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College Baptist Church

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### **The Word of God**

2 Tim 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20f; Heb 4:12

In the year 1521, a Roman Catholic monk named Martin was summoned before the Emperor of the Roman Empire and required to recant his criticism of the Roman church. He had found his church adding things to the grace of God and the faith of believers as conditions of salvation. It didn't square with what he found Jesus and the apostles teaching in the Bible, and so he protested the departures of his church from the gospel and the apostolic witness with 95 theses on the town bulletin board, which happened to be the door of the chapel in Wittenburg. The Emperor and the bishops of the church found their doctrinal opinions threatened, not to mention their personal power, and they made a public issue of Brother Martin's protest. But Martin Luther refused to back down, not from his own opinions but from what he read in the Word of God. Here is what he said to Emperor Charles V:

"Your Imperial Majesty and Your Lordships demand a simple answer. Here it is, plain and unvarnished. Unless I am convicted of error by the testimony of Scriptures, or (since I put no trust in the unsupported authority of Pope or of councils, since it is plain that they have often erred and often contradicted themselves) by manifest reasoning I stand convicted by the Scriptures to which I have appealed, and my conscience is taken captive by God's Word, I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to act against our conscience is neither safe for us, nor open to us. On this I take my stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen."

For the next dozen weeks, we'll be studying the affirmations of the Baptist General Conference, affirmations that are all fully in harmony with the statements of belief that College Baptist has held to for all of its history. Partly I want us to hear what the denomination stands for that we have determined last year to join. And partly I want us go back to reaffirm and understand our own basic doctrinal beliefs. As I said last week, I don't mean for this just to be a theology class. There is scarcely anything more significantly practical than basic doctrine, and I want us to see how much these affirmations affect our lives and our choices -- and our worship!

We begin today where the CBC and BGC statements begin (and where the monk, Martin of Erfurt began): with the question of bedrock authority. Take off from the wrong starting point and everything else is affected. Everything.

If there's a dispute, how do we resolve it? Where do we go? Something's got to serve as a standard. Kids who are having an argument coming running to Mom. When Rod M wants to build a house, he's got to start with a plumb line and a level. When you're trying to get your new Christmas gadgets to work, you've got to have an instruction manual from the manufacturer.

If there's no standard to consult, we can't get anything off the ground, we can't keep anything going, we can't answer any questions. Knowing what has final, bedrock authority is the first and most crucial question every single individual and every single church has to address.

So when Brother Martin had a disagreement with the other teachers and leaders in his church, everything came down to this starting point. The bishops and the emperor came back to their human authority as leaders of the church, and they came back to the "seven last words of the church": *we've never done it that way before*. By which they meant they hadn't been in that habit for a very long time. And their final authority came down to the church alone, or its leaders alone. It's no accident that 300 years later in the 1880's the Roman Church declared for the first time officially that the Pope is infallible when he speaks from his formal ecclesiastical office. That was in practice already the authority structure that Martin Luther was challenging.

Luther said the final authority in the church has to be Jesus Christ and the apostles he first taught. So he went to the sole, first-hand witness of what Jesus Christ and the apostles and prophets revealed as spokesmen for God, and he said the written Word of God is the only bedrock that is trustworthy as a final authority.

Traditions of the church can be useful. There are dangers in private interpretation that overlook the longstanding teachings that have been passed along from one generation to the next. We ought to respect those traditions. Declaring scripture to be the ultimate authority doesn't mean that traditions of the church have no authority. It simply means that when one tradition of the church is in conflict with another tradition (such as when the Eastern Orthodox

tradition of Constantinople conflicts with the Western Orthodox tradition of Rome), one needs a standard, a more basic authority to consult, to decide which tradition has the better claim to truth and reliability.

The Roman Church in which Brother Martin was born said and still says that it's up to the Church to decide infallibly what the extent of the scriptures are (what's in the canon and what isn't) and up to the Church infallibly to decide what those Scriptures mean when we read them. In other words, the final, bedrock authority is what the church and its leaders, guided by their traditions say.

The problem with that is the one Martin Luther pointed out to Charles V: those spokesmen for the Church "have often erred and often contradicted themselves." If we're really going to have an infallible authority, it's got to be one that gives a more objective witness of the teaching of Jesus Christ, and of the prophets and apostles through whom God was pleased to give this world a revelation of himself. And only one authority goes directly back to those sources: the documents themselves, this collection we call the Bible.

