**INTRODUCTION TO THE BIBLE**

**Lecture Two**

**The Bible as God’s Word**

In the first lecture, we took a brief look at what the Bible is, its power, and the very important question of how the early Church decided which books were the Word of God and therefore needed to be included in the Canon of Scripture. We also looked at other writings, some of which purported to be the Word of God, but which for various good reasons have been excluded from the Bible as we know it. In this lecture we aim to cover yet more important ground relating to the actual Word of God itself, how it came to us and just how and why we understand it to be “the Word of God”.

**THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE**

When we speak of the authority of the Bible, we mean “that property by which it demands faith and obedience to all its declarations.” The dictionary tells us that authority means “power and right to command” or “power to determine, on the grounds of knowledge, credibility or character”. It is therefore of prime importance for us to determine and understand in what matters, and to what extent, Holy Scripture commands our consent, and what is the range of its authority.

In considering the question of just how far our lives ought to line up with the Word of God, the most obvious consideration is how much of the Bible is the Word of God. Is the whole Bible the Word of God? How do we know it is the Word of God? If it is, then how did we receive it from God? These are legitimate questions and the answers are of the utmost importance. Dr J. I. Packer said: “The problem of authority is the most fundamental problem that the Christian Church ever faces”. It follows that if the Bible is the Word of God - then it must have authority, it must, as the Word of God, demand response and obedience from us. That is a frightening consequence - and people rightfully ask to what extent then is the Bible the Word of God and to what extent does its authority reach into our everyday lives. In the introduction to his book on the subject, Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones said: “If I understand the modern religious situation at all this whole question of authority is one of the most important problems confronting us. As such it demands our careful study. There is no doubt that things are as they are in the Christian Church throughout the world today because we have lost our authority. We are faced by the fact that the masses of the people are outside the Church. They are there, I suggest, because the Church has in one way or another lost its authority....another reason that I would adduce for a study of the problem of authority in our day is connected with the desire for religious revival. Any study of Church history, and particularly any study of the great periods of revival or reawakening, demonstrates above everything else just this one fact: That the Christian Church during all such periods has spoken with authority. The great characteristic of all revivals has been the authority of the preacher. There seemed to be something new, extra, irresistible in what he declared on behalf of God. The final reason I suggest to you is that this subject of authority is indeed the great theme of the Bible itself. The Bible presents itself to us as an authoritative book.” In other words, if the Bible has authority, and it reaches into every aspect of our lives, then the Church in turn needs to declare that Word with authority, to proclaim it as a Word to be believed and obeyed. When we speak of the authority of the Bible, and especially of the problem of how that authority relates to us and our lives, it is important to understand the four basic views adopted in relation to determining the authority of the Bible:

**Four Views on Biblical Authority**

**1. The Evangelical Position.**

The evangelical view states that the written Scriptures are God-given and are the final authority. Augustine said that “To the canonical Scriptures alone I owe agreement without dissent”. This was also the position of the great reformers, of Luther and Calvin, of the Puritans, Wesley and Whitfield - “It came to us by the instrumentality of men, from the very mouth of God”. The Westminster Confession puts it like this: “The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God, (who is truth itself), the author thereof, and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.” Evangelicals assign absolute supremacy to the Holy Scripture as being the final judge of controversy, the final rule of faith and practice, and the final test of truth. St Chrysostum wrote 1500 years ago: “There is not anything in Scripture which can be considered unimportant; there is not a single sentence which does not deserve to be meditated on; for it is not the word of man, but of the Holy Spirit, and the least syllable of it contains a hidden treasure.” Although we will deal more fully with our own viewpoint on authority under the section on revelation and inspiration, let it be said here that we adhere to an evangelical view of Biblical authority.

**2. The Roman Catholic Position**

Roman Catholics accept the Bible’s authority and inspiration but deny its all-sufficiency. The Roman Catholic Bishop Milner wrote: “The Catholic rule of faith .... is not merely the written word of God, but the whole Word of God, written and unwritten; in other words Scripture and tradition, and these propounded and explained by the Catholic Church”. In essence and actuality, Rome claims for the Church a position of authority above both Scripture and Tradition, since she has to determine a blend of both.

Protestants on the other hand, claim that it is from the Word of God that the Church derives her authority. The Roman Catholic view of authority is not Scriptural, as we shall see later. Whereas the evangelical view allows the Word of God to set the rule of faith, the Catholic view dilutes the authority of the Word by allowing the tradition of man equal influence in determining the rule of faith. In other words, the Bible alone isn’t the Word of God, only part of it, and the traditions and declarations of the church together with the Bible make up the Word of God. Needless to say, this affords man the opportunity to alter or modify the Word.

