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AUTHORITY

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Your role as a pastor rests on the firm foundation of God's Word. How well you understand and apply the principles in God's Word will largely impact how well your congregants understand and apply them. As a pastor, you have been called to exegete Scripture in such a way that others will come to know it and its divine Author more fully. Scripture is living, active, and able to transform lives like no other written work in all of history.

Your role is to declare the application of biblical truth acquired through the study of a passage in its context. And when you publicly interpret and apply God's Word, the Holy Spirit confronts your hearers and brings those who respond into conformity to God's Word. A pastor or church leader

who does not passionately love the Word of God, understand its power, and properly exegete and apply its truths should not preach at all. Without an authentic connection to and communication of its precepts and authority, one's sermons will be nothing more than eloquent discourses lacking the authority to transform. Sure, depending on how well you fashion your words or delivery, you may hear an "amen" and receive thanks from your congregants. But last I checked, the goal of pastoring or preaching is not applause.

No. The one main goal of pastoring and preaching is life change. And, lest we succumb to pride over the high calling to shepherd a flock, we need to be reminded that life change can be accomplished only by God Himself. One of the tools God gives us as pastors and leaders to encourage life change is His Word. Isaiah 55:10–11 reminds us of the transformative work of the Word:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
And do not return there without watering the earth
And making it bear and sprout,
And furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater;
So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth;
It will not return to Me empty,
Without accomplishing what I desire,
And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.

You will never find an unconditional guarantee like this in any other piece of writing—especially one that is still good nearly 3,000 years after it was first made. In fact, you will never find another book that can compete with the Bible in any form or fashion whatsoever. Scripture is the living, active foundation upon which our faith rests.

THE VALIDITY OF GOD'S WORD

Everything we are going to talk about in this book hinges on the fact that the Bible came from God. Scripture is unique because it is not the word of man. It is the Word of God. Now, some people will challenge this claim because they say their book is the Word of God. Mormons make that claim for the Book of Mormon, Muslims make a similar claim for the Qur'an, and cults say the same about their founders' writings.

The problem is that anyone can step forward and claim that he or she has received a revelation from God. So how do we know which claim to believe? Thankfully, we don't have to guess, because there are stringent tests that any writing must pass to be validated as the true Word of God (we will look at some here but also some in chapter 3). Since the Bible claims to be the unique revelation of God, its words must stand out from all other words. It must be self-authenticating.

The most important proof of the Bible's uniqueness is Jesus' testimony to the Scriptures. The main reason we know

the Bible is God's Word is that Jesus said so. He used the word *Scriptures* on a number of occasions to describe the Old Testament writings, whether the Law or the prophets (see, for example, Matt. 21:42; 22:29; 26:56). Jesus also made a statement in the Sermon on the Mount that no one can ignore: "Truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished" (Matt. 5:18).

One implication of Jesus' statement is that to reject the Bible is to reject Jesus and consider Him a liar. Many people who want to claim Jesus don't want to accept the Bible as His Word. But Jesus ruled out that option when He tied His life and ministry completely to the fulfillment of Scripture. Jesus used the strongest language possible to declare that the Bible is God's Word.

The Bible is also unique in the way it has come to us. The Bible's unity of message is nothing short of a miracle, given that it was written over a period of about fifteen hundred years by forty or more people who lived in several different countries with different cultures and came from various backgrounds.

Just try bringing together a liberator and national leader (Moses), a military general (Joshua), two kings (David and Solomon), a shepherd (Amos), a tax collector (Matthew), some fishermen (Peter and John), and a rabbi (Paul), have them write down even the simplest message, and see if they

can agree with each other. That wouldn't happen even if they were in the same room at the same time working with the same set of facts, let alone separated by hundreds of years.

The thin red line of our Redeemer and His blood runs all the way through the Bible—from the first prophecy of a Savior and God's slaying of animals to cover Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:15, 21) to the last chapter of Revelation that invites the redeemed to spend eternity with God (Rev. 22:17). The Bible's message is consistent and unified from beginning to end. The psalmist summarized this in the statement: "The sum of Your word is truth" (Ps. 119:160).

No one but God could make sixty-six books into one perfectly unified document. The unity of the Bible is like that of the human body, in which every part and function can be explained only in reference to the whole (see Ps. 119:160a).

Now someone might say, "You're just using circular reasoning here. You're going to the Bible to authenticate the Bible." Okay, let's use standards for historical literature to help verify its truth and corroborate the Bible's witness to itself.

