

SOURCES OF AUTHORITY



How do we choose who we listen to?

When we're given different opinions about an issue, how do we decide which of them it's worth paying attention to?

How many current issues on which there are different opinions from two, or more, different sides can you think of?

How do you decide between these different opinions? What factors do you take into account when deciding which statements are worth listening to, and which aren't?

One way of indicating that a source of information is worth paying attention to, whether it's a person, a news source, a TV programme, a celebrity or something or someone else, is to say it has 'authority'.

For Christians, there are sources of authority which are specific to their religion. The same is true of other religions and worldviews. Some sources of authority in religions are considered to be sacred (holy) by believers.

Christians believe that ultimate authority is in God. The Bible book of Exodus describes how God revealed his name to Moses.

But Moses said to God, 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you", and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?' God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I AM has sent me to you."'

Exodus chapter 3 verses 13-14 (NRSV)

The name of God, 'I AM', is 'Yahweh' in Hebrew, which is the language the book of Exodus was written in.

God said that his name was 'I am'. One meaning of that is that he has authority because of who he is, not because this has been given to him by anyone or anything else.

Christians believe that God reveals his authority or inspires and allows others to share it – this is known as revelation, which means when something which has hidden becomes known.

To find out more about the different sources of authority in Christianity, watch the video at:

biblesociety.org.uk/e/sources-of-authority

How do Christians believe that the Bible reveals God's authority?

One way in which Christians believe that God's authority is revealed is through the Bible. Many Christians see the Bible as the first authority that they should turn to, but as we have just seen in the video, there are a range of other important influences on them as well.

In his letter to another Christian named Timothy, the early Christian leader Paul says:

All **scripture** is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy chapter 3 verses 16-17 (NRSV)

'Scripture' is a common way for Christians to refer to the Bible.

Give three reasons why Paul thinks that the Bible is useful.

Paul says that 'All scripture is inspired by God'. The literal meaning of the Greek word used by Paul here, '*theopneustos*', is 'breathed out by God'.

Either use the internet to find out how this term is translated in three different versions of the Bible and/or think of three other ways to say this.



Three ways in which Christians believe that the Bible communicates God's authority

Read through this sheet and highlight the three most important points in each box.

Through the law and the covenants

One of the themes of the Old Testament is that God promised to be in a relationship with the Israelites; and that the Israelites promised to honour God in their lives and worship. In the Bible, this lasting promise is called a 'covenant'.

For the Israelites, part of honouring God was to follow his laws, including those which he gave to Moses as the Ten Commandments.

The law had over 600 commandments in total. In Psalm 119, the writer tells us about how important the law is to him:

Oh, How I love your law!
It is my meditation all day long.
Your commandment makes me wiser than
my enemies,
for it is always with me.

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to
my path.
I have sworn an oath and confirmed it,
to observe your righteous ordinances.

Psalm 119 verses 97-98 and 105-106 (NRSV)

Through the prophets

God's authority is also made known in the Old Testament through the prophets, people who spoke God's word into the situations the Israelites found themselves in. The prophets would tell people to live better lives, reinforce the teachings of the law and call them to realise that true authority was not found in kings or other gods, but only in the God 'I Am'. The prophet would say what was wrong with the existing world and then challenge the people to live better, offering them either punishment or a better future, depending on their response.

Through Jesus

Many Christians see the gospels as having greater authority than other parts of the Bible, as they contain the words and the actions of Jesus. They believe that because Jesus was the Son of God and not just a human being, he spoke with the authority of God. Some Christians think that the words of Jesus in the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) have the greatest authority of any part of the Bible – sometimes Jesus' words are printed in red letters in Bibles, to make them stand out from the rest of the text and to show their importance.



How did Jesus explain his authority?

Luke's Gospel describes an incident when Jesus was challenged about his authority.

One day, as Jesus was teaching in the temple and telling the good news, the chief priest and the scribes came with the elders and said to him, 'Tell us, by what authority are you doing **these things**? Who is it who gave you this authority?' He answered them, 'I will also ask you a question, and you tell me: Did the **baptism of John** come from heaven, or was it of human origin?' They discussed it with one another, saying, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will say, "Why did you not believe him?" But if we say, "Of human origin", all the people will stone us; for they are convinced that John was a prophet.' So they answered that they did not know where it came from. Then Jesus said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.'

Luke chapter 20 verses 1-8 (NRSV)

'These things' probably refers to Jesus' miracles and his teachings.

'John' is John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin. The gospels describe how he announced who Jesus was and baptised people who wanted to live better lives.

When Jesus was questioned by the _____, _____ and _____ about what authority allowed him to teach and do miracles, he replied by asking who they thought had given _____ his authority. This placed them in a dilemma, and they did not _____, fearing it was a trap.

Does it seem surprising that Jesus didn't give them a direct answer?

In fact, there are many occasions in the gospels when Jesus could have made a clear claim to be God's son, but didn't. Some Bible scholars have suggested that he did this to avoid conflict with the authorities, so that they did not have a reason to arrest him until the right time came. Another explanation is that he was helping his followers to gradually come to understand who he said he was. Matthew's Gospel describes how, after the resurrection, Jesus explicitly said that 'I have been given all authority in heaven and earth'.



Different ways of understanding the Bible

All Christians believe that the Bible is the word of God, and that it is a source of authority for their beliefs, decisions and behaviour. There isn't one single way to understand the Bible – different Christians read it and think about it in different ways. Here are some examples:

I understand the Bible literally – I think that it is an accurate, factual record of what happened.

The Bible is the story of how God communicated with humans, which helps us to know how to live our lives. But it is also a record of how people on earth have expressed their experiences of God in different ways.

The Bible is a sacred text and has authority, but I don't believe that everything in it is literally true. For example, in places there are symbolic stories and poetry. I think that we can hear God through these, and that we don't need to believe they are factual accounts.

The Bible is a way of helping us to remember important events.

Different parts of the Bible need to be understood in different ways – for example, I might read Genesis as a symbolic account of creation, the book of Job as if it is a novel, and the gospels as historical accounts of the life of Jesus.

The Bible was written by humans, and in the different books you can see how their culture influenced how and what they wrote. I think that the Bible is God's message to us, but that we need to 'translate' it into modern situations as well as into modern languages.

While this appears to be very diverse, there are some common threads through all of these Christian interpretations of the Bible. One is that all Christians believe that the Bible is inspired by God. Many believe that God inspires them to understand the Bible better, in a similar way to the belief that he inspired the writers of the different books in what they wrote.

Can you see any other similarities between these statements?

Thinking back across all of the work you have done on this topic, summarise the different sources of authority for Christians. Do you think there is one (or some) which is more useful to them than the others? Try to use at least three examples in your answer.



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