

The Supremacy of Scripture

Joshua 1:1–9, Acts 17:10–15

All Christians acknowledge the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the word of God. For some, such as mainline Protestants, it may be mere lip-service. Others recognize other sources of authority, including church tradition (Roman, Eastern) or new revelations of the Spirit (Charismatics), which undercuts and neutralizes the authority of Holy Scripture. Biblical Christians believe that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were “immediately inspired by God, and, by his singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages”¹; therefore, the Scriptures are the final authority on faith and practice. God has spoken definitively in his word; “holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.” The Scriptures are infallible, without error, and sufficient, revealed to the end “that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” No other special revelation is needed to discern God’s will. Our Lord definitively declared, “thy word is truth.” That settles the matter for the biblical Christian. Whatever the Bible teaches on any subject is absolute truth. Our job as Christians is to know the Holy Scriptures and bring all our thinking into conformity with the mind of God revealed in Holy Scripture.

1. Joshua: This word shall be in your mouth.

Both our Old and New Testament texts today speak to this. In the opening verses of the book of Joshua it is Yahweh himself who is speaking. Moses has just died; the Pentateuch is complete. Now that Moses is gone, what does God want his people to do? He tells his people, “Be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left.” Notice carefully: at this point in time the only part of the Bible God’s people have is the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses, the Torah. Does God want his people to pay mere lip service to his written word—to say that they believe it, but in actual fact to ignore it, devise their own religion, do their own thing? Does he tell them to follow the traditions of men? Does he want them to wait for new revelations of the Spirit? Obviously he wants nothing of the kind. No! Clearly, he wants his people to observe the whole law and not turn from it either to the right hand or to the left. That is the job of the people of God in every age. But the Lord is not finished: he goes on to say that “this Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.” Notice the divine logic: in order that God’s people obediently observe the law and not turn aside from it, they were to meditate on it day and night, and have

¹ Westminster Confession of Faith 1.8 (*Trinity Psalter Hymnal*, p. 920)

its words and phrases continually on their lips (“this book of the law shall not depart from your *mouth*”). They were to *speak* the words of Scripture—it should be constantly on their lips. It should be the topic of the saints’ conversation in the home and neighborhood and workplace, not just at public worship. Wherever God’s people go, they should never stop speaking the word of God.

Now that might seem to some to be a bit extreme: *Whatever* I do, I am to speak the words of Scripture? Isn’t this the teaching of this passage? You simply cannot read these words any other way. Neither can you show that this direct divine command was for God’s people in 1,500 BC only, and not for today. As biblical history shows, God’s people were all too prone to wander from the Lord and adopt the idols of the surrounding nations. Each time they did that they would come under God’s judgment: be defeated by their enemies, be taken into captivity, etc. Are we in the twenty-first century stronger and more steadfast than the ancient Hebrews? Hardly! Do we need this instruction any less? No!

God promises that if his people obeyed, they would prosper and have good success. Do we not want these blessings for ourselves as well? Do we not want our families, our children, our posterity to prosper and have good success? Do our hearts not say with the apostle John, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth”? If so, then we, their parents, need to *hear* the Scripture, *read* the Scripture, *talk* about the Scripture, *live* the Scripture. If the best our children were to say of us after our decease would be: “He was a good man; he lived a good life, he attended church, but he left all talk of religion to the pastor and elders; he never talked about it at home,” what would that say of the job we did as parents? Can we not do better? Here, brothers and sisters, is God’s will for us, his people: the very words of the Bible should not depart from our mouths; we should meditate on them day and night; we must dedicate ourselves to obey them in everything. This is more important than health, financial success, peace of mind, happiness, and the approval of our peers. Will we not commit ourselves to it?

2. Acts: Search the Scriptures.

In our New Testament text we have been following Paul and Silas on their second missionary journey. After establishing a church in Philippi, Paul and Silas come to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue, and they preach Christ there. When they begin to make converts, the unbelieving Jews incite a mob and attack the house of Jason, assuming that he was harboring the missionaries. When they did not find Paul, they dragged Jason before the authorities, accusing the Christians of disloyalty to Caesar. Jason, a new believer who put his own life on the line to save the lives of the missionaries, had to put up a security deposit to ensure that Paul and Silas did not further disturb the peace. Paul and his traveling companions leave that very night to make the trip to Berea, a distance of about fifty miles. Berea was a much smaller town, but it, too, had a synagogue. Paul, as

was his custom, began his ministry there. Luke’s account is terse, but the missionary duo’s ministry at the synagogue in Berea was likely much the same as it had been in Thessalonica. Paul’s evangelism was Word-centered; we can tell this from the verbs used earlier in the chapter: Paul *reasoned* from the Scriptures, *explaining* and *demonstrating* that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead, and that the Jesus Paul *preached* was in fact the Messiah of the Old Testament. Paul’s emphasis was on Christ as the fulfillment of Old Testament Scripture. This is the essential message of Christianity. So it is today: biblical preaching *reasons* from the Scriptures, *explains* and *demonstrates* the truth of the gospel, and calls upon men and women to repent of their sin and turn to Christ.

