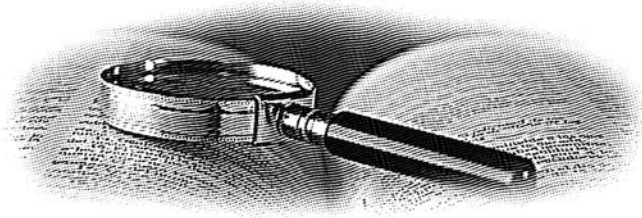


The Bible—the Authoritative Source of Our Theology



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Mark 7:1–13; Rom. 2:4; 1 John 2:15–17; 2 Cor. 10:5, 6; John 5:46, 47; John 7:38.*

Memory Text: “To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them” (*Isaiah 8:20, NKJV*).

There is no Christian church that does not use Scripture to support its beliefs. Yet, the role and authority of Scripture in theology is not the same in all churches. In fact, the role of Scripture can vary greatly from church to church. This is an important but complex subject that we will explore by studying five different influential sources that impact our interpretation of Scripture: tradition, experience, culture, reason, and the Bible itself.

These sources play a significant role in every theology and in every church. We all are part of various traditions and cultures that impact us. We all have experiences that shape our thinking and influence our understanding. We all have a mind to think and to evaluate things. We all read the Bible and use it for our understanding of God and His will.

Which of these sources, or combinations of them, has the final authority in how we interpret the Bible, and how are they used in relation to each other? The priority given to any source or sources leads to very different emphases and results and will ultimately determine the direction of our entire theology.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 25.

Tradition

Tradition itself is not bad. It gives recurring acts in our daily life a certain routine and structure. It can help us to stay connected with our roots. Hence, it is no surprise that tradition also plays an important part in religion. But there are some dangers connected with tradition.

What does Mark 7:1–13 teach us about how Jesus reacted to some human traditions in His day?

The tradition Jesus confronted was carefully handed down in the Jewish community from teacher to pupil. In Jesus' day, it had assumed a place alongside Scripture. Tradition, however, has a tendency to grow over long periods of time, thus accumulating more and more details and aspects that were not originally part of God's Word and plan. These human traditions—even though they are promoted by respected "elders" (see Mark 7:3, 5), for example by the religious leaders of the Jewish community—are not equal to God's commandments (see Mark 7:8, 9). They were human traditions, and ultimately they led to a point where they made "the word of God of no effect" (Mark 7:13, NKJV).

Read 1 Corinthians 11:2 and 2 Thessalonians 3:6. How do we distinguish between the Word of God and human tradition? Why is it so important that we make this distinction?

The living Word of God initiates in us a reverent and faithful attitude toward it. This faithfulness generates a certain tradition. Our faithfulness, however, always needs to be loyal to the living God, who has revealed His will in the Written Word of God. Thus, the Bible holds a unique role that supersedes all human traditions. The Bible stands higher and above all traditions, even good ones. Traditions that grow out of our experience with God and His Word constantly need to be tested against the measuring rod of Holy Scripture.

What are the things we do as a church that could be put under the label "tradition"? Why is it always important to distinguish them from a biblical teaching? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

Experience

Read Romans 2:4 and Titus 3:4, 5. How do we experience the goodness, forbearance, forgiveness, kindness, and love of God? Why is it important that our faith be not just an abstract, intellectual knowledge, but something we actually experience? At the same time, in what ways can our experiences conflict with the Bible and even mislead us in our faith?

Experience is part of our human existence. It impacts our feelings and thoughts in a powerful way. God has designed us in such a way that our relationship to His creation, and even to God Himself, is significantly connected to and shaped by our experience.

It is God's desire that we experience the beauty of relationships, of art and music, and of the wonders of creation, as well as the joy of His salvation and the power of the promises of His Word. Our religion and faith are more than just doctrine and rational decisions. What we experience significantly shapes our view of God and even our understanding of His Word. But we also need to see clearly the limitations and insufficiencies of our experiences when it comes to knowing God's will.

What warning is found in 2 Corinthians 11:1–3? What should this tell us about the limits of trusting our experiences?

