

The Authority of Scripture

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The Bible has a lot to say about its own authority. A whole lot. Indeed, "The authority of the Scriptures is the great presupposition of the whole of the biblical preaching and doctrine."¹

It is the constant claim of the writers of Holy Writ that what they write is the authoritative and living Word of God. When the Old Testament is quoted in the New, statements like "God says" and "the Holy Spirit says" are frequent (e.g. Acts 1:16; 3:24, 25; 2 Corinthians 6:16). What "the Scripture says" and what "God says" are quite simply the same thing in case after case. The Scripture is even personified, as if it were God (cf. Galatians 3:8; Romans 9:17). It was B. B. Warfield who noted accurately that the writers of the New Testament could speak of the Scripture doing exactly what Scripture records Jehovah as doing. "And this naturally implies authority," adds Ridderbos.² The phrase "It is written" (*gegraptai*), used often in the New Testament, settles the matter beyond reasonable doubt.

When we come to the New Testament writings we immediately note that nothing less than the authority of the Old Testament Scriptures is ascribed to the writers

¹ Herman Ridderbos, *Studies in Scripture and its Authority*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 20.

² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

of the New Testament (cf. Romans 1:15; 1 Timothy 2:7; Galatians 1:8, 9; 1 Thessalonians 2:13). *Gegraptai* is used of New Testament writings and the apostolic text is placed on a par with the writings of the Old Testament (cf. 2 Peter 3:15, 16; Revelation 1:3). The concept of faith found in the New Testament is consistent with this witness, for faith is simply obedience to the witness of the apostles, i.e. the New Testament Scripture (cf. Romans 1:5; 16:26; 10:3). We should note:

This apostolic witness is fundamentally distinguished in this respect from other manifestations of the Spirit, which demand of the congregation (*ekklesia*) not only obedience, but also a critical discernment between the true and the false (cf. 1 Thess. 5:21; 1 John 4:1). For this witness deserves unconditional faith and obedience, in its written as well as in its oral form.³

The authority of the Scripture, then, is not located in human brilliance or witness. It is not found in the person of Moses, Paul, or Peter. The authority is found in the sovereign God Himself. The God who "breathed out"⁴ the words through human writers stands behind every statement, every doctrine, every promise and every command written in the Scripture. After all, it was "In the past [that] God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways" (Hebrews 1:1).

Further, the apostle Paul makes a statement so bold that it must shock us if we carefully read it. To the church at Corinth he says, "what I am writing to you is the Lord's command" (1 Corinthians 14:37). His authority, as a writer of God-breathed Scripture, is *above* all other authority. Why? Because he is an apostle, which, as we shall soon see clearly, is one specially commissioned by the Lord to lay the foundation for the Christian church (cf. Ephesians 2:20; Revelation 21:2, 14). He was a special representative of the Lord Himself. His word, therefore, was the very commandment of the Lord!⁵

³ Ibid., p. 21.

⁴ The literal meaning of "inspired" is "God-breathed." The compound Greek word *theopneustos* means, literally, "God-breathed out." The point is that the resultant words are assured as those God desired because He breathed them. The inspiration is not of the human author as much as it is the inspiration of the resultant text itself.

⁵ Apostles were extraordinary in terms of revelation. To hold to apostolic authority is still very important and was an important *emphasis* in the church up until the time of the Reformation. The Roman Church had added, over some time, the dogma of apostolic succession to the biblical doctrine of apostolic foundation. In reacting, properly, to apostolic succession Protestantism has often tended to ignore, to varying extents, the important truth of apostolic foundationalism.

To the authority of this Word all must submit, without rebellion or reservation. Why? Because this Word has an authority of the most distinct sort. It has its origin in God's will, not man's. And it is both complete and final (cf. Hebrews 1:2, "in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son"). Of this authority Paul writes:

The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. And we are ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete (2 Corinthians 10:3—6).

Lutheran theologian Edward W. A. Koehler, writing earlier in our century, correctly concludes that "It [i.e., this authority which comes to us from the Bible itself] calls for instant and unqualified acceptance of every statement of the Bible on the part of man."⁶

Our Lord Jesus, in establishing His own authority during His incarnate earthly ministry, grounded His ultimate judgment in His spoken word which will judge men in the final day. This is true precisely because His word is the very Word of God itself, with all of the authority of Jehovah behind it. He said:

As for the person who hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge him. For I did not come into the world to judge the world, but to save it. There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day. For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it. I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say (John 12:47—50).

John R. W. Stott has correctly noted that submission to Christ's authority as Lord is "the only possible attitude of mind in which to approach our study of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Word of God." Stott adds that "belief in the authority of Scripture and submission to the authority of Scripture are necessary consequences of our submission to the lordship of Jesus."⁷

⁶ Edward W. A. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine* (St. Louis: Concordia: 1939), p. 10.

⁷ John R. w. Stott, *The Authority of the Bible* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1974), p. 6—7.

Koehler concludes, "To ignore, disregard, or reject any doctrine of the Bible is rebellion against God's authority, and will not go unpunished."⁸

But What Is Meant By "Authority"?

In general the concept of authority is a relational idea. It is a word which signifies superiority, or dominance. It has been properly said that:

To have authority is to have a right to rule and a claim to exercise control. Authority is expressed in directives and acknowledged by compliance and conformity. The word "authority" is used both abstractly for the commanding quality that authoritative claims have, and also concretely for the source or sources of those claims—"the authority" or "the authorities." In both usages the thought of rightful dominance remains central.⁹

The idea of authority appears regularly in ordinary conversation. We speak of scholars as "authorities," meaning those who use original documents, sources, etc.; or we speak of umpires in a baseball game as those having "authority" because they enforce the rules of the game. Lawmakers have authority to make laws while judges exercise an authority inherent in the laws themselves.

The Christian conception of authority, however, is quite different from these concepts. Here we encounter a divine authority, an authority inherent in the triune God Himself—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is revealed authority precisely because it has been given to us, finally and completely, in the Word of God. The Word of God is authoritative precisely because it is God's verbalized communication to His rational thinking creatures. It is

verbalized in both the indicative and the imperative moods, and particularized in relation to each person to whom it is sent. The nearest human analogies to this are the authority of legislation enacted by an absolute ruler, and of orders issued by a supreme military commander, for in both these cases what is uttered is at the same time what the person in authority said (on the occasion when the laws or orders were first given) and also what he says in the present moment since his laws, or orders, continue to apply to everyone who stands under his authority here and now.¹⁰

⁸ Koehler, *Summary of Christian Doctrine*, p. 10.

