

contents

Introduction 9

PART 1: THE WORD RIGHTLY PREACHED

Chapter 1: The Bible's Authority 19

Chapter 2: The Bible's Sufficiency 27

Chapter 3: The Bible's Usefulness 35

PART 2: THE ORDINANCES RIGHTLY ADMINISTERED

Chapter 4: Baptized in the Name of the Father,
Son, and Holy Spirit 45

Chapter 5: Christ's Body Broken and Blood Spilled 51

Chapter 6: Fencing the Table 57

PART 3: LEADERSHIP BIBLICALLY FORMED AND FUNCTIONING

Chapter 7: The Chief Shepherd 67

Chapter 8: Elders 75

Chapter 9: Deacons 85

Chapter 10: The Congregation 89

PART 4: DISCIPLINE PRACTICED WITH GRACE

Chapter 11: Go to Your Brother 101

Chapter 12: Tell It to the Church 107

PART 5: THE MISSION SHARED BY ALL

Chapter 13: Evangelism 117

Chapter 14: Discipleship 121

Notes 127

Acknowledgments 129

THE BIBLE'S AUTHORITY

The Bible is unlike any other book. There are thousands of sacred texts used by various religious groups searching for wisdom and life. But the Bible stands out from the rest, not only in terms of the number of ancient copies that have survived throughout history and its popularity around the world, but also in terms of what it is. The Bible is not merely the words of spiritual leaders or a book of instruction. It is the very Word of God.

THE BIBLE'S DIVINE ORIGIN

When the apostle Paul explains that “all Scripture is breathed out by God” (2 Tim. 3:16), he is telling us that what the church recognized to be and received as Holy Scripture, though penned by men, was in fact

God's Word to us. Further, the apostle Peter explains that Scripture is not the invention of man, but that "men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:20).

Because the Bible has a divine origin, it has divine authority. Psalm 19 unpacks the nature of Scripture and what it accomplishes in the believer:

*The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the testimony of the LORD is sure,
making wise the simple;
the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is pure,
enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the LORD is clean,
enduring forever;
the rules of the LORD are true,
and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey
and drippings of the honeycomb.
Moreover, by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.*

(PS. 19:7-11)

Scripture is "perfect," meaning that it is complete and lacking in nothing regarding its teaching on Christian

faith and practice. While we profit from the preaching and writing of Christian leaders, only when they rightly understand and apply Scripture do we benefit spiritually. The Bible is perfect.

Scripture is “sure,” meaning that it is trustworthy. Theologians often talk about “the trustworthiness of Scripture,” meaning that the Bible is reliable in all that it teaches. When people bet on horses—I am not advocating gambling—a “sure thing” is a horse that is guaranteed to win. Your bet is safe. There will be a return on your investment. Of course, there is no such thing as a “sure thing” in the matters of the world. But when it comes to the Bible, we have the divine promise that it is sure. And all of its promises are reliable. We cannot lose by believing what it teaches.

Scripture is “right,” meaning that it communicates the person, work, and will of God. It is in full accord with who God is and what He wants from us and for us. While God is unknowable in any complete way since He is infinite and eternal, we have the assurance that what the Bible reveals about God is right. It is not spiritual guesswork.

Scripture is “pure” in that it is without corruption in its content and message. We believe that the Word of God is “inerrant,” meaning that it contains no errors in whatever it teaches. And beyond that, the Word of God

is pure in its morality. Many today believe that the ethics and doctrines communicated in the Bible are not only primitive and antiquated, but also are immoral. How can a God condemning someone to hell be good? How can punishment for sin we inherited be just? How can the Bible teach that true marriage is between one man and one woman, and anything outside of that is sinful? Biblical morality is perceived to be out of step with our culture and “common sense” and thus impure. But the standard of righteousness is not found in the convictions of any one human, nor in the general consensus of any society. The standard of righteousness is found only in the God who created all things. He alone is pure, and His word is pure (1 John 1:5).

Scripture is “clean,” meaning that it is not only pure in itself, but also that it purifies all who receive it by faith. Scripture is the instrument by which God cleanses a soul and sanctifies a spirit (Eph. 5:26). It keeps us from sin, calls us to Christ, is the means by which we are born again (1 Peter 1:23), and is what God uses to transform us from the inside out (Rom. 12:2).

Scripture is “true,” just as God is true and Jesus is “the truth” (John 14:6). Despite what the world tells us today, truth exists and can be known. We can discover much of it, but the most important truth is that which we cannot unearth on our own. It has been revealed by

THE BIBLE'S AUTHORITY

God Himself. He has opened the deepest mysteries of life and death, God and humanity, eternity and salvation, in the pages of Holy Scripture. So when we open the Book, we open something given to us by God that is complete, trustworthy, comprehensive, life-changing, and true. All of this means that it brings with it authority which we all must recognize.

THE BIBLE'S CLAIM

Today in our Western individualistic culture, we tend to bristle at the idea of authority, unless it is our own. Most of us say we like freedom, but what we really want is radical autonomy—a life lived independently from the authority of another. We want to live life our way and for our own purposes. And when it comes to spirituality, most prefer anarchy to order and creativity to confession. But the Bible, as the Word of God, rightly claims a position of authority in the life of the church.

As Christians, we may be quick to say that God is our authority, but we must say more than that. If we say that the Lord is our God, then we must also say that His Word is authoritative in the church and in our own lives. This second confession is more difficult to make, for it means that there is a clearly articulated authority that directly applies to our thoughts, decisions, and actions, and to which we are held accountable.

The authority of Scripture implies that we should hear and accept God's Word as indeed divine when it is read and preached. Not only that, we should heed it as His very message to us. Every time we open Scripture to read it, we must recognize that God has spoken, and that He is speaking today—to us. It is all too easy to treat the Bible as a text to study and know, only to forget that it has been given to us so that we may be confronted by the God who wrote it, convicted of the sin it condemns, and rescued by the grace it offers to all. The authoritative Word of God, the Bible, is God's Word to us, and we must receive it as such.

Many people want a special word from the Lord, to have one of those miraculous moments when His voice breaks through the clouds and echoes overhead in booming authority. But we have something better: the voice of God recorded perfectly on pages that, when read, echoes in our hearts with thundering certainty. The miracle stays with us, and its authority is a gift and a safeguard. The old Baptist confession gives us a beautiful summary of this truth:

The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience, although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men

inexcusable; yet they are not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and His will which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord at sundry times and in diversified manners to reveal Himself, and to declare (that) His will unto His church; and afterward for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan, and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which makes the Holy Scriptures to be most necessary, those former ways of God's revealing His will unto His people being now completed.²

No doubt, a local church should be governed by elders working with the congregation. But the final evaluation of all that is done in and through the church is the Scripture itself.