

Authority of the Bible

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The central question that runs through the Bible is that of the authority of God. His authority is majestically displayed in Genesis 1, where the words "and God said" puncture the darkness of chaos and speak the cosmos into being. It is supremely challenged by a creature of his own making in Genesis 3: "Yea, hath God said?" asks the serpent of the woman (3:1 KJV), and the question reverberates down through the centuries that follow, all the way to the Book of Revelation, where the Almighty God "hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, king of kings and lord of lords," and "death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death," as the Lord God Omnipotent's reign is eschatologically established and every challenge to his authority destroyed (19:16; 20:14 KJV). This is the theological context for the question of the authority of the Bible, because as God's written ("inscripturated") revelation its authority is the authority of God; for what Scripture says, God says.

The serpent's question in Genesis 3 is not simply the most striking example of a challenge to the authority of God; it is the fruit of the challenge of Lucifer who as the devil stands behind, or within, the serpent. And it is the challenge that leads Eve, and then Adam, into their definitive act of rebellion. It should be noted that the serpent's challenge "Hath God said?" is, in particular, a challenge to the authority of the word of God, a claim to know better than the word that God has spoken. This focus in the original act of sin on challenge to the authority of God in his word underlines from the outset the closeness of the connection between the person and the word of a God who is characterized as God who speaks. "When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, and he ate it Then the Lord God said to the woman, What is this you have done?" ([Genesis 3:6](#) [Genesis 3:13](#)). The consequences are extraordinary.

So it is vital to understand that this doctrine, far from playing a minor role on the fringes of Christian belief, brings us face to face with the authority of God himself. What is at stake in the authority of Holy Scripture is the authority of its divine author. And, in light of the fact that every doctrine believed by the church is in turn authorized by appeal to Holy Scripture (theological proposals are grounded "according to the Scriptures," in the words of the creed), it is no exaggeration to say that the entire structure of Christian theology stands or falls by the authority of Scripture, the major premise for every theological statement that would claim the allegiance of the canonical community that is the church of Jesus Christ. This is still widely admitted in contemporary theological discussion, both implicitly (for every theologian, orthodox or not, quotes Scripture to bolster theological argument), and sometimes in so many words.

That immensely significant fact offers the context for the realization that the doctrine of the authority of the Bible is, uniquely, reflective in character. That is, though its subject is the Bible, it is a biblical doctrine like other biblical doctrines. Yet unlike other matters of Christian belief and practice on which the Bible speaks – Christology, eschatology, the nature of God, the Christian life we are here concerned with what the Bible says about itself. It is sometimes suggested that this invalidates the Bible's testimony to its own authority, through it is a matter of logic that the highest authority must be its own authority. If the Bible is the "supreme rule of faith and life," none can be higher. Moreover, the Bible's self-testimony is pluriform and, in turn, sustained by the testimony of others; especially, the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. Let us briefly review each of these factors, because they have special relevance to the significance of the reflexive character of the doctrine.

First, the pluriform character of the Bible's self-testimony. As we shall shortly be reminded, what we find in Holy Scripture is not some bald claim to raw authority but a collation of many testimonies on

behalf of Holy Scripture as a book. The canonical claim takes the form of interlocking claims and evidences that include the phenomena of the divine speech, the particular testimony of Jesus Christ to the character of what we call the Old Testament, and the authoritative use of canonical books by the writers of others. Second, the Bible's testimony is sustained by the use of the Bible in the church, as its authority has been recognized and found to be effective for the definition of doctrine and ethics, the public preaching of the gospel, and private devotion. Third, the chief ground of the believer's and the church's confidence in the authority of Holy Scripture lies in the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the Christian. That is to say, though the Scripture seems to be self-attesting, it is the divine author of Scripture, the Holy Spirit of God, who inspired the writing of that same Scripture, who is its final witness. He assures the believer that this canonical Scripture is verily the word of God written. That is, God offers his own witness to his word.

Yet the authority of Scripture is also a biblical doctrine like any other. It is the plainest of all biblical teachings, assumed as the starting point of the Bible in its role as a teaching book just as it has been assumed as the major premise of every use of the Bible since, lying behind the very possibility of biblical theology. Among the theological disciplines, "Bibliology" is both prolegomenon, part of the prelude to theology proper, and one among the articles that follow.

The Biblical Testimony. Perhaps the most striking, if often least noticed, testimony is the sustained interweaving of the direct speech of God in the text of the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. While serving as chief illustration and paradigm of revelation, the direct speech of the Creator-Redeemer resonates throughout the Scriptures and imparts its own stamp of authority to those books in which it is found. It is thus that the Book of Genesis begins with a chapter-long listing of the creative words of God, "And God said" Chapters 2 and 3 narrate the interlocution of the Lord God and Adam and Eve in the garden. In chapter 4 the Lord engages Cain in interrogation, and curse, and finally grace. And the pattern continues through the flood and the covenant with Noah, and into the call of Abra(ha)m and the long account of the patriarchal discipleship (and the later historical books). In Exodus this narrative leads to the giving of the law on Sinai, and alongside the Ten Commandments, written by the finger of God, we read the mass of first-person instruction that became the basis of the civil and ceremonial practice of the Hebrews. The prophetic books, of course, consist in large measure of discourse from the mouth of God. As we later read, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways" ([Heb 1:1](#)).