⁹ James I. Packer, "The Reconstitution of Authority", in *Crux*, Vol. 18, no. 4 (December 1982) p. 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

This concept of a distinctly Christian authority is not merely the creation of imaginative theological minds. It can be seen in the longest chapter in the Scripture, Psalm 119, where all 176 verses excepting one "speak explicitly or implicitly of due response to what the Psalmist variously calls God's word, words, precepts, statutes, law, promise, testimonies and ordinances, which spell out his ways and his righteousness, that is, his revealed will for mankind."¹¹

How the authority of this Word comes to us in our time, how its message is to be discovered and understood, and in what way human opinions relate to this written Word are all questions that bear upon this larger question of God's authority. All that I am asserting at the outset of this chapter is a simple, but very necessary, fact—what is final authority for a Christian must be the Word of God which comes from the Creator as the binding word of His covenant. That God must, of necessity, as Creator and sovereign, have authority over all His creatures is a given. The real debate among those who profess allegiance to Christ as Lord is not over the concept of authority itself. For Christians the debate is over how to regard His authority because He is Lord over all.

Our question is this: "How shall we who have come to embrace God's authority bend our wills and lives, explicitly, to this authority which is God's?" Or more directly related to what we shall see in this chapter, "What role do human opinions, or creeds, councils, and church authorities, have in this matter of the authority of Scripture?" There is agreement, among all Christian traditions, that God has revealed Himself in the person and work of Jesus Christ. This living Word is "the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6). But exactly *how* does Christ make known to His people the will of the Father? This is the question which must now concern us.

The Basis of Authority

As previously noted, Scripture openly claims authority for itself. It does this in several ways. The repeatedly-used statement "It is written" (46 times in Scripture, 33 in the New Testament alone) plainly asserts an authority for written Scripture. In addition, we note the frequent use of the phrase "Scripture says" (seven times) and the phrase "according to the Scriptures" (three times), both indicating that an unqualified authority is located in the written text itself. In addition, we have repeated appeals by Jesus to "the law and the prophets" (38 times; e.g., Luke 24:44—47, a classic example).

Indeed, the frequently used statement "according to the Scriptures" is a most significant clue to the ministry, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. The epistles are not written as mere expressions of human opinion—albeit important

¹¹ Ibid., p. 3.

religious opinion—but as an authoritative rule or canon for both doctrine and practice (e.g. 2 Peter 3:2, 16; 1 Timothy 5:8; 2 Thessalonians 3:6). Furthermore, Revelation 22:18—19 concludes the canon with the strongest warning imaginable. Any who would treat the words of this Apocalypse (and it is possible that the whole of Scripture is in view) as something other than the very Word of God, with all the authority inherent in such a statement, is in danger of eternal judgment.

Over the centuries both theologians and the faithful church in general have accepted the authority of Scripture as God's authority. Even when other authorities are put forward this stress is still present, at least initially. As in all ages, still today, new authorities (visions, prophecies, signs from heaven, etc.) are almost always put forward as subservient to the Scripture, even by those who endorse them.

St. Augustine stated this well when he wrote, "In those teachings which are clearly based on Scripture are found *all* that concerns faith and the conduct of life" (emphasis mine). It was this same Augustine who said, "What Scripture says, God says!"

We must further see that the authority claimed for the Bible is not merely a *historical* authority, although this kind of authority *is* claimed for the Scriptures. Consider for a moment this simple fact—almost all that you know about God's redemptive work under the Old Covenant, as well as what you know about the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus, is given in the Scriptures. Further, though we often hear discussion about the "early church" and its beliefs, the only things we really know about the very *first* Christians and the *first* church are *virtually* all contained in the pages of sacred Scripture. These writings are not only primary for our historical knowledge of the Christ, but virtually exclusive. Their historical authority can be seen in the peculiar way in which they speak as firsthand sources and as eyewitness accounts of the events set before them. To put this simply: What would we know of Jesus of Nazareth without the New Testament? Frankly, very little!

This historical authority, as original source material, is surely very important. I do not believe we can make too much of it. But many ancient documents make similar claims and as such are the primary sources for information about men and religious movements. What makes the Scripture unique? These writings describe events in a way that specifically demands the reader to believe in a certain way and to live accordingly. The Bible is, simply put, our *sole* testimony to God's words and great redemptive actions. The Bible does more than pass on historically authoritative information; consistently it has the stubborn habit of making authoritative demands upon our belief and practice.

All of historic Christendom—Roman Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox—is agreed up to this point: Scripture is the Word of God, and as such, it has God's

authority! *Vox Scriptura, vox Dei*; "the voice of Scripture is the voice of God." Scripture's authority is ultimately and finally God's authority.

Other Authorities?

Scripture's unique authority has been almost universally accepted by the historic Christian Church. But the nub of the debate for varying Christian traditions has come down to this: *other* authorities have been advanced which, at least in principle, rival or qualify the authority of Scripture. How are we to deal with these *other* authorities?

It is important that we understand several prominent authorities that have been advanced alongside of Scripture.

1. *Oral Tradition*. Note the authority of oral tradition. The argument is quite simple. What is written in Scripture was first spoken. Because it was first spoken it is a living word in a spoken form, and only later does it become inscripturated or written. This oral tradition has a status equal to the written word, since teachings and practices not written down had authority in the early church. If things not written down had status equal to the Scriptures, then they must still do so in our time as well.

The chronological priority of the spoken word is not in dispute. This is fact. I would even agree that, to the best of our knowledge, Jesus never actually wrote Scripture. But this really begs the important question at hand.

Oral transmission is far more subject to change, deviation and corruption than written communication. With written manuscripts (e.g. as in the study of Scripture) we can compare texts and various manuscripts and families of manuscripts, all the time seeking to get back to the source itself. This simply could not be done for long with oral communication.

