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In our world there are no absolutes. The opinion poll has become the arbiter of moral values. Having removed God from the system, modern man has discovered that the concepts of 'truth' and 'authority' have departed with him. Christians cannot but be affected by the demise of these concepts in our society. As we have looked at the state of Evangelicalism in the first few issues of The Briefing we have seen this to be the case. Most of the issues facing Evangelicals today resolve into a debate about authority, and in particular the authority of the Bible. In each area of controversy, the issue is 'Where do we go for the answer on this question? What is the truth by which we must live?' We all believe in the authority of the Bible, or say we do – why then do we disagree? In this important article, The Briefing looks at the place of the Bible in the lives of twentieth century Christians.

Four competing Viewpoints

While nearly all Christians uphold the authority of the Scriptures, in reality there are other authorities, which compete with the Bible for supremacy, other sources of truth about God and our world. Most commonly, there are four claimants to religious authority:

Bible

Experience

Institution

Reason

Put simply, these four competing authorities represent four Christianities.

There are those who seek to understand their life in terms of the Bible, and treat the Bible as the final and comprehensive authority in all matters of faith and life.

Others wish to be led more by their experience of God. They see their Christian lives in terms of following the moving and promptings of the Spirit.

A third group regards the teachings of the institution or tradition to which they belong as authoritative for their life. If their church or priest or bishop or pastor offers direction for their behaviour or understanding, they will adopt it readily and fall into line.

The fourth group bases their understanding of God and what he requires of us on human reason. They will accept and practice whatever can be demonstrated as sensible, rational and intelligent and discard the primitive and irrational.

Four views of God

Each of these views springs from an understanding of what God is like. The first view is based on a God who speaks. God reveals himself to mankind through speech, through his word, and can only be known through his word. The second view assumes that God moves and acts in our lives and can be experienced directly today. The third is built on a God of order, who has called out a

people to be his own – a people who are to live in unity. The fourth group has as its God one who is reasonable and rational and true, and will always be found in what is reasonable, rational and true.

We should find ourselves giving some assent to each of these understandings of God. Our God is all of these things. Nobody adopts any of these views to the extreme. Everybody's theological position has a measure of Bible, Experience, Institution and Reason mixed in.

Areas not points

If we were to draw a diagram of these authorities or sources of truth, we would need to draw an area, not simply four unrelated points. There is a continuum between these different areas of authority.

Those, for example, who wish to rely chiefly on reason may also use the revelation of Scripture, as well as their experience and the teachings of their denomination. In fact, this process is inevitable. We can hardly read the Bible without using our reason to help interpret it, and our experience to apply it to our lives.

Unfortunately, the fact that we have areas of authority rather than points leads to confusion amongst Christians. Those of us who want to have the Bible as our final authority keep finding ourselves using reason or experience to back up our argument, and even appealing to the traditions of our institution and its leaders. Furthermore, those who ultimately do not accept the authority of the Bible keep appealing to it to support their points of view, claiming all the while that the Bible really is their basis. Add to this the theological grasshoppers who flit about without a qualm and the scene is one of chaos.

Drawing the line

Should there be lines drawn between these different viewpoints? Some say no. They argue that the Church (the institution) has given us the Bible; or that the Spirit we experience today is the same Spirit who wrote the Bible; or that the Bible will always be rational (being the product of a rational God). However, we must not be fooled. The end result of these arguments is that the Bible's sphere of influence is radically diminished. When it is subordinated to or diluted among the other areas, the Bible ceases to speak with its own voice. It becomes a rubber stamp for our own views and prejudices.

There comes a point where one has to choose between these four competing authorities. What will we do when our experience doesn't tally with the Scriptures? Or when our reason disagrees with our church's teaching? Or when the Bible seems irrational or unreasonable? It is at this point that we reveal our true colours. We draw a line and take our stand. Within our authority diagram, the four areas of authority and truth need to have boundaries.

Some groups take their stand blatantly—others are more subtle. Groups like the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses are quite blatant about it. The Mormons regard the Bible as being full of errors (unlike the Book of Mormon). Where the two disagree, it is clearly the Bible that has got it wrong. Similarly, a Jehovah's Witness recently claimed that the Watchtower and the Bible never contradict each other, but that if they ever did, the Watchtower would be right.

For an example of the more subtle approach, let us delve back into history to a group called the "Soccinians". In 16th century Italy, Reformation ideas were in the air, and a man named Sonzinni came under their influence. He came to believe in the authority of the Bible, and fiercely proclaimed that the Scriptures, and the Scriptures alone, were to be the rule for Christian living. However, Sonzinni also firmly believed that God was rational and moral (according to 16th century rationality and morality).

Consequently he and his followers taught that the Bible would always be rational and moral, and that any passage that seemed irrational or immoral was being interpreted falsely. Those passages, then, that talked of the wrath of God and his desire to see Jericho destroyed must not be taken as explanations of God's character – God would never be immoral in that fashion. And the conclusion that God was three and yet one, being mathematically irrational, was also false. Jesus, therefore, was not God. The Soccinians became the forbears of that group that still exists in our community, the Unitarians.

Notice in this brief account, how the Soccinians fiercely upheld the authority of the Bible, and yet completely undermined it by their greater adherence to their concepts of reason and morality. This is a distressingly common feature today. Nearly every group, even outright heretics like the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, claim to abide by the authority of the Bible. However, it is not what people claim, but what they do with the Bible that reveals their true basis of authority. If, on some issue, we choose to observe some authority other than the Bible (and so come to an unbiblical conclusion) we have crossed the line – we have stepped out of the Bible square.

