

Thirdly, God's creation features blessing.

Conspicuously, God blesses his human creatures (Genesis 1:28). God's actions in creation are good and benevolent, for he is good and benevolent, and this is reflected in his words.

God, then, is knowing, sovereign and good. Accordingly, his words will be knowing, sovereign and good. His words cannot be mistaken, for he knows all. His words cannot be thwarted, for he is all-powerful. His words are not deceptive, for he is good. His word is, then, utterly trustworthy and rightly authoritative, because of who he is.

This means that evangelical stresses on the Bible's final authority are simply outworkings of who we believe God is. Conversely, if someone denies the Bible's final authority, then they are denying either that God is knowing, sovereign and good, or that Jesus was right about the Bible originating with God. If the former, the real problem is their ideas about God. If the latter, the real problem is their assumption that they know what is of God better than Jesus does.

We must note a couple of things before moving on. First, the origin of the Bible in God is not something we confer. This means, secondly, that this crucial characteristic of the Bible remains true even if we deny it. Our denial renders us disobedient. It is not the equivalent of voting someone out of office. Thirdly, to stress the divine origin of the Bible does not deny the human side of the authorship of biblical books. Rather, we follow Jesus in giving due weight to the divine side.

Who We Are and the Authority of the Bible

If we humans were knowing, sovereign and good, then our words too would be trustworthy and authoritative. We are not. First, we are creatures. As finite beings we generate finite knowledge. We depend on another's knowledge to know our creator and our relation to him. Secondly, we are fallen. After distinguishing purely human words from words originating with God, Jesus describes the human heart after the Fall. As well as obvious sins of violence and sexual immorality, Jesus speaks of deceit and slander, sins of falsehood. Our fallenness includes our

speech. Just as a good God produces trustworthy words, so a deceitful humanity produces untrustworthy words.

This means that humans cannot allow other words to displace God's words as authenticated by Jesus. While human words may sometimes be true and insightful, they cannot have final authority, given their origin. They need confirmation by a speaker who does not lie.

Who we are, then, means we need the Bible as God's final authoritative word. Who we are, though, also means we are sinfully tempted to reject God's word precisely because it is God's word and we as a race are hostile to God. This temptation remains even within churches (2 Timothy 4:1ff). We should not then be surprised that the Bible's authority is continually contested, nor that it is contested in subtle ways even by those giving lip service to the Bible's authority while in their conduct showing that the Bible has been silenced.

Further Reading

The Institutes of the Christian Religion J. Calvin, book I, chapters I-X. Trans. F.L Battles. Library of Christian Classics. Philadelphia:Westminster Press.

"Fundamentalism" and the Word of God J.I. Packer Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 1958, repr. 1992.

The Revelation of God P.F.Jensen. Leicester:IVP. 2002

UCCF *Doctrinal Basis* (see www.uccf.org.uk)

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Truth Matters is an occasional series of leaflets published by Reform addressing issues of importance for the understanding of the church today.

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The Authority of the Bible

truth matters

Essential issues in Christian teaching and practice

The authority of the Bible

God is knowing, sovereign and good .. his words will be knowing, sovereign and good.

Setting the Scene

What makes evangelicals different? A cluster of things is associated with evangelicalism, but one of the most typical is that we evangelicals view the Bible as supremely authoritative. We have a place for human reason, experience and for tradition, but these are not sovereign for our understanding. The Bible's sovereignty, though, is enshrined in evangelical statements of belief such as the UCCF Doctrinal Basis. It marks our corporate life as we stress the public teaching of the Bible. It marks our personal spiritual lives as we emphasise regular individual study of the Bible.

A Disputed Authority

This hall-mark of evangelicalism is also highly contentious. Think of some the current objections:

- 'you talk too much about the Bible and not enough about Jesus'
- 'your stress on the Bible makes you spiritually sterile'
- 'God speaks in many ways and the Bible is - at best - only one of them'
- 'Your use of the Bible is authoritarian'
- 'God is saying a new thing'

The list goes on, not to mention other questions too, for example about whether we have the real text of the Bible, how the canon of Scripture came to be formed and so on. The aim of this leaflet, though, is more restricted: to focus on the question of authority. Questions about the Bible's authority fall, perhaps, into two basic categories:

1. Why should the Bible have final authority?

Here the point is that final authority belongs to something other than the Bible. Perhaps modern science or psychology are surer guides to truth? Perhaps a particular person can lay down the truth, whether that person is Pope, Bishop, presbyter, or guru? Perhaps the voice of the majority is indeed the voice of God? The issue here is not that authority is wrong, but rather that we don't want the Bible to have final authority.

2. Why should the Bible have authority?

Here the point is that we are objecting to any attempt to set up codes that stand over people. The issue here is not that we want another authority than the Bible. Rather, authority over others is itself wrong.

This leaflet, however, will argue that anything short of accepting that the Bible has final authority misunderstands who God is, and who we are. Let me explain.

Who God Is and Biblical Authority

Why put these two things together? After all, some critics of the idea that the Bible is the final authority for humanity claim precisely that they uphold God whereas evangelicals do not, and instead 'really worship the Bible'. Behind this lies the idea that the Bible is separate from God, and that the characteristically evangelical view of the Bible elevates the Bible at God's expense.

This has a grain of truth. The Bible is not the same as God, but then evangelicals never said it is. What evangelicals have said is that the Bible has its origin in God: it is God's expression of his thoughts and will. Evangelicals are not claiming the Bible takes God's place, but rather that it has a unique place because it comes from God. Since it originates in God, there is a relation between the Bible's authority and who God is.

That relation of origin is taught by Jesus. In Mark 7:1-13 Jesus is questioned about observing the traditions about hand-washing (verse 5). His answer sharply distinguishes the commandments of God from the traditions of men (verse 8). Not all 'religious' words are the same. The difference is one of origin: the purely human origin of the tradition as against the divine origin of the command to honour parents (verse 10). This divine origin sets the Bible apart from other words and makes it wrong to ignore the Bible, as the Pharisees have done by their corban rule (verses 12 and 13).

Yet why is this relation of origin so important? Well, words can acquire importance depending on who utters them. My own thoughts on whether Britain should adopt the euro are worth little: they originate from an economic ignoramus. The words of the Bible, though, are God's words. It is worth recalling who this God is. He is the uncreated creator of all from nothing by his will (e.g. Revelation 4:11).

From this status several things follow. **First, there is his knowledge.** As knowing creator of all, he understands and knows his creation both in its individual parts and in their mutual relationships. As uncreated, he knows himself, since no part of his 'history' is hidden from him. His words about his creation and about himself are fully knowing words.

Secondly, there is his sovereignty. As creator of all, all things are his property. Hence the language of possession of, for example, Psalm 24:1-2. He has the right to issue words of authority to his creatures, for they are his. Since he is ultimate sovereign, his words necessarily have final authority. Not only, though, does he have the right to issue words of authority, his words carry effective authority. Since all things depend on him, his decisions for his creatures will ultimately be effective (compare Isaiah 55:11).