Group Bible Study: The Question of Authority
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Part two of a series. Read part one.

**Group Bible study can be a vital part of the Holy Spirit's great "mopping up" operation to deal with our doubts, misunderstandings, and difficulties with Biblical truth.**

In part one of this series we focused on group Bible study as one way to meet the great need to overcome today's deep and widespread famine of knowledge of the Word of God, even among those who claim to be Bible-believing Christians. Next we turn to the most essential consideration in Bible study, and that is the issue of authority.

**Man Cannot Truly Know God On His Own**

Scripture is God's written revelation given by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. For this very reason, as we study God's Word - individually, in our families, in private groups, in educational institutions, or corporately in the church - we must recognize that Scripture is the authority and we are not. Profitable study of the Word of God - and indeed salvation itself - entails bowing the knee to the authority of the Word.

Romans chapter one tells us that every human being has within him a knowledge of the existence of God. People may try to deny it, but God tells us it is there. We have, all around us, what the theologians call the "natural revelation" of God. We see "even His eternal power and Godhead," Paul tells us, in the creation. This knowledge alone is sufficient to condemn us as sinners in Adam's rebellious line.

But ultimate knowledge of God - that is, saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, and growth in His truth, culminating in life with Him forever - is a different matter. Scripture tells
us that we can never arrive at this ultimate knowledge by our own efforts. "The world by wisdom did not know God" (1 Corinthians 1:21). God the creator is eternal and absolutely holy, so that man on His own cannot even come into His presence. Man the creature is finite and subject to death, and utterly sinful.

How, then, can man savingly know God? How can those who are saved profitably study His Word? We must come to the point at which we realize that we are truly helpless on our own in this matter, and that we must come to God as a little child. Jesus said, "Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it" (Mark 10:15).

God in kindness and grace has chosen to reveal Himself to those who will come in such humbleness of heart, by hearing and receiving His Word. Scripture must be our authority.

**The Authority of Christ**

The person and work of Christ is the central fact of Scripture. In the Old Testament, by the illumination of the Holy Spirit, we see Christ in types and shadows. The Old Testament looks forward to Him. It tells us that a Person who is Authority Himself is going to speak - the greatest of the prophets, the supreme spokesman for God since He will be God in the flesh. The Old Testament anticipates this One who was to come.

And then we come to New Testament and we find that it is entirely taken up with Christ's authority in and over all things - in the creation and sustaining of the universe, in salvation, in the church, in genuine Christian life and ministry. In an address to a group of Christian college students, the great British preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones once said this:

> I have an increasing feeling that we must come back to this [the preeminence of Christ]. I am not sure that apologetics has not been the curse of evangelical
Christianity for the last twenty to thirty years. I am not saying that apologetics is not necessary. But I am suggesting that, with a kind of worldly wisdom, we have been approaching the world on the grounds of apologetics instead of (with the apostle Paul), determining not to know anything "save Christ crucified" [1 Corinthians 2:2].

We must become fools for Christ's sake, says Paul. "If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise" (I Corinthians 3.18). We assert Him, we proclaim Him, we start with Him, because He is the ultimate and the final Authority. We start with the fact of Jesus Christ, because He is really at the centre of the whole of our position and the whole of our case rests upon Him.[1]

The Authority of Scripture

Next, as we approach the study of God's Word we must understand that it is through Scripture that Christ exercises His authority over the individual believer and the church as a body. Dr. Lloyd-Jones noted that critics sometimes suggest that

Conservative Evangelicals are "Bibliolators", that is, we put the Scriptures in the place of the Lord. Their own authority, these critics tell us, is not the Scriptures, but the Lord Himself. Now this sounds very impressive and very imposing at first, as if they were but stating that for which we are ourselves contending.

It sounds as if it were a highly spiritual position until, again, you begin to examine it carefully. The obvious questions to put to those who make such statements are these: 'How do you know the Lord? What do you know about the Lord, apart from the Scriptures? Where do you find Him? How do you know that what you seem to have experienced concerning Him is not a figment of your own imagination, or not the product of some abnormal psychological state, or
not the work perchance of some occult power or evil spirit?' It sounds all very impressive and imposing when they say, 'I go directly to the Lord Himself.'

