



## Scripture Study Course 2014 – Part 8

---

### Daily Study – Readings and Meditations

#### Week 8

|

### The Power, Truth and Authority of God's Word in Scripture

- Morning Meditations (15-20 minutes daily):
  - Hebrews 6:9-20 The certainty of God's promises – page 2
  - Hebrews 7:1-10 A priest after the Order of Melchizedek – page 3
  - Hebrews 7:11-28 Our great High Priest – page 4
  - Hebrews 8:1-13 High Priest of a New Covenant – page 5
  - Hebrews 9:1-28 The only entry to the Presence of God – pages 6 - 7
  - Hebrews 10:1-18 The only true sacrifice – page 8
- Readings for study (30-45 minutes daily):
  - The Authority of Scripture, by Steve Clark – page 9 - 12
  - Bypassing Scriptural Authority, by Steve Clark – page 13 - 24
  - The Spirit – force of the Word, by Raniero Cantalamessa – pages 25 - 26
  - Authority of Scripture, by N.T. Wright 27 - 32
  - Scripture and Jesus, by N.T. Wright 33 - 34
  - Scripture and the Apostolic Church, by N.T. Wright 35 - 40

## ***"Where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf"***

**Scripture:** Hebrews 6:9-20

9 Though we speak thus, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things that belong to salvation. 10 For God is not so unjust as to overlook your work and the love which you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do. 11 And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness in realizing the full assurance of hope until the end, 12 so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

13 For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, 14 saying, "Surely I will bless you and multiply you." 15 And thus Abraham, having patiently endured, obtained the promise.

16 Men indeed swear by a greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. 17 So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he interposed with an oath, 18 so that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God should prove false, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to seize the hope set before us. 19 We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner shrine behind the curtain, 20 where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest for ever after the order of Melchiz'edek.

**Meditation:** God made a promise to Abraham and then confirmed it with an oath (see Genesis 22:16-18). His promise was that all Abraham's descendants would be blessed. This blessing came true in Jesus Christ.

Our hope in God is based on his promises and on who God is. The author to the Hebrews uses the image of an *anchor* to describe hope. An anchor kept a ship secure and upright in a storm and from being dragged onto rocks. People instinctively choose various things as anchors for security -- often wealth, fame, or relationships. The Christian possesses the greatest anchor of hope in the world--Jesus Christ. *That hope enters into the inner shrine where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf.* The most sacred of all places in the Temple was the Holy of Holies. There God's presence dwelt in a special way among his people. Only one person in the whole world could enter that place, once a year on the Day of Atonement, and that person was the high priest.

Jesus is the true high priest, whom the high priests of the Old Covenant foreshadowed, who has now opened the way for all to enter into the house of the Lord into his very presence. Jesus is called the *forerunner* who rushes ahead of us into the very presence of God to make it safe for us to enter also. Jesus offered his own blood as the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and thus purified us so that we might come freely and confidently into the presence of God.

"Lord Jesus Christ, free me from sluggishness and complacency that I may love and serve you zealously and persevere in faithfulness to the end."

## ***"Having become a high priest for ever after the order of Melchiz'edek"***

**Scripture:** Hebrews 7:1-10

1 For this Melchiz'edek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him; 2 and to him Abraham apportioned a tenth part of everything. He is first, by translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then he is also king of Salem, that is, king of peace. 3 He is without father or mother or genealogy, and has neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest for ever. 4 See how great he is! Abraham the patriarch gave him a tithe of the spoils. 5 And those descendants of Levi who receive the priestly office have a commandment in the law to take tithes from the people, that is, from their brethren, though these also are descended from Abraham. 6 But this man who has not their genealogy received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. 7 It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior. 8 Here tithes are received by mortal men; there, by one of whom it is testified that he lives. 9 One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, 10 for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchiz'edek met him.

