

1 The basis of Biblical authority

David Campbell

A war on two fronts

According to the book of Revelation, the battle of the ages plays out in two different ways. The first is the one we understand from the dramatic, frightening and sometimes strange imagery of the book. It is the battle between God and His angels, and the dragon, the beast and the false prophet. Both sides have a base of operations. God operates through the church and the devil operates through Babylon, Revelation's code word for the fallen world system as it stands in opposition to God's authority. Throughout history, from the resurrection of Christ until His return, the devil and his agents, the beast (representing the demonic power behind corrupt world governments) and the false prophet (representing the demonic power behind the false religions which uphold those same powers) seek to oppress and destroy the church. Believers are commended for resisting these powers, and are urged to continue to do so even to the point of death. This is a battle we understand, though its nature and duration have been grossly distorted by popular authors who try to interpret the Bible by the newspaper instead of by itself, and who locate its events only in the generation immediately preceding the return of the Lord. But the other battle set forth by Revelation is often overlooked. It is the battle Jesus referred to when He said, "*Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves*" (Matt. 7:15). It is the battle Paul referred to when, mindful of Jesus' words, he said, "*I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and out of your midst men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them*" (Acts 20:30). Thus our battle is on two fronts: without and within. The same dragon who uses the beast to stir up the world system to oppress the saints from without also sends his false prophet into the midst of the church to divide and conquer the church from within.

In third-world nations today, the battle is often (though not always) from without. Christians are being persecuted and put to death in record numbers. The beast is stirring up the energies of pagan governments and the false prophet is adding in a liberal measure of false religion. Taken together, this has produced a worldwide security crisis of which we are all aware. In the western world, the battle is more subtle but just as real. It is largely a battle from within. We are pressured to conform, to become acceptable culturally, socially and commercially. Wherever the values of the pagan culture around us conflict with those of the Bible, we come under pressure and are tempted to compromise. Because we don't want to appear to be undermining the Bible's authority, we introduce instead the concept of cultural relativity. Certain parts of the Bible were relevant to the culture in which they were written, but not to our own. This ignores the fact that Biblical values were just as radically counter-cultural in the pagan environment of the first century as they are to in the pagan environment of today. Yet I would suggest it is heresy to say that parts of Scripture are only "culturally relevant" and not authoritative for us today. The only parts of Scripture which are no longer to be observed are those parts which Scripture itself teaches are not to be observed – such as the daily offering of bulls and presentation of other sacrifices. Just because a teaching of Scripture is offensive to modern culture does not give that culture the right to declare those teachings out of date. The entire doctrine of the Atonement – the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross – is based on what are (humanly-speaking) completely

outdated Jewish cultural concepts of animal sacrifice. As Christians, we understand that such sacrifices are no longer to be offered, not because they are outdated or culturally unacceptable, but because God Himself has substituted another sacrifice for these, the sacrifice of His own Son. But the sacrifice of Christ on the cross makes no sense outside of the Old Testament understanding of the power of sacrifice to satisfy the anger of a holy God – a concept completely foreign to our modern culture. Once we discard this “outdated” concept of sacrifice, we have discarded the cross itself. When we begin to pick and choose which parts of Scripture are acceptable to us, it will not be long before we have thrown out Scripture – and our faith – completely. Such is proved by the history of modern theology, which began with the rejecting of “minor” points, and ended, several generations later, with the rejection of everything else.

The task before us today is twofold: *first*, to study God’s word, to teach and preach it in season and out of season, whether or not it is popular with the culture we live in. We are to be a prophetic people who speak against the values of our culture, not a compromising crowd who adopt them for ourselves. *Second*, to study the culture we live in, to become aware of all the areas in which its values oppose those of God’s word, and to make sure none of them enter our lives or the church. If we do not do this, we will fall into the situation of the church of Thyatira, which tolerated the presence of sin in its midst. One day, sooner rather than later, we, like they, will be confronted by the One with eyes of fire and feet of burnished bronze (Rev. 2:18), and rightly judged for our sin, whether participating in it directly or tolerating it in the house of the Lord. God give us prophetic eyes to see clearly and act justly in these challenging days.

