

## INTRODUCTION

First Samuel 15 is one of the saddest chapters in the Bible. It begins with a very clear command given to Saul, the newly crowned king of Israel: “Thus says the LORD of hosts, ‘I will punish Amalek for what he did to Israel, how he set himself against him on the way while he was coming up from Egypt. Now go and strike Amalek and utterly destroy all that he has, and do not spare him; but put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey’” (15:2–3). God proceeded to give Israel the victory over the Amalekites, but Saul led his people in disobedience to the LORD’s instructions: “But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were not willing to destroy them utterly; but everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed” (15:9).

Where it was easy to obey, Saul obeyed. He destroyed what was not valuable. But where obedience was difficult, as in destroying Agag and the best of the Amalekite flocks, Saul dissented. Rather than follow God’s clear instructions, Saul sought to temper God’s word with his own wisdom. He preserved the life of the Amalekite king and dedicated the best of the livestock as sacrifices to the LORD, thinking this would earn God’s approval. Solomon believed that disregarding the voice of the LORD was acceptable if he could improve upon it. The rebuke of the prophet Samuel was sharp:

Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD, but rushed upon the spoil and did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. . . . Has the LORD as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, **to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry.** Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He has also rejected you from *being* king. (15:19, 22–24)

Saul’s fall as Israel’s first king vividly illustrates the consequences of disregarding the absolute authority of God’s word. It was not that Saul rejected God’s word outright. He treated it as *an* authority. The crux of his problem was that he treated something else as *more authoritative*. He subtly sought to usurp God’s authority with his own intuition, and the consequences were stark. God rejected Saul that day, and the remainder of his life was marked by bitterness and defeat.

But Saul is not alone in the effort to usurp the authority of the LORD’s voice. From the fall of Adam (Genesis 3) to the present day, nothing is as disputed and disavowed as the absolute authority of the word of God. It was the issue of Adam’s day. It was the issue of Saul’s day. It is the issue of our day.

## THE NATURE OF AUTHORITY

### A. What is authority?

“**Authority**” = “power to influence or command thought, opinion, or behavior” (Mirriam-Webster).

“Authority itself 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” (Bernard Ramm, *The Pattern of Religious Authority*, 1).

Thus, **authority is that which binds the conscience**—either in an ultimate sense (a primary authority) or a derived sense (a secondary authority).

### B. Where is ultimate authority found?

Throughout history, spiritual or religious authority has been sought in these four sources:

1. **The Church** (Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, some Protestants). The Bible is authoritative, but neither *sufficient* to address all matters necessary for faith and life nor *clear enough* to be interpreted on its own. An *insufficient* and *obscure* Bible requires another authority, one that—from a practical standpoint—rises above it to provide what the Bible *lacks* and clarify what the Bible *obscures*.
2. **The Self** (Protestant Liberalism and Progressive Christianity). The Bible is authoritative but must still be submitted either to the dictates of *reason* (what I *think* is right) or to the dictates of *experience* (what I *feel* is right).
3. **The Community** (Postmodern Christianity and Woke Christianity). The Bible is authoritative but does not contain objective truth. Interpretation is based upon the shared experiences of each community.
4. **The Bible** (Biblical Christianity). The Bible is the ultimate authority for faith and life; it is never improved, clarified, validated, or augmented by any other authority; it presides as judge over all other authorities.

Recognition of the Bible as the ultimate authority in life is inseparably attached to the recognition of *the authority of God*:

**Major Premise:** God is the ultimate authority over everything that exists.

**Minor Premise:** God exercises His authority through His word.

**Conclusion:** God's word is His authority.

The biblical evidence for the authority of Scripture can be summarized into at least *three categories*:

#### A. Scripture's Self-Witness

Scripture describes itself using language that implies authority:

→ 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20–21

In fact, the way in which Scripture quotes Scripture is particularly illuminating. Such references reveal the logic of the biblical writers in the way that they *justify* their writings by referencing other Scriptures:

- **"It is written"** – γέγραπται (*gegraptai*); a perfect passive verb indicating that something was recorded at a moment in history and remains binding to this day.
- **"Scripture says," "it says," or "God says"** – the present tense verb indicates that the words of Scripture quoted are *living words of God*; they indicate unquestioned submission.
- **"The oracles of God"** – "the authoritative words of God"; Acts 7:38; Romans 3:2; Hebrews 5:12; 1 Peter 4:11.