### **Meditation:**

The author to the Hebrews ends chapter six with the statement that Jesus was made "*high priest for ever after the order of Melchiz'edek.*" According to Hebrews, Jesus was appointed by God. We can see that fact in Psalm 110:4 which is a Messianic psalm.

The story of Melchizedek's priesthood is mentioned in Genesis 14:17-20. His priesthood differed from the Aaronic priesthood in a number of ways. First Melchizedek had no genealogy and thus his priesthood was understood to be eternal. In chapter seven of Hebrews we see five qualities of Melchizedek's priesthood: It is a priesthood of *righteousness, peace, a royal priesthood* (Melchizedek was a king), *a personal* priesthood rather than an *inherited* priesthood, and it is *eternal*, since it has no genealogy, beginning or end

The *order of Melchizedek* indicates that Christ was not appointed to the Aaronic priesthood of the old covenant but to a priesthood that would replace it and would be greater, just as Melchizedek himself was greater than Aaron and even Abraham himself.

The priest was the only one who could present a gift to God (cf. Hebrews 5:1). He could do so, because he had to be chosen to be God's servant. As the minister of God, the priest had special access to God's presence and could approach more closely than ordinary worshipers. He was the intermediary between God and the people. He represented the people to God and God to the people.

Christ's position as the great high priest enabled him to play a special role in our redemption. Because he was appointed priest, Christ was able to offer his death as a sacrifice for others. His actions counted for others because a high priest is able to offer atoning sacrifices for sin to God on behalf of those he represents.

Jesus is our great and eternal High Priest who lives forever. He is the high priest who is himself sinless and never needs to offer any sacrifice for his own sin. In the offering of himself he made the perfect sacrifice which once and for all opened the way to God. No other sacrifice need be made.

"Lord Jesus Christ, you are our eternal high priest and intercessor. Your blood cleanses us from all stain of sin and guilt. Purify my heart and cleanse my mind that I my thoughts and actions may be pleasing to you and my prayer be acceptable as a sacrifice of praise and worship."

**"He is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him,  
since he always lives to make intercession for them"**

**Scripture:** *Hebrews 7:11-28*

11 Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron? 12 For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well. 13 For the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. 14 For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.

15 This becomes even more evident when another priest arises in the likeness of Melchizedek, 16 who has become a priest, not according to a legal requirement concerning bodily descent but by the power of an indestructible life. 17 For it is witnessed of him, "Thou art a priest for ever, after the order of Melchizedek."

18 On the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness 19 (for the law made nothing perfect); on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God. 20 And it was not without an oath. 21 Those who formerly became priests took their office without an oath, but this one was addressed with an oath, "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, 'Thou art a priest for ever.'" 22 This makes Jesus the surety of a better covenant.

23 The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; 24 but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues for ever. 25 Consequently he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. 26 For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens. 27 He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people; he did this once for all when he offered up himself. 28 Indeed, the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect for ever.

### **Meditation:**

The author to the Hebrews states that Jesus is the *surety of a better covenant*. He is the guarantee or surety of a new and better covenant, a new kind of relationship between God and man. The old covenant was based on law and justice and obedience. The new covenant is based on God's love and the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

The author to the Hebrews describes Jesus as a *high priest, holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens*. Jesus could do what the old priesthood never could; he can give us direct access to God. His death on the cross makes the perfect sacrifice which atones for sin. Christ's sacrifice makes possible the purification of all sin and uncleanness, allowing those who believe in him to come near to God, to come into the true holy place, and to engage in holy worship without being displeasing to God.

"Lord Jesus Christ, by your death on the cross you have ransomed us from slavery to sin and by the shedding of your blood you have cleansed us from our guilt. Help me to always live in your presence and to do what is pleasing in your sight."

"Lord Jesus Christ, protect me from complacency and from hardness of heart that my love for you and your ways may grow and never be cold."

## **"We have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven"**

**Scripture:** *Hebrews 8:1-13*

1 Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, 2 and the true tent which is set up not by man but by the Lord.

