



Truth

On Tough Texts

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A MINISTRY OF GRACE BIBLE CHURCH

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The Sufficiency of Scripture

Romans 4:3; Galatians 4:30

OF ALL THE ISSUES THAT SURROUND AND inundate the Church today—the redefining of the Gospel, the “seeker-sensitive” movement, the entertainment-orientation of ministry, the abandonment of preaching, the relativism and pragmatism that rule all aspects of Church life, etc.—I am absolutely convinced that it is *the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture* that is the key issue, that *every* issue and question, without exception, comes back to our attitude toward and approach to Scripture. *The bottom line is that what Scripture alone says is always the issue.* In contrast, when Scripture alone is not our *sole* authority, anything is possible.

May we interject here that even more alarming, as documented by several recent polls, is the fact that “a major reason many people are leaving the church is because they no longer believe the Bible to be the absolute Word of God.”¹ Is there any doubt of the Church’s weakness?

When one, therefore, sits down and *objectively* (repeat, *objectively*) compares modern Christianity with Scripture, it does not take him long to see the places of departure. He quickly sees that men have removed many of the necessities, such as the primary one of strong expository preaching, and then added several tons of baggage. How many doctrinal statements, church constitutions, and denominational creeds say, “We believe the Holy Scriptures, the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments, to be the only verbally inspired, inerrant, infallible Word of God, the final authority for faith and life” (or words to that effect), but how many truly *practice* it? How many pastors are standing in pulpits and boldly and unapologetically preaching “all the counsel of God” (Acts

20:27) and following *It alone* as their authority for every aspect of ministry? How many Christians live a life that follows *solely* the principles, precepts, and precedents of the Word of God?

In both of our texts, we see Paul concerned with one thing only, namely, **what saith the scripture?**—that is, *what does Scripture say on a particular subject.* In the first instance (Rom. 4:3), he speaks of justification by faith and cites Abraham as the prime example. To emphasize his point, he quotes from Genesis 15:6. In the second instance (Gal. 4:30), he speaks again of justification by faith. Illustrating the principle that we are no longer under law but under grace (vs. 21-31), he again quotes from Genesis (21:10, 12).

Over and over again, we see Paul going to the Scripture as His *sole* authority. He uses the phrase “it is written,” for example, thirty times (e.g. Rom. 1:17; 3:10; 9:13; I Cor. 1:19, 31; Gal. 3:10; etc.). Further, including all New Testament writers, we find that phrase a total of sixty-three times (KJV; 60 in the NASB, 62 in the NIV, etc.). Similarly, we find the words “Scripture saith” six times (Jn. 19:37; Rom. 9:17; 10:11; 11:2; I Tim. 5:18; Jas. 4:5). All this demonstrates the *singular importance* of the declarations of Scripture.

We read something very different, however, in our day. One noted evangelical author and pastor, for example, writes the following in one of his many books (so as not to offend, I will not cite the author by name):

There are four common misconceptions about spirituality and maturity that simply don’t hold water.

. . . [One of them is] all the problems you will ever have are addressed in the Bible. They're not.

To be fair, we'll give the author the benefit of the doubt by saying that perhaps he means that not every difficulty we will ever face is mentioned *by name*. For example, nowhere do we read, "Thou shalt not use tobacco products," but the principle of not doing anything that damages the temple of the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 6:18-20) plainly teaches against this practice.