#### B. Christ's Own Testimony

A fundamental proof of the authority of Scripture is found in Christ's own attitude toward Scripture. Without question, Jesus affirmed that the Scripture of His day (the Old Testament) was *absolutely authoritative*. In fact, one of the most powerful statements on the authority of the written word of God found anywhere is found in Jesus' statement, **"The Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35)**. Drawing out the implications of Jesus' view of Scripture from John 10:35, Donald Macleod states, "Scripture cannot be annulled, set aside, or deprived of its force . . . No Scripture command can be *breached*. No Scripture record can be *falsified*. No Scripture threat or promise can *fail of fulfillment*. . . . Therefore, to say negatively that Scripture cannot be broken is to say positively that Scripture must be fulfilled" ("Jesus and Scripture," 77). See also:

→ **Matthew 15:17–20; Luke 16:17**

Beyond these general assertions, Jesus' attitude toward the Scriptures as ultimately binding can be seen in His use of them to do three things:

THE  
TESTIMONY TO  
AUTHORITY  
  
The Testimony  
of Scripture

The Testimony  
of Christ

1. **Jesus treats Scripture as ultimately authoritative in His response to Satan.** Jesus illustrates the authority of the OT in dramatic fashion in His encounter with the devil in the wilderness.

→ **Matthew 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13**

In response to each of the devil's temptations, Jesus appeals immediately to the OT, and His citations of Scripture are decisive. In each case, Jesus responds with the introductory formula, **"It is written"** (vv. 4, 7, 10)—*γέγραπται* (*gegraptai*). Though written centuries before Christ, the passages cited remained unassailably authoritative in response to temptation.

2. **Jesus treats Scripture as ultimately authoritative in settling controversies.** The story of the Gospels is the story of Jesus turning the tables on the Pharisees and Sadducees, showing over and over that while they claimed to submit to the authority of God's word, their own behavior and teaching demonstrated otherwise. Over and over, Jesus used Scripture to respond to their hardened hearts and their misunderstanding of the written word of God.

→ **Matthew 23:1–7**

In fact, a crucial problem Jesus addressed was their guilt in elevating *other authorities*—namely, *human tradition*—to the same level of Scripture itself, and even higher.

→ **Matthew 15:1–9**

As John Frame states, Jesus "did not hesitate to disagree with Jewish traditions when he thought it necessary. But he never questioned the Jews' [high] understanding of scriptural authority. There is not a shred of evidence that he personally held a view of Scripture different from theirs" (*The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 119).

3. **Jesus treats Scripture as ultimately authoritative for rendering damnation.** Ultimately, Christ taught that the OT possessed such authority that it was all that was needed to condemn the unbelieving for their rejection.

→ **John 5:45–47; Luke 16:19–31**

Noteworthy in Luke 16:19–31 is how Jesus describes the authority of the Scriptures to command belief and to condemn unbelief as greater than that of the miracle of resurrection!

Without question, Jesus viewed the word of God as that which played *the central role* in explaining and implementing God's redemptive plan. As Mark Thompson has stated,

What is common to all of these (and the other uses of biblical quotation by Jesus as well) is a confidence that appeal to the text of the Old Testament is decisive: it settles the matter. Jesus' ministry is validated, not only by the miracles he has performed but by the testimony to him embedded in the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms (Luke 24:44). (*Clear and Present Word*, 83)

The Testimony  
of the New  
Testament  
Writers

### C. The Witness of the New Testament Writers

When turning to the New Testament writers' view of religious authority, there is no ambiguity. They demonstrate through direct assertions, abundant illustrations, and implicit argumentation that **whatever God has inspired is ultimately binding**. This can be seen in three ways:

1. The way in which the NT writers used the OT to establish their teaching and respond to questions and problems demonstrates that they believed those Scriptures were ultimately binding.
2. The way in which the NT writers treated their own writings and how their recipients were to receive them (e.g., 1 Corinthians 14:37; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; Titus 2:15).
3. The way in which the NT writers referred to each others' writings indicated they believed those writings were as binding as the OT Scriptures themselves (e.g., Paul's use of Deut 25:4 with Luke 10:7 in 1 Tim 5:18; Peter's reference to Paul's letters as "Scripture" in 2 Peter 3:16).

