

THE SPIRITUALLY
HEALTHY
LEADER



THE SPIRITUALLY **HEALTHY** LEADER



WORD AFLAME PRESS
WELDON SPRING, MO

**EUGENE WILSON &
MATTHEW MULLINS**

Word Aflame Press
36 Research Park Court
Weldon Spring, MO 63304
pentecostalpublishing.com

© 2022 by Eugene Wilson and Matthew Mullins

All rights reserved. No portion of this publication may be reproduced, stored in an electronic system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of Word Aflame Press. Brief quotations may be used in literary reviews.

Scripture verses quoted are from the King James Version unless otherwise identified.

Scripture verses marked (NKJV) are from the New King James Version © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.; (NIV) from the New International Version © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc. www.zondervan.com; (NLT) from the New Living Translation © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation; (ESV) from the English Standard Version © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers; (NET) from the NET Bible © 1996, 2019 by Biblical Studies Press; (WEB) from the Webster Bible (public domain, 1833). Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America

Cover design by Timothy Burk

31 30 29 28 27 26 25 24 23 22 1 2 3 4 5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Wilson, Eugene T., author. | Mullins, Matthew, 1983- author.
Title: The spiritually healthy leader / Eugene T. Wilson & Matthew R. Mullins.
Description: Weldon Spring, MO : Word Aflame Press, [2022] | Includes bibliographical references. | Summary: "This book provides a comprehensive overview of the essential elements of the spiritually healthy leader"-- Provided by publisher.
Identifiers: LCCN 2022021297 | ISBN 9780757759949 (paperback) | ISBN 9780757759956 (epub)
Subjects: LCSH: Leadership--Religious aspects--Christianity.
Classification: LCC BV4597.53.L43 W575 2022 | DDC 253--dc23/eng/20220720
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022021297>

To my daughter, Jaelyn, who inspires me
with her diligent pursuit of spiritual things.
~ Eugene Wilson

For my wife, Rebekka, and children,
Judah, Asher, Chantry, and Kenzie Brielle.
I love you.
~ Matthew Mullins

Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>Introduction</i>	<i>1</i>
1. <i>The Leader's Foundation</i>	7
When Scripture Is No Longer the Authority	9
Christian Leaders Who Are Not Believers	11
Does It Really Matter?	15
The Authority of Scripture	16
The Necessity of a Firm Foundation.....	22
Interpreting the Word of God	24
Final Thoughts	30
2. <i>The Leader's Guide</i>	33
Hearing and Obeying the Voice of the Lord.....	36
Outside One's Comfort Zone	38
<i>Agō</i>	40
The Various Ways the Spirit Leads	42
Observations Concerning the Spirit's Leading.....	43
Forward Progression.....	44
Led by the Spirit.....	47
Final Thoughts	52
3. <i>The Leader's Character</i>	55
The Importance of Character	56
Scripture and Character	58
A Leader's Life at Home	62
Above Reproach	66
Worthy of Followership	71
Becoming Precedes Doing.....	73
Final Thoughts	74
4. <i>The Leader's Identity</i>	75
The Importance of Validation.....	78
Jesus Was Validated	81
The Lack of Validation.....	82

Discovering Validation	85
Comparing Ourselves with Others	88
Validated by God	89
Healthy Identity	90
Final Thoughts	91
5. <i>The Leader's Focus</i>	93
Pontius Pilate	94
Daniel	96
Seven Principles of Kingdom Focus	98
Final Thoughts	115
6. <i>The Leader's Covenant</i>	117
Understanding Covenant	118
Edenic and New Covenants	119
The Creation-Worship Covenant Extension	120
Creation and Personal Holiness	123
Communion with God	126
Health and Holiness	131
Final Thoughts	136
7. <i>The Leader's Power</i>	139
Warning on the Label	142
Decisions Rooted in Wisdom	143
Decision-Making	146
Empowering Others to Make Wise Decisions	148
SSI in Action	152
Foundations of Mind and Thought	156
Reward and Coercive Power	157
Legitimate Power and Authentic Leadership	158
Expert Power	159
Referent Power and Charismatic Leadership	160
Final Thoughts	163
8. <i>The Leader's Mental Health</i>	165
Perpetuating Powerlessness	168
Leader Burnout	172

Considering Anxiety and Depression	179
Reclaiming Healthy Boundaries	182
Silence and Solitude	185
Final Thoughts	186
9. <i>The Leader's Success</i>	189
Getting Better and Better	190
Words to the Wise	192
Patient Endurance	195
Final Thoughts	205
10. <i>The Leader's Legacy</i>	207
Legacy Building.....	212
Authentic Leadership	220
Final Thoughts	229
<i>Notes</i>	231

Foreword

Simeon Young Sr.

The importance of being a spiritually healthy leader cannot be overstated. A leader's spiritual well-being impacts the effectiveness of the ministry; this is true whether it be behind a pulpit of a church or a desk in a business. The lives of others, such as a leader's family and those he or she leads, are also impacted.