In the New Testament there is some similarity, especially in the Book of Revelation, which repeatedly records the words of God. But there is also a fundamental difference: On page after page of the four Gospels, the incarnate Son of God speaks in human flesh the words of God. "In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" ([Heb 1:2](#)). As is so apparent in a red-letter testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John record the very words of Jesus in an extensive fashion.

Of course, it is possible to conclude that such claims to divine authority in particular portions of Holy Scripture need not extend to the whole. A general regard for the trustworthiness of Scripture is all that is needed to sustain the divine authority of sayings placed in the mouth of God. Indeed, is not the implication of "Thus says the Lord" that those other sayings recorded by the prophet fall short of divine authority? Should not the quoted speech of Jesus of Nazareth be taken to have an authority to which the letters of Saul of Tarsus could never aspire?

As it happens, the Scriptures themselves tell another story. For the teaching of Jesus Christ extends to the question of bibliology. This is evident in all four Gospels, and the evidence is overwhelming. In John 10:34 we read that Jesus said "The Scripture cannot be broken." In Mark 12:36, of Psalm 110, he states that David is speaking by the Holy Spirit. One of the most significant of all the many New Testament uses of the Old is found in Matthew 19. We read: "Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?' Haven't you read,

' he replied, that at the beginning the Creator "made them male and female, " and said, "for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh"?" (4-5). The importance of this reference lies in the fact that in Genesis 2:24, where we find this statement about leaving parents to become one flesh with a wife, the comment is simply attributed to the narrator. It is Jesus who puts it into the mouth of the one who "made them male and female." And the implication is strong: that what Scripture says, God says, whether Scripture places it in the divine speech or as narration and commentary.

The second thread of internal testimony within Scripture may be traced through apostolic use of other canonical books. There is of course extensive New Testament use of the Old in a manner consonant with that which we find in the teaching of Jesus. In 2 Peter 3:15-16 we find this principle carried through into the New Testament Scriptures themselves, as the writings of the apostle Paul are placed on a level with Holy Scripture: "Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote to you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction."

The Use of Scripture in the Church The central place of Holy Scripture in the life and history of the church in every age offers telling evidence of its authority. We do not believe its authority stems from the teaching of the church. But we note the authority which Scripture has, from the start, exercised in all the churches, as believers in the first century and the twentieth have done homage to the written Word of God as rule for their minds, their hearts, and their lives. Here we unite the devotional and doctrinal use of Scripture, its place in preaching, private reading, the great doctrinal controversies, and the anguish of the believer persecuted or bereft who turns to the Word of God for comfort from God himself. It is through Scripture that God has ruled the mind and heart of the church and the Christian.

The Testimony of the Holy Spirit Central to Christian confidence in the authority of Scripture lies the conviction that behind every argument and experience that lead the believer to trust the Bible there is another witness to be discerned; that of God the Holy Spirit, himself inspirer and interpreter of Scripture, as he testifies to that Word of God. We have noted that it is not possible for a supreme authority to find final testimony in anything lesser. So it is in God only that Scripture can be attested. As Calvin puts it, "For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men's hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. That same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded" (Inst. 1.7.4).

The near-universal acceptance of biblical authority in the church, liberal and conservative alike, is not coincidental. It draws our attention to the character of the church of Jesus Christ as a canonical community the people of the book. Yet one implication of this wide assumption that theology should be done "according to the Scriptures" is that the tail comes to wag the dog; because it is necessary to justify theological proposals with reference to Scripture, persons of all theological persuasions seek to find some way to connect their conclusions, on whatever ground they may have been reached, with Scripture. This has led to growing uncertainty about what it means to say that the Bible has authority. To what does that authority extend? Several points of focus have emerged in this discussion. The task of contextualizing the teaching of Holy Scripture in the cultures of every century has demanded the best scholars and exegetes at the disposal of the church. It also raises the question of the extent of biblical authority. Does it indeed extend to the Pauline condemnation of homosexuality? Growing disagreement among evangelicals has focused on issues of hermeneutics, and the nature of authoritative inspiration whether it implies inerrancy. The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy is

widely accepted as a consensus statement of the biblical position, and begins with an affirmation that "recognition of the total truth and trustworthiness of Holy Scripture is essential to a full grasp and adequate confession of its authority." That is to say, acknowledgment of the authority of Holy Scripture is no mere pRom forma indication of respect, but involves confidence in its inerrancy. "The following Statement affirms this inerrancy of Scripture afresh, making clear our understanding of it and warning against its denial. We are persuaded that to deny it is to set aside the witness of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit and to refuse that submission to the claims of God's own Word which marks true Christian faith." The heart of the confession that follows is found in this paragraph: "Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: it is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it affirms; obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God's pledge, in all that it promises."