Oral communication needed a standard, a North Star, a clear point of reference. The written Scripture alone supplied that point. What is proclaimed orally since the apostolic era is good in itself. It may even have the ring of antiquity about it. But it does not have *ultimate*, or necessary, authority. Why? Because it cannot be heeded in the same way Scripture can be. Peter states this well when he writes in sacred Scripture:

And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had

its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:19—21).

Only what was spoken by (true) prophets and then inscripturated by God could be carefully pondered and ultimately acknowledged as real and final authority throughout the ages. Men who were truly "carried along by the Holy Spirit" eventually wrote (or had written for them) what put the believer under ultimate compulsion and necessity. Oral communication will always be necessary. Indeed it still is the primary means of bringing particular men and women to the faith. But what determines its validity and authority is that it is clearly grounded in the text of Scripture.

Further, no true advocate of the supreme and final authority of Scripture would assert that the immediate hearers of the preaching of Jesus, or the apostles, were free to pick and choose what they would submit to since they did not receive it in written form. What is asserted in believing that Scripture alone has final and full authority is this: God revealed His Word orally and temporarily through prophets and apostles and then subsequently through the inscripturated text.

Oral communication, in this post-apostolic era, is powerful precisely because it relies so faithfully on the "more certain" word of Scripture itself. Thus we conclude, with the Apostle, himself a faithful preacher, "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard *through the word of Christ*" (Romans 10:17).

2. *The Church.* The second authority which rivals Scripture is the church. This argument goes as follows: The church is itself divinely instituted (Matthew 16:18—20, where Jesus calls it "*My church*"), and the church came *before* the Scripture. Indeed, the preaching and teaching upon which Scripture itself is based came prior to the canon of Holy Scripture. The church, it is argued, gave us the canon of Scripture, and the church, with its proper disciplinary function in every age, expounds and interprets the Word of God.

These arguments, in themselves, are again correct. What is wrong is to assume that they *prove* that the authority of the church is *equal to or greater than the authority of the Scripture itself*. Let me explain more fully.

The mistake in the conclusion drawn from the above theses is one of failure to understand the uniqueness of the apostolate. Exactly who were the apostles? What authority did they possess? Is that authority, on some continuing basis, the foundation for further revelation today? In what way?

The church is described in Ephesians as "God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone" (2:19b—20). Note that the text does not

say the church is built upon Christ, but rather upon the apostles and prophets. Christ is the cornerstone that holds the church together, but the foundation upon which this "holy temple" (vs. 21) is established and upon which believers, like "living stones, are being built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5) is the apostolate.

By definition, foundational matters have to do with those things which are at the beginning. You don't lay repeated foundations for a developing house. The point should be obvious.

Those who teach that we need new apostles, even secondary ones who will add to the primary work of the first century, are really saying that we need *new* foundations. This would logically require a *new* cornerstone for each *new* foundation. Christ is still building His church but He is building it stone by precious stone upon a foundation *already laid* because "this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins" (Hebrews 10:12a).

The word *apostolos* is a unique and most descriptive New Testament word. John Stott suggests that the word has a double background— one ancient and one contemporary. This, he suggests, helps us to understand the meaning of the term and why Jesus chose this word to describe the unique role of these foundation builders.

The ancient background of this word can be seen in the Old Testament's repeated use of this idea in reference to the prophets of God who were "sent" with divine commission to speak for Yahweh (cf. Exodus 3:10; Numbers 16:28—29; Isaiah 6:8; Jeremiah 1:7; Ezekiel 2:3; Jeremiah 35:15; where in each of these cases the "sending" is "not a vague dispatch but a specific commission to assume the role of a prophet and to speak God's word to the people").¹² When Jesus used this particular word it is evident that He was likening the men He called to be apostles to Yahweh's prophets during the Old Covenant era.

Stott suggests, further, that there is a contemporary reason for the use of this word by Jesus and the New Testament. *Apostolos* is the Greek equivalent of the Aramaic *shaliach*, which

already had a well defined meaning as a teacher sent out by the Sanhedrin to instruct the Jews of the Dispersion. As such *shaliach* carried the authority of those he represented, so that it was said, "the one who is sent is as he who sent him." In the same way Jesus sent out his apostles to represent him, to bear his authority and

¹² Stott, *Authority of the Bible*, p. 19.

teach in his name, so that he could say of them: "He who receives you receives me" (Mat. 10:40; cf. John. 13:20).¹³

The apostle was a specially chosen emissary, a bearer of higher authority vested in him by God Himself. What this means is that the apostles were *proxies* for their Lord. Prior to Pentecost the twelve are only infrequently referred to as apostles (cf. Matthew 10:1—2; cf. also John's record). They are, as others, more often termed "disciples." But after the resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit these unique men became proxies who stood virtually in the place of Christ, possessing unique authority. They had His unique power and His unique teaching (e.g. 2 Corinthians 12:12 which identifies "the things that mark an apostle—signs, wonders and miracles"). The words of an apostle carried an authority quite unlike the words of a present-day minister, priest, or Pope. That this is true can be seen in the way one Apostle writes this exhortation: "I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles" (2 Peter 3:2).

The apostles were eyewitnesses to the risen Lord and of necessity each was "a witness . . . of his resurrection" (Acts 1:22). Paul, a unique apostle to the Gentiles, was used to establish even more clearly the gospel and the unique new covenant. He was an eyewitness to the resurrected Lord in a special way. Three times in the Acts of the Apostles (note the very name of this fifth book of the canon) Paul testifies to his having seen the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Paul confirmed this on several different occasions (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:4—8; 2 Corinthians 10:5).

The words of Jesus in John 16:13 are variously interpreted. What is patently obvious that the promise that "He will guide you into all truth" is not general but rather a very specific promise that as apostles they would teach (and thus write) the truth and nothing but the truth. Further a correct memory of all He had taught them was promised (cf. John 14:26).

When one reads the statements of early church fathers (i.e., those earliest writings outside the New Testament writings) it becomes immediately evident that these writers considered all they wrote to be built upon a prior and more fundamental authority found in the writings of the apostles. Ignatius, as an example, said, in A.D. 117, that he was not competent to write to the church as though he were an apostle: "I do not, like Peter and Paul, issue commandments unto you. They were apostles."