The Word of God as a foundation of faith

Let me now offer a doctrinal foundation for all I have said above.

The ultimate foundation of our faith is God Himself, revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But God has chosen to reveal Himself in a very particular way, through His written Word, the Bible. All that we know about God finds its foundation in the Bible and must be tested by the Bible. In this way we can say that the Bible itself is a foundation of our faith. The Bible itself bears witness to its authority. The Psalmist declares: “*Your word, O Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens*” (Psalm 119:89); and again: “*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.*” (Ps. 119:105). Jesus Himself said: “*The Scripture cannot be broken*” (John 10:35). Paul wrote: “*...you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness...*” (2 Tim. 3:16).

The Bible as covenant

The Bible is the self-revelation of God. God has given this revelation to us in a carefully-defined form which emphasizes its authority. This form is called a “covenant”. While we can understand the essential nature of this covenant from the Bible itself, further light is thrown on it if we appreciate some of its historical background. God sent His Son “*in the fulness of time*” (Gal. 4:4), born in a day in which, more than ever before in history (thanks to the nature of the Roman Empire), the Gospel could easily be spread from one end of the civilized world to the other. In the same way, God chose to reveal Himself in His Word to a particular people at a

particular place and time in history, and He did so for a reason. God fashioned His Word using the format of a treaty or covenant which all the peoples of that day and age would have understood.

How God used the ancient concept of treaty or covenant to deal with the Israelites

Archaeological records show us that in the middle-eastern world of the second millennium BC (the time of Moses), conquering kings used a clearly-defined treaty format to impose their will on defeated peoples. This would have been the way the people of Israel understood for a people to come into submission to a king. The covenant (or treaty) God made with Moses and the children of Israel more or less exactly follows this format. God takes the place of the conquering king and Israel are the people He conquers or asserts His rulership over. God used a vehicle for His revelation which would have been easily and clearly understood by all the people. The heart of this covenant (and of our Old Testament) is the Mosaic law, but it is not hard to see how the other parts of the Old Testament are all related to it. Premosaic history (Genesis) sets the stage for the delivery of the covenant by defining who God is and who His people are, as well as illuminating God's character and faithfulness. Postmosaic history (historical books) is a record of obedience or disobedience to the Mosaic covenant. The Psalms are largely the worship accompaniment to the covenant celebrations (whether daily or weekly rituals or the great festivals). The prophetic books contain God's warnings regarding disobedience to the covenant in subsequent times. The wisdom books (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes) bring practical application of the covenant to various areas of life.

The ancient treaty was a binding agreement between two parties (with copies to both). It came in written form, could not be abrogated or altered, and had promises and curses attached. This is the form the Mosaic covenant and Old Testament take and this is the foundation of their authority. This treaty, once given, constituted a permanent, unchangeable legal document governing the relationship of the conquering king with the conquered people. Likewise, the Mosaic covenant (and, by extension, the entire Old Testament) was a permanent legal document detailing the requirements God placed upon His people. As with the ancient treaties, curses were attached to those who would alter the covenant document in any way (Deut. 4:2). To the covenant was attached the historical narratives, Psalms, prophetic writings and wisdom literature, all of which were necessary elaborations of the covenant. The various parts of the Old Testament operate in unity to form God's ongoing conduct of His covenantal relationship with His people. Thus God Himself fashioned the Old Testament as a permanently-binding and authoritative expression of His will, down to the last detail, even though He utilized humanly-understandable forms to express it. The ancient treaties show us exactly how the people of Israel would have easily comprehended the meaning of God's covenant as they received it, and why they held the Scriptures in such high reverence. This also explains why, even as other ancient treaties had to be preserved and guarded in a secure and often sacred location, the Mosaic covenant had to be preserved in the Ark of the covenant. It explains why Moses wrote two copies of the covenant (Deut. 4:13, which has sometimes been misunderstood as one copy written on two stones), one for God and the other for Israel. Finally, it explains why the whole Old Testament was so meticulously passed down for well over a millennium in a society without printing presses! Covenant requires Scripture -- where there is covenant, there will without doubt be a binding written record of its terms and conditions, and this is what the Bible is. You

