

Armagh Baptist Church
Sunday 23rd February 2020 – 6:30pm

Issues Facing Christians Today:

'Do we really still believe in The Final Authority of Scripture?'

2 Timothy 3:10 – 4:8

Introduction

Among the questions that were raised at our Members Forum, 18 months ago, to do with *Issues Facing Christians Today*, there was one that went like this:

'In terms of the pressure to be 'progressive' not 'traditional' as Christians is Scripture really still our final authority in all matters of faith and practice?'

Now, I think you'll agree with me, that's a very searching question indeed:

In terms of the pressure to be seen as '*progressive*' rather than '*traditional*' as

Christians, do we **really** still regard the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be our **final** authority in all matters of faith and practice?

This cuts right to the core of this whole series on *Issues Facing Christians Today*. Where does our right to speak on any of these matters come from?

I firmly believe, I have nothing to say on any of these issues we have looked at, unless I am speaking from God's Word. What value is my opinion over and above anybody else's opinion when it comes to divorce or remarriage, same-sex marriage, homosexuality or transgenderism. Why would anybody want to listen to anything I have to say on any of these matters? Sure, it's just my views against anybody else's. Why would you bother listening to me, on them?

On all of these matters, I have tried to show you what **God's Word** says about them. That is my task, that is my job – to '*Preach the Word, in season and out of season.*' Not just when it's popular or palatable to do so – but at all times. Even when God's Word is diametrically opposed to what is popular in the culture today.

I should add, that I'm taking tonight's question to apply to these big-ticket issues. Not just to whether or not women should wear hats in church; not just whether you should read from the King James Version of the Bible or the ESV, or NIV! Not just whether a Christian should drink alcohol or not. (Although God's Word does have something to say on such matters). The point is: what has God's Word got to say on these big-ticket issues facing us as Christians today. Are we really going to still hold to the *Final Authority* of Scripture in *ALL* matters we face today?

As far as the question of **authority** is concerned, we believe that...

'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to the Lord Jesus Christ' (*Matthew 28:18-20*). He is now seated at God's right hand in heaven, as King of kings and Lord of lords. He is in the position of **absolute authority** over this universe. He is therefore the only Head of the Church. - That's what we believe. If there is any authority in the church, therefore, it must be a delegated authority. Because all authority belongs to Christ by virtue of His resurrection.

So where does Authority lie in our Church?

Well, we believe in a congregational form of church government.

In other words, every decision in church life is taken by the **members**. We are a body of believers. So, as believers, each one of us has a relationship with the Head of the Church, our Lord Jesus Christ. So, each one of us should be able to seek God's will and be guided by Him, and then do His will.

So that's why members meetings are important.

When we gather together as members to discuss the business of the church, we are met together in Christ's name, we are under His authority, and we want to do only what pleases Him. So, we pray, and we discuss, and we are guided by Scripture, but then we come to make a decision, and so we vote. And we believe that the outcome of that vote, is God's guidance for us as a church, and so we proceed. If the vote is not clear-cut, then we need to go away and give it more thought and prayer, and come back to it, as the Lord leads and guides us.

So in a very real sense authority is invested in the hearts and minds of every believer, as we come together as members to discern God's Will as a body of believers. So there is **some authority** delegated to the membership of the church.

But then, there is **some authority** delegated to the **eldership** of the church also. The church members meet to decide who are going to be their elders. Again, led and guided by the Lord, the members vote, and those who receive a sufficient number of votes are then appointed to serve as elders of the congregation. This is an important task. The elders are put in place by the congregation, and by the will of God, and they have authority to lead the flock. But they can have no authority *over* the flock unless that authority comes from God's Word. As a pastor I have no authority over this congregation unless it comes from **God's Word**, as I preach Sunday by Sunday, and week by week.

So that brings us to the ultimate authority in our Church, and that is God's Word. **We believe in the Final Authority of Scripture.** To be exact...

*'We believe in the **Final Authority of the Scriptures** of the Old and New Testaments as originally given by God, for all matters of faith and practice.'*

I hope that each one of us really does believe this?

