

Unit 1 Introduction

Biblical Authority Matters for the Christian

Vishal Mangalwadi, a leading Christian intellectual from India, recently called the Bible, “the soul of Western civilization.” Ideas derived from the Bible such as personal liberty, social equality, and charitable responsibility have led to major cultural shifts in Western society, such as outlawing chattel slavery, instituting women’s suffrage, and creating the context for mass volunteer movements toward spiritual and social renewal. These notions capturing the collective imagination of Western nations have roots in the reading of Scripture.

The language of Christian Scripture has shaped and seasoned the English language: scapegoats, prodigal sons, a drop in the bucket, the apple of my eye, and hundreds of other biblical phrases entered everyday usage through reading the Bible. Around the world, local Bible translation teams have breathed new life into almost extinct languages by allowing God’s Word to speak through local cultural expression. There are 7,099 human languages and God will be worshiped in “every tribe, people, and language” (Revelation 7:9).

In short, the Bible has authority in the lives of those that have read it. In an early sermon, John Wesley, the 18th-century theological mind behind the Methodist revival, announced himself to be *homo unius libri* (a person of one book) in that the Bible leads the way to heaven. He wrote explanatory notes on the Old and New Testaments as guides for those reading the Bible for themselves. The Bible was always preeminent—first place—in the life and ministry of John Wesley, and it should be so to those of us continuing in this theological tradition.

Prima Scriptura—Scripture First

Christians believe the Bible has first place, or *prima Scriptura*. There is still valuable influence for Christian believers to be found in church history, theological reflection, and lived experience, but Scripture is the source of authority before everything else. What gives Scripture so much influence? Scripture is authoritative because it reveals Jesus Christ, God in the flesh. Therefore, the Bible offers expertise in what it means to be human. The variety of literary forms makes the Bible uniquely situated to speak into the lives of its readers. The Bible’s authority is what nourishes the gathered body of Christ. What makes the church into one, holy, universal witness to the gospel is the source of its faith, the Holy Bible.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). The gospel writer is not referring

to the Bible, but to Jesus Christ. The words of the Bible point to the personal Word of God, Jesus Christ. The good news is not a prophetic speech from Jeremiah, a hymn sung by the psalmist, or a letter from the apostle Paul. The good news is the hope of salvation found only in Jesus Christ.

Each book of the Bible communicates the hopeful good news of forgiveness from sinful disobedience to the breath of new life in Jesus Christ. As Paul wrote to the believers in Corinth, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). The written words always point to the personal Word.

Diversity of God’s Word

When reading God’s Word it is important to realize the Bible is like a library. Each biblical book, and even parts of each book, contains different kinds of writing styles called literary genres. The Bible has eight primary genres: history, law, poetry, prophetic speeches, wisdom sayings, apocalyptic visions, parables, and letters. The Psalms are mostly poetry, as is Proverbs and the book of Job. The prophetic books are mostly prophetic speeches, but also have narrative interludes and apocalyptic visions. The Gospels include various writing styles such as narrative history, teaching discourses, and parables.

Apocalyptic visions are one of the least understood genres. Biblical passages in the genre include Isaiah 24-27, Daniel 7, Zechariah 1-6, Ezekiel 37, Matthew 24, and the book of Revelation. These writings are future-oriented oracles that reveal the coming judgment of God upon obstinate and disobedient people. Typically it comes from historical periods of intense political oppression, and because of this, symbolic language is used to make it difficult for outsiders to understand. The “Valley of Dry Bones” in Ezekiel 37 is an example from Israel’s exile in Babylon. The vision begins with images of destruction, but ends with the hope of God’s intervention through the imminent arrival of the Messiah. Some commentators call the entire New Testament a kind of apocalyptic vision—the hopelessness of a marginalized and oppressed people reassured by the promise of God’s eternal reign.