The not-so-good news concerning being spiritually healthy is that no leader is perfect or complete. The good news, however, is that a person can grow. Hence, the importance of this book, *The Spiritually Healthy Leader*.

In order to be spiritually healthy, we must be continually learning. As of this writing, I am eighty-one years old. I am still involved in ministry. I teach the adult class at Emmanuel Pentecostal Church every Sunday morning. I try to give the people something that makes a difference in their lives. I pray before I teach on Sunday morning that God will help the lesson to make a difference in the lives of the people who hear me. In order to do that, I cannot be static in my study or learning process.

During my thirty-five years in serving as a senior pastor in Terre Haute, Indiana, I learned to make some adjustments. As I continued to pastor, my sense of secu-

riety grew, and I felt less of a need to prove my leadership skills. My growth didn't occur just because I aged and grew in mental and spiritual maturity, however. Much of my growth can be attributed to my continual delving into the Word of God.

I read the Bible daily, as well as reading Bible commentaries that help me understand what I am reading. I am not always successful in this discipline, but I make a good-faith effort to understand the Word of God. The Bible should be read and studied in a way that changes the way we think and the way we act. Doing this consistently has had a significant effect on the way I think and the way I lead.

One of the many things that changed was how I dealt with people that I knew were not supportive of my vision for the church. I admit that toward the beginning of my ministry, my reaction to these types of people was not the best. I felt threatened by them, and that probably came out of my insecurity. I had to learn how to handle these things in order to become a spiritually healthy leader. By doing this, I think I became a better pastor.

It is now common to see these kinds of issues dealt with on social media. Disagreements didn't start in the twenty-first century, however. This has been happening since the beginning, even within the church. For example, there was a strong disagreement between Peter and Paul. (See Galatians 2:11.) Paul's letters often dealt with dissension in the church because the church of the first century consisted of flawed humans, just as it does now.

With social media being what it is, we need to be wise in what we do and say on it. It is easy to dissociate

ourselves when we are behind a computer screen. However, that doesn't change the fact that what we put on social media has an impact on our influence. A spiritually healthy leader strives to live above reproach, even on various media platforms.

I no longer serve as a senior pastor. At this stage of my life, one of the greatest blessings God has bestowed upon me is allowing me to serve as a pastoral elder. The thing that helped me make the transition to where I am now was that my concepts concerning the kingdom of God evolved, specifically that it was much bigger than what I originally focused on while I was pastoring. Early on, I was chiefly concerned with the church I pastored. In time, I began to understand that God had given me a gift of writing and I wanted to use it to impact people far beyond a local congregation. Consequently, although I have preached around the world, my writing ministry has far exceeded my ministry behind a pulpit. Through the articles I have written, I have been able to minister to people I have never seen. Aligning with God's agenda and embracing His kingdom changes our view of success. I think there is a difference in the way most of us see success and the way God sees success. Success in biblical terms is hearing Him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant." I don't think we have to meet the world's standard for success to be successful in God's eyes.

The legacy of a great leader is faithfulness and focus. A spiritually healthy leader is faithful to the doctrine, the Word of God, and the calling. The leader's focus is on things that matter to God. That is the legacy I hope to leave.

This book, *The Spiritually Healthy Leader*, covers these important issues and more. I encourage you to read it. Don't just skim over its pages; instead, let it move you to dig deeper. Study the areas in which it challenges you. In doing so, you will grow.

Introduction

The year was 1919, and a big oil strike in the nearby town of Burkburnett, Texas, had swelled the population of Wichita Falls. J. D. McMahon, supposedly from Philadelphia, had come to town hoping, like everyone else, to make lots of money. So McMahon launched a brilliant scheme: he offered to build a skyscraper forty stories tall—so tall it would forever alter the city’s skyline. Wichita Falls would finally have arrived!

Like most oil booms, where money flows scams follow. And that is exactly what McMahon was involved in; his brilliant plan to put Wichita Falls at the forefront of progress was nothing more than a scam.

Dave Lieber tells the story of the “World’s Littlest Skyscraper.”¹

Desperate for both much-needed office space and ways to make money, the people of Wichita Falls listened when McMahon offered them a chance to invest in his new landmark office building. In that mass of confusion and greed, he sold \$200,000 worth of stock (worth \$3 million in today’s dollars) and brought his own crew in to put it up. It didn’t take long.

Much to the shock of the investors, however, a much smaller building than what they expected was erected. It stood only four stories tall and was only ten feet wide and eighteen feet long. Furthermore, there was only one room per floor, as there was no room for anything else.

The investors, according to legend, took McMahon to court, but the judge threw the case out because the investors had signed off on the specs without noticing they were done in inches, not feet. The building was 480", not 480'—one-twelfth of its expected size!

“The difference between inches and feet,” as Lieber noted, “is one tiny single quote mark.” Likewise, the difference between being a spiritually healthy leader and a not-so-healthy one could be just one thing. Yet that one thing could have significant ramifications.