That was the bedrock Martin Luther sought out. That is the bedrock that separates the historical churches called Protestant from Martin's church of Rome. That is the fundamental ground of the protest that makes our church a "protestant" church.

If you think doctrine is impractical, look at the world-changing effects of Luther's stand on this doctrine!

The BGC Affirmation is printed there in the bulletin. It says: *"We believe that the Bible is the Word of God, fully inspired and without error in the original manuscripts, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and that it has supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct."*

There is a host of biblical texts that will back that affirmation up. And, of course, if the affirmation is right, then that had better be so. One of the common responses that the Roman church often likes to make to the Protestant commitment to make Scripture the sole, final authority, is a complaint that Scripture itself doesn't teach that Scripture is the sole, final authority. That seems to me a misleading and superficial objection. If it simply wants to say there is no proof-text with the words "sola scriptura" represented, there may be a partial truth in the claim.

But the more important question is whether Jesus and the apostles and prophets do, by their teaching and their practice, give more support to a conclusion that the written revelation is a final authority or to a conclusion that the spokesmen for the church have that sole, final authority. We'll consider several of the main texts that address this question this morning, and I think it will be clear that when those apostles and prophets and when Jesus Christ himself need to find bedrock to rest their decisions and doctrine and daily lives on, Martin Luther had it right: the written testimony of God's revelatory spokesmen is always the bottom line.

We read today from 2 Peter 1. That is as good a starting place as any. I want us to see in addition to that the argument of several other key texts that stand behind the summary here in BGC Affirmation #1. There are three main things that this statement affirms about the Word of God, and I'll organize our look at the statement and these texts around those three things: (1) Where did the Scripture come from? What is its source? (2) What role does Scripture play in our lives? And the answer to that in scripture and the affirmation is supremacy. (3) How does it play that role out? And the answer there, of course, is with effectiveness in our faith and our conduct. That is its strength.

The Bible's source. Its supremacy. Its strength.

Peter couldn't be clearer about the **source** of the Bible's authority and teaching. In 1:16 he says "we didn't follow cleverly devised myths when we make known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty." We don't rely on human stories even if they have long-standing credibility. Those too often turn out to be cleverly devised myths. We rely on hard, objective evidence. We saw Jesus himself with our own eyes. We heard with our own ears the voice from heaven at his baptism, saying this is the Son of God Himself. We witnessed Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain. These aren't just stories and human opinions. These are objective, historical events.

But then listen to what he says. (1:19) Even our eyewitnessing of those events isn't as solid a foundation as something else. We have something even more sure than that. What is it? The prophetic word. The written record of God's own divine, revelatory spokesmen. This is better than our own witnessing of an event, because, as we know,

the same event might get interpreted from lots of differing points of view. (Is the war in Iraq a liberation of a captive people from a ruthless and deadly dictator? Or is it an arrogant act of imperialist intervention in the affairs of a sovereign nation?) Same event. Differing personal interpretations from different points of view. No authoritative standard.

Even the eyewitnessing of Jesus' baptism and transfiguration is just an event then. A subject that invites multiple, conflicting predicates. Where is the adjudicating standard? Where is final, bedrock authority among interpretations? (1:20-21) The prophetic revelation of Scripture is not a matter of private interpretation, not even by a leader in the church; not even by Peter himself (whom the Roman church identifies as the first Pope). Prophecy doesn't come from the will of man, but prophets and apostles spoke from (where? what was their *source*?): from *God*, as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

That's what the affirmation means when it says that these scriptures have supreme authority because they were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. God gave the predicates to go along with the historical subjects. God looked at the baptism of Jesus and revealed authoritatively that this is not just the immersion of any old person in the Jordan River. "This is God's own beloved Son, with whom he is well pleased."

This is what Paul taught about the source and origin of the written revelations in these books, too. Every scripture is breathed out (inspired) by God. That's why they're ultimately authoritative in a way that no human institution ever will be. That's why they are profitable for teaching and reproof and correction and training in righteousness. That's why reading these texts equips the person of God for every good work.

Neither Peter nor Paul says in express words that Scripture alone is the ultimate authority. That's true. But can you find any place in which Peter or Paul places this kind of final ultimacy for teaching and reproof or correction and training in righteousness as authoritatively and as reliably in the church? Or in its bishops? Or in any other place besides Scripture? Scripture (or what Paul calls the "sacred writings") is Paul's bottom line; and Scripture is Peter's bottom line. Why? In both cases because the source of scripture is not anybody's private interpretation. The source of scripture's interpretation of the events of history is the inspiration of God's Holy Spirit.