But what is unique in our text today is what is said of the Berean Jews. In the words of the old King James Version, “These were more *noble* than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.”

The word translated “noble” comes from a root meaning *well born*. As someone who grew up on the KJV, I find the New KJV rendering “fair-minded” a disappointment. Other versions render it “noble-minded,” “open-minded,” or “of more noble character.”² One author shows that the word “originally meant *high born* but came to have a more general connotation of being open, tolerant, generous, having the qualities that go with ‘good breeding.’”³ The Jews of Berea “were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.” The bottom line is that by the grace of God Paul’s hearers in Berea had a teachable attitude. They were not closed-minded; they were willing to consider Paul’s claims about Christ and “searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.”

Now think of what this meant. These men couldn’t just open up their own copies of the Bible. Remember that before the invention of the printing press and the introduction of paper mills, individual copies of written texts were prohibitively expensive—well beyond the reach of the average person. Where were copies of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures to be found? In the *synagogues*. Remember that synagogues were places where practicing Jews who lived too far from the temple in Jerusalem could gather to pray and hear the Scriptures read.

² “*nobiliores*” (Vulgate), “the worthier” (Wyclif), “the noblest of birth” (Tyndale, Cranmer), “more worthy men” (Geneva), “more noble” (Rheims, KJV, ESV), “more noble-minded” (NASB), “more fair-minded” (NKJV), “more open-minded” (Holman, NET), “of more noble character” (NIV), “*des sentiments plus nobles*” (Segond)

³ John Polhill (*Acts*, 363), quoted in *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary* (Olive Tree Bible Software); cf. Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich, εὐγενής. The *Pocket Oxford Greek Dictionary* (modern Greek) defines it thusly: “noble; polite, courteous.”

Every synagogue had a set of Torah scrolls, obtained at great expense by the congregation that met there. These scrolls were copied on papyrus or vellum, hand-lettered by the scribes. At the time of Paul such scrolls were written in unpointed Hebrew—that is, consonants only. Vowel points were not added till centuries later. But people who all their lives heard the Scriptures read in the synagogues retained the sound of the very words of Scripture in their hearts and minds. They treasured the word of God, they hid it in their hearts and spoke it with their lips, fulfilling the divine command given to Joshua, “This Book of the Law shall not depart from your *mouth*, but you shall meditate in it day and night.”

We live in the day of information overload. As we read or listen to the radio or watch television and videos we process the information we hear. Some of it we dismiss as unimportant. Some of that unimportant information sticks in our minds anyway. Information that is important to us we try to remember, but much of it we forget. And much of what is *truly* important we forget over time.

Do we not make a great effort to remember the words that are really special, such as when someone tells us, “I love you”? I remember when one of my granddaughters told me, “I can do it my own.” How Norma and I treasure those words! Or when one of my daughters said, “Daddy, will you please call me more?” The words of people we love are important to us.

But should not the words of our covenant God be of *supreme* importance to us? He has loved us with an everlasting love! In eternity past he determined to send his Son to die for us and save us. He promises us life with him forever. Should we not hide those words in our hearts and speak them with our lips? The prophet testified, “Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart” (Jer. 15:16). Should this not be our attitude?

The Jews in Berea “were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.” Here were men, heads of families, who kept going back to the synagogue every day to look up the Scripture references that Paul had cited, to make sure that he was exegeting them correctly, to make sure that he was handling the word of God accurately. Paul’s message was explosive. He was contending that the long-promised Messiah had come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth who died on the cross and rose again. The Jews of Berea were no doubt aware that this was a minority position within Judaism. But if it was in fact the teaching of Holy Scripture, then they were ready to risk all to follow Christ. Paul was contending that *Christ* is the subject of Holy Scripture. A Judaism without Christ is a worthless tradition. There are high stakes! What shall it profit a sinner to gain the whole world and lose his very soul in the fires of hell?