You Are Responsible for You

What is a spiritually healthy leader? The consensus of what it means to be spiritually healthy includes such things as personal values, connecting with God as well as others, transcendence, and growth or becoming. For this book, our focus stems from the understanding that a spiritually healthy leader consists of the following:

- You have a clear sense of your God-given purpose and are aligned with it
- Your beliefs and philosophies are scripturally sound
- You understand your life impacts others and live accordingly

- You are engaged in being a fully dimensional person with multifaceted components
- You are given to growth and progress, becoming versus doing

God's Word explicitly asserts we will give an account of everything we are before Him,² including our spiritual health. To this end, we have been given great responsibility; it is our responsibility to grow, to become spiritually healthy.

For leadership stewards of His church, responsibility takes various forms. For example, a pastor's time is earmarked with spiritual matters connected to God's people, such as relationship building, pastoral counseling, community building, sometimes temple building, and ministerial functions such as baby dedications, baptisms, funerals, and so on.

In contrast, an evangelist's role may be more transient in nature. This still requires responsibilities to both God and people but with a different degree of authority among people.

Likewise, a Christian leader's activities in the workplace might entail meetings, business travel, an expense account with long lunches or late dinners, or such activities as firing someone, or making decisions that could greatly impact the livelihood of employees and so on.

The roles and responsibilities a leader fulfills often occur in environments where it is impossible for any one person to pay close enough attention to account for your time or gauge your pursuit of being spiritual. It is impossible for others to give an account for what you have done

or where you have been. So who are you responsible to, especially in the most important of matters, such as being spiritually healthy? The answer is no one but yourself.

Years ago, during my (Matthew) general licensing interview with the Colorado District Board, then District Superintendent B. E. Hale asked the question, “As a minister, who do you answer to?” The answer is, of course, God . . . and so, with some assurance in response, I replied, “We answer to many things and many people, but in all things, we answer to God.”

Smiling in the gentle yet commanding way he is known for, the superintendent said (as genuinely as I can recall):

Ministers are often out there on their own, in their vineyard, working on behalf of the Lord. This does not make them impervious to sin or challenges. So they have to answer to someone and something. You have a pastor, good. You answer to God, as it should be. But without the discipline of your time, you open yourself up to greater challenges. I’ve seen many fall for this very reason and realized years ago that I also needed to answer to something. So every day I answer to my calendar. If the calendar says I should be up praying at this time, at the hospital with a saint at another time, I keep the date. My focus is all about where I should be at that moment so that I am accountable for my time and actions before God. And further, when it’s time for some

relaxation and fun but I get the call that says I need to be doing something else, I keep that date too. Until an emergency comes knocking that requires immediate attention, always keep the date, and you will have disciplined yourself to be responsible for something as well as someone.

These words of wisdom still speak to me. It is impossible to become what God wants you to become without discipline. Nothing just happens—you don't just happen to become everything God wants you to be. Rather, it is through much struggle that one lays hold of that for which he has been apprehended.³

Apprehending that for which we have been apprehended consists of more than a one-time movement toward the target. Instead, it is a daily thing, a constant movement in the right direction. We cannot stop because we think we have arrived. Instead, like Paul, we must continue to press toward the mark. We must continue to forget the things that are behind. We cannot allow what we have already achieved to cause us to become complacent. We must continue to press on.

Our Purpose

Hence, we address key elements in helping Christian leaders achieve to their fullest capacity: to apprehend their God-given purpose, to have a scripturally sound mindset, to live a life that impacts others, and to grow and become all God wants their lives to be. In short, to

become a spiritually healthy leader. This is the purpose for which we write.

Moreover, our endeavor in *The Spiritually Healthy Leader* is not exhaustive. There is much that can be said about being spiritually healthy and its connection to leadership. And while we acknowledge elements such as prayer, fasting, and faithfulness are touched on lightly, it is not because we view such things of less importance. It is only because such elements are commonly viewed as essential to being spiritually healthy. We have, therefore, focused mostly on other areas in which the focus is not as common but of equal importance.

We hope the material found in the pages that follow will play an essential role in Christian leaders becoming all they can be. It is to this endeavor we write:

1. *The Leader's Foundation*

For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

~ Hebrews 4:12

Approximately every five hundred years, according to Phyllis Tickle in *The Great Emergence*, Christianity has experienced a major upheaval or change. In the sixteenth century, it was the Great Reformation. Before that, it was the Great Schism, and before the Great Schism, the fall of the Roman Empire, or what some now refer to as the time of Gregory the Great. Tickle maintains Christianity is now experiencing a time of great change, what she calls the Great Emergence.

As in previous times of major upheaval, the central question of the Great Emergence is, “Where is the authority?”¹ The answer holds enormous ramifications, and particularly so for the individual who desires to be a spiritually healthy leader. The essence of authority is foundational to leadership.

In times past, during a major upheaval, Christianity's foundation or basis of authority has been Scripture. But that is no longer the case. Tickle claims that today the foundation is sometimes Scripture and sometimes community; it is no longer Scripture exclusively.² By community, Tickle is referring to the ongoing conversations that transpire between members of a community. She is saying that our discussions shape truth. Conversations in which we share ideas, philosophies, values, and so on create the truths by which we make decisions, and consequently, build our lives.

