

25.04.2020 AUTHORITATIVE SOURCE OF THEOLOGY

To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them. Isaiah 8:20

The word “theology” comes from two Greek words ‘*theos*’ and ‘*logos*’ that combined, mean “the study of God.” Christian theology is simply an attempt to understand God as He is revealed in the Bible. Theology is the human attempt (guided by the Holy Spirit) to apply the Bible to our questions and, indeed, to all human needs. It is the application of Scripture to all areas of human life.

Theology is generally defined as a disciplined study of God. It also means ‘**knowing God**’. The study of God is only meaningful to us as we use it to know God...*’and this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.’ John 17:3*

‘If you say that theology is knowing God, you make it a personal activity rather than a merely academic one. Knowing God is something more than knowing about God. It is a personal relationship, like knowing a friend-or knowing an enemy. The Bible is unique in teaching that God is a personal God. To think of theology as knowing God underscores this emphasis.’ *J Frame: What is Theology?*

How does Christ speak today? How does He govern His church? How does He exercise His authority?

In Christendom there are differing views about what is authoritative in the church.

‘The Roman Catholic Church teaches that Christ rules through the Magisterium, that is through the teaching authority which they believe Christ has given to the church and, indeed, supremely to the Pope and to the Bishops around him. The Orthodox churches teach that Christ governs the church through what they call the holy tradition – which includes scripture. Liberal theologians teach that Christ rules the church through what they are pleased to call the climax of educated opinion. Anglicans, who, popularly-speaking, are always trying to find a middle road, accept the threefold cord of scripture, tradition, and reason. Those who follow the reformed tradition, like ourselves, say that Christ rules the church through scripture. To be sure, tradition and reason have a vital role in the elucidation of scripture and in the application of scripture. But scripture has supreme authority in the church’ *From: John Stott on Biblical Authority*

The Bible

Scripture has supreme authority in the Church because it is the supreme revelation of God to mankind of Himself. How can man know an incomprehensible God? He is incomprehensible and His ways are past finding out (Romans 11:33-36), but He is KNOWABLE. He is knowable because He reveals Himself through His Word.

If we seek to know God, the Bible is the ultimate revelation of who God is (Exodus 3:14) and what His plan and desire for mankind is in relation to Himself.

“The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.” Deuteronomy 29:29

- God reveals Himself to us through His Son. We see His Son revealed in the Bible (John 5:39, ! Peter 1:10-12, Hebrews 1:1-3), for it testifies of Him.

“...no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.” Matthew 11:27

- God calls us to know Him as Lord and to follow His commands (Exodus 14:18, 1 Chronicles 28:6-9). We recognise His control over all things, we recognise His authority over our lives and we know His presence in our lives as we ‘*grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen*’ 2 Peter 3:18.

- Knowing God and submitting to His authority brings obedience (John 14:15, 21; 17:26). Obedience leads to further knowledge.

"If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God." John 7:17

"He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me?" declares the LORD. Jeremiah 22:16

A desire to obey leads to the knowledge that Jesus' words come from God. The obedient heart comes first, the knowledge second. And then, certainly, the new knowledge will lead to new obedience, the new obedience to still more knowledge, and so on...there is no true knowledge without godliness. This is why obedience is a criterion of knowledge in Scripture. *J Frame: What is Theology?*

In the Bible God gives us revelations of Himself which lead us to worship; He gives us promises of salvation which stimulate our faith, and finally, He gives us commandments expressing His will which demand our obedience. This is the meaning of Christian discipleship. Its three essential ingredients are worship, faith and obedience. And all three are called forth by the Word of God.

"And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says 'I know him' but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him" 1 John 2:3, 4

Tradition, Experience, Culture and Reason

Tradition, experience, culture and reason have a role to play in our interpretation of Scripture, but they are not authoritative. They are flawed because they arise from our humanness and not from God's authority. Therefore they cannot be given equal authority with the Bible.

Tradition

Tradition: a long-established custom or belief that has been passed on from one generation to another.

Tradition can be positive; one of the meanings in the original Greek is *'what is delivered, the substance of the teaching'* i.e. the word delivered by God to men. It is referred to in the following passages in the Bible:

Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle. 2 Thessalonians 2:15

But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us. 2 Thessalonians 3:6

Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you. 1 Corinthians 11:2

"To be disrespectful of tradition and of historical theology is to be disrespectful of the Holy Spirit who has been actively enlightening the church in every century." John Stott: The Cross of Christ

And yet, Jesus and the apostles were scathing about another type of tradition. **He disagreed that human tradition should supersede Scripture,** our foundational authority.

Then the scribes and Pharisees who were from Jerusalem came to Jesus, saying, "Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread." He answered and said to them, "Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?" Matthew 15:1-3

He answered and said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honours Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men, the washing of pitchers and cups, and many

other such things you do... making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things you do.” Mark 7:6-8, 13

“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged to perform it.’ Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold? And, ‘Whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he is obliged to perform it.’ Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift? Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears by it and by all things on it. He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by Him who sits on it. Matthew 23:16-22

Peter informs the church that Christ has redeemed us from empty human traditions.

*Knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, **from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers.** 1 Peter 1:18*

For Reflection: What are the human traditions we hold on to, ignoring the ultimate authority of Scripture?

Culture

Culture may be simply defined as ‘the ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society.’

God spoke to the writers of the Bible over many centuries and in many cultures and there is no doubt that these writers describe and refer to cultural practices of their time. But the culture was not the predominant message of the writers; it was only the setting in which God revealed Himself to man.