Experiences can be very deceiving. Biblically speaking, experience needs to have its proper sphere. It needs to be informed and shaped by Scripture and interpreted by Scripture. Sometimes we want to experience something that is out of harmony with God's Word and will. Here we need to learn to trust the Word of God even over our experience and desires. We should be on guard to make sure that even our experience is always in harmony with the Word of God and does not contradict the clear teaching of the Bible.

A faith in which love for God and love for others (see Mark 12:28–31) are the chief commandments is, obviously, a faith in which experience is important. At the same time, why is it crucial that we *always* test our experience through the Word of God?

Culture

We all belong to and are part of a particular culture or cultures. We are all influenced and shaped by culture, too. None of us escapes it. Indeed, think about how much of the Old Testament is the story of ancient Israel's being corrupted by the cultures around it. What makes us think that we today are any different, or better?

The Word of God also is given in a specific culture, even though it is not limited to this one culture. While cultural factors unavoidably influence our understanding of the Bible, we should not lose sight of the fact that the Bible also transcends established cultural categories of ethnicity, empire, and social status. This is one reason why the Bible surpasses any human culture and is even capable of transforming and correcting the sinful elements that we find in every culture.

Read 1 John 2:15–17. What does John mean when he states that we should not love the things of the world? How can we live in the world and yet not have a worldly mind-set?

Culture, like any other facet of God's creation, is affected by sin. Consequently, it also stands under the judgment of God. Yes, some aspects of our culture might align very nicely with our faith, but we must always be careful to distinguish between the two. Ideally, biblical faith should challenge, if need be, the existing culture and create a counterculture that is faithful to God's Word. Unless we have something anchored in us that comes from above us, we will soon give in to that which is around us.

Ellen G. White provides the following insight:

"The followers of Christ are to be separate from the world in principles and interests, but they are not to isolate themselves from the world. The Saviour mingled constantly with men, not to encourage them in anything that was not in accordance with God's will, but to uplift and ennoble them."—Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*, p. 323.

What aspects of your culture are in complete opposition to biblical faith? More important, how do we stand firm against those aspects attempting to corrupt our faith?

Reason

Read 2 Corinthians 10:5, 6; Proverbs 1:7; and Proverbs 9:10. Why is obedience to Christ in our thoughts so important? Why is the fear of the Lord the beginning of wisdom?

God has given us the ability to think and to reason. Every human activity and every theological argument assumes our ability to think and to draw conclusions. We do not endorse an unreasonable faith. In the wake of the eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment, however, human reason assumed a new and dominant role, especially in Western society, that goes far beyond our ability to think and to arrive at correct conclusions.

In contrast to the idea that all our knowledge is based on sensory experience, another view regards human reason as the chief source of knowledge. This view, called rationalism, is the idea that truth is not sensory but intellectual and is derived from reason. In other words, certain truths exist, and our reason alone can directly grasp them. This makes human reason the test and norm for truth. Reason became the new authority before which everything else had to bow, including the authority of the church and, more dramatically, even the authority of the Bible as God's Word. Everything that was not self-evident to human reason was discarded and its legitimacy questioned. This attitude affected large parts of Scripture. All miracles and supernatural acts of God, such as the bodily resurrection of Jesus, the virgin birth, or the six-day Creation, to name but a few, were no longer considered true and trustworthy.

The truth is, we should remember the fact that even our reasoning power is affected by sin and needs to be brought under the reign of Christ. Human beings are darkened in their understanding and alienated from God (*Eph. 4:18*). We need to be enlightened by God's Word. Furthermore, the fact that God is our Creator indicates that, biblically speaking, our human reason is not created as something that functions independently or autonomously of God. Rather, "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (*Prov. 9:10; compare with Prov. 1:7*). It is only when we accept God's revelation, embodied in the Written Word of God, as supreme in our lives, and are willing to follow what is written in the Bible, that we can reason correctly.

Centuries ago, American President Thomas Jefferson made his own version of the New Testament by cutting out anything that, in his view, went against reason. Gone were almost all of the miracles of Jesus, including His resurrection. What should this alone teach us about the limits of human reason for understanding truth?

The Bible

The Holy Spirit, who has revealed and inspired the content of the Bible to human beings, will never lead us contrary to God's Word or astray from the Word of God. For Seventh-day Adventists, the Bible has a higher authority than human tradition, experience, reason, or culture. The Bible alone is the norm by which everything else needs to be tested.