So the question of canonicity is not one *ultimately* decided by the church either. It is one principally decided by authorship: "Was it written by an apostle or with apostolic approval and involvement (as examples of the latter category we include Mark and James)?" This is the important question. The church never

¹³ Ibid, p. 20.

decided which books were inspired and which were authoritative. This had already been decided by the appointment of the apostolate by the risen Lord Himself. The church recognized this fact and properly *received* the canon.

Yes, the church must judge and it does rule. The church has made important decisions through the ages. And we would do well to study these and consider why they were made and what caused them. The authority of the church must never be treated lightly, a thing done by North American Christians in our time. But the church's authority is always to be grounded in a prior, more primary, authority—namely in the writings of the apostles. We conclude then that only when the church speaks biblically is its authority absolute. When the church does not speak according to the Word of God it has lost its light and has itself drifted into the darkness (cf. Isaiah 8:20).

3. *Creeds, Church Councils, and the Fathers.* A third source of challenge to the full and final authority of Scripture has been creeds, confessions, and even the fathers of the early church. It is correct that the church issues official and unofficial pronouncements on moral and doctrinal issues that affect her life in every age. These must be grounded in the Word of God. Such statements, as seen in historic creeds, have a real authority. We do well to read them, to consult them and to carefully understand them. But their authority is never final. It is always *relative* authority. Most of the work of the historic councils of the church, and much of the thought put into now-famous confessions, is sound and good. We are foolish to think, independently as postmodern people, that we do not need such historic contributions. But even these are to be judged by the one absolute, supreme authority.

It is the conviction of the various contributors to this present volume that the sixteenth-century Reformation was fundamentally a recovery of the full and final authority of the Scripture. It provided a correct reply to the numerous challenges to the authority of Scripture that had arisen over several centuries.

If the church in our time would wholeheartedly, and with true understanding, return to the final authority of Scripture she would avoid numerous problems presently ignored or misunderstood. We would do well to hear the advice of Martin Luther who wrote:

Jesus . . . subjects the whole world to the apostles, through whom alone it should and must be enlightened. . . All the people in the world—kings, princes, lords, learned men, wise men, holy men—have to sit down while the apostles stand up, have to let themselves be accused and condemned in their wisdom and

sanctity as men who know neither doctrine nor life nor the right relation to God.¹⁴

The Central Argument for the Authority of Scripture

The central argument for the supremely authoritative, uniquely revealed, and verbally inspired Holy Scripture, is not that difficult to grasp. It all leads us back to the *unique* authority of Jesus Himself. It was He who endorsed the Old Testament Scriptures as the Word of God, both in specific statements and in how He used them (e.g., Matthew 5:17—20; 12:18—27; 26:52—54; Luke 10:25—26; 16:17). Further, it was He who foresaw the writing of the New Covenant Scriptures and who made provision for this by appointing the apostles to be His proxies so that they might lay the foundation of the church upon His unique person and work.

But isn't this argument, as some have suggested, circular? Some suggest that evangelical Protestants argue as follows: "Scripture is inspired because the divine Son of God said so, but we know the divine Son of God only through the Scriptures." Such a stereotypical response actually fails to understand the argument and thus misrepresents it seriously.

The argument, as Stott has ably shown, "is not circular but linear."¹⁵ We come to the Gospels and their story of Jesus and in taking them at face value, as eyewitness accounts, we meet Christ, through the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit. Having met the Christ, who is Lord, we listen to Him and thus discover that this Lord gives us a doctrine of Scripture and its authority. This is not a circular argument, but one that builds on a beginning and then travels in a line from that beginning point. Simply stated we come to "historical documents [which] evoke our faith in Jesus, who then gives us a doctrine of Scripture."¹⁶

Can you not see that the central issue here relates to Christ Himself?

Authority and the Great Divide

Because Scripture is the Word of God, by virtue of its inspiration it must possess divine properties or divine attributes. These properties include not only its

¹⁴ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 21 (St. Louis:: Concordia) p. 61.

¹⁵ Stott, *Authority of the Bible*, p. 29.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

authority, but also its efficacy, perfection, and perspicuity.¹⁷ My purpose presently is to examine the nature of the authority of sacred Scripture more clearly as it relates to these particular properties. Each will be considered in terms of both the teaching of Scripture itself and the historical challenge to each raised by the continued refusal of some Christian traditions to submit to the *final* authority of God in Scripture alone.

This concern was expressed most clearly in the great debate which took place in the sixteenth century over the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. The Reformers believed that the Roman Catholic church had corrupted the doctrine of the authority of Scripture, and thus had *materially* altered the very foundation of the Christian Church. In reality the Reformation debate regarding the authority of Scripture was not like the debate in our age. The Reformation debate was more directly about *sole* authority; thus the word *sola* was connected with Scripture in the now-famous phrase, *sola Scriptura*. (This, by the way, is why the historic Protestant confessions have little in them about the questions of authority that were later raised in the nineteenth century.) Let us look back at this debate regarding *sole* authority briefly.

Scripture: The Sole Source of Authority

Heinrich Heppe, writing in the last century, refers to Holy Scripture as "the one source and norm of all Christian knowledge."¹⁸ In the words of Jude the faith of the Christian Church is one "given once for all time" (vs. 3). Scripture, as already noted, has unique authority. But why? Because it is primary and unique, not *primus inter pares* ("first among equals"). If it were the latter then it would be a source equal to others in certain ways. But Scripture has no equal precisely because Scripture alone has its source in God, who, by the Holy Spirit, is its Author.

But Scripture also has an authority that is normative. By this I mean that Scripture has an authority which is much more than descriptive. This is precisely the point made by several historic Protestant confessions which state this. Note the following:

The Church of Christ makes no laws or commandments without God's Word. Hence all human traditions, which are called

¹⁷ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. 1 (St. Louis:: Concordia, 1950) p. 307.