So we must object to the author's wording, for it immediately, whether intended or not, casts a doubt on the Scripture. This wording could easily cause someone to say, "Oh, since the Bible doesn't say anything about this practice, then it must be okay," or, "Since I can't find the answer in the Bible, I must look elsewhere." We submit, however, *every single problem or question we might have is answered by either word or principle in Scripture*. The Word of God is sufficient! If the above author agrees with that truth, and we hope he does, why didn't he word it this way: "All the problems you will ever have are addressed either in Word or principle in the Bible?" In the words of Puritan Thomas Gouge:

There is not a condition into which a child of God can fall but there is a direction and rule in the Word in measure suitable thereunto.²

While the Puritan's were certainly not perfect, their devotion to the authority and application of the Word of God puts us to shame. It was from them that we received the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646), in which we read these statements (which also appear virtually verbatim in *The London Baptist Confession of 1689*):

. . . all the books of the Old and New Testament. . . are given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life . . . (Chapter I, section II)

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 . . . (I.IV)

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men . . . (I. VI)

The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence, we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture. (I. X)

The Puritans believed the Bible to be the *only* model for life and cited Scripture for *every area* of living: worship, family, government, economics, sex, church, education, and all others. Do we *really* believe Thomas Vincent's (1634-1678) answer to the question, "Why are the Scriptures called the rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy God?"

Because all *doctrines* which we are bound to believe must be measured or judged of; all *duties* which we are bound to practice as means in order to the attainment of this chief end of man, must be squared or conformed unto this rule.³

Among my favorites of the Puritans was Thomas Watson (no relation that I know of), who wrote:

The Word is a rule of faith, a canon to direct our lives. The Word is the judge of controversies, the rock of infallibility. That only is to be received for truth which agrees with Scripture. . . . All maxims in divinity are to be brought to the touchstone of Scripture, as all measures are brought to the standard.⁴

Further, the Puritans mercilessly scorned (and rightly so) the traditions of Catholicism (in contrast to today's open tolerance of its heinous blasphemies and pagan practices). To them the Scriptures *alone* were to govern the Church. Watson continues:

The Papists, therefore, make themselves guilty, who eke out Scripture with their traditions, which they consider equal to it. The Council of Trent says, that the traditions of the church of Rome are to be received . . . with the same devotion that Scripture is to be received; so bringing themselves under the curse. Rev xxii:18. "If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book."⁵

We simply cannot avoid equating that with what we see today, even in Evangelicalism. Countless things have been and continue to be added to the Church and its ministry, and traditions often supersede the clear revelations of Scripture.

We should approach every question of life by turning to Scripture *alone*. If the Bible is absolutely authoritative, this therefore means that it is authoritative in *every* area. If, on the other hand, It is not authoritative in every area, then It's not authoritative at all. There can be no middle ground here, no "gray area." Therefore, when a question arises, we should turn to the Word of God *alone* for the answer.

Again, however, the grievous trend in the Church today is the idea that, "The Bible does not address every issue of life." To mention a single example, one of the most common things used to supplement Scripture today is psychology. I have heard many advocates say, "Psy-

chology by itself is not enough and the Bible by itself is not enough; we need both for effective counseling.” Such teaching is appalling and is no less than heresy; it flies in the face of Scripture by blatantly denying its sufficiency, that something else is needed to answer people’s problems. If we may submit, whatever did poor ole Paul, or the Lord Jesus Himself for that matter, do without modern psychological techniques? How could they possibly have been effective without adequate training in psychology? We must face the question: *Is Scripture solely sufficient, or is It not?* Our answer to that question reveals our true attitude toward Scripture.

In an article titled, “The Finality and Sufficiency of Scripture,” theologian John Murray wrote:

Here, I believe, we have too often made the mistake of not taking seriously the doctrine we profess. If Scripture is the inscripturated revelation of the gospel and of God’s mind and will, if it is the only revelation of this character that we possess, then it is this revelation in all its fullness, richness, wisdom, and power that must be applied to man in whatever religious, moral, mental situation he is to be found. It is because we have not esteemed and prized the perfection of Scripture and its finality, that we have resorted to other techniques, expedients, and methods of dealing with the dilemma that confronts us all if we are alive to the needs of this hour. . .

