming power of Scripture.

One of my friends who described himself as a modernist told me very cheerfully, Of course, I believe the Bible is inspired. It inspires me, so I know it's inspired. That amused me.

By the same token, one could say that Shakespeare is inspired, Kipling inspired, Longfellow inspired, and practically anyone whose writings appeal to anyone else. That's not what is meant by inspiration, where Scripture is concerned. On the other hand, one of my friends who was an extreme fundamentalist told me that he believed every word from cover to cover of the version was inspired.

I thought he was being rhetorically extravagant until I found that he really did believe in the inspiration of the committee appointed by King James, for he included the dedication to his majesty as well as the chapter headings. His was a rare case. One of the theories popular among extreme fundamentalists is a kind of verbal dictation theory that God dictated each word to his prophets and apostles the way one dictates to one stenographer.

Not many real evangelicals, certainly not educated evangelicals, hold such a position. In his letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul complains about the divisions in the church. He says, I thank God that I baptized none of you.

Then he adds, except Crispus and Gaius. Then the explanation, lest any should say that I baptized my own name. In another afterthought, the apostle added, I also baptized the household of Stephanus.

His final afterthought stated, beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else. It is obvious from this paragraph that the apostle was allowed the latitude of his memory, and that the actual words were not dictated to him consciously or unconsciously. Does this mean then that the passage was not inspired? By no means.

What then is the purpose of inspiration? The scripture itself is explicit. It is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness. It is not meant to be a textbook of chemistry, physics, mathematics, geology, biology, or the like.

Though allowing for pictorial language, it is free from the glaring scientific errors of contemporary religious books. The scripture claims that its own inspiration is dynamic and plenary. It is not only a literary work of God, it is also a literary work of man, with human manifestations aplenty.

The Holy Spirit allowed the sacred writers their own styles, figures of speech, symbols, and the like. And scripture contains personification, history, poetry, drama, proverb, allegory, and other fine literary devices which by no means conform to the exact language of law or science, though there is the latter in the Bible. The Bible is a collection of human books, God-inspired.

The human style of the writers of scripture is clearly seen by anyone who can detach himself from the 16th century style of the English translators in the authorized version. I have a sister-in-law who is an abbreviationist. She contracts everything possible and impossible.

My wife has a sister-in-law who is a protractionist. She takes 20 minutes to describe what anyone else could do in five. Everyone has his own style.

The Apostle Paul, for example, is prone to make a statement, insert a parenthesis, add a footnote, return to the statement, adjoin an explanation, just like a university professor. No wonder the Apostle Peter, a fisherman lacking the academic background of his confrere, said of his epistles, there are some things in them hard to understand. Figures of speech are permitted in the sacred writings.

I heard a man describe a vacation he spent in the Hudson's Bay country, where insects multiply in the muskeg. He said that he was bitten a hundred thousand times. His exaggeration was not deceitful, it was hyperbole, a recognized literary device.

And hyperbole is employed in the scriptures also. The Gospels declare that John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching, and that all the country of Judea and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. All? Every man, woman, youth, maiden, boy, girl, baby, and babysitter? No, not all in that sense.

The word all is used in the same sense that one today uses the expression everybody is talking about him. Symbols occur plentifully in scriptures, especially in the apocalyptic writings. The revelation of John declared that out of the mouth of Christ issued a two-edged sword, a statement obviously not to be taken literally.

It is difficult to define the nature of the inspiration of scripture. There are at least half a dozen varieties of scripture seen in the book. For example, there appears to be direct revelation in which Almighty God has spoken verbally to men, as in the case of giving the law to Moses, and God spoke all these words.

Second, there's likewise revelation with inspiration, as in the instance of the Lord speaking to John the Divine, write the things which thou hast seen. This was not stenographic dictation. Then in the introduction of the Gospel of Luke, there's inspiration without revelation.

Dr. Luke says, inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you've been informed. The text indicates that Luke collected and arranged his material in the best of journalistic style from reliable eyewitnesses. Then there are occasional passages in Scripture where the source of the material is stated to be solely inward in illumination, where,

to take one example, the Apostle Paul offers good advice on the subject of marriage.

Now concerning the unmarried, I have no command of the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. I think that in view of the impending distress, it is well for a person to remain as he is. He gives other advice to married people, and likewise qualifies it.

I say this by way of concession, not of command. Now there's also evident inspiration with illumination. The Apostle Paul says we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom, but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit.

Then, according to the writer himself, there is demonstrated inspiration without illumination. The Apostle Peter, writing the Old Testament prophets, declared, They inquired what person or time was indicated by the Spirit of Christ within them when predicting the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glory. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you.

In other words, the prophets who predicted the sufferings and glory of Christ had no idea who their Messiah would be. They wrote as men who were inspired in their hearts but unenlightened in their minds. In view of this variety of inspiration noted in the Scripture, it's very difficult to try and make the Scriptures fit a particular theory.

Rather, it's wiser to make the various theories fit the pattern of Scripture. The Church of England has an interesting article in Holy Scripture. Holy Scripture contains all things necessary to our salvation.

We have a sure authority for our faith in the Old and New Testaments of the Holy Bible. But is it wise to say that the Scriptures alone are the all-sufficient guide? Anyone who has ever discussed religion with a cultist knows that these determined folk are ready and willing to quote the word of Scripture, particularly verses that can be wrested to suit their arguments. Jehovah's Witnesses quote texts to disprove the deity of Christ and the deity of the Holy Spirit.

No, it's not enough to rely on Scriptures alone. A believer needs the interpreter of Scripture, the paraclete promised by Christ to guide him into all truth. The one who inspired is the one who alone can interpret.

I'm reminded of an incident of student evangelism. I was walking along the corridor of a dormitory in Seattle Pacific College. I heard a group of students having an argument, so I stopped to listen.

I did not mean to eavesdrop. I just wanted to hear what they were saying. Listen, Joe, said one, I'll tell you what Orr teaches on sanctification.

And he told it with a very Methodist flavor. Just a minute, Jim said another, I've heard Orr five times too, and I'll tell you what he teaches on sanctification. And he told it with a very Presbyterian flavor.

Then we heard the voice of authority, a sophomore. Pipe down, everybody, I'll tell you what Orr teaches on sanctification. His exposition showed that he was an air force flying totally off the beam, so I thought it was time for me to intervene.

Good evening, men, I said. I was greeted by a chorus of voices telling me that they'd just been talking about my lectures and they wanted me to settle an argument. A spokesman said, what is meant in your book, Full Surrender, by positional, critical, and progressive sanctification? I told them it would take a few minutes.

They urged me on, so I explained what I meant by positional, critical, and progressive sanctification. The Methodists were satisfied, the Presbyterian was satisfied, but the sophomore, never. Are you sure you meant that, Dr. Orr? I'm sure, I replied.

Well, are you sure you're sure, he persisted. Well, I assured him, I'm certain. He turned to the crowd of students.

Listen, Jim, you've had your say, and Joe, you've had your say, and Dr. Orr's been kind enough to explain his thoughts in the matter, but allow me to have my say and explain to you what I think that Dr. Orr must have meant when he wrote that book. We were all amused, for surely an author ought to know what he meant in his writings, and the author of scripture who inspired Moses, and David, and Paul, and the others, surely knows how to interpret the word to those whose hearts he indwells. The supreme authority for the Christian is the Lord Jesus Christ, and the vehicle of authority is the holy scriptures of the Christian faith, as interpreted by the Holy Spirit of God to every trusting believer.

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