3 For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. 4 Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. 5 They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly sanctuary; for when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, "See that you make everything according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain." 6 But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry which is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises.

7 For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion for a second. 8 For he finds fault with them when he says: "The days will come, says the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; 9 not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; for they did not continue in my covenant, and so I paid no heed to them, says the Lord. 10 This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 11 And they shall not teach every one his fellow or every one his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for all shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest. 12 For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more."

13 In speaking of a new covenant he treats the first as obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

### **Meditation:**

The writer to the Hebrews says that Jesus is unique both in majesty and in service. He states that Jesus took his place at *the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven*. There can be no greater glory than Jesus' ascension and exaltation at the right hand of the Father in heaven where he now reigns as King and Lord of the universe. Jesus is also *a minister in the sanctuary made by God*. He is exalted as both King and royal Priest.

Hebrews tells us that the earthly temple in Jerusalem was made by human beings to be a copy of the true temple (Hebrews 8:5). God had revealed the pattern of the heavenly temple to Moses. The true temple is heaven itself, and the true holy of holies is before the very throne of God.

Christ was not an earthly priest. His was a new covenant priesthood rather than an old covenant priesthood, meant to be exercised in a heavenly way rather than an earthly way. Christ's death on the cross was an earthly event with heavenly consequences. Christ the priest made the connection between earth and heaven. He was the Lamb provided by God, without the blemish of sin, and offered in the true tent of heaven.

By his glorification (his death, resurrection, and ascension), Christ's humanity was taken by God and so became holy in a new way, holy as a sacrificial offering. In fact, as a sin offering it became "most holy" (Leviticus 10:17). At the same time, his humanity was transformed in such a way that it could enter heaven and function in a heavenly mode.

"Lord Jesus Christ, you have sealed us in the blood of the new covenant and established us as a *chosen people and a holy nation*. Help me to live in your presence and to follow in your way of holiness."

## ***"Christ entered once for all into the Holy Place" - Hebrews 9:12***

### **Scripture: Hebrews 9:1-28**

1 Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary. 2 For a tent was prepared, the outer one, in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the Presence; it is called the Holy Place. 3 Behind the second curtain stood a tent called the Holy of Holies, 4 having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, which contained a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tables of the covenant; 5 above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail. 6 These preparations having thus been made, the priests go continually into the outer tent, performing their ritual duties; 7 but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood which he offers for himself and for the errors of the people. 8 By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the sanctuary is not yet opened as long as the outer tent is still standing 9 (which is symbolic for the present age). According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, 10 but deal only with food and drink and various ablutions, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.

11 But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) 12 he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. 13 For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, 14 how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

15 Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred which redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant. 16 For where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established. 17 For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive. 18 Hence even the first covenant was not ratified without blood. 19 For when every commandment of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, 20 saying, "This is the blood of the covenant which God commanded you." 21 And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. 22 Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.

23 Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. 24 For Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. 25 Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the Holy Place yearly with blood not his own; 26 for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. 27 And just as it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment, 28 so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

### **Meditation:**

Jesus Christ's death on the cross replaced the sacrifices of the old covenant. It did not cancel them or destroy their significance, but it replaced them by fulfilling them. What the ceremonies of the old covenant sought – the forgiveness of sins and restoration of relationship with God – was achieved by Christ's death and resurrection. Since the once sacrifice of Jesus Christ truly accomplished all that the many sacrifices of the old covenant sought and only partially reached, his sacrifice "fulfilled" those old covenant sacrifices.

The death of Jesus Christ is spoken about as a sacrifice in the New Testament more often than as a payment or a punishment. In First Corinthians 5:7 we read, "...Christ, our paschal lamb, has been

sacrificed." In Ephesians 5:2 we read, "Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and a sacrifice to God." Hebrews 9:26 states that Christ "appeared at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself."