The obvious danger, when the basis of authority is Scripture *and* community, is that community becomes a deciding factor in determining right and wrong, not Scripture alone. When community gets to decide what is right and wrong, we end up with many truths, not one central truth. Such is the society in which we live. And unfortunately, such is the mindset of a growing percentage in the Christian community.

According to Gallup Research, over the past three decades Americans' view of the Bible as the literal word of God has declined.³ Meanwhile, the view that the Bible is a collection of fables, myths, and history recorded by man has increased. The shift is significant among young adults, meaning that the decline will speed up in the coming years.

Gallup Research also reports that only 24 percent of Americans believe the Bible is "the actual word of God, and is to be taken literally, word for word."⁴ Slightly more, 26 percent, believe it is "a book of fables, legends, history and moral precepts recorded by man."⁵ For

the first time ever, in Gallup's four-decade trend, biblical skepticism has surpassed biblical literalism.

Additionally, Pew Research Center surveyed over 4,700 US adults and found that one-third of Americans claim they do not believe in the God of the Bible.⁶ However, they believe in some form of a higher power or spiritual force in the universe. They also report that although three-quarters of Christians say they believe the Bible is the Word of God, a growing number no longer believe it should be taken literally, word for word.⁷

When Scripture Is No Longer the Authority

It appears Phyllis Tickle's assessment of current conditions is accurate. We have entered a time in which Scripture is no longer the central authority, even among many Christians. Instead of Scripture being the authority, we have elevated our thoughts, opinions, philosophies, and so on alongside that of the Bible.

Paul, in II Timothy 4:1–3, warned of such a thing:

I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears.

He continued in verse 4, “And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.” According to *Vine's Expository Dictionary*, “fables” signifies “speech, conversation.”

This is interesting considering other comments in Paul's letters to Timothy. For example, in I Timothy 1:4, Paul instructed Timothy to stand against the teaching of false doctrine, and in this case, those who devoted themselves to myths and endless genealogies that prompted speculation. In I Timothy 6:4, he warned Timothy concerning the man who is proud of his intellect but really doesn't know much, who is constantly getting caught up with endless questions and strife of words. He cautioned Timothy concerning “godless chatter” (which increases ungodliness, II Timothy 2:16, NIRV) and “contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge” (I Timothy 6:20, NKJV). Last, he told Timothy to “avoid foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife” (II Timothy 2:23, NKJV).

Paul's warnings were aimed at confronting Gnosticism, which is knowledge based on personal experience or perception. The person under the influence of Gnosticism is driven by the desire for novelty. William Barclay describes such a person as “someone who must be in the latest fashion and must undergo the latest craze. He despises old things for no better reason than that they are old and desires new things for no better reason than that they are new.”⁸

Barclay's description fits many people nowadays. Such people are quick to point out why they think certain parts of the Bible and truth are outdated, and how

God is doing a new thing. When they find others who share the same sentiments, a community of like-minded people is birthed. Not long thereafter, this community—in which ideas and opinions are shared—becomes the deciding factor as to what is right and wrong.

The obvious danger is that when our philosophies, thoughts, and concepts have been elevated to equal status with God's Word, we devalue His sovereignty in our lives. His authority is no longer our foundation; instead, it is replaced with our knowledge. Thinking ourselves to be wise, we become fools.

The impact of such a foundation, one in which we are the deciding factor as to what is right and wrong, can be devastating. If the integrity of the foundation is not what it should be, it compromises the entire structure. The foundation is of utmost importance!

Christian Leaders Who Are Not Believers

An article by Daniel Dennett and Linda LaScola, "Preachers Who Are Not Believers," illustrates the importance of a sound foundation. Both Dennett and LaScola are atheists but are sympathetic and show a keen interest in religious practices and attitudes. The article shares the findings from a pilot study in which five pastors who are still engaged in leading churches were no longer believers. Three of the pastors represented liberal denominations; the other two came from a more conservative denomination.

When asked concerning a need to draw a line between belief in God on one side and nonbelief on the other, only two of the pastors responded. They felt there

was a need to draw the line but admitted that in where they had drawn the line, their own views had crossed it and “they no longer *deserve* to be called believers.”⁹

Three of the pastors stated they believed in something, even though it may not be a supernatural god. And what they believed in wasn't the same as most of their congregants. They also acknowledged they did not believe what most of the people would think they, as church leaders, should believe.

