



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 17.3 – The Doctrine of Holy Scriptures

The Authority of the Scriptures

Since there is no higher authority than God, and it is God who breathed out the Holy Scriptures (2 Timothy 3:16), which are therefore **“the oracles of God”** (Romans 3:2), the Scriptures are the final authority on all matters of which they speak. The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy: **“If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing”** (1 Timothy 6:3-4). Those who insist on the authority of the Scriptures are sometimes considered stubborn, proud, and arrogant, but the truth is just the opposite. Those who contradict the Scriptures are the ones who are proud and stubbornly ignorant.

Since **“all Scripture”** (2 Timothy 3:16) has been breathed out by God, the apostle Paul assured the Christians in Rome: **“Whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope”** (Romans 15:4). When the Jews in Berea were confronted with the teaching of the traveling missionary Paul in their town, they verified his teaching on the basis of the highest authority they knew: they **“sought the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so”** (Acts 17:11), and for this reason Luke commends them for being **“fair-minded”**.

Moses in his day insisted that the Word of God revealed to him should not be put on the same level as other words or other writings but should be considered the unalterable Word of God. **“You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you”** (Deuteronomy 4:2). Those who claimed to be prophets but did not adhere to the authority of God’s Word were not to be listened to. Moses said, **“You shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams”** (Deuteronomy 13:3). **“You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear Him, and keep His commandments and obey His voice; you shall serve Him and hold fast to Him”** (Deuteronomy 13:4). The prophet Isaiah recognized the authority of the Scriptures, saying: **“To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them”** (Isaiah 8:20).

Jesus Himself considered the Bible the final authority, for in disputing with the Jewish leaders He quoted Psalm 82:6 and then said: **“And the Scripture cannot be broken”** (John 10:35). There is no higher authority than Scripture. When the Scripture answers a question, the case is closed. No further inquiry is necessary. If anyone argues against clear Scripture, he is arguing against God, and that can never be right or good. Since Holy Scripture is the infallible (inerrant) Word of God, it has divine authority to teach us and to stand in judgment over all other teachings. All the words in Scripture are God’s words. Therefore to disbelieve or disobey any word of Scripture is to disbelieve and disobey God Himself.

Many students and readers of the Bible in our day make the mistake of judging Scripture and what it says on the basis of some other authority they consider higher than the Bible. For example, scientific theories of evolution are considered more trustworthy than Scripture, and so Scripture is interpreted in the light of evolution, rather than the other way around. Theories of evolution must be judged by Scripture, which is a higher authority, and when they are judged by Scripture, they must be declared false. In the same way archaeological findings need to be judged by the Scriptures and interpreted in the light of Scripture. We dare not alter (change) Scripture on the basis of findings outside of Scripture.

The Holy Spirit must have the last word, the final word. **“It is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth”** (1 John 5:6). **“If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater. ... He who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has given of His Son”** (1 John 5:9-10).

The Roman Catholic Church claims that their Church, guided by the pope, is a higher authority than the Scriptures. In fact, the official Roman Catholic teaching is that the pope is infallible in his teaching, and he is the final authority on how Scripture must be understood. Similarly, most geologists interpret Genesis 1 in the light of their science. Marxists interpret Scripture in the light of their philosophy, feminists in the light of their presuppositions, and in all such cases the tenets of their group become a higher authority than Scripture.

But since there is no higher authority than God Himself, who speaks to us through the Scriptures, the only proper interpreter of Scripture is Scripture itself. Passages that are hard to understand need to be interpreted based on clear passages. Parables, visions, dreams, and prophecies must be interpreted and understood in the light of clear passages of Scriptures. For example, the visions and dreams of books like Daniel and Revelation are not to be the basis for our understanding of the rest of the Scriptures. But rather we must interpret these visions and dreams in the light of plain, straightforward passages.

For example, Revelation 20:5 speaks of **“the first resurrection”**. Based on this statement some Bible teachers claim that there are two bodily resurrections from the dead, separated by a thousand years. But this understanding of Revelation must be false because Jesus plainly said: **“The hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth”** (John 5:28-29). According to Jesus, there will be only one final bodily resurrection, and the passage in Revelation 20 must not be understood in a way that contradicts this plain teaching of Scripture. This is the way that Scripture interprets Scripture.

Many early Christian leaders and teachers introduced faulty ways of studying Scriptures. Instead of accepting the plain meaning of Scripture, according to the actual words and the grammar, they taught that there is a four-fold way of understanding the Bible: literal, allegorical, moral, and analogical. Thus, each passage had four separate meanings. In his early years as a Bible teacher Martin Luther also followed this four-fold way of teaching. But later he realized that by this method the Scripture could be twisted to mean almost anything. He then insisted that each Scripture passage has only one intended meaning, not many different possible meanings. Otherwise it could not be **“a light that shines in a dark place”** (2 Peter 1:19).

Some Christians, in trying to determine what God wants them to do, misuse the Bible by opening up the Bible at random, blindly putting their finger on some passage on that page, and then claiming that that particular passage is God’s specific word to them for that day. To see how foolish and dangerous this method is, imagine someone pointing his finger on Matthew 27:5, where we read that Judas Iscariot **“departed, and went and hanged himself.”** Imagine that same person in his next search for guidance opening his Bible at the Gospel of Luke and finding his finger on Luke 10:37: **“Go and do likewise.”** Would such a person be obeying God’s command by committing suicide? Of course not! The Bible must not be read as though it were a book of magic. The Bible is to be understood according to its context.

Questions

1. Why can we call the Bible the highest authority?
2. What good example did the Jews in Berea set when Paul came?
3. How did Jesus show that He accepted the authority of Scripture?
4. What is the highest authority in the Roman Catholic Church?
5. What is meant by the statement: "Scripture interprets itself"?
6. If you are aware of misuses of the Bible in your locale, mention them.
7. How are scientists tempted to understand the Scripture teachings?