

What is the most authoritative part of the Bible?

Is the New Testament the most authoritative part of the Bible? The New Testament is the New Covenant that Jesus Christ gave to us, that sure is a powerful thing.

Could the Gospels be the most authoritative part of the Bible, because they are about the person of Jesus Christ? Or even further, what about the red letters in the Gospels? Could those red letters be the most authoritative, because they are after all, the words of Jesus?

Perhaps the Old Testament is the most authoritative part of the Bible? Remember, the Old Testament is the Bible that Jesus and the Apostles exclusively used. It may be obvious when you think about it, but Jesus only quotes the Old Testament when he taught the disciples and when he taught the crowds, as the New Testament had not been written yet.

So, what is the most authoritative part of the Bible?

That is not really a fair question. The whole bible is authoritative from cover to cover. From the very early days of the church, the Old Testament, sometimes referred to as the Hebrew Scriptures, from the early days of the church, the Old Testament is not something to be dismissed.

The Old Testament is authoritative. The Old Testament does not lose its authority when Jesus shows up. This appears to be the question at hand: Has Paul undermined the authority of the Old Testament in his eagerness to spread the Gospel?

The Apostle Paul arrives in Jerusalem after being gone for an extended time and he is greeted by the “brothers” (v17). Those who greeted Paul gladly were probably the Hellenistic element of the church. If you remember from our study early on in the book of Acts (chapter 6), we saw that the church in Jerusalem was a church made up of exclusively Jewish members.

The Jewish population in the city of Jerusalem was split up into two groups Hellenistic Jews and Aramaic Jews. The Hellenistic Jews, or their ancestors, had immigrated from another part of the Roman Empire. While the Hellenistic Jews lived outside of Palestine they not only picked up the Greek language, but they tended to also pick up some of the local Roman and Greek customs as well. They are called Hellenistic because Greek was their first language. These Hellenistic Jews were the first to become believers in large

numbers. Stephen was the leader of the Hellenistic Jewish Christians before he was murdered.

Aramaic Jews on the other hand grew up in Palestine and were Hebrew through and through. They are the local folks. They spoke Aramaic and avoided speaking Greek, and usually only spoke Greek for business. The Disciples of Christ were Aramaic Jewish Christians.

Whereas Hellenistic Jews were open to different cultures and different ideas, Aramaic Jews were concerned with all things Jewish. They liked their Jewishness, and wanted to keep their Jewishness intact. These ways of seeing the world stayed with these two groups of Jews even after many have become believers in Jesus Christ.

So, we see at the start of verse 17, that is was most likely the Hellenistic Jews, the Jews who were open to new things and other cultures, these were the ones who welcomed Paul. They were the one who supported the mission to the gentiles, they were the ones who supported the bringing of the Gospel to people who were not Jewish, those they called gentiles.

Next, Paul meets with the elders of the church in Jerusalem and reported all that had happened in his latest mission work. There would have most likely been seventy elders for this was the traditional figure for Israel. Notice, there is no mention of any of the others who were the twelve disciples of Jesus - Only James is mentioned.

In verse 21 we see that Paul is falsely accused by people in the city. A rumor has circulated that Paul is telling the gentile Christians that they can ignore the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament. Essentially someone is accusing Paul of what we saw at the beginning of the sermon, that they Old Testament does not carry any authority anymore. Paul is being accused of apostasy, and worse, the gentile Christians are being accused of not fully being Christians.

Luke says nothing here about the financial gift that Paul delivers to Jerusalem at this time. Paul brings a large monetary gift for the church, the collection taken from the Gentile Christians across the Empire for the Jerusalem church. The irony here is this: The very one the Aramaic Jewish Christians are condemning, the gentile Christians, are the ones who step in to economically save them. They condemn the very ones who set out to save them.

The city of Jerusalem is in the middle of very hard economic times. Many of the members of the church in Jerusalem are struggling to make ends meet. Paul brings a gift from the gentile church which has reached out to help, still the Aramaic Jewish Christians believe the rumors they have heard.

