The authority of the Bible

1. Introduction

a. What we have in our bibles today are what we believe to be the complete revelation of God, written by over 40 different authors over a period of 1500 years. In their content they are timeless and will last for all eternity. It helps us makes sense of the world we live in, where we came from and what it means to be human.

   i The language of our bibles has changed since the first English translation by Tyndale in 1526. The English language has significantly changed since those days, thus the need for translations that are meaningful for us today.

   ii the words and the language may have changed, but the power behind them is undiminished by time or by translation. Ultimately they are the word of God to us and as such they carry a weight of authority unparalleled by any other document in the history of the world.

b. Today's subject is the biblical doctrine of scriptural authority. Understanding doctrine isn't just for theologians – it's important for us – it shows us who God is and how we should live. The doctrine of biblical authority means that Scripture is:

   i clear enough for the simplest person

   ii deep enough for highly qualified readers

   iii clear in its essential matters

   iv obscure in some places to people because of their sinfulness

   v understandable through ordinary means, understandable by an unsaved person on an external level, understandable in its significance by a saved person through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, and available to every believer whose faith must rest on the Scriptures.

2. Biblical authority begins with God

a. But the authority of scripture cannot be our starting place, we have to start with the authority of God himself. To understand and make sense of the authority of scripture, we first have to consider the authority of God. If we believe scripture is God's word, any authority it carries for us has to have its origin and power in God.

Genesis 1:1 *In the beginning God created….*

Revelation 22:20 *Surely I am coming soon…*

b. In 1521, at the Diet of Worms in Germany, Martin Luther was under intense pressure to recant from embracing the truth that we are justified by faith based on the authority of the bible. His response to his inquisitors was unequivocal:

   "Since then Your Majesty and your lordships desire a simple reply, I will answer without horns and without teeth. Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen."

c. Authority is a central element of the person of God, we see it on every page of our bibles. But outside the confines of scripture, a right understanding of authority is hard to find today. We live in an age of anti-authority, where the trend is towards illegitimate expressions of authority – from totalitarianism, often accompanied by terrorism, to post-modern individual selfishness.

d. A definition of what we understand authority to be:

Authority means that right or power to command action or compliance, or to determine belief or custom, expecting obedience from those under authority, and in turn giving responsible account for the claim to right or power.

i Put simply, authority is the power or right to give orders, make decisions and enforce obedience. It is the power to influence or command thought, opinion, or behaviour.

e. A few examples of how authority is exercised in a secular worldview:

i **oligarchical** – authority exercised by a powerful few

ii **democratic** – authority exercised by the people

iii **hereditary** – authority exercised by those in a particular family

iv **despotic** – authority exercised by one or more in an evil fashion

v **personal** – authority exercised by one person (eg. Power of Attorney, Bank account)

f. For us with a biblical worldview, ultimate authority lies with God alone. He didn't inherit his authority and he didn't receive his authority. It didn't come by election, and he didn't seize or earn his authority. God inherently embodies authority because He is the great "I AM"

Exodus 3:14 *God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"*

John 8:59 *Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am."*

g. Consider three ways in which God's authority is displayed. First, God created the heavens and the earth. Second, God owns the earth and everything in it (Psalm 24:1). Third, in the end he consumes it all:

Revelation 21:5 *"Behold, I am making all things new."*

h. We must grasp fully both the scope and the vastness of God's authority. There are numerous statements in the bible that speak of God's authority, and each one contains a different facet and sheds a different light on this enormous subject. Paul addresses this issue with great clarity:

Romans 13:1 *For there is **no authority except from God**, and those that exist have been instituted by God.*

i. The names of God as revealed in scripture always reveal something that is true about him and especially speak of his authority.

i **Elohim** (Genesis 1:1) –He is supreme above all things and above all people; he is the eternal God.

ii **YHVH or Jehovah** (Exodus 3:13-14) – The Lord God, it literally means "I am" and is used over 6,800 times in the Old Testament. It speaks of, the God who is, who was, and who is to come.

iii **El-Shaddai** (Genesis 17:1-2) – God the all-sufficient one, or God Almighty. This name speaks of God's invincibility, his omnipotence, he is all-powerful. He can do all things, nothing is too hard for him and no enemy will ever defeat him.

iv **Adonai** (Deuteronomy 10:17) – Master or Lord, indicating authority through ownership. God is worthy of our worship, allegiance and obedience, because it is from him that we have received our very existence, and our eternal redemption through Jesus.