That the Bible is God's final authority in your life and mine.
That the Bible is God's final authority for our life together as a church.

Do you believe that the Bible is a unique book, a special book, a very important book? Because here in 2 Timothy 3:16 we are told (in the NIV) that The Bible is: **"God-breathed"** and **"Useful"**, or in the AV - **"Given by Inspiration of God"**, and **"Profitable."** And in the ESV it is **'breathed out by God'** and **'profitable for teaching, for reproof, or correction.'**

I hope that each of you **really** believe those 2 things about the Bible:

It's *God-Breathed, Breathed out or Inspired by God*, and
It's *Useful and Profitable* to teach each one of us the truth.

The Inspiration of the Bible is a Foundation stone of our faith that is very much under attack these days. (N.B. Paul told us this would happen - 2 Timothy 4:3-4).

* Some people believe that the Bible is just a collection of 66 books written by some 40 different human authors; that they have a bit of historical importance, and tell us a lot about life thousands of years ago - but that's really about it. It's just an interesting book!

* Others believe that it is an important religious book, it contains a lot of wise sayings, and if you choose to read it, then somewhere along the line God might just use something that you read to speak to you, and for you, at that moment, that bit *becomes* God's Word to you for that given circumstance in your life. Now, although that idea sounds commendable, it is not the truth of the matter, as far as the Bible is concerned.

* We believe (on the authority of the Bible itself) that **"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God,"** and **all of it** is **"profitable"** and **"useful"** for us (2 Tim 3:16). So, every bit of it, at all times, is God's Word to us, whether we choose to read it or not, whether we actually believe it or not, this Book actually contains in its entirety God's Word to you and to me today.

In fact, if you look at v.17, we are told that this book, the Bible, is all that we need. It is totally sufficient or competent, in and of itself, to thoroughly or completely

equip us for every good work. We don't need anything else in addition to the Bible to help us to live right before God.

* So according to our Church's Statement of Faith, we believe in:

"The verbal inspiration and total inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as originally given by God..."

That means that we believe every word of this book was originally given to us by God (cf. 2 Timothy 3:14-17 with 2 Peter 3:14-17). So, God moved, and inspired, the human authors about what to write – So, although it was written down by various men, it is actually **God's Word** - every bit of it (See 2 Peter 1:19-21). They were **"carried along by the Holy Spirit"** as they wrote down the original manuscripts, mostly in Hebrew & Greek.

* We also believe in:

"...their sole-sufficiency and final authority in all matters of faith and practice."

This means that if we want to know what to believe on any point of doctrine, or on any matter of church practice, or any matter of Christian behaviour, then we get our answers solely from this Book - The Bible. It is all that we need. It is our **final authority** - there is nowhere else we can go for answers, but to God's own Word.

Now **tradition** does play a part, for example, in the Christian view of Marriage, between one man and one woman for life, which is as old as Creation itself! But we shouldn't just appeal to church tradition as the basis for our doctrine or practice, as some churches do. At times they're a bit like the Pharisees of Jesus' day who had elevated their own man-made traditions, rules and regulations on to the same level as Scripture, but as Jesus points out in Mark 7:1-13, what they had actually done is what usually happens - they had elevated tradition to a **more important** place than Scripture, so much so that they had nullified the Word of God by the traditions of men. (e.g. Some churches today are changing their rules or traditions to allow for the marriage of two men, or two women, and in ages to come they will appeal to that change as their authority to marry people that way). We, as Baptists, will not be making any changes as far as marriage is concerned!

Why? Because the Sole-Authority of Scripture in all matters of faith and practice is a Baptist distinctive. Many of the Reformers preached **"sola scriptura"** as their watchword, but in practice they didn't go far enough – they held on to too many traditions from the old Medieval Church – infant baptism being one very

obvious tradition they held onto, that had no basis in Scripture at all. i.e. they were guided by church tradition & customs, more than by what Scripture taught!

We believe that no Church or Churchman, Bishop or Pope, has the right to say anything more, or anything less, than what is contained in this Book about any point of doctrine or practice. The Bible is our final court of appeal in any disputed point of doctrine.