Read John 5:46, 47 and John 7:38. For Jesus Christ, the Bible is the ultimate source for understanding spiritual matters. How does the Bible confirm that Jesus is the true Messiah?

Some people claim to have received special "revelations" and instructions from the Holy Spirit, but these go against the clear message of the Bible. For them the Holy Spirit has attained a higher authority than God's Word. Whoever nullifies the written and inspired Word of God and evades its clear message, is walking on dangerous ground and is not following the leading of God's Spirit. The Bible is our only spiritual safeguard. It alone is a reliable norm for all matters of faith and practice.

"Through the Scriptures the Holy Spirit speaks to the mind, and impresses truth upon the heart. Thus He exposes error, and expels it from the soul. It is by the Spirit of truth, working through the word of God, that Christ subdues His chosen people to Himself."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 671.

The Holy Spirit should never be understood to replace the Word of God. Rather, He works in harmony with and through the Bible to draw us to Christ, thus making the Bible the only norm for authentic biblical spirituality. The Bible provides sound doctrine (*see 1 Tim. 4:6*), and as God's Word is trustworthy and deserves full acceptance. It is not our task to sit in judgment over Scripture. The Word of God, rather, has the right and the authority to judge us and our thinking. After all, it is the Written Word of God Himself.

Why is the Bible a safer guide in spiritual questions than are subjective impressions? What are the consequences when we do not accept the Bible as the standard by which we test all teachings and even our spiritual experience? If private revelation were the final word in spiritual questions, why would this lead to nothing but chaos and error?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Scriptures a Safeguard,” pp. 593–602, in *The Great Controversy*.

Tradition, experience, culture, reason, and the Bible are all present in our reflection on the Word of God. But we need to ask a decisive question: Which of these sources has the final say and the ultimate authority in our theology? It is one thing to affirm the Bible, but it is something else altogether to allow the Bible, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, to impact and change the life.

In one sense, culture, experience, reason and even tradition, in and of themselves, might not of necessity be bad. They become problems when they contradict what Scripture teaches. But that is, often, to be expected. What’s worse, however, is when these things take precedence over the Word of God. So much of the history of apostasy in both Old Testament and New Testament times is when outside influences took precedence over divine revelation.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Why is it easier to uphold details of some human traditions than to live the spirit of God’s law: to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and our neighbor as ourself (see Matt. 22:37–40)?
- 2 In class, discuss your answer to Sunday’s final question. What role should tradition play in our church? Where do you see blessings and challenges in religious traditions?
- 3 How can we make sure that tradition, no matter how good it may be, does not supersede the Written Word of God as our final norm and authority?
- 4 Suppose someone claims to have had a dream in which the Lord spoke to him or her, telling him or her that Sunday is the true day of rest and worship for New Testament times. How would you respond to that person, and what does a story like this teach us about how experience must always be tested by the Word of God?
- 5 In class, talk about the culture in which your church finds itself immersed. How does that culture impact your faith? What examples can we find from history in which culture greatly impacted the actions of church members in a way that, looking back now, we see as negative? What lessons can we take from this for ourselves today so that we don’t make similar mistakes?

Surprise Package in Finland

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Six-year-old Timo Flink looked with awe at a picture of Jesus' second coming in Arthur Maxwell's *The Bible Story*. Unable to read, he stared at Jesus sitting on a cloud of angels. *I want to be up with the angels*, Flink thought.

As a young adult, he wanted to serve God but became distracted with computers. As he studied to become a software engineer, he joined a group of young adults who discussed the Bible every Friday evening with a pastor.

Soon the group became embroiled in a debate about infant baptism. Flink's church practiced infant baptism, but several young people in the group belonged to another Sunday church that baptized by immersion. Flink was surprised that his pastor defended infant baptism but couldn't support the practice biblically.

At that time, Flink joined a Revelation study group. He sensed that the book was important, but he couldn't understand it. He prayed for understanding. At the height of his confusion, he visited his parents during spring break. Sitting down to eat, he was surprised to see a book. His father didn't read much, and he wondered why he had the book. "What's this?" he asked.

"The postman delivered it yesterday," his father said. "It's from a distant relative."

Flink took a closer look at the book. Its title was *The Great Controversy*, and in smaller text he read the words "Ancient prophecies are coming true." At that moment, he remembered the picture of Jesus' second coming from his childhood. Three days later, he had finished the book. It answered all his questions about Revelation and infant baptism. *This is what I have been looking for*, he thought.

