

The Authority of Scripture

“Preacher, don’t talk to us about racism again.” Church council meetings at my first pastorate in the middle of nowhere (a beautiful place in east Texas) were typically very easy going. This meeting was a bit different. I’d apparently touched a nerve. “Slavery is God’s will. Brother McAdams taught us about the *curse of Ham* (Gen 9:20-27, often used to justify the subjugation of races deemed inferior). The Bible is clear in what it says!”

In that little country church, there were no paintings of Jesus in the foyer. Only a large framed picture of Brother McAdams greeted those who entered. If he had said it, then it may as well have been written in stone.

“The Bible is clear in what it says....” Thus, comes the impassioned assertion of preachers and teachers and leaders throughout the history of the church. Indeed, it is the clarion call of those of us who declare that scripture is authoritative about how we live and relate to each other. But, what does it clearly say?

When it comes to the authority of scripture, I believe there are two kinds of authority it has for us. First, there is the dominion we claim from it, and then there is the control we yield to it. I suggest that the second is the greater of the two.

The Bible is clear in what it says. Claiming the authority of what the Bible says can serve good purposes, like motivating folks. We preachers often do it when encouraging stewardship, service, witnessing, or just about any other thing the good Lord needs us to do. Then again, we can also abuse our privilege of claiming authority so that the Bible serves us. I recall an early experience in my return to religion, when I parked in the overflow area at my brother’s church, in front of a yard filled with Cadillacs. I mentioned to my brother that I parked where the rich people park their cars. “No, that’s the preacher’s house. Those are all his cars,” came his matter-of-fact reply. The sermon that evening— “Tithing: What the Bible Says.”

Persuasion is another good use for claiming what the Bible clearly says. I’ve got to admit, I’ve used the authority of scripture to make my point; to give weight to my argument, and to signal that the discussion was over. I look back on those times, and I’m a bit embarrassed to write that indeed it was *my point*; it was *my argument*.

The Bible is clear in what it says. As powerful as the Bible is, I’ve never seen it have more authority than when it has persuaded me; when it has motivated me; when it has softened my hard heart; when it has shown me my true self. That is the real authority of scripture—the control that we yield to it. Why do you suppose we all experience the Word of God differently? Why does it give different insight, comfort, strength, encouragement, conviction, assurance to each of us? I believe that the Bible is simply a means of God’s inspiration. It is God doing the enlightening, comforting, strengthening, convicting, and assuring. We can hardly claim the authority of the scriptures with integrity unless we have also surrendered to the Word and been changed by it. The greatest authority of the Bible is the authority that we yield to it.

The Bible is clear in what it says. The Bible has been enlightening me and growing me lately. What do I find in the Bible regarding slavery, the role of women, our treatment of other religions, and even LGBTQ inclusion? I am becoming convinced of scripture’s relevance amid the controversies of the church throughout the ages. The Bible has been speaking clearly to me, these things: God so loves the entire world that God sent Jesus; Jesus came as the fulfillment of all righteousness; even though not one mark of the Law will disappear, Jesus has fulfilled that same Law; the legalistic water of purification has been changed into the wine of God’s grace—the blood of Jesus; we have been set free from the law of sin and death; now the greatest commandment remains—love God, love neighbor, love each other; sin is no longer limited to rules—the greatest sin is our willful refusal

to receive God's love and to give God's love. But, how shall we receive and how shall we give? Seek, and we shall find the way.

I'm blessed to say that the authority of Scripture is important to our church. See you there, --pastor tony