

Aim of lesson

There are many sources of authority, some general and some religious. We claim that the Bible is not only a unique source of authority in matters of belief and practice, but that it is both inclusive and exclusive - that is we believe it tells us all we need to know and that we do not need any other source of religious knowledge. This is a massive claim with far reaching consequences and the aims of this lesson are - to convey the importance of this belief; to justify it and to illustrate the consequences for our faith

Bible background

Acts 17:10-11

Here is a difficulty! Those who have accepted the truth of Scripture for some years may not even notice the inconsistency in the argument 'the Bible claims to be the Word of God and to be the final authority on the beliefs and practices of discipleship - and therefore it is'. Such a circular argument will not convince our students! Our Bible references therefore need to be used with care and total honesty. It also means that we will have to resort to deduction and 'logic' rather more than in those lessons which accept Scripture and derive conclusions directly from appropriate verses.

Preparation required

It is recommended that you carry out the exercises suggested in the students' notes, possibly before reading the rest of these notes. In the section on the claims of the Bible there are too many references to use them all and you should go through them making a selection suitable for the group, and adding others.

Suggested outline of lesson

This is a lesson where it is best to involve the students at the earliest possible moment in making suggestions and deductions - after all 'authority' is something about which they often have strong opinions! The students' notes contain a chart along the following lines and the group should be given opportunity either individually or in smaller groups to use the chart to develop an awareness of the sources, the need for, and the limitations of authority. A few entries in the chart are suggested but many more will come to mind. Do not spend too long on this as it is only a prelude to a similar chart on more important matters.

Source of Authority	Why trust them?	Strengths	Weaknesses
Parents	Nature? Power? God's law	They care. They have experience	Human! Out of date?
School Teachers / College Lecturers	Need order to learn	Trained, 'grown up'	Human! Biased? Out of date?
Police	For the common good	Impartial, trained	Human! Biased?

Once the list has been compiled go back and ask the group to describe what would happen if each 'source' had no authority and no control - there is scope here for wild imagination and some humour! Ask if it really would be a good situation.

Now go on to the second chart in the students' notes and ask them to do the same exercise for religious authority.

Source of Authority	Why respect it?	Strengths	Weaknesses
What I learnt from my parents	Respect, tradition, convenience	Avoids upset, continuity	Could be wrong, not own conviction
Personal 'revelation', a 'call'	Inner conviction	Inner conviction	Self delusion? Hard to test

Source of Authority	Why respect it?	Strengths	Weaknesses
The church	'Obvious', respect, tradition	Security, undemanding	Could be wrong, not own conviction
An individual (e.g. the Pope or an influential person)	Accept (need?) authority figure, majority, tradition	Undemanding, simple	Could be wrong, depends on unprovable assumption
Own choice	Self-satisfying, Self-sufficient	Undemanding, easy, individual freedom	Could be wrong, hard to test
The majority	'Common sense'	Undemanding	Which majority? Could change, poor track record
Books other than the Bible	Conviction, tradition	Definite and examinable, many people accept	Could be wrong, based on non-rational assessment?
The Bible	Conviction, tradition	Definite and examinable	Different interpretations, complex

The conclusion from this exercise will probably be that either we take a subjective 'stab in the dark' and just accept one of these sources of authority without much reason, or we examine for our selves those sources which are subject to examination recognising that our ability to think is God-given and we are supposed to use our reasoning powers. One other possibility is to reject all and believe that there is nothing beyond a naturalistic point of view of what we see around us; even this last choice requires some view of authority and right/wrong whether it be 'nature' or 'the social good' unless total anarchy is to rule.

Taking a 'stab in the dark' - accepting what we have been told or the conclusion which appeals to us at the time - is not a rational choice for a thinking person.

As the group works through these and possibly other sources of authority it will become clear that to be acceptable on a rational basis an authority will have to be testable in an objective manner. The authority of the church is probably the most widely accepted religious basis but it will soon become clear that without a more fundamental basis the teaching of the church can easily be the views of a particular set of people, with churches often holding conflicting views. This has been recognised by the churches, some of whom claim to find their authority in the Bible whilst making little use of it in matters of doctrine, and some who claim a continuous line of authority from the days of Jesus and effectively an inspired priesthood appointed by God. In either case there is a more fundamental source of authority behind the claims of the church. We should be careful not to choose ridicule as a means of expressing our distrust of such man-made authority; many such beliefs are sincerely held even when incorrect. It is generally sufficient to point out the shaky foundations.

This should leave those faiths with a basis in written text - the Bible and other religious books. It will not be possible to discuss books such as the Koran in this lesson but they will be considered in other lessons. It will be sufficient to mention that many of these writings are of a 'mystical' nature and do not easily lend themselves to reasoned analysis. Again we should not ridicule such beliefs.

So the principles the young people should identify in their notes will be along these lines:

- . It should be possible to check the veracity of any authority.
- . We should not be dependent on our personal feelings, which may deceive us.
- . We should not be dependent on other people, who may be mistaken or untrustworthy.
- . We should look for something firm and unchanging: that means something written down.

The Claims of the Bible

There are other lessons dealing with proofs of the truth of the Scriptures and in this lesson we should simply point out the claims of the Bible. The purpose of this is to establish that the Scriptures accept and encourage a careful, reasoned assessment of their claims in the light of sense and logic, approached with humility. The Bible does not demand trust without reason, nor belief without the full use of our God-given powers of thought.

The following passages are relevant; there are many others and you will no doubt choose those appropriate for the group:

Acts 3:18, 17:10-11, 18:9; 2 Timothy 3:16; 1 Corinthians 2:4-7; Hebrews 1:1-2; Galatians 1:1, 1:11-12; 1 Peter 1:10-12; Ephesians 2:20; 2 Peter 1:21; 1 Thessalonians 2:13, 4:15; 1 John 2:27

Many Old Testament passages contain the words 'Thus saith the Lord' or 'The Word of the Lord came unto me' (for example Ezekiel 20:2, Jeremiah 32:1, Isaiah 8:1). There are many direct statements about the origins of the commandments under the law of Moses, such as Deuteronomy 6:1. There are many passages in the Gospels where the Lord Jesus assumes or states the truth of the Old Testament as the Word of God, for example Matthew 15:1-6.

It is clear that the Bible makes claims to be the Word of God and therefore has authority. These claims can be tested and verified in a number of different ways. These are the subjects of other lessons. Any other claims of authority should be testable in a similar way.

Relevance to our lives

As has been noted young people are very conscious of questions of 'authority'. This lesson is a vital opportunity to propose a clear and often stark contrast between the authority of the Bible and other sources, including the authority of parents and leaders. We are human and fallible and often make mistakes; our exercise of authority, though necessary and commanded by God, is also fallible and subject to error despite our good intentions. The authority of Scripture has no such limitations. If we can lead the group to accept the authority of Scripture even if some are questioning every other form of authority, including our own, we shall have taught a vital lesson.

Prayer

Teach us, O Lord, to use the minds you have given us and the powers of reason you have given to us uniquely in this world, to find out truth and to recognise in your Word the path of life and the gift of salvation which can make us pleasing to you and contented in ourselves. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Other suggestions for activities

Carry out a mock television interview, between someone who accepts the Bible as his, or her, only real authority in life, and a rather cynical interviewer.