The death of Jesus Christ was directed to God and intended to affect God in some way. As Ephesians 5:2 states, "He gave himself as a sacrifice to God." God was the object of the sacrificial death of Christ. What happened in his redemptive work was directed to God in worship and homage and was intended to affect him. To see Christ's death as an expression of God's love for us or as a good example for us to imitate misses the central aspect of his death if it was a sacrifice. A sacrifice is directed to God, not to us.

This understanding of sacrifice also tells us something about why death was necessary for Christ. A death, after all, is not a very good gift – especially not the bloody death of a beloved Son. But the death of Christ on the cross was not an offering of death to God. It was the way Christ gave his life in sacrifice to God. Christ "offered himself without blemish to God" (Hebrews 9:14). He "put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Hebrews 9:26). He "gave himself as a sacrifice to God" (Ephesians 5:2). Christ made himself an offering, a sacrifice to God, a gift that was truly pleasing to his Father. We were saved by Christ's blood because we were saved by his life made over to God through a killing which made it a true sacrificial offering.

Christ's death on the cross fulfilled the sacrificial offering on the Day of Atonement. On this day atonement was made for all the sins and uncleanness of the people of Israel that had not been previously atoned for by specific sacrifices. At the same time the temple with the altar – the place of God's presence – was purified from the defilement due to its contact with unclean people. In fulfilling the offerings on the Day of Atonement, Christ's sacrifice on the cross purified God's people from all of their sin and uncleanness so they could be the place of the presence of the holy God. Moreover, as Isaiah 53 indicates, Christ atoned not simply for Israelites but also for Gentiles, so that their hearts might be cleansed through faith in him and in what he did (see Acts 15:9).

The New Testament also describes Christ's sacrifice as a sacrifice for sin (Hebrews 9:12). Atonement for sin was an integral part of the great ceremonies of old covenant. It made possible the establishment, restoration, and strengthening of relationship with God. Christ himself understood his death to be a sacrifice for sin. When at the last Supper he described his blood as "poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28), he was explaining his coming crucifixion as a sacrifice for sins. In alluding to Isaiah 53:10-12, Christ also seemed to be asserting he would offer a sacrifice that was not just for a specific sinful action or offense of some individual. It was a corporate sacrifice for sin, a sacrifice for a body of people (see Leviticus 4:13-21). It was, moreover, not just a sin offering for the people of Israel but for the whole human race.

"Lord Jesus Christ, by your death on a cross you have won pardon for our sins and you have opened the way for direct access to the throne of God. Help me to draw near with boldness and confidence that I may give you thanks and praise for your work of redemption."

**"When Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins,  
he sat down at the right hand of God"**

**Scripture: Hebrews 10:1-18**

1 For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices which are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who draw near. 2 Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered? If the worshipers had once been cleansed, they would no longer have any consciousness of sin. 3 But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin year after year. 4 For it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins.

5 Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings thou hast not desired, but a body hast thou prepared for me; 6 in burnt offerings and sin offerings thou hast taken no pleasure.

7 Then I said, 'Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God,' as it is written of me in the roll of the book."

8 When he said above, "Thou hast neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), 9 then he added, "Lo, I have come to do thy will." He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. 10 And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

11 And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. 12 But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, then to wait until his enemies should be made a stool for his feet. 14 For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. 15 And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, 16 "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds," 17 then he adds, "I will remember their sins and their misdeeds no more."

18 Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

**Meditation:**

Christ's whole life was lived in obedience. Nonetheless, it was by a specific action that he saved the human race--going to death on a cross. In concluding a discussion of how the sufferings and death of Christ replaced the old covenant sacrifices, Hebrews 10 quotes Psalm 40:6-8:

*"Sacrifices and offerings thou hast not desired, but a body hast thou prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings thou hast taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God,' as it is written of me in the roll of the book."*

According to Hebrews, these verses are properly understood as words spoken by Christ to express his purpose in coming into the world. They express Christ's intention to replace the old covenant sacrifices by an action which fulfills God's will.

