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The Authority of the Bible: A Historical Study

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Abstract

The authority of the Bible is one of the controversial issues in the theological topics. The issue has received divergent opinions from Biblical scholars. The question therefore motivated by this study is that, does the authority of the bible reflect in its words and mission? Some theologians had argued that the words in the bible are divinely inspired by God. Thus the paper will educate and inform the readers that the bible is inerrant and infallible as compared to other books. The study is also positively confirmed that the authority of the bible is demonstrated in its words and the mission.

Keywords: Authority, Bible, Christians, World, History

Introduction

The Bible is the book written by men through the inspiration of God. The Bible is a unique because it is the collection of sixty- six books which comprises both the old and new testaments.¹

Thus the Bible explains the ways in which God reveals Himself to humankind over a period of many years. This accounts the ways in which God intervened in human history.² The Bible gives the nature and attributes of God differently from the worldly literature.³

The Bible is more than history since it gives moral and spiritual issues which makes it relevant today. The Bible enables Christians to discover the will of God in our lives.⁴ The Bible is the book of divine revelation that is both complete and comprehensive which contain the church's needs of the world for its guidance in the way of service and salvation.⁵

With Bible, it is relatively easy to believe that an omnipotent God can possess authority over whatever or whoever He desires.⁶ It is obvious to know that some printed materials are reconsidered more essential than the bible.⁷ Here, it is surprising that among all books, Bible presents and interprets itself.

Thus the words in the Bible have been handed down to us in substantially the identical form as spoken by God through His prophets.⁸ In this wise, the Bible looks like God, behaves like God, sounds like God, speaks like God and endorsed by Himself as authoritative.⁹ Hence, humankind must live under the authority of the Bible.

Essential enough, throughout centuries, Christian have insisted that the Bible is the sole ultimate written authority for Christians' faith and practice.¹⁰ Many Christian believers have refuted the claims of popes, kings, bishops, evangelists, prophets and teachers who placed

¹ Fernando Canale, *The Cognitive Principle of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Create Space, 2010), 245.

² B. G. Craig, *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 113.

³ J. M. Frame, *The doctrine of the Word of God* (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2010), 163.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁵ Peter A. Lillback and Gaffin B. Richard, *Thy Word is Still Truth* (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2013), 47.

⁶ W. G. Reid, *Understanding Scripture* (USA: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2006), 5.

⁷ D. H. Kelsey, *The Use of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 19.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁹ C. F. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 10.

¹⁰ B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (New York: Strauss Press, 1948), 19.

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tradition and their teachings equal or above Bible.¹¹ It is amazing to know that in the attempt of resisting these bad practices, some faithful Christians were persecuted for their commitment and defending authority of the Bible.¹²

God is the ultimate author of the Bible. According to Ulrich Zwingli in his book called *Survey A General of the History of the canon of New Testament* posited that the Bible comes from God, not from man; and even that God who enlightens will give thee to understanding that the speech comes from God. The word of God is to be held in “the highest honor and to no word is such faithful to be accorded as to it”¹³ This implies that God is the author of the Bible and He interprets His own words for understanding.

This paper therefore will examine the nature of the Bible, historical view of the Bible, Bible as an authoritative, usefulness of the Bible authoritative, summary, conclusion and bibliography.

The nature of the Bible

The word in the Bible perfectly reflects the character of God. Thus, the qualities which describe and identify every book of the Bible as His words.¹⁴ The Bible also reveals Christ and Holy Spirit as entities for the purpose of men’s redemption and salvation.¹⁵

Most importantly, the Bible portrays God as an omnipotent.¹⁶ This indicates that God is all powerful and through Him heaven, earth and all inhabitants were created. The Bible discloses God as omniscient.¹⁷ Here God knows everything and everyone on this earth. The Scripture also identifies God as omnipresent.¹⁸ With this, the Bible describes that God is present everywhere. In the Bible, the words of God are exalted, effective, truthful and powerful to accomplish His purpose and mission.¹⁹

In Hebrew 4:12, Paul suggests that “The words of God is living, active and sharper than any two- edged sword, and piecing as fast as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”²⁰ The implication is that word of God is authoritative and eternal for our salvation.

Historical View of the Bible

A popular school of thought in ancient time (2nd cent AD) believed that the New Testament was written to understand God as a creator and authoritative of all things (from the period between the first and second coming of Jesus Christ) whereas the Old Testament was also documented to augment the books in the New Testament. With this analysis, both the New Testament and the Old Testament

¹¹ J. W. Wand, *The Authority of the Bible* (USA: Harvest Press, 1949), 90.

¹² *Ibid.*, 125.

¹³ B. F. Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Crown* (London: Cambridge Press, 1954), 157.

¹⁴ G. W. Bromiley. *The Authority of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1952), 48.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁷ N. Geldenhuys, *The Supreme Authority Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 10.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁰ C. J. Maxwell, *The Maxwell Leadership Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 1530.

books are meant for the mission of God’s church.²¹

The reason is that the New Testament which contains the book of Acts has the initiative and action of the Holy Spirit in the lives of disciples who formerly were cowardly, powerless and ignorant.²² Essentially, the Old Testament demonstrates the teachings and the works of the Prophets, the Priests and the Kings.

