

Voices: Authority of the Bible: Doctrine to defend, doctrine that shapes

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When you hear the phrase “the authority of the Bible,” what comes to your mind? For many, this phrase is associated with “battles for the Bible” that can take shape in the life of a church, denomination or seminary.

The past four decades within Southern Baptist life often have been framed as a battle for the Bible and its authority. There is nothing wrong about associating the authority of the Bible with these battles, but too often the authority of the Bible primarily is associated with a doctrine to be defended instead of a doctrine that shapes our lives.

Defending authority at the expense of being shaped by it

When the authority of the Bible is associated solely with a doctrine to be defended, it can be easy to disconnect how the authority of the Bible needs to be applied and lived in the everyday life of Christians.

It is important, therefore, to reflect on how the authority of the Bible needs to shape the lives of Christians. For this connection to happen, the authority of the Bible needs to be expanded from solely a doctrine to be defended to a doctrine that aids in the spiritual formation of Christians.

In order for the authority of the Bible to form the life of a Christian spiritually, this doctrine needs to shape the lives of Christians in at least three ways.

The authority of the Bible corrects error

First, the authority of the Bible needs to function as a corrective to other supposed authorities demanding allegiance.

One example of this is the challenge many Christians in the West face living within a culture that prioritizes experience as the most important and powerful authority. This prioritization of experience leads to the belief that anything that is seen as a threat to the “authority” of experience needs to be rejected.

For the Christian, though, the Bible functions as a greater authority than experience. Therefore, the authority of the Bible should foster a healthy tension and correction in the lives of Christians as they live within the broader culture where experience is seen as authoritative.

A question to help maintain this healthy tension and correction is, “Where am I submitting to the authority of God’s word in my life where I wish, based on my experience, the Bible taught something else?”

The authority of the Bible fosters trust

Second, the authority of the Bible can help foster trust in God. This doctrine enables trust in God by connecting the authority of the Bible to God and his authority. By making this connection, Christians can trust what God has spoken to us in the Bible.

An example of this can be seen when people cling to God and the promises he has given in the Bible even as they experience tragedy. When people cling to God and his promises revealed in the Bible in the midst of tragedy, they are not thinking necessarily about the doctrine of the authority of the

Bible. Nevertheless, the authority of the Bible—an authority greater than even painful experience of tragedy—is undergirding their trust in God and his promises.

The authority of the Bible spurs obedience

Third, the authority of the Bible can remind Christians the Bible needs to be applied to our lives in such a way that it leads to joyful obedience to the glory of God. That is, the truth of God needs to be applied, or Christians can end up becoming hypocrites who loudly defend the authority of the Bible while living lives of disobedience to God's word.

The sobering reality is someone can have a right understanding about the authority of the Bible, be willing to oppose those who seek to undermine the authority of the Bible, and be able to write beautiful theology about the authority of the Bible and still be found disobedient because they did not apply the truth of God's word to their own life.

A life obedient to God's word is the best defense of the authority of the Bible.

Living under the authority of the Bible

What comes to your mind when you hear the phrase "the authority of the Bible?"

When it comes to the authority of the Bible, there is certainly a place for this doctrine to be defended in our churches, denominations and seminaries.

Nevertheless, the authority of the Bible should not be solely a doctrine to

be defended. Additionally and importantly, the doctrine of the authority of the Bible, rightly applied and lived, is essential to how God shapes the hearts and minds of Christians in living a God-glorifying, joyfully obedient life.

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