But we must face the vital question concerning the basis of our knowledge of the Lord, our certainty with respect even to His authority, and how we are to come into practical possession of it.[2]

We come into that practical possession of knowledge and certainty through the Scriptures.

**The Spirit's Great "Mopping Up" Operation**

Certainly nothing could be more important to the matter of group Bible study. And so Dr. Lloyd-Jones goes on to point us to the right approach to the question of authority. He points out, first of all, that Scripture must be viewed as a whole.

It is of vital importance that we should always approach our consideration of this problem as a whole and not immediately start with details. So many, it seems to me, are in trouble because they take up this or that particular difficulty, or some other detailed point. As a result, because they start with details, they become so immersed that they miss the main argument. Now I know that there are parts to a whole, but the whole is not merely the summation of the parts.

There is nothing more important, if we are concerned about the authority of the Scriptures, than to start with the whole Bible first, and to consider the details in the light of the whole, and not in the reverse order.

Let me use a simple illustration. In many realms of life the same principle holds true. Take for instance the way in which the British Commonwealth secured the addition of Canada. Canada was wrested from the French in one battle, the Battle
of Quebec in 1759. Although the result of that one battle was crucial it took many long years and many local skirmishes really to occupy the whole land.

That is what I mean by this distinction between possessing the whole and then proceeding to possess the parts. In approaching the Scriptures, we must adopt a similar procedure. There are points, there are particular matters, which do constitute real difficulties and problems to us. Are we then to reject the whole because of a particular difficulty? Is a scientific theory to be rejected because at a given stage it fails to explain certain comparatively unimportant details? Am I to disbelieve in the existence and value of the sun because there are spots upon it?

No, that is very false reasoning. That is to introduce confusion. The Bible is a whole and its authority is complete. But having accepted it all, I still have certain residual difficulties, problems and questions. It is surely nothing less than tragic that a man should start with a detail and because he is unhappy about that should say, "I cannot recognize the authority of the Scriptures at all."[3]

Our study of the Word of God is part of the Holy Spirit's great "mopping up operation" to deal with our doubts, misunderstandings, and difficulties with Biblical truth. This is why Jesus prayed to the Father for us in these terms: "I have given them Your Word... Sanctify them by Your Word. Your Word is truth" (John 17:14, 17).

The Spirit's Authority

And so it was that Jesus said this about the One who is the author of all Scripture:

And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever - the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. (John 14:16-17)
But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me. (John 15:26)

When He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. (John 16:13)

And thus the Apostle John declares, "For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one" (1 John 5:7). Dr. Lloyd-Jones commented:

It is...the Holy Spirit alone who can give us true spiritual understanding of the Scriptures, an understanding of the doctrine. John puts this clearly (1 John 2:20). He is dealing with the "anti-Christs", those people who had been in the Church, but who had gone out of the Church because they were not of it. They had thought that they were converted, and had been accepted as such. But they had now gone out. They had never really been true believers. They were temporary, false believers.

The question arises as to how we can differentiate. How were these ignorant first Christians, most of whom were slaves, to discriminate in these matters? John says: "But ye have an unction [an anointing] from the Holy One, and ye know all things." He repeats it in verse 27, "But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you."

There is an anointing and an unction given by the Holy Ghost which gives us understanding. And thus it has often come to pass in the long history of the Church that certain ignorant, more or less illiterate people have been able to discriminate between truth and error much better than the great doctors of the
Church. They were simple enough to trust to the "anointing", and thus they were able to distinguish between things that differ.

The saintly Samuel Rutherford, that mighty man of God who lived three hundred years ago in Scotland, commented one day: "If you would be a deep divine [that is, have a deep understanding of God and Scripture], I recommend to you [the Spirit's work of] sanctification." Ultimately the way to understand the Scriptures and all theology is to become holy. It is to be under the authority of the Spirit. It is to be led of the Spirit.

This is why prayer is such a vital element in group Bible study. All who lead and all who participate must come together in humility. All must seek, and submit to, the authority of Christ, the Word, and the Spirit in order to grow in grace.

References:


2. Authority, page 36.


Next: Types of Bible Studies