Jesus referred to the culture of the world being able to rob us of fruitfulness...

Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word, and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. Mark 4:18, 19

Today many Christians seek to use the excuse of ‘culture’ to disobey the Word of God. They say, “This passage is not relevant to us in the 21st century; it reflects the culture of the time.” And yet, the God who spoke the Word into being, is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). We need to recognise that the **principles** that underlie the cultural context are still relevant to us today. (e.g. Foot washing and humility, the sanitation laws of Moses).

‘No word of the Bible was spoken in a cultural vacuum. Every part of it was culturally conditioned. This is not to say that its message was controlled by the local culture in such a way as to be distorted by it, but rather that the local culture was the medium through which God expressed himself. This is a fact which we neither can nor should deny. But we must be careful what deductions we draw from it. Extreme positions are being taken up on both sides of the debate. Some, whenever they find biblical teaching couched in cultural terms other than their own, declare the teaching irrelevant because the culture is alien. Others make the opposite mistake and invest both the kernel of the teaching and the cultural shell with equal normative authority. The more judicious way, however, is to preserve the inner substance of what God is teaching or commanding, while claiming the liberty to re-clothe it in modern cultural dress...

There can be no gainsaying the fact that in the purpose of God, His revelation reached its culmination in the first century AD, in Christ and in the apostolic witness to Christ, and therefore in what to us is an ancient culture of mixed Hebrew, Greek and Roman ingredients. Nor can there be any doubt that, in order to grasp His revelation, we have to think ourselves back into that culture. But the fact that God disclosed Himself in terms of a particular culture gives us not a justification for rejecting His revelation, but rather the right principle by which to interpret it, and also the solemn responsibility to reinterpret it in terms meaningful to our own culture.’ *John Stott*

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. Romans 12:2

But reject profane and old wives’ fables, and exercise yourself toward godliness. 1 Timothy 4:7

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. 1 John 2:15-17

(Please read the additional notes on what it means to be a cultural Christian today).

Experience

There is no doubt that experience plays a role in the life of the Christian. In addition to testifying that the Word of God is true, we can also testify about our experience with God. So Peter wrote, *‘We were eyewitnesses of His majesty’* 2 Peter 1:16. Paul witnessed, *“I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance”* Acts 26:19, 20. And John the Beloved declared, *“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life— the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us.”* 1 John 1:1, 2

But our experience and more particularly, the interpretation of our experience, never supersedes the authority of God’s Word.

In parts of Christendom today, particularly the charismatic wing, Satan has been successful in getting Christians to prioritise their experience over the Word of God. He makes them believe that the Holy Spirit will guide them at this particular time in earth’s history and the Word of God is not a priority (this counterfeit has been present since the beginning of church history). This makes them focus on experience (which is often linked to emotions). Many such Christians are very sincere, but they do not recognise that the work of the Spirit is to exalt Christ and His work for mankind.

‘To experience God's grace is to claim by faith the facts that God has accomplished for man through His Son, Christ Jesus. These facts are accomplished by God. What man needs is faith. The facts belong to God, and the experience belongs to man. Thus, faith is God's facts becoming man's experience. What the Bible shows us is simply "Fact, Faith, and Experience.”

As we learn more and more of God and obey Him, He will write His laws in our heart and we will experience the love, joy, peace that is the fruit of the Holy Spirit. But we must never place the emotions above our allegiance to God’s Word.

Reason

God’s revelation is a rational revelation to rational creatures... *“Come now, let us reason together”, says the Lord. Isaiah 1:18*

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. James 3:17

Because we have a sinful nature, Satan seeks to distort our reasoning.

Therefore, we must surrender our minds daily to the Holy Spirit, so that He controls our reason and reasoning. We must approach our reading and study of the Bible by asking the Holy Spirit to illuminate our minds.

For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. 2 Corinthians 10:4, 5

Satan’s counterfeit to reason under the control of God is to deceive the world into believing the philosophy of rationalism. This is the idea that truth is not sensory or experiential, but intellectual and is derived from reason. In other

words, certain truths exist, and our reason alone can directly grasp them. This makes human reason the test and standard for truth.

But the Bible clearly states that sinful man's heart is *"is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?"* Our only hope is in going to *'the Lord, who searches the heart and tests the mind'* Jeremiah 17:9, 10

'Search me, O God and know my heart and know my heart' Psalm 139:23

If we seek God and ask His Spirit to rule our minds, we will be kept from following what seems right in our own eyes and from falling into the deceptions of Satan.

In Your light we see light. Psalm 36:9

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. Colossians 2:8

There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death. Proverbs 16:25

'The Christian doctrine of revelation, far from making the human mind unnecessary, actually makes it indispensable and assigns to it its proper place. Our duty is to receive His message, to submit to it, to seek to understand it, and to relate it to the world in which we live. That God needs to take the initiative to reveal himself shows that our minds are finite and fallen; that he chooses to reveal himself to babies (Matt. 11:25) shows that we must humble ourselves to receive his Word; that He does so at all, and in words shows that our minds are capable of understanding it. One of the highest and noblest functions of man's mind is to listen to God's Word, and so to read his mind and think his thoughts after him, both in nature and in Scripture.' *John Stott: The Authentic Christian*

Conclusion:

The Bible and the Bible alone is the authoritative source of theology for the Christian. From it we learn who God is, the great 'I AM' and we learn to know Him *'in whom we live and breathe and have our being'* (Acts 17:28). We know God supremely through His Son, Christ Jesus.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth... No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him. John 1:14, 18

And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. 1 John 5:20