Flink read the book again that summer and a third time in the fall. Then he saw a newspaper advertisement for a Daniel seminar at the Adventist church. He had read about Adventists in *The Great Controversy*, and he went. He was baptized. An article about his baptism subsequently appeared in a church magazine, which publishes announcements about all baptisms. Across Finland, the distant relative who had mailed the book rejoiced at the news.

FLINK, pictured, gave up computers to become a pastor and now is 45 and communication director for the Adventist Church in Finland. He doesn't know how *The Bible Story* ended up in his grandmother's house. She found the Finnish-language edition, and he looked at it when he visited her. *The Great Controversy* also holds a special place in his heart. Every Friday evening, he reads from the book for family worship. "My wife thought we needed to teach our children the more serious side of what we are facing now," he said. "So we decided to do *The Great Controversy*." Finland is part of the Trans-European Division, which will receive the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering this quarter.



Key Texts: *Isa. 8:20; Mark 7:1–13; 1 Cor. 11:2; 2 Thess. 3:6; Rom. 2:4; Titus 3:4, 5; 1 John 2:15–17; 2 Cor. 10:5, 6; Prov. 1:7; Prov. 9:10; John 5:46–48; John 7:38.*

Part I: Overview

Often we are not aware of the influence of other sources on our thinking and on our theology. Even if we want to live by Scripture alone, our understanding of Scripture is significantly shaped and influenced by a number of factors: the traditions we are used to and grew up with, the way we are trained to think and how we use our reason in explaining things, our experience with certain people and ideas, and the formative culture around us. The priority given to any source or combination of sources has a significant influence on our theology; ultimately, it will determine the direction of the entire theological enterprise. In Catholic and Orthodox churches, tradition often plays an important and decisive role. In charismatic and Pentecostal churches, experience often is credited as final authority. In liberal theology, human reason often assumes the last word that decides what is acceptable or not. Furthermore, every church is impacted to some degree by the local culture. And no church exists without the Bible. We don't want a faith that is devoid of any experience, and in which we don't think—a faith that is unreasonable and not blessed by positive traditions. It is important to be aware of all those influences and to understand the positive contribution that each source has on our faith. But it is vitally important to see clearly the limitations of each source, too. Here is the decisive question: To which source do we grant the ultimate and highest authority in matters of faith and practice?

Part II: Commentary

Tradition

Tradition often has a bad reputation. It is associated with a certain narrow-mindedness that slavishly sticks to the rigid repetition and performance of certain rituals and practices. But tradition is not all bad.

Think of some positive aspects that any tradition might have. It gives reoccurring acts of structure and stability. It connects us with our pasts and perhaps even our origins. It transmits values and things that are important to us. It helps to keep alive the memory of significant events and things. All these things are good.

The problem arises when those traditions gain a life of their own and ultimately become more significant than the original things they try to preserve. Traditions also tend to grow over time and are prone to add aspects that go way beyond the initial thing that triggered the tradition.

In Galatians 1:9, Paul admonishes the believers not to preach another gospel than the one that they had received. Thus, there is a tradition that God has initiated, but there also are human traditions that are not originally part of God's plan or God's Word.

Experience

Human beings are created with the ability to experience love. We are able to experience beauty, harmony, music, and art and can relate to things and other relationships in far more than just a rational manner. Experience is part of our lives and forms a significant part of our spiritual lives with God.

Think of aspects of your faith where the experience of joy, forgiveness, a clear conscience, and acts of kindness and love have positively impacted your relationship with God and with other believers.

Where has the experience of rejection, prejudice, hate, suspicion, doubt, envy, and jealousy negatively impacted your relationship with and understanding of God? What does that teach us about our responsibility to be living letters of Christ (*2 Cor. 3:2, 3*) that other people might read when they want to learn something about God?

Illustration

Our human experience is not only powerful but also can be deceptive and misleading. How would you react if a charismatic Christian tells you that in her experience God has told her to worship God on Sunday, whereas the Bible clearly states that the seventh-day Sabbath is the sacred day of rest for God? What should we do if the experience of one particular spiritual gift is made the norm for what it means to live a Spirit-filled life?