v **Jehovah-Jireh** (Genesis 22:14) – The Lord will provide, or the Lord sees. Abraham encountered God in this way when God provided a substitute sacrifice to replace Isaac.

vi **Jehovah-Rophe** (Exodus 15:26) – God is our healer, both physically and spiritually. It displays his shepherdly qualities of mercy, compassion and lovingkindness.

vii **Jehovah M'kaddesh** (Leviticus 20:7-8) – Revelation of God's burning holiness, the Lord who sanctifies and purifies. It speaks of God's hatred of sin and our need for him as our redeemer and sanctifier.

viii **Jehovah-Shalom** (Judges 6:24) – Shalom is that quality of peace that is central to God's nature.

ix **Jehovah-Tsidkenu** (Jeremiah 23:5-6) – A reminder that God is a God of righteousness and justice – he alone is our righteousness

x **Jehovah-Rohi** (Psalm 23:1) – The Lord displays his authority through the imagery of a shepherd. This is consistent with his everyday care and leadership over his people.

xi **Jehovah-Shammah** (Ezekiel 48:35) – literally "The Lord is there" describing God's presence to guide, protect, and make provision for all of our needs.

j. The Bible also reveals many different aspects of God, shown in his nature and attributes. There are many different ways we can describe God's nature, here are six that speak specifically about his authority:

Romans 11:33 *Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How **unsearchable** are his judgments and how **inscrutable** his ways!*

1 Timothy 1:17 *To the King of ages, **immortal**, **invisible**, the only God, be honour and glory forever and ever. Amen*

Romans 1:23 *they… changed the glory of the **incorruptible** God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.*

Revelation 19:6 *And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunderings, saying, "Alleluia! For the Lord God **Omnipotent** reigns!*

k. Throughout the scriptures, time and time again we read of both Satanic and human rebellion against God's authority. Starting with the serpent in the garden in Genesis 3, right through to the final defeat of Satan in Revelation 20, there has been a constant assault on the authority of God. Adam's sin in the garden; the Tower of Babel; the wilderness wanderings of Israel; the exile of Judah in Babylon; we see it in the rejection and crucifixion of Jesus; we see it in the persecution of the saints in every age; the final rebellion of the Antichrist at the end of the age.

i We live in a culture that is potently antagonistic to the authority of God at both individually nationally. We have seen an accelerating erosion of our culture's recognition of God's authority. Biblical absolutes have become grey areas of individual choice, backed up by legislative demand for compliance. It is all rebellion against God and his authority.

l. But culture can have an impact on how we apply God's word. Paul's insistence on women wearing head-coverings in Corinth was because of the cultural norm of the day where temple prostitutes presented themselves without veils. So we can apply a similar principle today – for instance we should avoid wearing any clothing that is associated with worldly or sinful activity. How we apply these kind of biblical directives may change with the culture of the day.

m. The sense of awe and wonder has all but disappeared from the church, and many take God's revelation of himself for granted. God is infinite, eternal, the incomprehensible creator, immeasurable in essence, he is a different type of being altogether. How incredible is it that he would stoop down to make himself known to such sinful creatures, so that we might know him? This revelation of God through his word is an incredible gift.

n. We must be absolutely convinced in our own hearts and minds that the authority of God, and hence the authority of his word, is the bedrock on which we build our lives.

3. The authority of the bible

a. We will now see how God self-authenticates himself.

Hebrews 6:13-17 *For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, **he swore by himself**, [14] saying, "Surely I will bless you and multiply you." [15] And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. [16] For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. [17] So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath…*

i In a courtroom you put your hand on a bible and swear an oath to tell the truth – you're swearing by something that's greater than yourself, that you will tell the truth.

ii There is no greater authority for God to appeal to, so he bound himself to his promise to Abraham. Because his authority is absolute he doesn't need to appeal to anyone or anything else, he speaks with his own authority that cannot fail.

b. The authority of God's word is founded upon that same authority declared by God. We don't need scientists or archaeologists or historians or psychologists to authenticate scripture's authority. If it comes from God and we accept that it comes from him, it needs no further authentication.

i Some of these other sources are able to bring some clarity and confirmation to affirm the scriptures – archaeology and science are helpful in confirming many of the details that we read in our bibles.