¹⁸ Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker 1950, rpt. 1978) p. 12.

ecclesiastical commandments, are binding upon us only in so far as they are based on and commanded by God's Word.¹⁹

We believe that the Word contained in these books has proceeded from God, and receives its authority from him alone, and not from men. And in as much as it is the rule of all truth, containing all that is necessary for the service of God and for our salvation, it is not lawful for men, nor even for angels, to add to it, or to take away from it, or to change it. Whence it follows that no authority, whether of antiquity, or custom, or numbers, or human wisdom, or judgments, or proclamations, or edicts, or decrees, or councils, or visions, or miracles, should be opposed to these Holy Scriptures, but on the contrary, all things should be examined, regulated, and reformed according to them.²⁰

And getting more directly at what has been called the internal witness of the Spirit, another confession adds:

We receive these books, and these only, as holy and confirmation of our faith; believing without any doubt all things contained in them, not so much because the church receives and approves them as such, but more especially because the Holy Ghost witnesses in our hearts that they are from God, whereof they carry the evidence in themselves.²¹

Adding to this, we conclude that to receive the Scriptures as our sole source and norm for both faith and practice is to submit to Christ Himself, as we saw earlier.

Therefore, we do not admit any other judge than Christ himself, who proclaims by the Holy Scriptures what is true, what is false, what is to be followed, or what is to be avoided.²²

Uniformly, without any equivocation, these sixteenth-century evangelicals elevated the authority of Scripture to a place above all other authority in the church. They did this believing that they were keeping Christ in the place of sole authority over all that pertained to the church. Thus, in a most important way, *solus Christus* (i.e., "Christ alone") was not only linked to *sola fide*, and thus to salvation doctrine, but also to *sola scriptura*, or to the authoritative basis for faith.

The Roman Catholic view, which stands in sharp distinction from that given above, was clearly posited at the Council of Trent. The Council showed that it fundamentally rejected the Reformers' efforts to call the church back to the

¹⁹ The Theses of Berne (1528).

²⁰ The French Confession of Faith (1559).

²¹ The Belgic Confession (1561).

²² The Second Helvetic Confession (1566).

authority of the Word of God. In the fourth session (April 8, 1546), the Council of Trent said that:

the purity itself of the Gospel be preserved in the Church: which (Gospel) before promised through the prophets in the holy Scriptures, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, first promulgated with His own mouth, and then commanded to be preached by His Apostles to every creature, as the fountain of all, both saving truth, and moral discipline; and seeing clearly that this truth and discipline are contained in the written books, and the unwritten traditions, received by the Apostles from the mouth of Christ himself, or from the Apostles themselves, the Holy Spirit dictating, have come down even unto us, transmitted as it were from hand to hand: [the Synod] following the examples of the orthodox Fathers, receives and venerates with an equal affection of piety and reverence, all the books both of the Old and of the New Testament—seeing that one God is the author of both—as also the said traditions, as well those appertaining to faith, as to morals, as having been dictated, either by Christ's own word of mouth, or by the Holy Ghost, and preserved in the Catholic Church by a continuous succession.²³

It is most important that the reader understand the issue at stake here. It is not, "Is all that Christ taught to be found in Scripture?" (cf. John 20:30). Nor is it, "What is Scripture?" (i.e., the question of canon, or of which books were part of the New Testament). The question is: Should oral traditions, creeds, church fathers, or writings of an extrabiblical sort ever be allowed to stand alongside the Holy Scripture as equal authority? Put in a different way we might ask: What is the supreme court of all appeals to which all matters of faith and practice are directed? The answer of Rome was, and still is, clear. Trent said that "the unwritten traditions, whether referring to faith or to conduct, are to be received with the *same pious feeling* as Scripture" (italics mine). The modern Catholic Church has confessed the same view plainly in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) when it says:

And [Holy] Tradition transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit. . . . As a result the Church, to whom the transmission and interpretation of Revelation is entrusted, does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the Holy Scripture alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence. ("The Relation Between Tradition and Sacred Scripture," Part One, 11, p. 26).

²³ *The Council of Trent*, "The Decree concerning Canonical Scriptures."

Certain Catholic apologists have referred to explicit and implicit authority. By this they mean to say that Scripture is insufficient in a direct sense, needing supplement through the church's interpretive role. (This can be seen in the above quotation from the modern Catechism.) Only, then, in a *limited* sense can one speak of authority and sufficiency in the Scripture.

Protestant apologists have been historically quick to counter by insisting that Scripture alone is to be *canon et regula fidei* (i.e., "the canon and rule of faith"), because a rule which is insufficient, or incomplete and not final, is really no rule at all. Turretin, a Reformed scholar of the seventeenth century, argued that as the New Testament is Christ's final will and testament, and since no one dare add to a deceased person's will, then how dare one add to Christ's divine will (cf. Galatians 3:15)? Only with a *supreme, final and sufficient* authority can the church itself have anything which is reliable, internally consistent, and never misleading. That authority has to be in Scripture alone.

This Divine Authority Observed

1. *Divine Authority and Witness of the Spirit.* But how does Scripture actually *become* divine authority for us? Christian certainty (*fides divina*) is created solely by the self-testimony of the Word of God, through the power of the Holy Spirit operating in it, not through the employment of human proofs. This is the obvious meaning of 1 Corinthians 2:4—5: "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power." Jesus taught the same when He said, "For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him [i.e., hears Christ's word and believes savingly in him] shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:40). And in the next chapter of John, "If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own" (John 7:17). In the words of Lutheran theologian Francis Pieper, "The Word of Scripture, being the Word of God, is an object of perception that creates its own organ of perception, of faith, and thus Scripture itself bears witness to its [own] divine authority."²⁴

By this is meant the doctrine of *testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum*, or the so-called internal witness of the Spirit. This witness does not exist simply in the human emotions. It is already present in the Scripture itself and it comes with Spirit-wrought faith in the testimony of the Scripture. This is the idea inherent in the words of the apostle who writes:

²⁴ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 308.

We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which He has given about His Son. Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son (1 John. 5:9, 10).

This internal witness, or testimony, can be seen in the letter of Paul to the Thessalonians where he writes:

And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

This is, further, why the Scripture speaks of faith in the Word of God as a seal, or a confirmation, of God's utter truthfulness (cf. John 3:33). But isn't this a doctrine without *practical* consequence on the level of true authentication? Not at all. When we are assailed by doubts regarding the authority of the Scripture what are we to do? The answer of this truth is that we must have more profound intercourse with the Word of God itself. Here, as we read, meditate, and study the Scripture we are acted upon by God the Holy Spirit who bears witness to the supreme authority of the Word through the self-testimony of the Scripture.