As to the value in remaining a pastor, one respondent, Wes, commented:

I will be the first to admit that I see Christianity as a means to an end, not as an end unto itself. And the end is very basically, a kind of liberal, democratic values. So I will use Christianity sometimes against itself to try to lead people to that point. But there's so much within the Christian tradition that itself influenced the development of those liberal values, you know. They didn't arise through secular means. They came out of some religious stuff. . . . I could couch all that in very secular language. If we were in a college setting, I would. But we're in a religious setting, so I use the religious language.¹⁰

Wes noted that the only meaningful difference between him and those who consider themselves to be atheists was his willingness to use the word *God*:

The difference between me and an atheist is basically this: it's not about the existence of God. It's: do we believe that there is room for the use of the word "God" in some context? And a thoroughly consistent atheist would say, "No. We just need to get over that word just like we need to get over concepts of race. We quit using that word, we'd be better off." Whereas I would say I agree with that in a great many cases, but I still think the word has some value in some contexts. So I think the word God can be used very expressively in some of my more meditative modes. I've thought of God as a kind of poetry that's written by human beings. As a way of dealing with the fact that we're finite; we're vulnerable.¹¹

Another pastor, Darryl, remarked:

I reject the virgin birth. I reject substitutionary atonement. I reject the divinity of Jesus. I reject heaven and hell in the traditional sense, and I am not alone.

I am a "Jesus Follower" for sure. It is arguable whether I am also a "Christian." I can't imagine continuing in this work if I did not have a strong personal faith of some kind. My cognitive dissonance revolves around the urge to rescue others who find themselves in the same boat—and who still strongly believe in God in some sense, and find Jesus a compelling religious figure.¹²

Wes claimed that many of his colleagues have similar views, which they would express if they had a suitable opportunity. He stated:

My colleagues here are very educated, very well read, and do not believe the significance of Christianity lies in whether it's literally true. They do believe that it is metaphorically describing something that is real. Something spiritual that we cannot get at, that is a presence in this universe. That's where they differ from me. But the way we use the language is going to be very similar, and the reason it's going to be similar is that our goals are the same. Our goals are to help people become freer than they were before, and to be transformed. So if becoming a Christian transforms a person's life for the better, I have no problem with them becoming a Christian. But I also have no problem with it if it means betraying Christianity, if that's what helps them. And I think many of my colleagues, if they were in this kind of environment [confidential interview], would admit to that. . . .

They're very liberal. They've been de-mythologized, I'll say that. They don't believe Jesus rose from the dead literally. They don't believe Jesus was born of a virgin. They don't believe all those things that would cause a big stir in their churches. But that's not uncommon in mainline denominations.¹³

Perhaps most damaging, though, is not the course such leaders have taken. Rather, it is the negative impact their ministry has on others. One respondent admitted his mission was to stay with the church long enough to make it “obsolete.”¹⁴ Another pastor maintained that his aim was to stay with the church because he wanted to “change” it.¹⁵

I mean, I want the church to hear this stuff! I want the church to deal with me. I want the church to know that there's a progressive way of thinking out there. I want the church to know that there are people who are thinking really radical stuff about theology.¹⁶

Such change does not generate a good ending. When the foundation is compromised, everything is compromised. This is true for ministers as well as Christian businesspeople. One's foundation matters.

Does It Really Matter?

We can see the struggle with the authority of the word of God in the Garden of Eden. In Genesis 3:1, the serpent asked Eve, “Did God really say that?” The intention of the serpent was to sow doubt, to mess with Eve's mind. Paul, in I Corinthians 11:3, wrote, “But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.” Questions will arise concerning biblical truth; one must be careful not to allow one's mind to become corrupted, maintained Paul. To do so would be to weaken the foundation.

Consider the sentiments of Bart D. Ehrman, an American New Testament scholar focusing on textual criticism of the New Testament. The author of *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*, Ehrman is one of the most controversial Bible scholars in the world today. Although Ehrman's book addresses the discipline of textual criticism, it is framed in his personal spiritual journey. Ehrman claims the lack of original biblical manuscripts became a "compelling problem" for him, one that eventually led him to deny his previously held belief in the inerrancy of Scripture.¹⁷ And it was the undoing of the inerrancy of Scripture that eventually led him to walk away from his faith.

One might argue there are many Christians who don't affirm the inerrancy of Scripture, that inerrancy of Scripture is not a prerequisite to becoming an atheist. Although that may be true, it doesn't negate the point—when the foundation is compromised, everything else is too.

Regardless of what a person may claim, there remains a close connection between the inerrancy of Scripture and the authority of Scripture. When the inerrancy of Scripture is compromised, the authority of Scripture is compromised. When the authority of Scripture is compromised, a person's opinion rises to the same level Scripture once held. Again, the key is the importance of the foundation.

The Authority of Scripture

We can see the concept of authority throughout Scripture. We see it in the first verse of the Bible, "In

the beginning God created” (Genesis 1:1) and the concluding verses of Revelation, “Surely I come quickly” (Revelation 22:20). As Christians, our foundation begins with the belief that God exists and that His Word is true. This is what is called presuppositional thinking. We presuppose that what God says about Himself is true.