Christ saw his own undergoing suffering and death as the way God intended to have the old covenant sacrifices replaced by a new and effective sacrifice that would accomplish the sanctification of the human race. Christ acknowledged that this offering of himself as a redemptive sacrifice was the reason for his becoming human. The Father had prepared a body, a way for his divine Son (Hebrews 1:3) to share in the same nature as those to be redeemed (Hebrews 2:14). Christ was therefore eligible to be their priest. He accepted his Father's wish in the words, "Lo, I come to do your will."

"Lord Jesus Christ, by your obedience to the Father's will you reversed the curse of our disobedience and sin. Free me from pride and wilfulness and help me to live in full submission to your will for my life."



# The Authority of Scripture

By Steve Clark

## *The Nature of Scriptural Authority*

The traditional Christian view has been that the scripture (both Old and New Testaments) has highest authority for the beliefs and life of Christians. This means that Christians ought to change if they discover that their beliefs contradict those presented for acceptance by scripture or if they discover that their way of life does not conform with that directed by scripture. The word "authority" is not a traditional word to describe the scripture. It is, however, commonly used in modern theological discussions of the nature of scripture. To say that the scripture has the highest "authority" in this case does not necessarily mean that there are no other authorities or that there is nothing else which also has highest authority. Some would hold, for instance, that tradition, reason, or personal revelation likewise have highest authority. In the sense used here, highest authority means that there is nothing which should cause Christians to contradict or otherwise set themselves at odds with scripture.<sup>1</sup>

A more traditional word for describing the claim scripture has upon the Christian is "canonical." The word "canon" means "rule" in the sense of a "yardstick" or "ruler." Something which is canonical is a standard for measuring or judging something else. In this sense, the canonical scripture is the standard against which all other opinions can be measured. If something is at odds with scripture, it is not Christian and therefore for a Christian not true.

The authority of scripture, in the traditional approach, is grounded in its origin. The scripture is composed of writings which come from God. They contain the highest revelation of God and of his intentions for the human race. The scriptures are not merely human books or collections of human opinion, although they are also these things. They are books which contain God's revelation of himself. When people deal with scripture, they deal with God himself—the creator of the universe, the one who has all power in heaven and earth, and who knows all things. They are dealing with the one whose opinions count, whose word is automatically truth because he knows everything, and because he does not lie. God himself is a rock, and his words are faithful and true. Therefore, anyone who does not approach the scripture with fear of the Lord either does not know what the scriptures are or does not know who the Lord is.

There are two words which have been commonly used to describe the origin of the scripture as from God: inspired and apostolic. The New Testament books, the part of the scriptures with which we are primarily concerned in this book, were written by inspiration with apostolic authority and are therefore accepted as canonical for the Christian faith.

"Inspired" means that the New Testament writings are given by God. They are the product of the Holy Spirit, inspiring the human authors to write these books. To make this basic point, the different approaches to scriptural inspiration do not need to be discussed. Here it is sufficient to say that the collection of books called scripture are writings which have been described as inspired by God (cf. 2 Tm 3:16), meaning that they were given through the work of the Holy Spirit and can be counted on to give truths from God. Human beings actually wrote the scriptures, and the scriptures bear many marks of the human personalities of their authors, but these works were nonetheless written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and this inspiration guarantees their truthfulness.

"Apostolic" is a second word that is important for understanding the New Testament's origin in God. In this case it designates the way his inspiration is mediated through authoritative human beings. The New

---

<sup>1</sup> Augustine states the practical application of the authority of scripture by saying: "If I do find anything in these books which seems contrary to truth, I decide that either the text is corrupt, or the translator did not follow what was really said, or that I failed to understand it" (Epistle 82, 1, 3 (PL 33, 277)).