Culture

The English word *culture* stems from the Latin word *cultura*, stemming, in turn, from *colere*, meaning to cultivate. Culture encompasses, among other things, the set of customs, values, social behavior, and norms found in human societies. God has given us the ability to shape culture, yet at the same time all of us are influenced by the respective culture(s) we live in.

The Bible came into being in a specific culture. It helps to be familiar with the culture of Scripture in order to understand better some of its statements. The culture of Scripture does not make Scripture relative to culture. After all, Scripture is the revealed Word of God. As such, the Bible can have a positive impact on human culture and uplift any society.

List examples where biblical thought has changed society and your culture for the better or where it could have a positive impact on our society and culture. Think with your Sabbath School members about strategies for introducing the Bible and biblical ideas in ways that will be well received, creating a positive biblical counterculture in our society.

No culture is perfect, and every culture is affected by sin. Hence, not everything in culture is positive. Some cultural things might have a negative impact on our faith or might even be demonic in origin. How can we distinguish between positive and negative aspects of our culture? How can we avoid simply copying our culture in our worship? Why do we have to be culturally relevant in order to reach other people? How can the Bible be the final norm in this pursuit?

Reason

God created us with the ability to think. Much of the Bible calls us to reflect upon what is written in Scripture and stimulates our thoughts and thinking. The repeated question “What do you think?” (*Matt. 17:25, Matt. 18:12, Matt. 21:28, Matt. 22:17, Matt. 22:42, Matt. 26:66, etc.*) or the related question “Have you not read?” (*Matt. 12:3, 5; Matt. 19:4; Matt. 21:16; Matt. 21:42; Matt. 22:31; etc.*) implies that God wants us to use our minds in understanding Him and His Word. While we can understand God correctly and truthfully, we have to acknowledge that we will never *fully* comprehend everything about God. After all, we are created beings. We are not God! Furthermore, our thinking is darkened and affected by sin. Therefore, we need to bring even our thinking “into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (*2 Cor. 10:5, NKJV*). If we are not willing to submit our thinking to the higher authority of Scripture, we will quickly start judging more and more parts of Scripture according to what we think is reasonable and true, thus making our reason the norm for what we can accept or not. This mind-set will eliminate the miracles in the Bible and will affect biblical truths such as the doctrine of God and His triune nature or the divinity of Christ or the personality of the Holy Spirit or the bodily resurrection or the relationship between human free will and God’s

sovereignty, to name but a few teachings. In the end, “a *critical* method must fail, because it presents an inner impossibility. For the correlative or counterpoint to revelation is not critique but obedience; it is not correction . . . but it is a let-me-be-corrected.”—Gerhard Maier, *The End of the Historical-Critical Method* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1977), p. 23.

The Bible

The Bible is our highest and most definitive authority in all matters of faith and practice, because we believe that the Holy Spirit has inspired the writers of the Bible to write down in a trustworthy and reliable manner what God wants to communicate through them. Jesus and the apostles treated Scripture with this understanding. For Jesus, the Word of God is truth (*John 17:17*). As far as Jesus is concerned, if we don’t believe Moses, we will not believe His words (*John 5:46, 47*). For Jesus, the Scriptures are the norm for our faith: “ ‘He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water’ ” (*John 7:38, NKJV*). In a similar manner, the apostles repeatedly referred back to Scripture as the norm of their teaching (*Acts 17:11, Rom. 10:11, etc.*) and believed Scripture, “for whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope” (*Rom. 15:4, NKJV*). We can’t be more apostolic in our treatment of Scripture than the apostles themselves were, and we can’t be more Christian than Christ Himself was. He is our example. We do well to follow His footsteps in the way He used and constantly referred to Scripture as the decisive norm for His faith.

Part III: Life Application

When we love another person, several of the factors we have discussed this week come into play. In love, we experience some strong feelings. Yet, love is more than just a feeling. When we love another person, we normally have some good reasons as to why our love for this person is real and why the other person loves us. Yet, it is not wise to ground our love on reason alone. When we start a loving relationship, we tend to develop some common practices or traditions that remind us of meaningful moments together. But when those traditions become more important than the relationship itself, they have gone astray, and we have lost something essential. When we show our love for another person, we normally do it in ways that resemble and reflect the common customs and norms of our culture. But when we permit only culture to define how love should