Rome objects to this doctrine precisely because she continues to set the church and the papacy over the Scriptures. Moderns often seek to drive a wedge here as well, severing faith from the inherent authority of Scripture itself. But it is an observable and common fact that we accept a thing through *perceiving* it. I believe, for example, that the moon shines full on a particular evening because I *perceive* that it does.

Besides *fides divina* we also recognize a *fides humana*, or an argument for the authority of the divine word based on human reason. This argument says: As a natural, rational observation of creation reveals God as its Creator (cf. Romans 1:18ff.), so a rational observation of the teaching of Holy Scripture points to God as its author. When Scripture is compared with other "divine" or "holy" books in the world (e.g., the Koran) we see the astounding power of the Scripture, both in its doctrines and in its effect upon those who hear it. This is the area in which the more formal work of apologetics occurs (Christ seems to have used such an argument, or apologetic, in Matthew 22:29). Extremes of either seeing too much in this approach, or too little, should be carefully avoided. Ultimately, it must be God's gift of *fides divina*, through the internal witness of the Holy Spirit, that gives a person confidence in the Scripture as God's supreme authority.

It is most important that we understand that this internal witness of the Spirit is tied directly to the Gospel itself, i.e., the message of "Christ and him crucified" (1

Corinthians 1:18—2:5). One must come to believe, as the Reformers taught, *satisfactio Christi vicaria*, i.e., in the vicarious satisfaction of Christ's death for him as a sinner. Without this reality the inner witness of the Spirit to the truth of Scripture can never be known. Any witness regarding the Scripture that does not bring the recipient savingly to the Gospel, and thus to Christ crucified in my place, is not the work of the Spirit and will not, therefore, give a person confidence in the authority of the Holy Scripture.

The witness of the Holy Spirit to the authority of Scripture is present when we are filled with joy in the richness and power of the truth. But it is also present when it is not so obviously felt. The heart may long for and cling to God in the word of Scripture. This is why Luther correctly wrote that "The Spirit is given to no one without and outside the Word; He is given only through the Word."²⁵

The situation, then, is this: The Holy Ghost, who originally spoke His Word through the Apostles and prophets, remains united with His Word until Judgment Day. Through His Word the Spirit works that faith which believes on the basis of the Word itself and not on the basis of rational arguments or human authorities. This is Christian, or divine, faith (*fides divina*) in contrast to a mere human opinion, or conviction (*fides humana*).²⁶

2. *Divine Authority and Efficacy.* The church has no word of its own. Luther put this correctly when he wrote, "No book teaches anything concerning eternal life except this one alone."²⁷ By this he meant that if any other book or writing teaches correctly regarding eternal life it does so exactly because it is faithful to Scripture.

But in what does this efficacy consist? I answer, in the way it affects man. It does this in ways that exceed all earthly and human power. The Law has power, through the Word of God, to bring the conviction of sin (cf. Romans 3:20). The Gospel has inherent power to work faith in the human heart through the preaching of its truth (cf. Romans 10:17). Pieper is again a helpful instructor to us when he writes:

The Word of the Gospel, presented in Scripture, has the inherent power to write God's Law into the heart of man, that is, so to change man inwardly that he gladly subjects himself to God's Law and willingly and with delight walks in the ways of God according to the new man, which is created in him through faith in the Gospel. Human strength and human training cannot accomplish this change.²⁸

²⁵ Ibid., quoted in Pieper, p. 315.

²⁶ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 315.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 315.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 316.

Within the camp of the Protestant Reformers there were differing views on this matter but it seems they all agreed that this divine power never operated outside the Word of God, nor even alongside of it, but rather *through the Word*. Thus, there is an authority inherent in the Word which operates efficaciously *only* through the teaching of Scripture, or, even more literally, through the preaching of Christ (cf. again Romans 10:17).

3. *Divine Authority and Sufficiency*. Is Scripture able to judge between truth and error in all matters of faith and practice? The doctrine of the sole authority of Scripture answers with an unmistakable "yes." Scripture is not an encyclopedia of facts pertaining to all areas of human knowledge. There is an area of natural reason and of human experience not addressed by the Word of God.

Further, the Scriptures do not reveal *all* divine truth (1 Corinthians 13:12; Romans 11:33— 34). Mystery still is very much a part of our faith in this present age. There is much we do not understand, but Scripture does teach all that we need to know to obtain eternal life and to live to the glory of God (2 Timothy 3:15). Quenstedt, a Lutheran theologian, said this well:

Holy Scripture is perfect . . . in the sense of a restricted perfection, in so far as it teaches all things that a Christian needs to know in order to believe correctly and to lead a saintly and pious life here on earth.²⁹

It is obvious, then, given this perfection of Scriptural authority, that the Word of God does not need to be supplemented by any outside source of doctrine, be it found in tradition, decrees, confessions or in the Pope. Indeed, if this perfection and sufficiency are surrendered the true authority of the Word of God will be surrendered.

What has Rome done in the face of this argument? She has argued that there is a *perfectio implicita Scripturae Sacrae*, i.e., a Scripture which is perfect only when supplemented by the "Church." This means that without the Pope and the magisterium of the church there really is no *completely sufficient* authority to be found in Scripture. In this way of thinking Scripture has been called a *norma remissiva* (a weakened or relaxed norm), but this is no real authority at all.

According to this notion Scripture would have been sufficient if it had said: "Hear the Church," or rather, according to the Roman interpretation: "Hear the Pope!" But the Pope is not the man of whom Scripture says: "Hear ye Him," Matthew 17:5.³⁰

²⁹ Quoted in *Ibid*, p. 319.

³⁰ Quoted in *Ibid*, p. 319.

4. *Divine Authority and Perspicuity.* According to Roman Catholic dogma Scripture becomes clear only through the light which shines out through the church itself. According to modern charismatics and enthusiasts of all types Scripture is illumined, or made plain, by a personal or privatized inner light, which is communicated directly or immediately to the soul. According to modern theologies of various sorts the Bible presents a mixture of truth and error and by means of Christian experience the person sorts all this out and clarifies the matter. As has been noted, Reformation theologians saw one common thread—this all makes man the decisive factor.

Does this doctrine of the clarity of Scripture mean that we find no problems in interpreting the Word of God, no difficulties exegetically, no "hard sayings" in the Word? Of course not. This would be patently absurd. Further, this doctrine does not mean that we need no skills, linguistic or technical, to carefully study the Word of God. (We do need a trained ministry for the edification of the church.)