**3. The Liberal Viewpoint**

This view goes even further than the Catholic position, and exalts human reason to the position of being final authority in matters of religious belief. Liberal theologians claim that to assent to a fixed body of truth is to commit intellectual suicide and that the whole thought of an authoritative body of writings is repugnant. Although they do admit that the Bible “contains” the Word of God, and that the place to look for divine revelation is in the Bible, yet they do not believe that the “whole” Bible is the Word of God. This view is extremely prevalent in the church today, particularly among some of the older main line denominations. They see the Bible as a good guide book, but fall short of recognising its divine authority, its right to speak into our lives. Liberal theologians will argue about questions of authorship, archaeology, dates, language, intentions, meanings etc. until the basis of faith has been completely eroded. Jesus said that God’s word is truth, yet Liberal theologians place human reason and thought above the Holy Scriptures, maintaining the dangerous position that man has to sift interpret the Bible to determine what he considers to be the Word of God. Such a view is clearly unscriptural. Furthermore, it cannot be intellectual suicide to remain within the framework of truth - even scientists recognise that they must function within a framework of factual reality.

**4. The Barthian Attitude**

Karl Barth (1886-1968) also adopted an unscriptural approach to the authority of the Word of God. In essence, his claim is that the Bible is only the Word of God in so far as God “makes” it His word to you. In other words, the Bible is a vehicle of divine revelation and whatever God quickens to you out of it, then becomes the word of God to you, and the rest remains irrelevant for the time being. However, Jesus himself said that Scripture cannot be broken, that not one jot nor title would pass from the word until all be fulfilled. Paul wrote to Timothy: “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 unto all good works.” (2 Tim 3:16-17)

In conclusion, the Bible is the Word of God, whether one believes it or not, or understands it or not. It does not “contain” the Word of God, it “IS” the Word of God, in its entirety. Neither the Church nor man has the right to usurp the authority of the Scriptures. The Bible alone is God’s final word in all matters of faith, salvation and Christian living. No man has the right to say which bits apply and which bits do not, and no man has the right to add to or to take away from the Word, thus making the Word of God of no effect because of the traditions of men (Mark 7:13). The only acceptable view of Biblical authority, in the light of Scripture itself, and in the light of all other evidence, is the evangelical view. In the remaining sections of this lecture may be found ample evidence as to why the evangelical standpoint is the only tenable one.

**REVELATION AND INSPIRATION**

If the Bible is the Word of God, the next question is how did we get it? When we read the Bible, ought we to allow for the possibility of human error in recording the Scriptures? Did God use men like robots or secretaries to record His every word? Or did God express His Word through human words and personality, not allowing any error in transmission? These important questions must be viewed with an understanding of revelation and inspiration, or in other words, the means by which God communicated His word to mankind.

**Revelation**

The word “revelation” means the “unveiling of something hidden”, so that it may be known in truth. When the Bible speaks of revelation, it conveys the thought of God the Creator, actively making known to men His power and glory, nature and character, His will, ways and plans. In short, it is God revealing Himself to man. The created would never be able to know the Creator, if He did not reveal himself to His subjects. God, through revelation, seeks to make known to men both His person and His purposes. God has revealed Himself in many ways. Through various events and instances in the history of Israel for example, God revealed Himself to His chosen people as their provider, their all-sufficient God and their protector. In other words, Israel or one of the patriarchs or prophets would experience something from God - healing, protection or provision - and God would then complete the revelation by saying something like “I am the Lord your healer, protector or provider.” Divine revelation also came in the form of God communicating knowledge to men, e.g. the prophets of Old Testament times said: “Thus saith the Lord...” and often used such expressions as “The Word of the Lord came unto me”. So we may say that truth has been..”revealed unto His holy apostles and prophets, by the Spirit..” (Eph 3:5). Finally, through Jesus, God revealed Himself to mankind as Saviour of the world, redeemer of the lost. “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.” Heb 1:1-2. This leads us into the next topic, inspiration, i.e. the method by which God communicated the revelation to us accurately.

**Inspiration**

Inspiration is that which secures an accurate recording of the revelation given. In other words, God gives man a revelation of His person or His purposes, and then through divine inspiration, ensures that that revelation is accurately recorded or written down or communicated to others. The vital importance of inspiration is that it gives God’s authority to the Word, it authenticates and establishes the revelation given. Revelation would be of little value if it were not communicated correctly. Through inspiration, men are enabled to record revelation accurately, so that the revelation remains true and uncontaminated. That does not mean to say that men were used like mechanical robots by God to record things. On the contrary, even a casual reading of the various books of the Bible reveals how the characters and personalities of the different authors pervades the writings. Nevertheless because those men were led and guided by the Holy Spirit, i.e. inspired in the recording, we can be sure that the revelation of God remains a true revelation and can be relied upon and trusted. Dr Charles Hodge summed it up by saying: “Revelation is the act of communicating Divine knowledge by the Spirit to the mind. Inspiration is the act of the same Spirit controlling those who make the truth known to others.” See 2 Tim 3:16 and 2 Pet 1:19-21. Inspired is literally “breathed of God” in other words, God has given it His seal and stamp of approval and authority by breathing His life into it. Moved is literally “carried along by the Holy Spirit”.