3. The bottom line: A teachable attitude

You and I, like the Bereans, ought to have a teachable attitude. It is absolutely essential that we have a teachable attitude. Scripture warns, “Do not be like the horse or like the mule, which have no understanding, which must be harnessed with bit and bridle, else they will not come near you.” God promises, “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with My eye.”⁴ The best arguments in the world will not convince a person with a closed mind. You must always come to the word with attitude of the Psalmist, “Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law” (Ps. 119:18). We must pray, Lord, send your Spirit into my heart. Have him give me spiritual understanding. Enable me to see Christ in all his glory. Help me to think your thoughts after you. Conform my will to yours in every respect. As we sang two weeks ago, “Teach me, O Lord, your way of truth, and from it I will not depart; that I may steadfastly obey, give me an understanding heart.”⁵

Now the interesting thing is that the believing Jews of Berea, though brand-new baby Christians, were so committed to their new-found faith that they did these things intuitively. God had told his people long before, “This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it.” Here were people who heard Paul preach Christ and said to themselves, “Is this really the teaching of Scripture? If so, then this is the word of the living God, and I am duty-bound to receive it.” They were ready to make life changing decisions for Christ’s sake. Their lives from that moment forward would never be the same. Their very identity was bound up in their Jewishness. All their close friends were Jews. These were the people they saw at synagogue. These were the people they worked with. These were the people they saw at weddings and parties. Now, they were faced with an uncomfortable choice. The Jews as a whole did not accept Christ. The religious leaders in Jerusalem had said, “We will not have this man to rule over us. His blood be on us and on our children. Crucify him! Crucify him!” When Jesus healed the man born blind, and he simply told the truth about his healing and would not renounce Christ, they cast him out of their synagogue. Being excommunicated by their fellow Jews was the worst kind of punishment they could ever imagine. Yet here were men who had done their homework. They had talked it over with their wives and children. They had told them, “Rabbi Shaul preaches that Jesus of Nazareth is the long-promised Messiah. He cites Scripture after Scripture to prove his case. I have been to the synagogue and looked up these Scriptures for myself. You know what: he is right. Jesus is the Messiah. To accept him will not be easy. It will involve expulsion from the Jewish community. Our friends, neighbors and

⁴ Ps. 32:8, 9

⁵ *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* 119E

loved ones will reject us. People we love very dearly will hate us. But to reject the Messiah Jesus is infinitely worse! Whoever calls on him in true faith will be saved, but whoever rejects him will be doomed eternally. I now confess Jesus to be the Messiah. My love for him eclipses my love for father, mother, wife, children, brethren, sisters and my own life also. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. Jesus, I do now receive you. Amen.”

What do you stand to lose if you receive Christ? You may lose some of your friends. Your family may turn against you. But the gain is incalculable. “Whosoever shall confess me before men, him shall the Son of man also confess before the angels of God” (Luke 12:8). Let us not be like the mule that has to be led around with a bit and bridle. Let us have teachable hearts that are receptive to the truth of God.

But a teachable attitude is not just for seekers, it is for *leaders* too. The Berean Christians searched the Scriptures daily to verify that what Paul and Silas were telling them was true. There is no record that the apostle Paul was ever offended by this. He did not tell anyone, “Who do these people think they are? Don’t they know who I am? I am the apostle Paul! I was personally chosen by Christ himself who appeared to me in a vision on the Damascus Road.” A teachable attitude is not just for seekers; it is for leaders too. The church must have a teachable ministry. Godly leaders should not feel threatened if their people ask them to demonstrate their teachings from Scripture. The church must be Reformed and always reforming. Teachings that cannot be established from Scripture must be jettisoned. Scripture must always reign supreme. God’s servants must not lord themselves over God’s heritage but be examples to the flock. The church has divine authority to teach whatever is in the Scripture, and it must *not* teach anything that’s *not* in Scripture.

A courageous Roman Catholic bishop, Athanasius Schneider, has decried Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi’s “sacrilegious” reception of Holy Communion at the Vatican recently as a pathway to her soul’s damnation. Schneider said that in receiving the Eucharist despite her mortal sin of supporting the killing of innocents in abortion, Pelosi must be pitied, because “she is consciously, stubbornly eating her judgment.” Those who are most responsible for this sacrilege, according to Schneider, are “the churchmen in the Vatican,” and “ultimately the pope, who is doing nothing in this case. He is seeing this soul is going consciously and publicly to her perdition, to her condemnation” and remaining silent about it.⁶ Bishop Schneider is calling for the church to be consistent in its teaching and not allow pro-abortion politicians to think that all is well with their souls. This is welcome news. All churches should stand firm in their declaration that abortion is murder, the deliberate snuffing out of an innocent human life.

⁶ <https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/bishop-schneider-by-her-sacrilegious-communions-nancy-pelosi-is-eating-her-judgment/> accessed 7-8-2022

This morning we have seen three things: (1) Joshua: This word shall be in your mouth; (2) Acts: Search the Scriptures; and (3) The bottom line: A teachable attitude. This is for *us*, God's people in the twenty-first century: the word of God shall be in our *mouths*; we must always search the *Scripture*, and we must be noble-minded and have a *teachable attitude*. Scripture must reign supreme in every heart and in every church.

“All idols underfoot be trod, the Lord is God! The Lord is God! To God all praise and glory! Amen.”