But having said this we should observe that when Erasmus declared widely how truly obscure the Scriptures were Luther correctly answered him:

I certainly grant that many passages in the Scriptures are obscure and hard to elucidate, but that is due, not to the exalted nature of their subject, but to our own linguistic and grammatical ignorance; and it does not in any way prevent us knowing all the contents of Scripture. For what solemn truth can the Scriptures still be concealing, now that the seals are broken, the stone rolled away from the door of the tomb, and that greatest of all mysteries brought to light—that Christ, God's Son, became man, that God is Three in One, that Christ suffered for us, and will reign forever? And are not these things known, and sung in our streets? Take Christ from the Scriptures—and what more will you find in them? You see then, that the entire content of the Scriptures has now been brought to light, even though some passages will contain some unknown words that remain obscure.³¹

Basically, "perspicuity" (or clarity) means the Bible is self-interpreting as to its *essential* truths. This truth seems presupposed, as a matter of course, in Luke 16:29: "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them." We read, in words that came from the lips of our Lord: "Search the Scriptures" (John 5:39). This counsel would be meaningless unless all readers can know the truth through the Scriptures. Further, the Bereans are commended as the most noble of all early Christians because "They searched the Scriptures daily" to see if the oral teachings of even an apostle were faithful to the text (cf. Acts 17:11). Again, the assumption is that in truly searching the Scriptures truth can be clearly discovered. The fact is, most of the epistles of the New Testament were written

³¹ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (Westwood, N. J.: Revell, 1957) p. 71.

to entire congregations to be read in public. If they could not be clearly understood, then the church could not know the directions of the apostle.

But we must go even further than this. Not only is this idea of clarity presupposed by texts such as the above but it is most *plainly* taught by several others. Scripture speaks of itself as "a light shining in a dark place" (2 Peter 1:19) and as "a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path" (Psalm 119:105). Paul very specifically says to young Timothy that "from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures" (2 Timothy 3:15) and the Psalmist says that the Word and statutes of God are "making wise the simple" (Psalm 19:7). To attack the perspicuity of Scripture is a not-so-subtle attack upon the very authority of Scripture itself.

But the detractor demurs: "If the Scriptures are so clear the public office of teacher is not *really* needed." I answer, one truth does not exclude the other. We are told by Scripture that we need such teachers in the church (Ephesians 4:11—12), and the same Scripture teaches us its own clarity. Indeed, those who are taught in the church are told to judge, on the basis of Scripture, if their teachers are true or false prophets. This is to be done on the basis of whether their teachers depart from the Word of the Apostles (cf. Matthew 7:15; Romans 16:17). The institution of teachers for the church actually shows how concerned God is for the well-being of His people. He has gone to great lengths to give light to His people if they will seek Him for it.

Even Luther himself admitted, "It is indeed true some passages in Scripture are obscure."³² Pieper has stated this matter clearly:

These obscure passages either do not pertain directly to the Christian doctrine, but give chronological, topographical, archaeological, etc., data, or, if they do pertain to doctrine, the same matter is elsewhere stated in Scripture set forth clearly and explicitly.³³

And St. Augustine adds, "In the clear passages of Scripture everything is found that pertains to faith and life." And as Luther counsels wisely, "If you cannot understand the obscure, then stay with the clear."³⁴

Augustine, indeed, sums up my point well by writing:

The Holy Ghost has arranged Holy Scripture in such a magnificent and wholesome way that through the clear passages He appeases the hunger and through the dark passages He prevents loathing.

³² Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 5 (St. Louis.: Concordia) p. 335.

³³ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 324.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 324.

For hardly anything is derived from the obscure passages but what is stated elsewhere more clearly.³⁵

As we previously demonstrated, the true light of Scripture shines only into the hearts of those given faith by the Holy Spirit (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:1—6). The doctrinal truth of Scripture is plain at one level, but only those regenerated by the Spirit of God will love, embrace and accept the teaching of Scripture as from God. This simply cannot be overstated. What the Holy Spirit works in those who receive the doctrines of the Scripture is true faith, and this is a *specific* faith—it consists of trust in the crucified One, the Lord Jesus Christ.

What Does "Authority" Mean in This Age?

In what ways is the truth of biblical authority challenged in our time? I suggest that authority is being challenged in at least five ways. Let us consider these.

1. *By limiting the nature and scope of inspiration, thus authority.* A famous liberal once said, "It is quite true that the Bible is inspired but so are many other literary treasures of the world." As we have seen, this begs the question of what inspiration actually is. Another more conservative scholar argues that it is "the truths which are inspired but not the words." But what could this possibly mean since the words are the chosen vehicles for communicating the truths themselves? A fallible "God-breathed" book is a contradiction, a verbal illogicality.

2. *By restricting the application of Scriptural authority.* To say, as some do, that the Bible is authoritative in matters of faith and conduct and yet to deny its authority in important areas such as worship, counseling, mission and music is to deny its authority. When the Bible speaks, God speaks. If this is still so then we must learn to apply the Scripture to all the church as well as to the believer more directly.

3. *The influence of human philosophy opposes the authority of Scripture.* The gospel owes nothing to human wisdom. It is a revelation of God. The Scripture is not the product of human opinion, but the opening up of God's thought to us. We should understand how men think (i.e. philosophy) but we must not force the Word of God to fit into a human philosophy. We must intentionally allow it to judge our fallen philosophies.

Philosophy seeks after truth. It originates with man and is always tentative and relative. It is powerless to save. Scripture proclaims truth. It is absolute, the final and saving power of God in Christ. It humbles men before the sovereign God.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 324.

4. *Modern versions of word and faith teaching attack the authority of the Scripture.* "God told me" is bad enough, but now we have special "words of knowledge" which come to modern enthusiasts.

The Reformers had their own versions of this in the sixteenth century. Luther once dealt directly with a group of charismatics ("enthusiasts"). An observer of this meeting wrote:

He patiently heard the prophet relate his visions; and when the harangue was finished he said, "You mentioned nothing of Scripture." Anabaptist Thomas Muntzer complained, "The doctrine of Luther is not sufficiently spiritual. Divines should . . . acquire a spirit of prophecy, otherwise their knowledge of theology would not be worth one half a penny." Luther added, "You yourself must hear the voice of God," they say." The Bible means nothing. They are not Christians who want to go beyond the Word . . . even if they boast of being full and overfull with ten holy spirits.³⁶

Luther once sarcastically noted: "Any teaching which does not square with Scripture is to be rejected even if it snows miracles every day."³⁷ Calvin added that we should speak only when the Scripture speaks and be silent when Scripture is silent. Wise counsel!