The Bible is without error because it comes from God. The Bible is supremely authoritative in all matters of faith and doctrine because it is the Word of God on those questions. The source of Scripture is God. That's why we call the Bible the Word of God. That's why it will always be the bottom line and the ultimate, infallible standard for the church. And not the other way around.

So what does the Bible do? What role does it play in the church? What role should it play in our individual lives day by day? The statement of the affirmation expresses the Bible's own answer to that question. It has **supremacy**. Its word holds final, trustworthy supreme, authority in all matters of our faith and in all matters of our conduct.

In Peter's words, (2Pet 1:3f) God's divine power has granted us all things that pertain to life and godliness. How does his power do that? Peter answers that: (v.3) through knowledge of him. How do we get knowledge of another person. They have to talk to us. We have to have a "word" from them. If we want to have knowledge of God, then, what do we need? We need the Word of God.

The Word of God tells us everything we need about life, about our conduct, how to escape the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.

The Word of God tells us everything we need to know about the godliness that makes us partakers of the divine nature. Faith comes by hearing, Paul told the Romans, and hearing by (what?) the Word of God.

Paul reaffirms all this himself in the 2Tim text we looked at a moment ago. 2Tim 3:15 says, "The sacred writings are able to make you wise unto salvation through faith in Jesus Christ." When it comes to something that important, that eternal, that ultimately monumental in our lives, we don't want to settle for anything less than the most authoritative standard we can employ.

If it's just a minor dispute between kids (should we build a happy snowman or a scary snowman this time?) they might resolve that by seeing what the neighbor friend thinks. But when the question is huge (I thought it was your turn to do the dishes! I've got a big report to finish for school tomorrow!) then the kids want an authority that's going to be more supreme. Mo..o..o..m!

If Rod M is just going to pitch a little lean-to that only needs to hold up for a day or two, he might just eyeball the perpendiculars. But if he's going to put up a four-story house that's going to be personally occupied by the county building inspector, he's going to get the best level and plumb line apparatus he can get his hands on. The more important the question, the more important is the authority and trustworthiness of the standard.

Could any question be more important than whether you'll spend the rest of eternity in the presence or the absence of God? I can scarcely think of a more important question than that one. And so I can't think of a more urgent need to have a standard that is ultimate and infallible and supreme.

Let's look at what Jesus himself does when he confronts the most important and pressing questions in his experience.

In Matt 4, Jesus is led into the wilderness to do battle with his most formidable enemy, the devil. Weakened by 40 days and nights of fasting, he faces some of the strongest temptations of his life: Would he use his divine power to solve his problem of hunger? Would he show that he could force God's hand by jumping off a high pinnacle and make his father salvage his mission by rescuing him before he hit the ground? Would he take all the political power in the world in exchange for worshiping Satan? What does Jesus do in every case? What did he consider supreme enough to answer his strongest enemy? Where did he find the right answers for his challenges when he was physically worn out and vulnerable? The first three words out of his mouth in every temptation were: "It is written!"

And the result of turning to the supreme authority of the written Word of God? "The devil left him and angels came administered to him." "The Prince of Darkness grim: we tremble not for him. One little Word will fell him." The Word of God.

In Jn 10, Jesus is facing deadly conflict with the Jews who want to stone him to death because they considered him a blasphemer for calling himself the Son of God. How does he answer the Jews? Jn 10:34 -- "Is it not written in your law that those to whom the word of God came were called gods?" And, he adds (v.35), "Scripture cannot be broken. Size my work up by the standard of scripture and then decide whether the Father is in me and I am in the Father."

One further example. In Lk 10:25, a teacher of the Law stood up to put Jesus to the test and asked him, "what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" There is that most important of all questions. What authority does Jesus himself consult when a question of that ultimacy is at stake? Listen to Jesus' answer: You want to know how to live forever? "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" He didn't ask this leader of Israel, this human authority on the Law, what his tradition taught him, or what the council of the Sanhedrin might say, much less a declaration of his own ecclesiastical authority. He asked him what his Bible said. And it is interesting that even in the Law Jesus believed the right answer to eternal life might be found.

And the lawyer found it. He didn't have to put any interpretive spin of tradition on what the Law said. He just had to read it: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." And Jesus said that is the right answer. God the Son said if you want a supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct, look no further than the written Word of God. It will not err in making you wise unto salvation. You on the other hand will err if you don't know the scriptures.