As an illustration of this, let us think about the use of statues in worship. The Bible's teaching on idolatry, on the use of statues to represent or worship God, is consistently prohibitive. There is no ambiguity. However, when the issue is discussed in churches you will hear people who claim to live under the authority of the Bible putting forward all kinds of arguments in favour of statues and religious art. "They are so helpful to my prayer life" (experience), or "Surely we shouldn't demolish the rich tradition of a thousand years of Christian heritage" (institution), or "God loves beauty – shouldn't we honour him with objects of holy beauty" (reason), or "People need concrete, visual examples to help them understand all these abstract concepts" (reason).

The clear teaching of the Bible is smothered under the weight of arguments appealing to other authorities. None of these arguments take any account of Jesus, the perfect image of the invisible God, revealed to us in the Bible.

Interpretation and Authority

A persistent problem for Biblical Christians is the question of interpretation. In this classic ploy, the point of contention is shifted from authority to interpretation. In any particular dispute, it will be claimed that both sides accept the authority of the Bible – they simply disagree on its interpretation at certain points.

Sometimes, it is true, there can be legitimate difference amongst Christians on the trivial details of Christian life and practice. On the subject of what to do symbolically with the children of believers, for example, we see groups who genuinely subscribe to the authority of the Bible unable to agree. This is mainly because the Bible says so little on the subject. This side of glory,

this is perhaps inevitable.

However, disagreement over interpretation is increasingly being used to avoid the teaching of the Bible. Where Scripture comes to an unpalatable conclusion, it is simply reinterpreted along more acceptable lines. We see this happening in almost every area of controversy within Evangelical Christianity.

A Case study: the Charismatic debate

The debate surrounding the Charismatic Renewal movement is as good an example as any. It is generally accepted that both sides are Christian, and both sides claim to accept the authority of the Bible. Interpretation is the difficulty, so it is claimed. One side concludes that the "Baptism in the Spirit" is a second and subsequent experience from regeneration – the other asserts that this "Baptism" is just another way of describing regeneration. One side places great emphasis on tongue speaking – the other questions what tongues really are and regards them as unimportant anyway.

It is beyond the scope of this article to canvass the Biblical material on these issues (let alone the other issues involved in this area of debate). Let us take just 1 Corinthians 12- 14, one of the chief passages used to support the Charismatic position. This section talks about the gifts God gives us by his Spirit and how we are to employ them in our congregational life. What does this passage teach? It makes plain that all Christians, all who are members of Christ's body, have been baptised by the one Spirit (12:12-13). This is the Spirit who enables us to confess that "Jesus is Lord" (12:3). There is no room in this passage for a second and subsequent "Baptism by the Spirit". Paul also pours cold water on the practice of speaking in tongues, especially in church, asserting that the edifying gifts (such as prophecy) are much to be preferred and sought after (14:1-19).

Perhaps the Charismatics are reading a different Bible. Many of them have concluded from this passage (and others) that Christians should seek a Spirit-Baptism apart from regeneration, and that tongue-speaking is the mark of a dynamic and fully obedient church. This is a classic case. The teaching of Scripture has been turned upside down to fall into line with people's experience and church practice. Unfortunately, their attitude to the Scriptures has been revealed by their actions, not their words. The authority of the Bible has been usurped, in this case by experience.

The authority of the Interpreter

We must not point the finger too quickly, however, for we all fall into error on the question of interpretation. Frequently, we make up our minds on an issue according to how the great Evangelical interpreters have spoken. "If F. F. Bruce, John Stott and Jim Packer all hold this viewpoint, then..." They could all be wrong.

More astonishing still is the "disputed passage" fallacy. The argument runs: "If all the great scholars can't agree, if the passages are all disputed, then there is no point appealing to them." This is a total misunderstanding of the authority of the Bible. It rests on the naïve belief that there is such a thing as an undisputed passage and on the sinful assumption that God has made the Scriptures unclear (rather than the interpreters). This comes out in the footnotes of the Revised Standard Version, where that little phrase keeps popping up: "The Hebrew text is uncertain." The Hebrew text is not uncertain – it is the translator who is uncertain how to translate it. Taking this

line of argument to its logical conclusion, perhaps we should dismiss all those passages that speak of the divinity of Christ because they are disputed by the Jehovah's Witnesses, and all those passages that speak of the death of Christ because they are disputed by the Muslims.

Sola Scriptura

The authority of the Bible will never be maintained unless it is maintained alone. While recognising the subsidiary roles of experience, institution and reason in our understanding and application of the Scriptures, it is still crucial that we establish again the supreme authority of the Bible for our lives. There can be no alternative or additional authority. It is the only reliable source of truth, the only reliable guide to knowing God. The other claimants are better regarded as lampposts – helpful for illumination, but not for leaning on. The Bible is sufficient for making God's mind known to us, for telling us all that we need to know to live in godly obedience to him – in all ages, in all cultures, until the Lord returns. God has not left anything out that is of any significance for us as Christians. We don't have to search elsewhere for the answer to our dilemmas. If the Bible doesn't give an answer, then there is no dilemma – we can do as we see fit, for the issue is unimportant. If we are taught things by spiritual experiences, church traditions or rational reflections (beyond the realm of Scripture) they are unimportant for Christian living. These things must not be laid on the consciences of other Christians. If the Bible doesn't teach it, it is not normative or significant for the Christian.

We must be on our guard against groups and individuals who follow additional authorities to the Bible. It is an oft-repeated pattern. Some additional authority teaches them some 'truth'. They then find this truth in the Bible, reading their new idea back into the text. Before long, this 'new truth' has become an 'old truth' that Christians need to rediscover if they are to live a life pleasing to God.

Subtly, but inexorably, the Bible's emphasis on godly living and ministry is placed to one side. The area of the Bible's authority has been left far behind. The Bible is not simply authoritative. The Bible alone is authoritative.