Luke reported that early disciples mobilized the church so effectively to reach villages, cities and entire world with the gospel. This shows that Jesus empowered His followers with Holy Spirit to accomplish His work.²³

For instance, Peter was a fisherman became the leader of the church of Jerusalem. Philip became the first evangelist and missionary to cross- cultural groups. Barnabas and Paul established the first equipping church in Antioch and led first missionary team.²⁴ Against this background, Jesus and Paul affirmed the authenticity of Old Testament as God’s word for edification, redemption and salvation.²⁵

More surprisingly, Roman Catholic Church accepts Bible, tradition and the teachings of the church where tradition is placed equally or above the Bible.²⁶ The reformed evangelicals on the other hand, believe in the Bible which contains humanly and divinely word of God. Thus, the reformers place high value on the Bible than any other book.²⁷ The Pentecostals and charismatics have also insisted that the human and divine nature of the Bible gives the basis of its authority. In the light of this the authority of the Bible is discussed below.²⁸

Bible as an Authoritative

The word authority comes from a Greek word “*exousia*” which means rightful, actual and unimpeded power to act, or to possess, control, use dispose of something or somebody.²⁹ The word signifies power that is in some sense rightful and lawful of possessed to do something. This power is actually possessed by Bible.

In the first place, the Bible is authoritative for humankind because it is from nature of God and about God.³⁰ This presupposes that the Bible was written by men inspired by the Holy Spirit and all the words in the Bible are about God. The authority of God’s word begins the greatness of its nature. Thus the words in the Bible are inseparable from God Himself.³¹

God sent His son Jesus Christ to exemplify the physical, visible manifestation of the son of God on earth.³² Here, both Christ and the word functioned as one part of the

²¹ P. T. Forsyth, *The Principles of Authority* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1974), 70.

²² P. T. Forsyth, *The Principles of Authority* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1974), 72.

²³ *Ibid.*, 74.

²⁴ H. J. Cunliffe, *The Authority of Biblical Revelation* (London: SCM Press, 1799), 60

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

²⁶ D. J. Dunn, *The Living Word* (London: Longman and Todd, 1979), 30.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁹ D. J. Dunn, *The Living Word* (London: Longman and Todd, 1979), 39.

³⁰ A. H. Ralph, *The Expository Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 869.

³¹ Baker G. Norman and Nix W., *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1986), 720.

³² *Ibid.*, 724.

divine trinity to execute God's authority on earth.³³ The authority of the Bible is confirmed in the way in which earliest believers received the word of God.³⁴

In the Old Testament exodus 24:7 Moses discloses that the people responded to the written word of God just as the Lord was speaking useful message to the Israel and the entire humanity. God Himself took the book of the covenant and read it to the people of Israel. The people of Israel affirmed that they would do and obey everything the Lord had said.³⁵ In the New Testament, 1 Thessalonian 2:13, "Paul commended the church at Thessalonica for having received the spoken Gospel as the word of God"³⁶

Again, the authority of the Bible is demonstrated in the way in which Christ and apostles appreciated and dealt with the word of God.³⁷ For instance, Jesus was tempted by Satan three times and He defeated him (Satan) by quoting the scripture, "It is written, man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God, again you shall not tempt the Lord your God, and finally worship the Lord your God, and in Him only you shall serve (Mathew 4:1-11, NKJV).³⁸ Jesus also confirmed to His disciples that "everything that is written by the prophets about the son of man will be fulfilled" (Luke 18:31, NKJV).³⁹

The testimony of the Holy Spirit affirms the authority of the Bible. Thus, the spirit of God is the author of scripture and He is its own interpreter.⁴⁰ From John Calvin point of view, "the Bible can only be useful unless it is confirmed by the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit"⁴¹

Biblically speaking, the authority of the Bible rests on the reliability and authenticity of God's love, mercy, compassion and protection He has for humanity and other creatures.⁴² Here, the word of God consoles the wretched, empowers the weak and heal the sick.

The authority of the Bible refers to the power, ability or capability to complete an action. Jesus was given the power to forgive sins and to drive out evil spirit. Jesus also gave seventy disciples the authority to trample on snake and scorpions (Luke 10:19).⁴³ The Bible gives the authority to decide or a right to act without hindrance.⁴⁴ For example, God gave Paul the right and authority to preach the gospel (1 Cor 9:18, NKJV). He also gave the believers authority to become children of God.

Radically speaking, authority is the power to command and make people obey or believe in one's saying or decision. God's sovereignty, universality and eternal reign over the entire universe evidences His authority. He establishes His

purposes in time and does all things according to His will.⁴⁵ Thus, God's providential direction over the events of history shows His authority.