Now, we have to understand that Jerusalem is not the place it used to be back in Acts chapter 2. There is great conflict in Jerusalem with nationalism on the rise, tensions are growing as temple assassins murder aristocrats who are accused of working with the Romans. To be Jewish is to be Jewish through and through, and any associations with people who are not Jewish, makes one suspect.

The Christian church in Jerusalem is now connected with thousands of non-Jewish believers all over the Roman Empire. Now, if these non-Jewish believers lived exactly like the Jews in Jerusalem, there would be no problem, if these non-Jewish believers left their Roman-Greco culture and became culturally Jewish there would be no problem, but these non-Jewish believers remain in their culture and as a result - the accusation flies at Paul: You teach the non-Jewish believers to ignore the Old Testament AND worse you teach the Jewish believers to ignore the Old Testament as well!

Well, what can they do to show that these rumors are false? What can they do to show the church in Jerusalem that Paul has done no such thing? James knows that it will take more than a speech to convince these folks, it will take actions. If they see the actions, they will see his sincerity. James is saying that actions are louder than words

They come up with an idea. Paul can show that he is still very Jewish by doing a pious act: Pay for the Nazirite vows of four men. These acts would show that Paul was after all, a practicing Jew himself.

You see, the Jewish Christians in the early church saw themselves as completed Jews. They were Jewish, Jesus was Jewish. They were waiting for the Messiah, Jesus was the Messiah. So now they were Christians, but they were still culturally Jewish, so they lived like Jews ---in the same way that when we as Americans become Christians, we are still culturally Americans, so we live like Americans.

So, the Nazirite vow was a purity vow, with a minimum length of thirty days. In these 30 days, the one taking the vow would abstain from drinking wine or any other alcoholic drink, have no contact with a corpse and leave their hair uncut.

That doesn't seem so difficult, don't drink, don't get a haircut, don't touch a dead body, well, unless your a mortician. The vow wasn't the difficult part for most people, the difficult part for most people was ending the vow.

To end the vow several sacrifices were to be obtained and brought to the temple: one male lamb, one female lamb, one ram, accompanying food and drink offerings. All these would be offered at the temple including the hair of the one making the vow at the end of the vow.

To end the vow was expensive and as a result, many who started the vow, could not afford to end the vow. All these items added up in cost, and in hard economic times, it would be more difficult. Many times a person of means would step in and pay for the sacrifices. This was considered a pious thing to do. This is what they ask Paul to do. If Paul does this, the Aramaic Jewish believers will see that he has not forsaken his culture and see the rumors as false.

Wait a moment here. Do you see what has happened here?

I started of the sermon asking the question about what part of the Bible has the most authority and we saw that the Bible, Old Testament and New Testament, is authoritative from cover to cover - but do you see, what appeared to be about biblical authority is really about culture.

How did that happen?

It turns out that Hebrew rituals and customs were so tied into the Scriptures, that people had trouble separating the two. People were imagining their culture, the pious things they loved to do, was on the same level as Scripture.

As a result, many of the early Jewish Christians believed that non-Jewish Christians should adopt their Jewish customs to be "real" Christians. They had confused culture with Christianity.

We don't do that, do we?

So, why is Paul buying into this issue about culture, disguised as an issue about the authority of Scripture? Isn't Paul just buying into the fears of the Aramaic Jewish Christians in Jerusalem? By joining in this ritual, isn't Paul saying by his actions: To be a real believer, one has to act culturally like a Jew?

Paul addresses this in 1 Corinthians 9:19-22, "Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. 21 To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some."

Now, let's be careful and not misinterpret what Paul is saying here. Paul is not saying that we can live anyway we want, nor is Paul telling us to abandon our Christianity. Paul is saying that we are free in Christ, but sometimes we may need to obligate ourselves to cultural customs in order to remove cultural barriers, so the message of the gospel can be heard.

Paul is not saying that Jewish culture is equivalent to the authority of Scripture.