ii Take care not to confuse these confirmations with authentication. We must not be drawn into the argument that because science or archaeology have confirmed something written in the Bible therefore it must be true. What authenticates the Bible as being true is that God has said it. Not science, not archaeology, but our conviction that what God has given us in his word is true and authentic.

c. These confirmations help confirm the inerrancy of scripture. Inerrancy just means that it is never wrong. Inerrancy is part of scripture's authority, something that is never wrong carries its own authority. In October 1978 a gathering of over 200 evangelical church leaders was held in Chicago, culminating in this statement known as the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy:

   i *God, who is Himself Truth and speaks truth only, has inspired Holy Scripture in order thereby to reveal Himself to lost mankind through Jesus Christ as Creator and Lord, Redeemer and Judge. Holy Scripture is God's witness to Himself.*

   ii *Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: it is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it affirms; obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God's pledge, in all that it promises.*

   iii *The Holy Spirit, Scripture's divine Author, both authenticates it to us by His inward witness and opens our minds to understand its meaning.*

   iv *Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God's acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God's saving grace in individual lives.*

   v *The authority of Scripture is inescapably impaired if this total divine inerrancy is in any way limited or disregarded, or made relative to a view of truth contrary to the Bible's own; and such lapses bring serious loss to both the individual and the Church.*

d. The bible is both theologically authoritative, and is entirely accurate about everything recorded in it. The events recorded occurred exactly as stated.

e. The bible speaks about the nature of reality, the way the world actually is. It is correctly and accurately describing facts in the world as they really are. So these are attributes of scripture as they flow out of what God has said that once again confirm the truth of the bible.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 *All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, [17] that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.*

f. Scripture asserts and affirms truthfully and in a trustworthy manner. We should not limit scripture's inerrancy just to its main doctrinal message. The writers of the bible believed God spoke truly through them in whatever they affirm. Inerrancy applies to all areas, including its ethical instruction, as well as its doctrinal instruction and its historical content.

g. Another aspect of scripture that is very similar to its inerrancy is its infallibility. In other words the bible never fails – the word of God carries out the purposes for which God gave it, and so it always functions perfectly in whatever context it is to be found.

Isaiah 55:11 *…so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but **it shall accomplish that which I purpose**, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

1 Thessalonians 2:13 *And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it **not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God**, which is at work in you believers.*

i The word of God is eternal, it will never pass away, it is more permanent than the earth itself, this is a theme found throughout the bible

Matthew 24:35 *Heaven and earth will pass away, but **my words will not pass away**.*

Isaiah 40:8 *The grass withers, the flower fades, but **the word of our God will stand forever**.*

1 Peter 1:25 *"…but **the word of the Lord remains forever**. "And this word is the good news that was preached to you.*

h. So we can see that there is an eternal dimension to the word of God. There are two things that remain unchanging: God and his word. There is something about this permanence that adds a further dimension of security and confidence to those who trust in this word as their ultimate authority in this life.

i. There is also a timelessness about the word of God. In the bible we find the word of life that speaks to us as clearly today as it did when it was first written. God has designed it to be that way.

Psalm 102:18 *Let this be recorded **for a generation to come**, so that a people yet to be created may praise the LORD.*

i There is a timeless quality to the word of God that transcends all of time and culture and ethnicity and age and gender so that what was written down by the psalmist in Israel some 3000 years ago to address the people of God in that age and in that place, also speaks to us today as clearly as it did then.

Romans 15:4 *For whatever was written in former days **was written for our instruction**, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.*

ii Without this unchanging and eternal frame of reference we have no spiritual or moral direction. There are no absolutes, leaving man to live his life being tossed to and fro by the restless waves of society, becoming a slave of his generation.

j. We have the word of God to instruct us, inform us, admonish us, correct us, encourage us, strengthen us, inspire us and equip us, teaching us how to avoid sin and live a godly life in our generation. Jesus prayed for us in John 17 that we would be sanctified by the truth of God's word. That is his desire for each one of us, and he has given us 66 books that reveal and explain that word, each one packed with power that comes with the authority of God himself.

4. Conclusion

a. Though the Bible is a book, it is unlike any other—it is of divine origin. In the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647):

"The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received because it is the Word of God".

b. In the simplest of terms, we believe and obey the word of God because God wrote it. And we know that God wrote it because the Bible says so. In the end, we can rejoice in the knowledge that God has inspired the Bible, as numerous passages testify. When we have doubts about the authority of God's word, we can turn to Scripture and pray for the Spirit to allay our fears.