

Value No 1- 'We seek to root everything we do in scripture'

1. Introduction

- Paul introduced the 'value' series last Sunday. Essentially, we will be exploring the 'DNA' of the vision which the founders of MJ felt God was calling them to incorporate into this new work.
- For all of you who eagerly visited the Melville Junction website after Paul's preach last Sunday, keen to explore the riches and depths of our values, you would have seen that the first of our values boldly declares that:

*"We seek to root everything we do in scripture  
As Christians we are a "people of the book" and hold the Bible to be  
authoritative for everything we do and everything we believe. We are  
shaped and transformed by the Bible's story."*

- It is thus critical for us to understand both what the bible is and what it isn't, if we are to take this injunction seriously. Yet it is all too easy for the bible to be seriously misunderstood, within all flavours of the church - from the literalists (fundamentalists) who claim that every word from Genesis to Revelation should be taken at face value and blindly followed; to the current howls of reactionaries in the post-colonial and feminist academic traditions who equally claim that scripture should be exorcised of its 'texts of terror', and that certain portions should carry a health warning.
- We need to acknowledge our own fallibility in reading scripture, particularly if we come at it with an Enlightenment attitude (which most of us unconsciously do) of a shrunk, absent God using scripture as a vehicle for rules and morality only. And when we get it wrong, it really does matter; the ability of scripture to shape and mould our lives, the mission of the church, and our understanding of God's purposes for putting this world to rights, becomes seriously distorted, often to the point where our faith seems bland and sterile, robbed of the life of God and the mystery of his purposes.

- So, let me ask the question again: what does it mean for us to ‘root everything in scripture’?

### 2.1. By Whose Authority? Understanding the ‘Authority of Scripture’

- Let’s think about a few phrases which are widely used in the Christian circles we typically move in: ‘It’s in the Bible’; ‘Scripture says’; ‘It is written in the Word of God’. In other words, we appeal to scripture ‘already knowing’ that it has the final word, or the authority, on matters as diverse as money; how the church should be run; salvation; atonement; and sexual ethics.
- However, the phrase ‘the authority of scripture’ can only make sense if it is shorthand for “the authority of the triune God, exercised somehow through scripture”. Once we think this through, several other things become clear.
- All authority is from God declares Paul in relation to governments (Rom 13:1); Jesus says something similar in John 19:11. In Mat 28:18, the risen Jesus makes the still more striking claim that all authority in heaven and earth has been given to him, a statement echoed in Phil 2:9-11. A quick glance through both the OT (e.g. Isa 40-55) and the NT (Rev 4 and 5) confirms this.
- When John declares “in the beginning was the word”, he does not reach a climax with “and the word was written down” but rather “and the word became flesh”. The letter to the Hebrews speaks glowingly of a God who spoke through scripture in time past, but insists now, at last, that God has spoken through his own son (1:1-2).
- Since these are scriptural statements, it shows that scripture itself points away from itself and to the fact that final and true authority belongs to God himself, now delegated to Jesus Christ. It is Jesus, according to John 8:39-40, who speaks the truth he has heard from God.
- So, the familiar phrase ‘the authority of scripture’ thus turns out to be more complicated than it might at first appear. This hidden complication may be the reason some current debates are so boring and so vicious.
- This kind of problem is endemic to many disciplines, and we need to be mature enough to cope with it. Slogans and clichés are often shorthand ways of making complex statements. In Christian theology, such phrases act as ‘portable stories’ - ways of packing up longer narratives about God, the church, and the world, and folding them up into convenient suitcase, and carrying them around with us.
- However, we can’t forget the point of a suitcase - i.e. what has been packed away can then be unpacked and used in a new location. Too much debate about scriptural authority has taken the form of people hitting each other with packed suitcases. It is

time to unpack our shorthand doctrines, to lay them out and inspect them. They may need some fresh air, and perhaps a hot iron.