Modern personal words from God repeatedly set the authority of Scripture on its head. Further, modern proponents of psychotherapeutic reformations need to be rejected as false teachers when they write: "Where the sixteenth-century Reformation returned our focus to the sacred Scriptures as the only infallible rule for faith and practice, the new reformation will return our focus to the sacred right of every person to self-esteem."³⁸ The result of all of this is, and will continue to be, chaos. "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn" (Isaiah 8:20).

5. *Seriously distorted interpretations challenge the authority of scripture.* What has been called the *analogia fidei*, or "analogy of faith" (e.g., "in proportion to his faith" in Romans 12:6b) is to be observed in the Scriptures. By this is meant that, in the light of the overriding truth of Scripture, all Scripture finds its intended meaning. No one portion of Scripture should be put over against another. This is a principal missing ingredient in much modern exegesis of Scripture.

Luther properly explained this vital truth when he wrote:

³⁶ Quoted in Victor Budgen, *Charismatics and the Word of God*. (Welwyn: Evangelical Press, 1985) p. 126.

³⁷ John Blanchard (compiler), *Gathered Gold: A Treasury of Quotations for Christians* (Welwyn: Evangelical Press, 1984) p. 70.

³⁸ Robert Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation* (Waco, Tex.: Word) p. 30.

Anyone who ventures to interpret words in the Scriptures any other way than what they say, is under obligation to prove this contention out of the text of the very same passage or by an article of faith"³⁹

Here both Catholic and fundamentalist exegetes often err in strangely similar ways. The authority of ancient church tradition keeps some Catholic exegesis from the plain meaning of many texts, though this has changed among some Catholic scholars in recent years. For many fundamentalists their own man-made traditions, often only a few decades in duration, hinder the plainest word of Scripture from finding the heart. (As an example try engaging many fundamentalists about the subject of regeneration and you will soon discover their mechanical notions will generally prevail over their seriously dealing with the text of John 3.)

Scripture demands interpretation, furthermore, that flows out of what has been called the grammatical-historical method. Here I have in view questions such as: "What was the author's meaning? What is his intention? His audience?" We must do careful research in the text of Scripture using proper historical, linguistic and lexicographical tools. Exegesis, after all, means "to take out of." It never means to add to what is not there. And the Scripture must be interpreted in its literal sense, meaning nouns are nouns, verbs are verbs, and miracles are truly miracles.

R. C. Sproul has correctly suggested that when the unity of Scripture is lost in modern interpretations of the Scripture it becomes something like watching a tennis match without a net between the players.

Further, legalism undermines Scriptural authority in the same manner. Michael Horton has ably shown that whenever we impose moral expectations upon ourselves, or others, which are not clearly and plainly revealed in Scripture we have set up our own norms for the covenant and thereby *trivialized* the authority of Scripture. Let the reader beware!

It is a strange time indeed when believers know more about the Antichrist and the Beast in the Revelation than they do about justification, original sin, election, the cost of true discipleship and eternal judgment. Yet we are told repeatedly that these rather speculative prophetic matters are the "deep truths of the Scripture."

It is also a mark of our lack of reverence for the authority of Scripture that we have thousands of Christians sitting around in small groups asking one another, "What does that passage say to *you*?" I answer, "Who cares what it says to you?" It's as if Bible interpretation has become a matter of multiple choice.

³⁹ Quoted in Paul Cook, *The Whole Truth* (London: The British Evangelical Council, nd.) p. 9.

Conclusion

Several important points have emerged in our study. We need to briefly note these in conclusion.

1. Mischief is always the result when rival authorities are set up alongside the Scripture. If any authority is made coequal to Scripture the normativeness of Scripture's authority is seriously disturbed and the results are seismic. Without an anchor the life of the believer is tossed to and fro in a manner that attacks the foundation laid in Scripture.

2. Conversely, acknowledgment of Scripture's authority actually establishes the proper authority of other sources which will help us mature as believers.

Geoffrey W. Bromiley said well that "the absoluteness of the Bible is not absolutism." When confessions and creeds are seen in their proper place, when the writings of the church fathers are related to Scripture as the final court of appeal, when the church and its public ministry are accountable to Scripture alone, then all of these have a proper place. Their weight, as secondary sources, is important, indeed very important, for here we have earnest and well-trained minds and hearts wrestling with the very authority of the Word itself. To ignore these contributions, secondary though they are, is the height of contemporary arrogance and leads inevitably to independent foolishness. Modern evangelicalism needs to hear this message!

3. The truth that secondary sources have their own authority, albeit under Scripture, is a reminder to all that we are not, ultimately, the judges of truth.

We may rightly ask, "Is this teaching faithful to Scripture?" We must "search the Scriptures" as did the Bereans and we must carefully challenge the teaching of any minister of the Word only with the Word, and that in the right spirit. As Bromiley has properly written,

Even where we have reason to suspect they might be in error, we must proceed with due caution and respect, recognizing that in the upshot they might still have the best of the argument. Like tradition, the individual Christian is infallible only where he is truly biblical, and he is not always as biblical as he thinks. In reminding him of this the secondary authorities play a role of inestimable value."⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, "The Inspiration & Authority of Scripture" (n.d.) published in special reprint of *Eternity* and the *Holman Family Reference Bible* (Nashville, Tenn.: Holman, n.d.) p. 6.

Evangelical Bishop Thomas Cranmer centuries ago said, "The Word of God is above the church." So it is. And James I. Packer several years ago added, "The religion in which our Lord was brought up was first and foremost a religion of subjection to the authority of a written divine Word." So it was.

Without the Scripture the believer has no authority for there is no "word of the prophets made more certain" (2 Peter 1:19) without Scripture. With the Scripture the most ordinary and weak Christian has a "God breathed" word that will always be found "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16). Such authority will always make both him and his life something to truly be reckoned with in this present age and in the age to come.

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