While some might think presuppositional thinking holds little value, this is the example Jesus set for us. All of His messages presupposed that what the Scriptures said was true. Grant Jeffrey, in *The Signature of God*, states:

One of Jesus' most significant statements was His declaration that Daniel wrote the book of Daniel (see Matt. 24:15), contradicting critics who claim that the book of Daniel was written by someone pretending to prophesy in 165 BC. Jesus also spoke of Adam, Eve, and their son Abel as real personalities (see Matt. 19:4–5; 23:35). In Luke 17:26–28, Jesus referred to both Noah and Lot. According to John 8:56–58, the Lord confirmed the Bible's narrative about Abraham. Perhaps most important, Jesus confirmed the accuracy of the Genesis account about the creation of the world (see Mark 10:6–9) and the worldwide flood (see Matt. 24:37–39).¹⁸

Jesus also referenced Jonah and the fish and said the writings of Moses were more powerful than someone rising from the dead.¹⁹ No wonder John 7:15 states that Jesus knew the Scriptures so well that learned men marveled.

Jesus used Scripture, presupposing its inerrancy, in confronting the Sadducees. He stated, “You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. . . . Have you not read what was said to you by God . . . ?” (Matthew 22:29, 31, ESV). In Matthew 22:41–46, Jesus used Psalm 110 in proving to the Pharisees that their one-sided teaching regarding the Messiah’s Davidic ancestry was wrong.

Jesus used Scripture, presupposing its inerrancy, in confronting the devil. Three times in the discourse of Matthew 4:1–11, He told the devil, “It is written.” In other words, what has been written is the authority to which even Satan himself must yield.

But it wasn’t just Satan who had to yield. Jesus Himself had to yield to the authority of Scripture. Isaiah had prophesied concerning the transgressors;²⁰ and in Luke 22:37 (ESV), Jesus stated “that this Scripture [Isaiah’s prophecy] must be fulfilled in me.” In another place Jesus asked if the cup would pass from Him (that He wouldn’t have to die on the cross, Matthew 26:37–39); nevertheless, His obedience to the will of God and to the authority of Scripture ensured that the penalty for sin would be paid in full.

Paul Attested the Divine Authority of Scripture

The apostles repeatedly attested the divine authority of the Old Testament and did so by constructing their teachings on it. Consider the apostle Paul’s references to the Old Testament in his letter to the Romans.

For proof that no one is justified by works,
since all are sinners, Paul does not draw on

general experience, but on Old Testament Scripture—“as it is written”—and then cites a number of passages (3:10). Also his teaching on original sin is based on the Old Testament. For him the fall into sin, as written, is a fact: “As sin came into the world through one man . . .” (5:12). Applicable for all time is the statement that “he who through faith is righteous shall live,” “as it is written” (1:17). This righteousness of faith is attested in the Law and the Prophets (3:21). Therefore he repeatedly asks, “What does the Scripture say?” (4:3). Scripture says that Abraham’s faith was reckoned to him and to all who are his descendants by faith as righteousness (4:16, 22)—“as it is written” (4:17). No one has an inherent right to be Abraham’s seed, but it is free grace—“as it is written” (9:13, 15, 17). And so on through the entire letter. So for Paul, “God says” and “Scripture says” mean the same thing (9:15, 17). All New Testament writings attest the same thing with “that it might be fulfilled what the Lord spoke through the prophet” in the Gospels, and with the Scripture proof in the Acts and in the Epistles.²¹

But that’s not all. In most of his letters Paul referred to himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ. He emphasized several times the fact that God had called him to be an apostle,²² not men.²³ As an apostle, a messenger who had

been called, sent, and empowered by God, Paul expressed authority in the words given to him by God. He stated in I Corinthians 14:37, "If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord."

In II Thessalonians 3:6, Paul said, "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us." In verse 12, he wrote, "Now them that are such we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread." And in verse 14, Paul commanded, "And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed."

It is important to note, however, that Paul did not assume himself to be the foundation for his expressions of authority. In I Thessalonians 2:13 (ESV), he wrote, "And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers."

Paul's basis for the authority he expressed in his dealing with the church was not of his own doing. He had been called by God and used by God as an instrument in establishing the church. His words were the words of God. Interestingly, Paul stated his desire was not to lord it over others.²⁴ Rather, he desired to be a servant to the churches. His preaching and teaching and writings were

not stemming from a desire of control. The foundation wasn't self; the foundation was the Word of God.

Only for that reason does the Gospel, as he has proclaimed it, possess such authority that he can anathematize every one who preaches it differently, though he be an angel (Gal. 1:8). Only for that reason can he declare even Old Testament ceremonial laws of God to be repealed (Col. 2:16). Only for that reason can he repeatedly admonish the churches to remain conscientiously faithful to the doctrine proclaimed by him; and he makes no distinction between oral and written proclamation. (See, for example, 2 Thess. 2:15: "So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter.")²⁵

Last, notice the apostle Peter's support for Paul's writings as being the words of God. In II Peter 3:16, he wrote:

As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.

The Necessity of a Firm Foundation

Spiritually healthy leaders stand on the Word of God; it is the foundation.²⁶ Care must be taken not to weaken the foundation, for once the foundation is compromised, everything else is too. Hence, spiritually healthy leaders believe the Bible is trustworthy.

The need for a firm foundation is paramount. Consider II Peter 1:19–20:

We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts: knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.