. . . it is not the tradition of the past, not a precious heritage, and not the labours of the fathers, that are to serve this generation and this hour, but the Word of the living and abiding God deposited for us in Holy Scripture, and this Word ministered by the church. And we must bring forth from its inexhaustible treasures, in exposition, proclamation, and application—application to every sphere of life—what is the wisdom and power of God for man in this age in all the particularity of his need, as for man in every age. There will then be commanding relevance, for it will be the message from God in the unction and power of the Spirit, not derived from the modern mentality, but declared to the modern mentality in all the desperateness of its anxiety and misery.⁶

I am compelled here to cite another example of today’s trend. My desire is not to be divisive or unkind, but to “[speak] the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). One writer first makes this well-sounding and typical evangelical statement:

If I could have only one wish for God’s people, it would be that all of us would return to the Word of God, that we would realize once and for all that His book has the answers. The Bible IS the authority, the final resting place of our cares, our worries, our sorrows, and our surprises. It is the final answer to our questions, our search.

We whole-heartedly agree so far, but then in another book, he writes:

Clearly my position is on the side of openness, allowing room for the untried, the unpredictable, the unexpected, all the while holding fast to the truth.

[My wife] and I are neither brilliant nor worldly wise, but we do learn fast and we stay flexible, always open to innovative ideas. . . . If a fresh idea, never tried before, makes sense, we’ll give it a whirl! If it fails, we learned. If it works, we get all the more excited!

That is so appalling that it’s hard to know where to begin. First, God doesn’t ask us to be *brilliant*, and He certainly doesn’t ask us to be *worldly wise*; He asks us to be *obedient*. Second, we must ask “makes sense” to whom, man or God? Third, “give it a whirl?” What verse of Scripture tells us to give things “a whirl”? On the other hand, how many verses outline what we are to do and how many more tell us to obey? Fourth, Christian ministry is simply *not a matter of trial and error*. We must disagree with the writer’s statement, “If it fails, we learn,” for he obviously *didn’t* learn that when we do *what* God says and do it the *way* He says, we won’t fail. Fifth, why can’t the writer “get all the more excited” by just doing things God’s way? Sixth, in light of the second paragraph, it’s difficult to know what the writer means when he says “holding fast to the truth” in the first paragraph.

My Dear Christian Friend, God doesn’t want simply our physical *activity*, nor does He need our mental *productivity*, rather He demands our total *reliability*. He wants to use us, but He wants to do it *His* way, and His way is outlined in His Word *alone*. We have flooded His church with man-made programs, gimmicks, humanistic psychology, worldly marketing, and a plethora of other “helps” just to get results, but what kind of results are they? They are not lasting results, for just as man’s ideas come and go, so will the followers of such ideas. Only when we follow the Word *alone* will we have lasting, permanent results: “I [Paul] have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase” (I Cor. 3:6-7; cf. 2:1-5).

Of many Scriptural examples we could cite of those who just did things God’s way and obeyed His Word without addition or subtraction, Noah is among my favorites. Here was a man who appeared to everyone outside his family to be either an eccentric at best or “a nut” at worst. Though totally land-locked, he built a huge boat, all the while proclaiming it was going to rain, even though it had never rained before. Why would anyone do such a thing? Did God give Noah any signs that it was going to rain? Did He give Noah any evidence that what He said about the coming judgment was true? No. So why did Noah do it? *Simply and solely because God said to do*

it. That was enough for Noah; his response to what God said was: “Thus did Noah; according to all that God commanded him, so did he” (Gen. 6:22).

How many of us today fear what people will think if we simply obey what God says? We fear that we will appear old-fashioned, behind the times, out of touch, naïve, simplistic, non-intellectual, or just plain silly if we quote and practice the Bible. Not Noah.

Noah teaches us another lesson. Notice that he did not build the ark because he saw “a need” for it—there wasn’t one. There were no large bodies of water nearby, and Noah certainly didn’t live in a port city, so there was absolutely no need for a big boat. In contrast, many today want to go out and “do something” just because they perceive a need. So using human reasoning they think up something to “meet the need.” This is not what Noah did. *He did what God told him to do, no more and no less.* He didn’t form a committee, he didn’t found an organization, he didn’t think up a method for ministry; he simply obeyed God by building the ark and preaching the Word. Likewise, if we would just do what God says to do, the way He says to do it, no more and no less, we will see God’s blessings like never before.