“What do the Scriptures say?”

That’s what we want to know, more than anything else. So that’s what should be our motto, as a church. Now this is quite some claim. But we can only make such claims because we believe that this is God’s Final Word to us. It is absolutely unique. That’s why 2 Timothy 3:15 refers to the Bible as “*the HOLY Scriptures.*” (The ESV has changed that to ‘*the sacred writings*’ – which is the same idea). The Bible is God’s Holy Word. Therefore, we should treat this Book with reverence and respect, and more than that, we should seek with God’s help to live it out in our lives.

What is your attitude to the Bible? I hope you believe that it is useful, and that it is fully inspired by God. If so, what should we do with it?

1. WE SHOULD CONTINUE TO BE GUIDED BY GOD’S WORD (vs.14-15)

Paul was able to remind Timothy of three things here in v.14:

- (i) What he had ‘learned’ from God’s Word.**
- (ii) What he had personally become convinced of (‘firmly believed’)**
- (iii) Those ‘from whom he had learned it’.**

From childhood, Timothy had been taught God’s Word - and that is a tremendous privilege. If the foundation of God’s Word was laid in your life from childhood, thank God for it! We know how hard it is to begin with totally un-churched people today to try to lay even a foundational knowledge of Biblical Truth!

But more and more that is what we have to do, because the Bible is being taught less and less. So praise God if you’ve had that foundation from childhood (v.15).

Timothy would have been taught the Bible from his mother’s knee and indeed by his granny as well (2 Timothy 1:5). As a Jewess, Timothy’s mother would have got Timothy to learn the whole of the Book of Deuteronomy off by heart before he was 12 yrs old – just like Jesus (Matthew 4:1-11). It’s so important to learn Bible verses from memory in childhood years. It’s so much harder to do it as an adult!

So **Sunday School teachers**, continue to make sure you teach the memory verses to the children in your class. Keep going; keep persevering – because it’s so important, and so worthwhile!

But we mustn’t leave it all to the Sunday School teachers...

If you’re a parent, make sure you play your part at home in getting your children to learn Scripture too. As a family, make sure you’re teaching God’s Word to your children at home.

But of course there comes a time when each individual has to become personally convinced of these things for themselves. We can teach and preach until we’re blue in the face, but that doesn’t save people.

What does? (v.15b) – Faith in Jesus Christ – the one the Bible points to. A true knowledge of God’s Word should of course include the way of salvation. Not until you personally take that step can you really become convinced of the truth of these things (v.14). The knowledge in your head must sink down into your heart and cause you to trust in Christ, otherwise all the Bible knowledge in the world will not save you!

So, what have **you** got - **Head knowledge** or **Heart conviction** about the Bible? - mere knowledge of the Bible, or real knowledge of the One the Bible speaks about - the Lord Jesus Christ? Do you know Him as your Saviour?

Trust those who’ve taught you. **Trust what** you’ve been taught about the Bible, but most of all, **Trust** the one you’ve been taught about – The Lord Jesus Christ.

2. WE SHOULD GROW IN OUR KNOWLEDGE OF GOD’S WORD (v.16a)

Once your knowledge of the Bible has brought you to faith in Christ, that’s not the end; it’s only the beginning. Now that you know the One of whom the Bible speaks, the Bible takes on a whole new meaning for you. It’s no longer just a Book about the God who created the World - it’s the Book that *Your God* has written to *you*. *It’s His Word to You*. You’ll find it coming alive. You’ll find verses jumping off the page at you with new meaning, new significance - a freshness you never noticed before. God is now speaking to you personally.

So now you need to grow in your knowledge of God’s Word, because as you do, you’ll grow in your knowledge of God Himself. A relationship has begun, and it’s a wonderful relationship that you can develop as you read what God wants to say to you, day by day, through His Word.

Verse 16 says that there are four things that the Bible is useful for - in 2 pairs.