The context reveals that Peter knew he was about to die.²⁷ He wanted to leave his readers with a solid foundation. He knew false teachers were already negatively impacting the church. If the church was to remain, false teachers and their false doctrine would have to be dealt with. And according to Peter, the foundation needed was the Word of God, and the central focus of the Word of God is Jesus Christ.

In II Peter 1:16–18, Peter boldly proclaimed:

For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ,

but were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received from God the Father honour and glory, when there came such a voice to him from the excellent glory, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with him in the holy mount.

Peter was saying, “Our [Peter, James, and John] experiences on the Mount of Transfiguration backed what we knew to be true. Namely, we were not following ‘cunningly devised fables.’ Instead, our foundation was Scripture.”

He said in verse 19, “We have also a more sure word of prophecy.” The prophetic words Peter spoke of were the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Day of Judgment and salvation. “The idea is that the Old Testament prophecies about the coming day of the Lord [were] confirmed and clarified by the transfiguration, where the disciples saw a prophetic preview of Jesus in His glory.”²⁸

What did Peter mean when he said, “more sure”? Some think Peter was stating that the Scriptures ranked higher than Peter, James, and John’s experience on the Mount of Transfiguration. That “the Word of God is a more reliable verification of the teachings about the person, atonement, and second coming of Christ than even the genuine firsthand experiences of the apostles themselves.”²⁹

Peter’s statement in verses 16–18, however, suggests that he believed the experience on the Mount of Transfiguration was unquestionable. So when Peter says “more

sure,” it seems to show that Peter was saying the Old Testament prophets gave a sure word about Jesus Christ. They prophesied He would suffer, He would be rejected, and He would be despised. But His sufferings would not be the end. Instead, Jesus would arise in glory.

The apostles did not understand it in its fullness. It wasn't quite clear. But after Jesus' death and resurrection, and His explanation that it was necessary for Him “to suffer these things and to enter into His glory” (Luke 24:26), along with recalling the experience Peter, James, and John had on the Mount of Transfiguration, things were made clear. Seeing Jesus in His glory on the Mount was a prophetic glimpse of what was to come. Jesus would come again. It is in this sense that the Old Testament prophetic word was made “more sure.” The experience on the Mount of Transfiguration confirmed and clarified the preexisting truth.

Interpreting the Word of God

An experience with God can help bring clarity to Scripture. However, one's experiences with God must never be allowed to discredit Scripture. If an experience stands in contradiction with one's understanding of Scripture, one of two things has happened: (1) one's previous understanding of Scripture or scriptural principle was wrong, or (2) one's experience needs to come into alignment with Scripture. If a previous understanding of Scripture was wrong, it cannot be replaced with an opinion based on one's experience. We must correct our faulty understanding of Scripture, not replace Scripture with an opinion or an experience. One's opinion

must not be elevated to the same level of importance as Scripture.

Peter continued in II Peter 1:19, “Whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts.” Peter was saying, “Since the Old Testament prophets prophesied the glory of Christ in His coming, and since our experiences on the Mount of Transfiguration helped us in our understanding and confirmed to us those prophecies, we need to pay close attention to the Scriptures.”

In verse 20 he wrote, “Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation.” He was presenting the argument that we must interpret Scripture carefully. Although human authors are involved in the process, the Word came from God. In our interpretation of the Word, we must not dilute or disregard in any way the Word of God. We must pay close attention to it and interpret it correctly because the Word is God's Word, not man's word.

Peter's words should cause us to pause and consider carefully what we are doing when we interpret Scripture. It matters how we apply Scripture, whether in preaching, teaching, writing, business, family, and so on. His exhortation should cause us to consider our own biases in reading and interpreting Scripture. “Peter is saying that we aren't free to interpret Scripture according to our own personal whims. Scripture is not to be interpreted subjectively, according to my feelings or preferences, but rather, objectively, according to the meaning of the text.”³⁰

The idea is, you are not free to interpret the Bible according to your feelings or to take or leave parts of it as you like, because [“for”] the Bible is the very word from God to us through these inspired men. It carries God’s authority and wisdom for how we should live. It is the word of the Sovereign of the universe, to whom we will give account. So we had better take care to understand it correctly and obey it completely!³¹

If we interpret Scripture according to our feelings or opinions or experiences, we are liable to twist the Scriptures and make them say what we want them to say, which we must not do.

In verse 21 Peter stated, “For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.” This verse is one of the key verses in the Bible explaining the inspiration of Scripture. It shows that although human authors were involved in writing the Bible, what they wrote came from the Holy Spirit. The Greek word translated “moved” is the same as the word translated “wind” that carried along Paul’s ship in the storm.³²

Charles Hodge presents an excellent explanation in *Systematic Theology*. He writes:

Inspiration was an influence of the Holy Spirit on the minds of certain select men, which rendered them the organs of God for the infallible communication of his mind and will. They were in such a sense

the organs of God, that what they said
God said.³³

God dictated certain portions of Scripture directly, but He also used the personalities, experiences, and skill sets of the authors—even their language. The final product however, is what God said.³⁴ In the Old Testament alone, the writers referred to their writings as the words of God over 3,800 times.³⁵

It was clear to Peter that the Word of God, although spoken and written by man, was God's Word. Thus, it is of utmost importance when interpreting the Word of God that one does not dilute it or delete any aspect of it. The integrity of the foundation matters. Once the foundation is compromised, everything else is too.