Without doubt, most of Christianity today is totally pragmatic in its approach to ministry. To many, if not most, Christian ministers, “the end justifies the means.” They, like Charles Finney, D. L. Moody, and others, will “do anything to get a man to God” (Moody’s words). But is that what we see in God’s Word? Is that what we learn from Noah? No. We see a man doing what God told him to do.

Consider what Noah would do today if he followed modern trends. To be successful, he would build several boats (or just one even bigger one) and then do anything to get people on one of them. He’d run an attendance contest, give away balloons with dinosaur pictures on them, put on a stage play to dramatize the coming flood, make people feel comfortable by appealing to their “felt-needs,” sing praise choruses for an hour, have a celebrity give his testimony, and then deliver a ten-minute talk on self-esteem and that “God has a wonderful plan for your life so you really need to get on the boat.” But Noah’s ministry was not a *pragmatic* one; it was a *biblical* one. He did things God’s way.

I’m also constantly reminded of another example, namely, the book of Nehemiah, where we read:

And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate; and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded to Israel. (8:1)

The pivotal words here are “bring the book,” the background of which we find in Deuteronomy 31:9-13, where Moses delivers a law stating that,

At the end of every seven years, in the solemnity of the year of release, in the feast of tabernacles, When all Israel is come to appear before the LORD thy God in the place which he shall choose, thou shalt read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Gather the people together, men, and women, and children, and thy stranger that is within thy gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear the LORD your God, and observe to do all the words of this law: And that their children, which have not known any thing, may hear, and learn to fear the LORD your God, as long as ye live in the land whither ye go over Jordan to possess it. (vs. 10-13)

Note carefully that *all* the people—men, women, and children—were to listen to the Law of God. The accepted practice today, of course, is that we need “graded curriculum” and different classes and programs for each age group, an approach that is, according to historical fact, a by-product of evolutionary thought propagated by John Dewey and others. Here, however, all the people listened to the reading of God’s Law. In fact, what we find in Scripture is that children of every age were *always*, without a single exception, with their parents when God’s people met for worship; in other words, *families always worshipped together*.⁷

And what was (and is) the purpose? “That they may learn, and fear the LORD your God, and observe to do all the words of this law.” While people were instructed every Sabbath and daily in their homes, this public reading served as a collective reminder to obey God’s Law.

So the people’s request to “bring the book” is extremely significant. During the seventy years of captivity in Babylon, the practice of publicly reading the Scriptures had been neglected, but was now reinstated. I am always struck by those words. The people did not say, “Ezra, bring entertainment,” “Bring a celebrity,” “Bring your opinion,” “Bring psychology,” “Bring a new method,” or “Bring your experience”; rather they said, “Bring *the Book!*” Oh, how much we need the Book today! We bring everything under the sun into our assemblies except the one (and *only*) thing we should bring, the Word of God.

We also read that the people “gathered themselves together as one man.” We hear much today about “unity,” but it is the Word of God *alone* that provides the ground for true unity. If there is no unity around the Word of God, then there’s no unity.

Also notice that the people were attentive to the Word (v. 3), and that they “stood up” when It was opened (v. 5). What reverence and awe they had for God’s Word, in stark contrast to today’s often nonchalant, flippant, and lip-serving attitude.

Further, the people listened from “the morning until midday.” The Hebrew for “morning” (*owr*) means “light, light of day, daybreak, or dawn.” So God’s people stood

and listened to the Word read, exposit, and applied for several hours. What an indictment on us today who barely have time to give God an hour on Sunday morning, or who don't want the sermon to go "too long" so as not to interfere with our plans for the afternoon, or who think nothing of attending a Christian content or having an hour long song service but only a ten-minute "sermon" (or none at all).