- When we take the phrase “the authority of scripture” out of its suitcase, we recognise it can only have meaning if we are referring to scripture’s authority in a delegated sense, from that which God himself possesses and that which Jesus possesses as the risen Lord and Son of God. It must therefore mean “the authority of God *exercised* through scripture”.
- The question for us at MJ then becomes: what might we mean by the authority of God, or Jesus? What role does scripture have within that? Where does the spirit come into the picture? And, not least, how does this authority actually work?

## 2.2. The Bible as Story: Authority and Narrative

- Before we try to answer these questions, there is another complication: the bible itself, as a whole and in most of its parts, is not the sort of thing that many people envisage today when they hear the word “authority”.
- For a start, it is not a list of rules, though it contains many commandments of various sorts and in various contexts. Nor is it a compendium of true doctrines, though many parts of the bible declare great truths about God, Jesus, the world and ourselves in no uncertain terms
- Most of its constituent parts, and all of it when put together (in both the Jewish and Christian forms) can best be described as *story*. The question then is, how can a story be authoritative?
- If the boss at work sends out an email telling a short story, instead of outlining the requirements of a project plan, staff will not know what to deliver. At first sight, what we think of as “authority” and what we know as “story” do not fit readily together.
- But a moment’s thought suggests that, at a deeper level, there is something more to it than that. For a start, suppose the boss, having attempted unsuccessfully to get her staff to deliver their projects on time, decides to try a different tack, and emails instead a story of a customer who came to grief because the work was not done properly. In this case, we would understand that some kind of “authority” was being exercised, and probably all the more effectively than through a simple list of commands. (+ fridge / pawn shop / Fred example).
- There are other ways too, in which stories can wield the power to change the way people think and behave - in other words can exercise power and authority. A familiar story told with a new twist in the tail jolts people to think differently about

themselves and the world. A story told with sadness, humour or drama opens the imagination and invites readers and hearers to imagine themselves in similar circumstances, offering new insights about God and human beings which enable them to order their own lives more wisely.

- All of these examples are in fact ways in which the bible does really work, does in fact exercise authority. This means that, for the bible to have the effect it seems to be designed to have, it will be necessary for the church to hear it as it is, not to chop it up to make it something else.

### **2.3. Rooted in Scripture: shaped for the Kingdom**

- When we say ‘rooted in scripture’, we by no means always think of the thing the bible has in mind when speaking of the way in which God exercises “authority” over the world. Scripture’s own preferred way is within the more dynamic concept of God’s sovereignty or Kingdom. God’s authority is his sovereign power accomplishing the renewal of all creation. Specific authority over human beings (esp. the church), must be seen as part of that larger whole.
- Indeed, we need to go further and realise that scripture functions dynamically within the complex events of human salvation, and continues on to bring renewal to the whole world. This is the “unfinished story” in which readers of scripture are invited to become actors in their own right.
- To land this, when we say that MJ is to be ‘rooted in scripture’, three things are of central importance:
  1. We are reminded that the God we worship is characterised not least by a God who speaks, who communicates with his human creatures in words. This differentiates the God of the Old and New Testaments from some other gods known in the worlds of the time, and indeed today. It means that the idea of reading a book to hear and know God is not far-fetched, but rather is fully in line with the nature of God himself.
  2. It is central to early Christian instruction that we be transformed by the renewal of our minds (Rom 12:1-2). In other words, it is important that God’s transforming grace is given to us through enabling us to *think* in different ways. Again, this means that the idea of reading a book in order to have one’s life reordered by the wisdom of God is not counter-intuitive, but lines up with the nature of Christian holiness itself.
  3. It reminds us that the God we worship is the God whose world-conquering power, seen in action in the resurrection of Jesus, is on offer to all those who

ask for it in order thereby to work for the gospel in the world (Eph 1:15-23). The idea of reading a book in order to be energised for the task of mission is not a distraction, but flows directly from the fact that we humans are made in God's image, and that, as we hear his word and obey his call, we are able to live out our calling to reflect the creator into this world.