It is unacceptable to think that God would allow inaccurate recordings to be made in His Word of His truth. He knows full well our inability to discern for ourselves what is and what isn’t His Word. That is why God revealed Himself to mankind, and then inspired certain men to make a totally accurate recording of the revelation. That, too, is why when we read the inspired Word of God, it becomes a mode of revelation to us also. Inspiration is the work of the Holy Spirit, inspiring writers, speakers and readers alike, to ensure that a correct and true revelation of God is made known to all.

God - through revelation - makes Himself known to man.

Man - through inspiration - makes the revelation known to others.

God Himself is responsible for both the revelation and inspiration. It is the Holy Scriptures themselves which are inspired and thus give us a correct and true revelation of God.

**Some Words of Caution.**

One very important thing to remember is this: Inspiration does not mean that every statement and deed recorded in Scripture is approved by God, but it does mean that these things have been recorded correctly. For example, in the book of Job we have speeches of Job, his three friends, and from God. We also have words of Satan recorded. The record is true, but God does not necessarily approve of what Satan and the three friends said. Each person is responsible for his own utterances, just as there are “lies” recorded in Scripture. Peter’s denial of our Lord on three occasions is recorded. It is correctly and accurately recorded, because the Scriptures are inspired, but of course we realise that God does not approve of lies! The Inspiration of the Book vouches only for the accuracy of the record. Another important point to remember is that the inspiration which we claim for the Bible related to the Word as it was written in its original languages. Some translations could be better described as interpretations. What we need to do is gain understanding of the message that Scripture was intended to cover. There are of course many different types of inspiration, such as mechanical, natural, dynamic and so on. A full and detailed analysis of the various modes of inspiration is beyond the scope of this lecture. However, let us say that in our view, the only type of inspiration acceptable in the light of Scripture is “verbal” or “plenary” inspiration. Here are some quotes regarding this type of inspiration, which should explain it adequately:

“By verbal inspiration is meant that, in the original writings, the Spirit guided in the choice of the words used. However, the human authorship was respected to the extent that the writer’s characteristics are preserved and their style and vocabulary are employed, but without the intrusion of error. By plenary inspiration is meant that the accuracy which verbal inspiration secures, is extended to every portion of the Bible so that it is in all its parts, both infallible as to truth and final as to Divine authority.” Schaeffer. “The supernatural influence of the Spirit of God on the human mind, by which prophets, apostles, and sacred writers were qualified to set forth Divine truth without any mixture of error.” Webster’s Dictionary.

“The inspiration of which we contend is, of course, that of the original Hebrew and Greek words as written by the prophets and apostles. We believe that if these are understood in their intended sense - plain statements of fact, figures of speech, idioms and poetry as such - the Bible is without error from Genesis to Revelation.” Loraine Boettner.

“By inspiration we understand that supernatural influence, exerted on the sacred writers by the Holy Spirit, by virtue of which their writings are given Divine truthfulness, and constitute an infallible and sufficient rule of faith and practice. When it is said that the writers were guided by the Holy Spirit in writing the books of the Bible, the term ‘writing’ must be taken in a comprehensive sense. It includes the investigation of documents, the collection of facts, the arrangement of material, the very choice of words, in fact all the processes that enter into the composition of a book.” Louis Berkhof.

**A Final Word on Biblical Authority**

a)The Bible stands supreme over the light of human reason. It does not contradict reason but goes beyond reason by giving revelation.

b)The Bible is supreme over the Church - the Holy Scriptures have been called the title deeds of the Church. Although the Church existed before the written word of the New Testament, we must not forget that the Church already had the spoken word of the Apostles and the writings came to us by revelation and inspiration.

c)The Bible is supreme over Tradition. The apostolic origin of much that is attributed to Church Tradition cannot possibly be proven. Much of it would appear to be clearly at variance with New Testament teaching, and must be rejected.

Ultimately, acceptance of the supreme authority of Holy Scripture is a question of faith rather than argument. The evidence in favour is overwhelming, however assurance regarding the supreme and final authority of the Bible as the Word of God must come to men as a result of the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said the Holy Spirit would lead and guide us into all truth.