cannot have faith in the God of the Bible without possessing and obeying His written record of covenant. This is the foundation for our understanding of the authority of Scripture. The Bible is authoritative, therefore, not because the church says it is but because God has inspired and created it Himself, and it holds validity independent of any human agency or power.

This concept also explains the authority of the new covenant (or treaty) in Christ

What about the New Testament? The New Testament is fundamentally a renewal of the Old Testament covenant. It is given by the same God, and its conditions are prophesied in the original covenant (from Genesis to Malachi). Moses, as well as Abraham and David, not to mention the prophets, spoke of the coming of the Messiah. The Old Testament, indeed, is in its entirety a prophetic foreshadowing of the New. The New Testament renews the Mosaic covenant, but alters its conditions, so that forgiveness comes by the blood of Christ rather than temple sacrifices. It also alters the nature of the covenant community, widening it from Jews to people of all nations. The structure of the New Testament is amazingly similar to that of the Old. At its heart is the giving of the covenant in Christ. Like the Old Testament, it has its history which sets the stage (Gospels), as well as a historical record of the subsequent obedience and disobedience of the covenant community (Acts and Epistles), gives prophetic insight and teaching (Epistles), wisdom (Epistles) and praise (Epistles and Revelation). This new covenant, being a renewal of the old, has the same characteristics of the latter, in that it comes from God, is inviolable and cannot be altered, and even has curses attached to that end (Rev. 21:18-19).

Covenant and church

Covenant creates a community or house of God which must live according to its commandments or suffer the consequences. The function of each testament or covenant is that of a legal document which defines the covenant community (Israel or the church) as a system of government by which the lordship of God through Jesus Christ is made real on the earth. Even as God through His creative word in Genesis fashioned the heavens and the earth, so God through His Scriptural Word fashions the structure and nature of His covenant community upon the earth. As opposed to the Roman Catholic conception, in which the church creates the Bible and may therefore subject it to its own changing interpretation, we maintain that God through His Word stands as Lord over the church and calls the church into line with His Kingdom purposes. It is not that Scripture creates the church, but that God through Scripture orders the church and brings the church into submission to His will. Without Scripture, therefore, there is no way of knowing what the nature or will of God is other than through the limited lens of revelation through creation, which men have rejected (Rom. 1:18-32), and which brings no understanding or means of salvation from sin.

God's old and new covenants were both made with His people, not with isolated individuals. It is important to note, therefore, that the covenant extends now to the church, not just to Christians considered as individuals. Salvation can only be received on an individual basis, but it comes on the basis of the covenant God has made with His body, the church, and there is no salvation outside of this Body of Christ. Those who seek to undermine the church or fail to recognize that it is the instrument of God's purposes on earth may find themselves outside the boundaries of His covenant and therefore lost forever. If we fail to build the church properly, we will survive,

even though what we have built will not (1 Cor. 3:10-15). But if we seek to destroy the church, as some at Corinth were evidently doing, we will be utterly and eternally destroyed (literal Greek: “torn limb from limb”) by God: *“If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you [Greek plural] are”* (2 Cor. 3:17) . Note that here Paul is using the concept of temple to refer to the body of the church corporately, rather than (as he does in 1 Cor. 6:19) to refer to a person’s individual physical body.

If we seek to build churches today on the solid foundation of God’s unchanging word, those churches will remain standing on the rock of that foundation long after the changing tides and storms of human culture have abated. Against such churches the gates of hell – no matter how those gates appear, whether as opposing armies without or false prophets within – will not stand. God give us the courage to build such churches in these days.