What was the result of all this in Nehemiah's day? Did the Word of God make a difference in the lives of God's people?

Now in the twenty and fourth day of this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, and with sackclothes, and earth upon them. And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers, and stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers. And they stood up in their place, and read in the book of the law of the LORD their God one fourth part of the day; and another fourth part they confessed, and worshipped the LORD their God. (9:1-3)

Again the people gathered to read God's Law, this time for a fourth part of the day, that is, for three hours. They then spent another three hours in confession of sin and worship of God. What a contrast to our habit today! As Matthew Henry puts it, "They stayed together six hours . . . without saying, Behold what a weariness it is."

Further, we often hear such clichés as, "Oh, we need revival," "We need renewal," "We need reformation," and so on. We then use every human idea we can think of to produce the desired effect. Charles Finney wrote in his autobiography, "A revival is not a miracle, nor dependent on a miracle in any sense. It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means, as much so as any other effect produced by the application of means."⁸ Likewise, today's basic philosophy of ministry is, "If it works, do it." But that is not what we see in Nehemiah. It was *only* when Ezra opened the Book, read It, and expounded It that true revival broke out. It was *only then* that the people of God repented and turned back to Him. Likewise, new life will come to the Church only when we "bring the Book" *alone*.

In his typical straightforward style, A. W. Tozer brings the issue down to this pointed and practical application:

What Christian when faced with a moral problem goes straight to the Sermon on the Mount or other New Testament Scripture for the authoritative answer? Who lets the words of Christ be final on giving, birth control, the bringing up of a family, personal habits, tithing, entertainment, buying, selling, and other such important matters?⁹

What is the final conclusion of believing in Biblical authority and sufficiency? We *say* we believe it, but do we *really*?

The final conclusion of believing in biblical authority and sufficiency is that we do that which It says, refrain from doing what It forbids, and add nothing to It or subtract nothing from It in both doctrine and practice.

It's one thing to say those words, but it's quite another, indeed, to *live* them.

Dr. J. D. Watson
Pastor-Teacher
Grace Bible Church

NOTES

¹ From a poll taken by Answers in Genesis, as a follow-up to a 2002 Barna poll and a Southern Baptist poll of around the same time. Cited in "Answers Update", Volume 13, Issue 11 (Hebron, KY: Answers In Genesis, 2006), p. 2.

² Cited in Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans As They Really Were* (Zondervan, 1986), p. 137.

³ Thomas Vincent, *The Shorter Catechism Explained from Scripture* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1980), p. 22 (emphasis added).

⁴ Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1992 reprint), p. 30.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), Vol. 1, pp. 21-22 (emphasis in the original).

⁷ See Josh. 8:35; II Chron. 20:13; Neh. 12:43; Joel 2:15-16; Lu. 2:41-42; Matt. 18:1-5; Mk. 10:13-14; Acts 2:46; 20:20.

⁸ Charles G. Finney: *An Autobiography* (Revell, n.d.), p. 5.

⁹ A. W. Tozer, "The Waning Authority of Christ in the Churches" in *God Tells the Man Who Cares* (Christian Publications).

In The Next Issue: *Is There a So-Called "Call" to Ministry? (I Tim. 3:1)*

The Holy Ghost rides in the chariot of Scripture, and not in the wagon of modern thought.

**Charles Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*
Vol. 37, p. 233 (on Ephesians 6:17)**

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A Ministry of
Grace Bible Church
P.O. Box 235
Meeker, CO 81641
www.TheScriptureAlone.com
docwatson3228@qwest.net

This monthly publication is intended to address Scriptures that have historically been debated, are particularly difficult to understand, or have generated questions among Believers. We hope it will be an encouragement and challenge to God's people to carefully examine and discern Truth. While the positions presented here are based on years of careful Biblical research, we recognize that other respected men of God differ.

If you have a question that perplexes you, please send it along so that we might address it either in an article or in our "Q & A" section. Other comments are also warmly welcomed, and letters to the editor will be published.

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