## THE IMPLICATIONS OF AUTHORITY

The authority of Scripture has definite implications for our lives today. God has designed the Bible as the means by which He mediates His lordship over all of our lives. Thus, the Bible cannot only be professed as inspired, inerrant, trustworthy, clear, sufficient, and necessary. It must also be received as “the voice of the LORD” itself. As such, it must be read and studied carefully to arrive at a correct understanding so that correct obedience can follow. J. I. Packer captured this well when he wrote,

It will not be enough to fight and win the battle for biblical inspiration and infallibility if we are then going to lose the battle for understanding the Bible and learning to live under its authority. We must be clear therefore on the rules of biblical interpretation and with that work constantly to get the blinders off our spiritual eyes so that breadth and depth of practical insight may be ours at all points” (Packer, “Give Me Understanding,” in *Truth and Power*, 118).

- A. **Acknowledge the Bible for what it is.** The Bible expresses God’s sovereignty over our lives, so when the Bible speaks, God speaks. Our response to the biblical texts should be that described in Isaiah 66:2, which states, “‘For My hand made all these things, thus all these things came into being,’ declares the LORD. ‘But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word.’”
- B. **Respond with comprehensive submission.** Faith recognizes that if God said it, that seals it; no other verification is needed. Then remember the words of the prophet Samuel: “Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry” (1 Samuel 15:22–23).
- C. **Study the Scriptures diligently.** A biblical text wrongly understood will lead to a conscience wrongly bound. Take heed to the exhortation of Paul to Timothy when he wrote, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). Submission to the authority of God in His word will be manifested in the right, disciplined interpretation of it.
- D. **Speak the Scriptures with conviction.** Don’t succumb to the pressure to “prove” Scripture. Assert it! As Spurgeon famously said, “There is no need for you to defend a lion when he is being attacked.” Therefore, remember the command of Paul in Colossians 3:16, “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another.”

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Discuss these questions in your small group:

1. In your own words, explain what “the authority of Scripture” means.
2. Identify the three alternative sources of authority (in addition to the Bible) when it comes to religious or spiritual authority. Give examples and explain the allure of each one. Out of these three, to which one have you been most prone to gravitate?
3. Why is it easier to profess the inspiration, inerrancy, sufficiency, and even necessity of the Bible, than it is to profess its authority?
4. What is one area in your life where resistance still remains to the authority of Scripture? Ask for prayer and counsel for how to bring this area of life into submission to God’s government. Identify and implement a practical plan for taking this area captive to the obedience of Christ.
5. How does the doctrine of Scripture’s authority motivate and embolden evangelism?

## FURTHER STUDY

For further study this week:

1. Memorize Psalm 1:1–2 and Isaiah 66:2.
2. Listen to the sermon by Martyn Lloyd-Jones, entitled “The Authority of the Bible” (MLJ Trust), preached Sept 30, 1956, and available here: [The Authority of the Bible: A sermon on Acts 17:1-3.](#)
3. Listen to the sermon by John MacArthur, entitled “For the Authority of Scripture” (Ligonier Ministries), available here: [John MacArthur: For the Authority of Scripture.](#)
4. Read Kevin DeYoung, *Taking God at His Word*, chapter 5, “God’s Word Is Final,” pp. 71–83.
5. Read the article by Richard Mayhue, “The Authority of Scripture,” in the Fall 2004 edition of *The Master’s Seminary Journal*, available at this link: [tmsj15j.pdf](#).

**Audio, video, and handouts for this session:** [www.gracechurch.org/motw](http://www.gracechurch.org/motw)

**Next meeting:** December 4, Fall Fellowship (6pm, Family Center)