Scripture's function is to serve as our supreme authority in all matter of faith in practice, because it is the only reliable guide whose source is God himself.

How does it succeed in exercising its supremacy? Why is the Bible effective as a supreme authority? The Law came as a written authority from God, and yet Paul said the Law by itself couldn't give life. If a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law (Gal 3:21). But the letter of the written word only kills (2 Cor 3:6). It's the Spirit that gives life.

So how does the dead letter of this written Word of God ever exercise its supremacy to accomplish anything? Where is its **strength**?

Isaiah the prophet had promised in 55:10-11 that "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread

for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: it will not return to me empty, but it will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." How?

The answer to that question of strength comes out the same no matter which biblical writer you ask. Peter says in 2Pet 1:3, "God's great power has granted us everything we need for life and godliness," and then he identifies two components of that power.

First is knowledge. We have to have some written information, but not just any kind of information. It has to be true. It has to have its source in God, who inspires and carries along the authors who write these texts. But it also has to be more than math tables, or laundry lists, or recipes. It's not that kind of knowledge and information that has effective power. It's the kind he points to in v.4: precious and very great promises. Promises have power, because when we believe them they motivate us.

So the second, related component is that disposition in us that gets moved by promises. And that disposition is an attitude of the heart that we call faith. Faith is the belief in a promise.

Faith and promises fit so hand-in-glove together that the one almost can't exist without the other. They define each other. They imply each other. Every act of faith has a promise as its object, or it isn't faith. No promise ever has any relevance until someone responds to it by believing or disbelieving it.

The power and strength of the Word of God is the activity of faith that God puts into our hearts.

Look at one last important text with me, in Hebrews ch. 4. This whole chapter is about that most ultimate of all issues again: How do we enter God's rest? How do we live forever in the presence of God? "Strive to enter that rest so that no one falls by the same sort of disobedience" that kept the rebellious children of Israel out of the promised land, the author of Hebrews says in 4:11. For (v.12) "the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

How is the living, active strength of the Word of God a reason for striving not to fall into disobedience but striving instead to enter God's rest? The answer is at the beginning of ch. 4. "While the *promise* of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. *For* the good news (the written word of promises) came to us just as it came to them, but the *word* they heard did not benefit them."

Why not? For the same reason Gal 3:21 says the Law failed to give life and righteousness to Israel. Because it didn't meet with faith in those who heard it. They heard the promise, but they didn't believe it.

Paul says in Rom 9:30 that Israel who pursued a law of righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law, because they didn't pursue it by faith, but as if the Law were based on works.

The power, the strength of the Word of God is faith. To say God keeps his Word is the same as to say he keeps his promises. "The Word of God is living and active, sharper than a two-edged sword, discerning the thoughts and intentions of our hearts," because its promises are powerful, strong promises. They tear the happy mask off of the short-term promises of sin to reveal the ugly face of sin's temporary, dying, deceptive seductions.

The disobedience that Hebrews is warning us against is the sin of believing the lies of the world's little promises and disbelieving the truth of God's profound and eternal promises.

Unless we are daily saturated in the truth and beauty of the stunning promises that God makes us in his Word, we are sitting ducks for the attractions of this world and of the flesh. That's what the striving is all about that Hebrews tells us we need to work at. Fight the fight of faith, to believe the promises of the Word of God. It's a daily, hourly thing that we never grow old and mature enough to simply do on automatic pilot. We will struggle against the promises of this world to our last dying breath.

That's why Paul puts his discussion of the inspiration and authority of scripture into the context of the deceivers and the dedicated. 2Tim 3:16 -- evil people and imposters proceed from bad to worse, but you, don't proceed, continue! Continuing here is the opposite of going forward. Advancing is for the deceived. Continue, abide, dwell, stay. Where? Not just in any old thing that you've learned. Continue in the sacred writings that you've been acquainted

with since your childhood. Don't go forward from these. Don't think there is some graduation from the Word of God to some graduate level of the Christian life.

The Word of God gives us the promises and the authority we need every day of every year of our lives if we want to have the godly conduct that reflects our belief that the promises of God are good and true.

We have something more sure than an eyewitness view of the transfiguration of Jesus. We have the prophetic Word of God. Its source is God. Its supremacy is the authority of God. Its strength is the power of faith in the promises of God.

Let's not just affirm the Word of God as an article of doctrine. Let's continue striving to believe its promises, so that we may become partakers of the divine nature and escape the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. This is our foundation. Let's stand here in faith.