

EQTH105 Basic Bible Doctrine

Unit 6 Reading 1 — Sources for Christian Doctrine

Presented by the



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Don Stewart :: What Source or Sources Should Be Used to Compile Christian Doctrine? (The Bible or the Church?)

QUESTION 3

What Source or Sources Should Be Used to Compile Christian Doctrine? (The Bible or the Church?)

From where do Christians derive their beliefs? What is the infallible source, or sources, of authority in which doctrines, or teachings, are based? How are these issues of what to believe finally settled?

This question is primary. Before any spiritual issue can be resolved, it is absolutely necessary that we know where we can go to find out the authoritative answers. Much misunderstanding will be cleared up if people can agree as to how these issues may be resolved.

Observations about Where Final Authority Rests

There are a number of observations that need to be made about this important issue. They include the following:

1. There Is a Big Difference of Opinion among Professing Christians as to Where Final Authority Rests

With respect to the source of authority for Christian doctrine there is a big difference between the two major branches of Christianity, Protestantism, and Roman Catholicism. They do not agree as to where final authority rests. In fact, the two positions cannot be harmonized. It is crucial that we understand this. In fact, the word Protestant means one who is protesting the teachings and practices of the Roman Catholic Church.

2. The View Protestantism Holds: the Bible Alone Is the Final Authority

Protestant Christianity places its ultimate source of authority in the Bible alone. It is plain that the Scriptures, by direct statements and indirect statements, testify to their divine origin and authority. Of this there is no doubt. The Scriptures, therefore, are the final authority on all matters of faith and practice. There is no church leader, or council, who makes decisions that affect the entire church. It is the Bible, and it alone, that settles all questions concerning spiritual truth. No other source has any authority whatsoever. Holy Scripture alone is the infallible guide.

3. The View of Roman Catholicism: the Church Is the Final Authority

The Roman Catholic Church, however, believes that ultimate authority does not reside in the Bible, but rather in the church—the Roman Catholic Church. It is an intermediary, or go-between, between God and each individual human being.

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that we do not have all that God says on any particular subject in the Scripture alone. Therefore, we must listen to the church. The church, they contend, has the final say on all matters of faith and practice. It has the infallible authority to interpret that which is contained in Scripture. It also has the authority to add to what has previously been revealed. They believe that written Scripture and unwritten church tradition are in total harmony. The Roman Catholic Church argues that all the doctrines they teach are in accord with Scripture.

The Roman Catholic Church believes that Jesus gave this infallible authority to one of His disciples; Simon Peter. Peter's authority has been transferred to a continuous succession of human beings since that time. The person who holds this authority is the Bishop of Rome, or the Pope. The Pope supposedly has the same authority as Christ. The Roman Catholic Church believes the present Pope, as well as all past Popes, speaks infallibly on all matters of doctrine.

4. The Roman Catholic View Is Rejected by Protestants

Protestants reject the doctrine of apostolic succession, the authority of the Pope, and the primacy of the Roman Catholic Church. They believe none of these ideas are taught in Scripture. Indeed, they argue that many of the teachings and practices of the church have been contrary to Scripture. Protestants believe that church history may help understand what God has said, but it cannot add to His Word. Since the time of the apostles, God has not added anything to what we should believe. Scripture alone is sufficient for us.

Jesus gave unique authority to those whom He personally taught. They were able to faithfully preach and teach His Word. However, this unique authority ended when they died; it was not passed on to others.

5. Protestants and Catholics Cannot Both Be Right about Where the Final Authority Rests

Consequently, there are wide differences of opinion between Protestants and Roman Catholics as to where ultimate authority comes from. They cannot both be right about this issue. Someone has to be wrong. Although many have tried to forge some sort of compromising position between the two; it simply will not work. The Roman Catholic Church has the final authority, or the Bible alone is the final authority—it cannot be both.

6. There Is No Biblical Evidence for the Roman Catholic Position

We must emphasize that there is no biblical evidence for the Roman Catholic position. Scripture does not give the slightest hint that the church on earth is to have the same infallible authority as Jesus Christ. The New Testament emphasis is on the Word of God—written and spoken. It is the only infallible authority—not the church. The church is to submit to the Word of God—the Word of God is not to submit itself to the church.

7. The Differences Between Protestants and Roman Catholics Need to Be Understood

It is absolutely essential that differences on matters of final authority be understood by those from both Protestant and Roman Catholic backgrounds. Otherwise, we will not understand many of the issues that have been historically debated and are still presently being debated.

8. Believing in Scripture Alone Does Not Mean Christians Can Come up with New Doctrines or Belief Systems

While the Protestant position is that the Scriptures alone are the final authority on all matters, there must be some qualifications made to the idea that each Christian should be able to read the Scriptures on his or her own. It does not mean that each individual believer can read the Bible and come up with teachings that are unique to the historic faith.

When the Holy Spirit is leading a person, He is leading them into the truth of God. We must remember that we have two thousand years of godly people studying, interpreting, and discussing their findings with others.

We also have a number of great creeds or belief statements that sum up the central doctrines of the faith. Private reading of Scripture does not give anyone the right to deny what Christians have always believed. In fact, those who argued for the Scripture alone as the final authority on all matters assumed that those who read it would subscribe to the “faith that has been once and for all delivered to the saints.”

There is an old adage that says, “If it’s true it’s not new, and if it’s new it’s not true.” This is certainly the case when it comes to the understanding of the central teachings of the Christian faith.

Summary - Question 3

What Source or Sources Should Be Used to Compile Christian Doctrine? (The Bible or the Church?)

When it comes to final authority concerning spiritual matters, there is a difference of opinion among those who profess to be Christians. While Protestantism believes final authority is derived from the Bible, and the Bible alone, Roman Catholicism teaches the final authority resides in the Roman Catholic Church.

This is a crucial issue. Because of the wide differences between the two groups, they both cannot be correct at the same time. Either Protestantism or Roman Catholicism is wrong as to where ultimate authority comes from. There is no meaningful middle ground.

The Roman Catholic position of authority cannot be sustained biblically. There is no evidence that when Christ left the earth He gave His followers continuous infallible authority until He comes a second time.

The Bible alone, the written Word of God, is the ultimate authority for all matters of faith and practice. This is the consistent teaching of Scripture.

However, the idea that Christians can and should study the Scripture on their own does not mean that they have the right to come up with new teachings that are at variance with the consensus of Christian believers for the last two thousand years. The faith has been delivered and believers have agreed on the essentials.