The authority of the Bible is also exercised over the church. Here God has ultimately revealed Himself in the person of Jesus Christ (John 1:1-18, NKJV). The spirit of God inspires His ambassadors to communicate God's truth.⁴⁶ Therefore, because God's word is truthful and trust worthy, it becomes final authority in all things that pertains to life and godliness

The infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible makes it authoritative. The reason is that the Bible does not lie, a complete and final book which provided usefulness of Christian living.⁴⁷ The power of God's message to transform individuals' lives which make Christians affirm the authority of the Bible.⁴⁸ The implication here is that the words in the Bible are powerful to mold Christian lives to do God's work, if one trusts and obeys.

Essentially enough, a view of the Bible that affirms its divine inspiration and total truthfulness is of little value if it is not accompanied by an enthusiastic commitment to the Bible's complete and absolute authority. Therefore, an approach to the subject of Biblical authority must begin with God Himself, for in God all authority is finally located.⁴⁹ God is His own authority. There is nothing beyond Him on this universe.

Usefulness of Bible as an Authoritative

The understanding of the authority of the Bible helps people to identify the church with sound and correct doctrine.⁵⁰ When such people identified with the sound and right doctrine, it helps them to give themselves to Christ. On the strength of this it gives opportunity for God's church to grow and develop.

The Bible as an authoritative provides sources of protection and blessing from God to His followers.⁵¹ Thus, the Bible gives an account of many people who receive mercy, compassion and healing from God. For example, the authority given to Jesus from the words in the Bible, made the unclean spirits cast out from the man into the pigs (Mk 5:1-20). Jesus Christ again he raised Lazarus from death from the word of His mouth.

Critically speaking, Jesus Christ was tempted and He was empowered by God's spirit to overcome the devil (Mathew 4:1-11) For example. Jesus Christ healed a paralyzed man in (Mathew 8:5-13) and He fed five thousand men in (John 6:1-15)

The understanding of the authority of the Bible assists Christians to practise morality.⁵² Thus the Bible contains, many moral teachings in when Christians can practise to acquire good behavior. More importantly, the Bible as an authoritative helps faithful believers to be committed to

³³ Ibid., 870.

³⁴ J. Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 25.

³⁵ D. E. Radmacher, *The Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 130.

³⁶ Ibid., 1494.

³⁷ K. Barth, *Church Diagnostics* (Edinburg: T&T Clark, 1960), 24.

³⁸ Ibid., 1495.

³⁹ Ibid., 1636.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 58.

⁴¹ Ibid., 59.

⁴² F. G. Hasel, *Biblical Interpretation Today* (Washington, DC: Biblical Research Institute, 1985), 13.

⁴³ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 18.

⁴⁵ F. G. Hasel, *Biblical Interpretation Today* (Washington, DC: Biblical Research Institute, 1985), 62.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 66.

⁴⁷ K. Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Edinburg: Thomas Nelson, 1956), 56.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 58.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 59.

⁵⁰ B. G. Norman, *Encyclopedia of Christians Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publication, 1999), 69.

⁵¹ Ibid., 71.

⁵² B. G. Norman, *Encyclopedia of Christians Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publication, 1999), 76.

God.⁵³ When this happens such believers become closer to God. In the light of this, we are able to obey God's words and do His will. Thus, the promise of doing God's will enables Christians to be redeemed from our sins thereby receiving salvation.⁵⁴ Again, the infallibility and inerrancy nature of Bible makes it unique and supreme over all other books in the world.⁵⁵ Hence, Bible becomes useful for Christians' life.

Summary and Conclusion

In nutshell, the authority of the Bible is established by the nature of God's word. God's word are such of a nature that they perfectly reflect His own characteristics.

Thus, it elicits an irresistible response from humankind, and personally identifies with the person of Jesus Christ, The authority of those words are established primarily by their intimate identification with God. Bible expresses God's authority and His will to live perfect life. The Bible expresses Gods authority over humanity that one has to oblige to it. Thus, man's responsibilities to God must be seriously honored. Thus, the word of God is just and faithful.

Essentially enough, throughout centuries, the Bible has proved itself as truly the inspired word of God. With this, the Bible has to redeem people from their sins and shapes their lives. Spiritually speaking, the Bible is self-evidence of inspiration, authority, reliability and necessity. It is complete enough to provide salvation for humankind. The teaching in the Bible are specific and universal for people in all time. Thus, the general teachings have universal application and implicit authority.

The Bible has both humanly and divinely nature which help to empower Christians. Surprising enough, Roman Catholic Church believes in the scripture, tradition and magisterium but they place high value on the church practices over the scripture.

The reformers accept Bible as source of truth which is considered as supreme as any other teaching in their churches. In nutshell, Bible portrays God as a creator, Jesus Christ as a savior and Holy Spirit as a guide, protector, comforter, counselor, leader and director. Finally, the Evangelical Protestant Church like Seventh-day Adventists uphold Bible as the authoritative, authentic, genuinely, edifying and useful than any other book in the world.

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⁵³ Ibid., 82.

⁵⁴ T. Longman, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 62.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 68.