When I make the argument that history testifies to the veracity of Scripture, I am not talking about the Bible as a supernatural document but as a work of historical literature. The point here is that if people accepted the same standards of validity for the Bible that they readily accept for other historical documents, they would have to admit that the Bible is the most widely attested book ever written.

We can take any figure from history who is no longer on the scene. How do we know that George Washington was our nation's first president? Nobody alive today can say, "I have seen George Washington. I've met him and heard him speak, and I know he was real." We accept the historicity of George Washington because we trust the historical record we have about him. And the same can be said for many other people we could name from history.

One test of the validity of any historical record is its proximity to the life of the person whose history it records. One reason the history of George Washington is considered reliable is that much of it was written during his lifetime by people who saw and knew him, and more of it was written in the years shortly after his death. The closer the historical record is to the person's life, the more valid it becomes.

Well, the Bible comes through with shining colors on this score. The very latest part of the New Testament, the book of Revelation, was written in the 90s AD, about sixty years after Jesus' death. But it was also written by the apostle John, an eyewitness to Jesus' life. That gives his writings added weight.

This is amazing testimony to the Bible's trustworthiness. By comparison, some of the famous writings of antiquity, such as those that tell of people like Julius Caesar, were recorded hundreds of years after the events they describe. Many critics attack the early dates for various books of the New Testament because they know that if they admit that the

Gospels and Epistles were written so soon after Jesus' life and death—mostly by eyewitnesses, their case against the Bible is greatly weakened.

Another test of the Bible's historical validity is the number of existing manuscripts that affirm it. We are told that ten copies exist of the account of Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon, one of the most famous events of ancient history. The earliest of these manuscripts was written hundreds of years after the event, yet the fact of Caesar's crossing has never been seriously questioned by historians.

But the Bible puts that record, and almost any other historical record, to shame. We have over five thousand copies of the Greek New Testament in existence, from fragments of a single verse to entire books. These copies agree on the basic doctrines of the faith and the important facts of Jesus' life, although there are numerous differences of words and the order of events. This record is unheard of in historical circles.

In addition, only the Bible teaches history in advance. Teaching history in advance sounds like an oxymoron—and it would be for any book but the Bible. God's Word teaches about history hundreds of years before it happens, which is called prophecy. If we had no other validation of Scripture but its fulfilled prophecies, we would still be on very solid ground.

There have been many so-called prophets in history, and some of them seemed to make some accurate prophecies. But the Bible's standard is one hundred percent accuracy,

whether the prophecy is one hundred or five hundred years in advance of its fulfillment. It's not even worth discussing other prophets' records, because no prophet in any holy book has ever claimed to prophesy the future on the scale that the Bible does.

One of the Bible's most amazing prophecies to me is one of its most familiar: the prophecy that Jesus Christ would be born in the village of Bethlehem. This prophecy was given in Micah 5:2, which was written about seven hundred years before Christ's birth. Its fulfillment is recorded in Matthew 2:5–6. The time frame of this alone is miraculous, but it's even more so when you consider that Bethlehem is just a dot on the map. In other words, the chances of prophesying Jesus' birth and getting it right by accident are next to none.

And don't forget that biblical prophecy isn't limited to religious events. The book of Daniel contains the progression of the Gentile world powers in the centuries before Christ, written hundreds of years before Alexander the Great and the Greeks defeated the Medo-Persian Empire and then were in turn defeated by the Romans. You can close your Bible and open your history book, and you'll find that God tells the story of world history in advance—because the Bible is prophetic in its teaching. In fact, the prophetic nature of the Bible reaches beyond what is commonly understood as prophecy (or foretelling) of events.

Peter writes that “no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men *moved* by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (2 Peter 1:21, emphasis added). The Old Testament prophets, like Elijah, Isaiah, and Daniel, were messengers sent by God to carry His words and speak them directly to His people. And while these prophets fall within Peter’s intended meaning, a closer look at the biblical use of the term “prophecy” in this verse can help build the case that Peter is using the term to denote all of God’s Word. The literal translation of the word “prophecy” comes from the Greek word *propheteia*, which means “speaking forth.” Thus, Peter contrasts the possibility of all Scripture being a matter of human action or interpretation with the notice that these prophets were “moved by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21).

The Bible is unique not only in its prophecy and Holy Spirit-inspired writings, but also in its preservation. It has survived for several thousand years, even though kings and the world’s mightiest powers and intellects have been trying to destroy it for centuries.