Testament has been handed down as a collection of apostolic writings. Whether this means that the writings of the New Testament were actually penned or dictated by one of the apostles is a question that is not crucial for our concerns. It suffices here to say that the term "apostolic" at least indicates that the work in question comes to us under apostolic authority; that is, it comes to us as the teaching of one of the apostles. The apostles are the foundational authorities of the Christian church (Rv 21:14), and the foundational authorities of Christian teaching. They have a unique authority, the highest authority after Christ. They were delegated by Christ to do whatever was needed to establish the Christian people after his resurrection and ascension, and that role included teaching (Mt 28:19-20). They therefore exercised Christ's authority and did not hesitate to speak with his authority (2 Tm 3:6-15; 1 Thes 4:1-2). Clement of Rome, a contemporary of the apostles and a man taught by them, summed up their position in this way: "The gospel was given to the apostles for us by the Lord Jesus Christ; and Jesus the Christ was sent from God. That is to say, Christ received his commission from God, and the apostles theirs from Christ."

Reading some contemporary scholarship on scripture leads to approaching the apostles as though they were merely early Christian thinkers, limited men like all other men. Most scholars discuss Paul as a theological thinker, or evaluate John's opinions, or reflect on the origin of Matthew's views, and so forth. To do so is unavoidable, both because scripture scholarship is a secular discipline, and because the human authors of scripture did stand in human history under historical influence, and they were limited men of a particular age in history. It is sometimes helpful for a Christian to look at them in that way. But if this view dominates, one loses the Christian perspective on the apostles—namely, that they were given the foundational authority to establish the Christian people and they were delegated the authority of Christ to teach, and were often equipped with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to do so. A collection of the books that represent the apostolic teaching has therefore become the canon for the Christian people.

"Inspired" and "apostolic" have been chosen here to describe the scripture insofar as it originates in God. They have been chosen because they are two of the most common terms used in Christian tradition for this aspect of the scripture. Of the two, "inspired by God" is the more important term. It should, however, also be observed that the books of the scripture were probably not received as canonical simply because their inspiration was discerned or their apostolicity was well attested. Very commonly books were eliminated because they did not teach unquestioned orthodoxy. They were discerned, in other words, on the basis of their content. That too was seen as a sign of their origin from God. The fundamental point, however, is simply that scripture has been given the authority it has because it has been understood to be from God and to be reliable as an expression of his mind.

Sometimes this understanding of the nature of scripture is attributed to Protestantism, while Catholicism is often said to substitute the church for the scriptures. However, Catholic teaching on this point is no different than most Protestant teaching that holds to the authority of scripture. Both Catholics and Protestants stand on the same ground in approaching the scripture as authoritative truth from God. The Vatican Council II, in its Constitution on Divine Revelation (sec. 11), makes this point very clear:

The divinely revealed realities, which are contained and presented in the text of sacred Scripture, have been written down under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. For Holy Mother Church, relying on the faith of the apostolic age, accepts as sacred and canonical the books of the Old and New Testaments, whole and entire, with all their parts, on the grounds that, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn 20:31; 2 Tm 3:16; 2 Pt 1:19-21; 3:15-16), they have God as their author, and have been handed on as such to the Church herself. To compose the sacred books, God chose certain men who, all the while he employed them in this task, made full use of their powers and faculties so that, though he acted in them and by them, it was as true authors that they consigned to writing whatever he wanted written, and no more.

Since, therefore, all that the inspired authors, or sacred writers, affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture, firmly, faithfully

and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures. Thus "all Scripture is inspired by God, and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tm 3:16-17, 13 Gk. text).

In Catholic teaching as well as in Protestant teaching, nothing can overrule or contradict scripture-not pope, council, inspired prophet, or great theologian.