Each of these literary genres within the text requires unique attention. One specific genre—letter writing—is the primary form of Paul’s writings, comprising almost one-fourth of the New Testament. Paul adapts this common mode of written communication to convey the good news. To best understand each letter, it is important to

know the rhetorical devices he employs, such as the lists of virtues and vices, roles and responsibilities of households, the blessing of prayers and thanksgivings, and echoes of Old Testament themes that would be well-known to a rabbi. Paul borrows many well-known rhetorical devices from the philosophers of his day, especially in First and Second Corinthians.

For example, the fruits of the Spirit are a memorable passage from Paul's letter to the Galatians (5:22-23). Often, this passage is read as a simple list. Paul uses the technique of putting the most important item first in a list of virtues because it is the most important. In this case, "love" is not just one characteristic of life in the Spirit, but the source of all the virtues on the list. Awareness of genres and writing styles will open up one's knowledge and understanding of the Scripture.

Ways of Reading the Bible

Dr. Roger Hahn was one of my Bible professors in seminary. He told a story about the evangelist D.L. Moody, who was once challenged by a young seeker. The young person said, "There are many things in the Bible I don't understand yet. How can I believe it if I do not understand?" The evangelist replied, "Do you eat chicken?" The young man, a bit confused, replied, "Of course." Moody said, "When we eat chicken, we lay aside the bones—the hard stuff. That's how you should read the Bible. There's enough in the Bible to chew on, and you can just lay the hard stuff aside." At first glance, it seems like good advice, especially for a new believer. Eventually, young ones will mature and need to deal with the "hard stuff."

The Bible can be hard to understand, but not impossible. Reading the Bible begins with three questions in mind. First, *What did Scripture say to the original readers?* There is an objective, plain meaning for readers patient enough to look for it. The historical and literary context of verses need to be viewed from the perspective of the ones who first heard or read it. Today's readers should avoid imposing their own situation and perspective upon an ancient text. Good questions to ask in this first reading all seek basic details. Questions will typically seek answers to questions about Who, When, and Where: Where does Jesus go to pray in Matthew 26? Who visits Jesus in the middle of the night in John 3?

Secondly, *What does this Scripture mean to today's readers?* This question helps us bridge the original meaning into today's context.

Sometimes, the text is difficult to understand. Biblical commentaries need to be consulted to show us something of the original meaning and offer bridges to today. Peter's conversation with the resurrected Jesus at the end of the Gospel of John makes sense today only if the reader understands something about the original Greek ways of thinking about love. Questions move beyond basic information and move toward ways the Scripture might shape readers' hearts and minds. Questions in the second reading usually start with What and How: What does Paul mean by "new creation" in Second Corinthians? How does servanthood exemplify Christlikeness in John 13?

Thirdly, *Why does God desire for all readers to hear this message?* God's words point the reader in the direction of truth found in knowing the personal Word. The truth of Scripture begins the process of transformation in the lives of readers. Questions need to be asked about why this Word is so important: Why does Paul boast about his weaknesses and struggles in Second Corinthians 11? For what purpose does God use Paul and Silas while imprisoned in Acts 16? The purpose of the biblical text nourishes the heart only through prayer along with the study. As with prayer, where two or three are gathered creates a community of learning. Here the Holy Spirit guides readers into "all the truth." (John 16:13). Many misunderstandings and mistaken notions are avoided when the Bible is read together with other believers. There is no formula for reading the Bible, just regular practice necessary to bring Scripture alive "in step with the Spirit" (Galatians 5:16).

The Bible has significance for every Christian. The transforming words of Scripture offer authoritative responses to the pressing questions if one is patient enough to seek the answers. The array of human existence requires diversity and variety in the ways God communicates through the Bible. The truth of Scripture is uncovered in the presence of other believers in unison with the Spirit's guidance. In every case, the words of God point to the incarnational presence of the Word in the Person of Jesus Christ. For those willing to read the Bible, God is there ready to speak and be heard.

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