

# Editorial: Further Reflections on the Importance of Scripture for Theology and the Church

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In this issue of *SBJT*, we are continuing to reflect on the doctrine of Scripture and its significance for the life and health of the church. As I noted in my editorial in *SBJT* 26.2 (2022), there are many reasons why the doctrine of Scripture and a proper understanding of biblical authority is crucial to affirm today, but the most significant reason is due to the fact that without an authoritative Word from the Creator and providential Lord who knows and plans all things, we would have no epistemological warrant to affirm that God has spoken definitively and objectively. Without a reliable and authoritative Bible, we could hypothesize about God and the world, but none of

our hypotheses would be properly warranted and grounded. Apart from an *inspired* Scripture, that is, Scripture is God's Word due to his extraordinary or supernatural action in and through the human authors (2 Pet 1:20-21) which results in a "God-breathed" (*theopneustos*) text (2 Tim 3:16-17) so that Scripture is completely authoritative and trustworthy, we would have no objective foundation on which to warrant our beliefs.

Does this statement sound too strong? Many have thought so, but this statement is not hyperbole; instead, it is a sober reality. Why? For this reason: apart from such a foundation, any statement of Scripture could be false. But if this is so, how would we determine that one or numerous points of falsity? Ultimately, we would need an *independent* criterion to allow us to determine which statements of Scripture are true or false. Unless we can do this, then we would never know which specific statements are true, if some statements are actually false. However, as I noted in my previous editorial, this only compounds the problem. Not only would Scripture *not* be able to be used as a sufficient ground of epistemological warrant, we must also have to ask: What is the independent criteria we are to employ by which we are able to judge Scripture as true or false? Is it human reason? But what then warrants human reason? Why should we trust the finite perspectives of fallen people who more often than not get things wrong? Or, is the standard my religious experience? But how is religious experience an objective warrant for theological truth when it reduces to human subjectivity? Although many affirm these "standards" to determine what to believe and not believe in Scripture, the problem with each of them is that they do not result in objective truth. For this reason, without a fully authoritative Scripture as the necessary and sufficient warrant for our theological beliefs, the possibility of doing an objective theology and knowing truth in an objective, universal way is not possible.

This is why the doctrine of Scripture is so important and it must never become a point of compromise. It is also why the inerrancy debate, along with Scripture's clarity and sufficiency is so important. Sometimes we are told that "inerrancy" is only an American debate. In fact, Michael Bird makes this kind of claim. But this is simply false. Inerrancy is not some esoteric issue; instead it is the consequence of Scripture's verbal-plenary inspiration. Scripture, in the original autographs and properly interpreted, is entirely true and never false in all that it affirms precisely because it's the product of the

sovereign God who cannot err. To not affirm such a position is ultimately to undermine biblical authority. And something is similar in regard to the other attributes of Scripture such as clarity (perspicuity) and sufficiency. If Scripture is not clear or sufficient, it cannot function as an authority for us. In the end, we are left to independent standards outside of Scripture to determine its meaning and to give us knowledge that is sufficient for our theology and lives. But if this is the case, then Scripture itself is not God's authoritative Word in all that it affirms, teaches, commands, and instructs. Much is at stake in the debate over biblical authority. The church has to be constantly vigilant in affirming biblical authority, and also, living under its authority and obeying all that it teaches.

However, this is precisely the problem today, and the reason why we are devoting another issue of *SBJT* to the doctrine of Scripture. On every side, not only does our society face an authority crisis, but sadly it is also in our churches. In our society, whether in issues of morality, philosophy, or religion, we are surrounded by a secular pluralistic age that has no ultimate grounds for saying, "This is right and that is wrong," or "This is true and that is false." Unfortunately, this same mentality is now in the church. For many who identify as evangelicals, we have lost the nerve to say that "God has spoken" authoritatively and definitively. And if we do say that Scripture has some kind of authority, for many, it does not seem to apply to their lives, especially in the area of ethics and morality. Just recently, evangelicals have claimed that the Bible is not clear about sexual ethics, in direct opposition to what Scripture actually teaches. But as I noted in my previous editorial, the church needs to be reminded that the failure of nerve in the evangelical church has nothing to do with the teaching of Scripture. Scripture is clear: The God who is there has spoken, and as such, there are universal, objective grounds for morality, human thought, and theology, rooted in Scripture as God's authoritative Word written.

But with this said, it is not enough simply to affirm these important truths, we must also apply them to our lives. On this point, the church needs help in applying biblical authority to a whole host of issues. This is why we are continuing in this issue of *SBJT* to extend our discussion of Scripture and to apply it to a number of areas. Our essays are divided into a number of important areas, all of which are either giving theological grounding to the doctrine of Scripture, or applying Scripture to specific areas of challenge in

our day. For example, Chris Bolt discusses the crucial theological point of Scripture's self-attestation and why this is important to affirm for a proper understanding of biblical authority. Ardel Caneday and Thomas Sculthorpe wrestle with a number of hermeneutical issues that undergird a proper reading of Scripture, and thus contribute to an understanding of the clarity of Scripture. Randall Johnson and Drew Sparks discuss a pivotal issue in the warranting of an inspired, authority Scripture, namely, the important relationship between God's divine agency and human agency which results in an inspired, authoritative text. Brian Powell addresses the crucial issue of the use of Scripture and its authority and sufficiency in its application to the LGBT debates of our day. Joost Pikkert addresses a specific critique of biblical authority and demonstrates that it does not stand up to careful scrutiny. And T.J. Betts round out our discussion of Scripture by addressing the importance of the OT, and encouraging us to think about the entirety of Scripture as authoritative for the life and health of the church.

My prayer is that this issue of *SBJT*, building on the previous issue, will help the church to think rightly about Scripture and to appreciate anew God's sovereign grace in not leaving us in the dark but revealing himself to us so that we may know him in truth.