There are many questions connected with the authority or canonical status of scripture, not the least of them why these twenty-seven books and only these twenty-seven books are contained in our canon and should be regarded as having highest authority. Christian theologians have traditionally answered these questions in various ways. The fundamental point, however, is that we do have a canon, and the books in that canon have the highest authority for a Christian because they have been given by God through the Holy Spirit. This is a faith position (like all faith in Christ or in his word). Christianity is based upon the recognition of God speaking in the words of men. The acceptance of the canon is also a first principle. It determines to a great extent what someone will claim that Christianity is. If someone does not accept the New Testament as canonical, or only accepts something in the New Testament as canonical, that person will come up with a different religion. That religion may preserve some faith in Christ, and it may be properly termed "Christian" by historians or sociologists, but it will be different from traditional Christianity. The New Testament as a whole is foundational for faith in Christ.

#### *Submission to Scripture*

If the New Testament is a collection of inspired apostolic writings that are the canon, then it has the highest authority in the life of a Christian. It presents words from God, the Lord of all, and it must be believed and obeyed. To use a term from the New Testament (2 Cor 11:4), Christians must "submit" themselves to it. They must submit their minds, indeed their whole lives, to it. That submission includes both believing it where the scripture proclaims a fact about the Christian faith, and obeying it where the scripture indicates the Lord's desires. Christians must respond to scripture as something with authority in their lives, in such a way that it is enough for them to know that scripture has taught something in order to accept it and follow it. Scriptural teaching is not merely one of many opinions, viewpoints, or theologies. It is the standard against which all other opinions must be measured. If other views do not correspond, they must be rejected.

The concern here is not primarily with an intellectual position, but a question of how people should orient their lives. One can easily begin to approach scripture as a source of opinion or a justification for different propositions, taking a stance in regard to it as a thinker who makes use of scripture. While Christians must think about scripture, they may not stand over it, using it for their purposes. Approaching scripture is approaching the Lord himself. It should be received as a message from the Lord. The appropriate attitude is one of submission-the submission that should mark any relationship with the Lord. Righteousness demands submission to the Lord.

Contemporary society, however, does not value personal submission. Rather, it teaches that the ideal, the highest position a human being can attain, is that of personal autonomy. The human being who decides for himself, who is creative, that is, who devises novel opinions or viewpoints, the human being who is "adult," taking the responsibility to make his own decisions-this is the human being who is valued. By contrast the ideal for a Christian is to submit totally to God, to be molded and formed by him, to desire first and foremost to be what God wants. The Christian is the servant (doulos-slave) of Jesus Christ; perhaps a voluntary servant, but a servant nonetheless (Rom 6:16-23). He is the person whose life does not belong to himself, but who has given it completely, his mind included, to another-his Lord.

Many modern Christians have lost not only the sense of the dignity of submission to the Lord but also an understanding of how to submit. They no longer have an instinctual understanding of the importance of

obedience as an aspect of personal loyalty to God, and of how obedience grows out of personal devotion to him. Jesus said, "If you love me, keep my commandments." Obedience and love go together. But loving obedience is not content merely to keep the explicit commandments that are solemnly enjoined. Loving obedience also means eagerness to follow his preferences as well and to be formed by all of his desires. Christians who show loving obedience want their lives to be formed by the Lord's desire, so that it is pleasing to him even in the smallest respects. Moreover, loving obedience is active obedience. It does not wait for the Lord to make his will known but seeks out the Lord's will. It is eager to discover where the Lord has a preference, and to follow it. Concretely, obedience means comparing one's mind and one's thinking with the Lord's mind and thinking as found in scripture. Obedience means changing one's mind when it is not in harmony with the scriptures and changing one's life when it is not shaped by God's desires as revealed in the scriptures. This attitude does not deny that God can reveal his will in other ways, but it does emphasize that he has revealed his will in scripture, and that one must at least be eager to follow what is stated there.