Think about it. How many books have not only survived for several thousand years, but also are still being read, debated, and sold around the world today at the level that the Bible is? And Bible societies tell us that when they go into a country where Bibles are scarce, people stand in line for hours and even days to receive a copy.

No book in history has been preserved like the Bible. Why wouldn't it be, if God is the author? He is going to take care of His Book. Nations have outlawed the Bible, tried to destroy every copy, and killed people for translating and printing it. People like William Tyndale and John Wycliffe are among the heroes of the faith who dedicated their lives to making sure we have the Bible in our hands.

The Bible records an amazing story in Jeremiah 36, an attempt made by King Jehoiakim of Judah to destroy God's message that the prophet Jeremiah had recorded on a scroll. The king cut up the scroll and burned it (vv. 22–23), but God simply told Jeremiah to get another scroll and write His Word on it again.

The eighteenth-century French philosopher Voltaire despised the Christian church and boasted that within fifty years of his death, Christianity would be extinct and people would have to go to a museum to see a Bible. Yet after Voltaire died, his house was acquired by the French Bible Society and used to print and distribute Bibles.¹

God says His Word will stand forever (see Ps. 119:89; Isa. 40:8). “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away,” Jesus declared (Matt. 24:35). There is no destroying the Bible, because it is the eternal Word of God.

1. Cecil Willis, “The Indestructibility of the Bible,” *Truth Magazine* 19, no. 31 (June 12, 1975): 483–85, <http://www.truthmagazine.com/archives/volume19/TM019211.html>.

THE TRUTH OF GOD'S WORD

What if a college professor stood up before his class one day and said, "I want to begin this philosophy class by getting to the bottom line with a statement that will govern everything we study and talk about this semester. The bottom line of this philosophy class is that there are no absolutes. There is no such thing as absolute truth, no propositions that are true in every circumstance. Let me say it again. The bottom line of this philosophy class is that there are no absolutes."

A student in the back raised his hand and said, "Professor, may I ask a question?"

"Yes."

"You said there is no such thing as absolutes, and no such thing as a statement of absolute truth. Are you absolutely sure about that? Because if you are, you have just given us a statement of an absolute that is true in every circumstance, which is a contradiction of the assertion you just made that there are no absolutes."

That exchange may sound like the kind of academic double-talk that makes parents wonder what their children are learning in college and why they have to pay so much for it. But the student who challenged his professor made a very important and valid point about the issue of truth, and about the absurdity in denying the existence of a concept called truth.

How would you react to a doctor who was unsure of

his diagnosis of your condition, but gave you a prescription anyway, which you took to a pharmacist who wasn't even sure he was giving you the medicine the doctor had hesitantly prescribed? You would probably run from both of them, since your health and life might be at stake. You want a doctor and pharmacist who believe in truth, a fixed standard of reality that guides their decisions.

The problem is that many people who insist on living by truth in the physical realm confidently reject it in the spiritual realm. But simply announcing that truth does not exist does not solve anything. We are faced with this thing called truth, and we have to do something with it.

Pontius Pilate asked the question of the ages when truth Incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ stood before him on trial. Jesus said to Pilate, "For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice" (John 18:37).

Pilate responded, "What is truth?" (v. 38).

If that evil Roman governor had been an honest seeker, he would have found the answer to his question. In fact, Jesus had definitively answered Pilate's question the night before at the Last Supper, during His prayer to the Father on our behalf: "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth" (John 17:17). The Bible is truth—the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

The world has always been confused and divided on the

question of truth. There has been a myriad of responses to the question, “What is truth?” The *denier*, for lack of a better term, is the person who simply dismisses and rejects the very concept of truth.

The *agnostic* says that absolute knowledge on issues, such as God’s existence, cannot be attained in this life. Since the word *agnostic* means “without knowledge,” the agnostic’s answer to Pilate’s question would be, “I don’t know.” This person is supposedly the perpetual questioner and seeker after truth.

The *rationalist* says that human reason and experience are the ultimate criteria for determining truth. Rationalism focuses on the mind and simply says that whatever the mind conceives of as being reality is, in fact, truth. Rationalism thus limits the search for truth. It is one of the theories that came into play during the eighteenth-century movement known as the Enlightenment when the truths upon which Christianity is based came under sustained attack and were largely abandoned.

There is also a school of thought called *positivism*, which says truth is limited to that which can be validated by the scientific method. If science authenticates a theory, then perhaps we can regard it as truth. Positivism doesn’t leave any room for a supernatural Savior with a supernatural revelation, because these things cannot be tested by the scientific method in a lab.