Exegesis

Spiritually healthy leaders understand the importance of Scripture. It doesn't matter the level of success one has been able to attain; if a leader's foundation isn't what it should be, the leader's effectiveness won't be what it should be. Thus, interpreting Scripture matters.

The term *exegesis* means "exposition or explanation."³⁶ Biblical exegesis, therefore, involves the examination of a particular text of Scripture in order to properly interpret it. A person who practices exegesis is called an exegete.

The need for proper interpretation of Scripture cannot be understated. It is a biblical command. "Study [be diligent] to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (II Timothy 2:15). According to this

verse, how we handle the Word of God matters a lot. We must “rightly divide” the Word of God; we must study it the right way so we can interpret it the right way.

We will lightly touch on a few key principles for interpreting the Bible. There is much more to it than we can possibly cover here, however.

First, consider grammar. Examine a passage by defining the words in it. Definitions are basic to understanding the passage as a whole, and it is important that the words be defined according to their original intent and not according to modern usage. Look for a grammatical relationship of words in a passage: What or who is the main subject? What is the primary idea?

Second, consider each word in a passage in a normal, literal meaning, unless there is good reason to view it as a figure of speech. The exegete does not go out of his or her way to spiritualize or allegorize. Words mean what words mean.

Third, consider the historical significance: To whom was the text written? What was the culture of the day? What were the current issues? What was the religious mindset? What was the political climate like? And so on. An understanding of ancient Jewish culture can greatly aid an understanding of Scripture.

Next, examine a passage in relation to its immediate context (the verses surrounding it), its wider context (the book it is found in), and its complete context (the Bible as a whole). The Bible does not contradict itself. Any theological statement in one verse can and should be harmonized with theological statements in other parts

of Scripture. Good Bible interpretation relates any one passage to the total content of Scripture.

There are many factors to consider when looking at a verse through the lens of its original audience. It is only after such things have been first considered that we should then look to see how they apply to us in our culture.

Share the Word

Proper exegesis seeks answers to questions such as: What was the intent of the author? Who was the author's audience? What was the cultural and political climate of the day? How might these things have impacted the author's perspective? Eisegesis, however, is interpreting the text in such a way that one reads into the text what may not be there. Eisegesis occurs when we interpret text through our own agendas and biases.

Unfortunately, much of today's Christian culture is apt to focus on eisegesis, not exegesis. Such leaning is heavy on inspiration and light on doctrine. It refuses to allow the Bible to get in the way of a good thought. Such leanings reveal a lack of study and understanding. It is a person doing a person's thing as opposed to a person submitting to God's thing.

There is a great need for Christian leaders to interpret Scripture the right way. Everything we do should be in alignment with the Bible. What does the Bible say? The Word of God doesn't need our help; we need its help. The Word of God is powerful. It is "sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and

is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

Spiritually healthy leaders do not neglect their responsibility in studying the Word of God as well as living out the Word of God. We must be careful in sharing our opinions, thoughts, biases, and so on. We must share the Word of God.

It is what Jesus preached (Luke 5:1). It was the message the apostles taught (Acts 4:31 and 6:2). It was the word the Samaritans received (Acts 8:14) as given by the apostles (Acts 8:25). It was the message the Gentiles received as preached by Peter (Acts 11:1). It was the word Paul preached on his first missionary journey (Acts 13:5, 7, 44, 48, 49; 15:35–36). It was the message preached on Paul’s second missionary journey (Acts 16:32; 17:13; 18:11). It was the message Paul preached on his third missionary journey (Acts 19:10).³⁷

Final Thoughts

The history of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton is intriguing. Harvard was named after a Christian minister, John Harvard, and its purpose was mainly to educate clergy. Clergymen established Yale with the purpose of educating ministers. Reverend Jonathan Dickinson taught Princeton’s first year of class, and the English translation of the school’s Latin crest still says “Under God she flourishes.” Today these schools no longer reflect the foundation on which they were established.

It is shocking when one considers how drastic things change once the foundation is compromised. You likely know of someone who no longer believes what he or she once professed. Why? Usually it can be traced to a compromised foundation, one that was compromised when the weight of Scripture was lowered and the weight of opinions was elevated.

When such people serve as leaders within the church, the outfall can be quite devastating. The same is true when professing Christians do not live out their profession in the workplace. Carl F. H. Henry, one of the twentieth century's leading theologians stated:

Without an authoritative Scripture, the church is powerless to overcome not only human unregeneracy but also satanic deception. Where the church no longer lives by the Word of God it is left to its own devices and soon is overtaken by the temptations of Satan and the misery of sin and death.³⁸

The church is people, not a building. Neither is it a church service. We are the church. Thus, a spiritually healthy leader understands the importance of Scripture and gives oneself to studying it, proclaiming it, and living it.