First of all (v.16a) The Bible is useful for:-

(1) Teaching you, and Rebuking you. (Positive and Negative)

The Bible tells you what you should believe, and by contrast it also tells you what you should not believe. This is called Doctrine (Teaching).

Some people think today that Doctrine is not important. They say things like, "You shouldn't bother with doctrine, because doctrine only causes divisions - that's why you have so many different churches today, because they all fell out over doctrine."

But the Bible (and therefore God himself) does not allow us to adopt that attitude to doctrine. Just look at 2 Timothy 4:1-5. Doctrine is **so** important. In the sea of confusion out there today, with all kinds of weird and wonderful ideas about morality, I believe we need clear Biblical doctrine more than ever.

Doctrine is Truth. Throw Doctrine out and you throw Truth out!
And if you throw truth out, what are you left with? - only falsehood and error!

Do you want to build your relationship with God on falsehood and error?
- It wouldn't be much of a relationship - would it?

So, as you study the Bible, look out for what you should believe, and for what you should not believe; What you should do, and what you shouldn't do.

3. ABOVE ALL, WE SHOULD PUT GOD'S WORD INTO PRACTICE (vs.16-17)

The second pair of things the Bible is useful for, doesn't have to do with what we **believe**, but with how we **behave**. Those two things are always closely linked in the Bible - **Our Beliefs must always influence and control our Behaviour**, otherwise those beliefs are no good to anybody – they are empty beliefs, and your behaviour will probably be hypocritical – i.e. not practising what we preach.

(2) The Bible is useful for "correcting us" and for "training us in righteousness" (v.16b). (Again positive and negative)

The Bible is there to correct our bad behaviour, and then to train us to replace our bad behaviour with good behaviour, or righteousness.

So as you grow in your knowledge of God's Word, you should also grow in your knowledge of God Himself, and as you grow in your knowledge of God, then others around you should be able to see the difference in your life.

Putting bad behaviour behind you, and replacing it with upright, Godly living - Isn't that the whole point of being a follower of Jesus!?

What's the point in us (as Baptists) claiming that one of our distinctive beliefs is that the Bible is our **Final Authority** in all matters of faith and practice, if our lives don't back up what we claim?

Of all people, we need to be people who practise what we preach, otherwise it doesn't really matter what we claim to believe. They must see it in our lives!

I have spoken tonight about how God's Word teaches and rebukes, corrects and trains the individual believer, but it also does the same for the church as a whole. As God Word is preached here Sunday by Sunday we are being taught what God requires. Sometimes we will hear God's rebuke on us as a Church, sometimes The Lord will be trying to correct us, but all the time God is trying to train us to be the Church he wants us to be in our day and generation - and in this culture!

So we must never move away from the Final Authority of God's Word.

CONCLUSION

The Goal of God's Word the Bible is to make us into mature men and women of God - People who are fully equipped to serve God in whatever task He calls us to (v.17).

See Eph.4:11-14. That is the purpose of a true Christian Church, and of true Christian ministers - To bring God's people to maturity in their faith, and to fully equip them to serve God. We cannot fulfil these goals without God's Word, so the Bible is Indispensable!

- So let's continue to give importance to Bible study.
- Let's put God's Word into practice in our lives, and
- Let's use God's Word to bring others to maturity in Christ, and to equip God's people for works of service.

Let me finish with an O.T. reference from Ezra 7:8-10 – Ezra was a companion of Nehemiah that we're looking at on Sunday mornings. Ezra saw revival in his day!

In Ezra 7:10 we read that...

*“For Ezra had set his heart to **study the Law of the Lord**, and **to do it**, and to **teach** his statutes and rules in Israel.”*

That was why (v.9) **“The good hand of his God was on him.”**

May the Good Hand of God that was on Ezra and Nehemiah be upon us too, and may we yet live to see a revival in our day - a turning back to the Word of God.

So, whatever is going on out there in the culture today, on a whole range of moral issues, may we as Armagh Baptist Church, continue to devote ourselves...

- to the **study** of God's Word,
 - to the **doing** of God's Word, and so
 - to the **teaching** of God's Word
- ...in this church, and in this community, always. Amen.