In the late 1800's Hudson Taylor arrived in mainland China to work as a Christian Missionary. Christian missionaries who arrived before Taylor, had been working for years in China, but the result was only a handful of Chinese believers. Taylor saw that the problem wasn't the Chinese rejecting Jesus Christ, the problem was a wide cultural divide between the West and the East.

When Taylor explained what he saw to the other missionaries, they thought he was flat out crazy. Taylor had just arrived in China, what did he know? The other missionaries believed that it would take time, but eventually, the Chinese would come to their churches.

What the other missionaries had done was set up European style churches, with European style music, and services in whatever European language they spoke. What Hudson

Taylor saw was that in effect, to become a Christian, to fit into the missionaries version of Christianity, a person from China would have to reject everything Chinese and embrace everything European. No wonder the Chinese stayed away.

All the Christian missions were on the coast - Hudson Taylor made his mission inland. In his mission, Hudson Taylor spoke the local Chinese dialect, sang in the local Chinese dialect, translated the bible into the local Chinese dialect; Taylor dressed like the local Chinese, he ate the local Chinese food - he even wore his hair in the traditional pony tail that was the favored style in China at the time. Thousands upon thousands came to Christ.

Hudson Taylor knew what the Apostle Paul knew: Jewish culture is not Christianity, European culture is not Christianity, Chinese Culture is not Christianity and neither is American culture Christianity. Culture and Christianity are separate.

So Hudson, like Paul, took on culture to serve others for Christ. Paul and Hudson Taylor were both accused of selling short the Gospel - Paul because he didn't make the Gentiles Jewish enough and Taylor, because he didn't make the Chinese European enough.

Now let's note verse 25, "As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality."

The elders of the Jerusalem church did not ask the gentile believers to adopt everything Jewish, but they did ask them to flee from those things in Roman-Greco culture that ran against the Scripture. This is the same for us today. When the culture is against the scriptures we chose to leave that part of our culture behind.

So we see a three fold understanding about culture from our Scripture today.

First: All of Scripture is Old Testament and New Testament is authoritative, from cover to cover.

Second: If part of our culture is against the Scriptures, we chose to leave that part of our culture behind.

Third: It is perfectly alright to adopt culture to reach others for Christ, if what we adopt from culture does not go against the Scriptures.

We were at this particular church and at this particular church women had worn only dresses to services for over one hundred years. It was my second Sunday as a pastor and my wife Katie shows up to service wearing PANTS. The first woman to wear pants to church in over one hundred years. Oh the scandal. Now, to be fair, I would have to leave early in the morning for church and Katie was then on her own to deal with our infant son and get ready for church, so she was just happy to get to church on time.

Unbeknownst to us, there was quite an uproar, and all the ladies were talking about the pastor's wife and her pants in church. What the church members had done was confused church culture with the authority of Scripture. They had, somehow, place the concern of wearing pants or wearing a dress in church on the same level as Scripture - and its not. They talked about it all week.

I have to say that I was proud of that church though, the next Sunday almost every woman showed up wearing a pair of pants. They were able to move past their equation of church culture and Scripture.

What about us?  
Do we do this too?

You bet we do.

In our personal lives, and here at this church we do things a certain way, we become comfortable with doing things that certain way, we like doing things a certain way, we don't want to change doing things a different way and you know, some of us will fight for that thing like it is some kind of foundational Christian doctrine right out of Scripture....but its not.

Is there something that you do in your personal Christian walk, is there something we do at this church that we really like to do, and it is a good thing, but it may be getting in the way of you and I reaching others for Christ, it may be getting in the way of this church being able to serve this community and getting in the way of us as a church reaching others for Christ?

Maybe. Perhaps.

## Keeping Up Appearances

Acts 21:17-26

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The session, this next year, will be taking a look at all aspects of this church to see how we can better serve Jesus Christ and this community. Many of the things we do here at First Presbyterian, we do so well, and that is wonderful, yet our mission, first and foremost is to serve Jesus Christ and spread the Gospel, so we need step back, take a look both on a personal level and on a church level at the things we do; We need to look past the things we love, and move the Gospel forward in this city.