Christians are often tempted by a selective submission. Some scriptural teaching is very attractive to them, and they find in themselves an admiration and a willingness to submit to it. Modern Christians usually find it easier to feel enthusiastic about Christian teaching about God's fatherhood or about love of others. Some scriptural teaching, however, contradicts their desires. Some may even repulse them. To be sure, often the difficulty is genuine uncertainty about how to respond to some part of scripture. Often a person may know that the scripture is saying something on a given subject, but can be uncertain how to understand or apply what is said. Despite some uncertainties, for most Christians there remains much scriptural teaching that is sufficiently clear, or could seemingly become sufficiently clear with more investigation, but which they find themselves unwilling to submit to. The genuineness of submission is tested precisely at these points. They prove that their submission is genuine, and not a mere pretense, when they submit to the Lord in something which is personally difficult and which may lose them the respect of the world around him. A Christian may be uncertain about how to submit, but should not be selective about submission.

[*The Authority of Scripture* is excerpted from, [Man and Woman in Christ](#), Chapter 14, by Stephen B. Clark, 1980, originally published by Servant Books, Ann Arbor, Michigan, U.S.A. Available from Tabor House.]

# Bypassing Scriptural Authority

By Steve Clark

THE SCRIPTURES COME to a Christian believer as writings that come from God and that hold authority over the life of the Christian people. Many people today have been unwilling to accept a role difference for men and women in contemporary Christian life. Some have disputed such a role difference on the basis of exegesis, holding that the scripture does not actually teach such a role difference or does not teach it consistently. Some have done so on the basis of applicability, holding that scripture was teaching for circumstances so different from ours that the scriptural teaching no longer applies. Still others, however, have disputed such a role difference while simply bypassing the authority of scripture. "Bypassing the authority of scripture" is a more accurate description of what these people do than "disputing the authority of scripture," because many contemporary Christian authors treat scripture in a way that calls its authority into question, but does not explicitly reject that authority, or even directly confront the issue. Discussions of the roles of men and women are, in fact, one subject where Christian authors most commonly attempt to bypass the authority of scripture.

## *Modern Bypasses*

Modern bypasses of the authority of scripture can be subtle and difficult to pick out. The clearest bypasses are those which directly challenge a teaching of scripture, either by preferring a different opinion, or by openly disagreeing with the scriptural approach. A less easily detected set of bypasses are those which label certain parts of scripture as bearing no authority. A still less easily detected set of bypasses are those which operate by stressing difficulties to force a choice of one scripture passage over another. What follows in this chapter is a discussion of some of the more common bypasses which appear in writings concerning the roles of men and women.

A. *"Scripture must be in accord with my view of what is ethical, or I will have to reject it."*  
This view is stated in a strong form in the following quote:

Either religion promotes human development and well being or it is destructive and cannot be representative of the true God. This must be kept in mind when we insist that the life, human development and well being we are talking about is that of women as well as men. Then we can say with a clear conviction and without fear or guilt that if Jesus was not a feminist, he was not of God.[\(1\)](#)

This writer—and those who take a similar approach—is coming to scripture with an ethical conviction to which scripture (and Jesus) must measure up. In this case, the ethical conviction is embodied in the author's feminist ideology. Scripture is not the judge; rather, the scripture is on trial. Jesus and the scripture could easily be rejected. The writer is placing herself and her ideology over the scripture and over the teachings of Jesus. And if the scripture is the inspired word of God, she is placing herself in a position of telling God whether his morality is acceptable to her.[\(2\)](#)

B. *"The apostle cannot interpret scripture/the gospel correctly"*

This view is very common. It is expressed in the following quotes:

1 Timothy 2:13-14: "Let a woman keep silent with all submissiveness, for Adam was first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived." The writer not only displayed poor logic but poor theology and misinterpretation of scripture. Eve alone is blamed for the mutual sin in the garden....(3)

Thirdly, St. Paul's method of hermeneutics, that is, interpreting scripture, is not a method which would be acceptable in the twentieth century. Indeed, to accept his method would be to fall into anti-intellectualism.... St. Paul takes what we might call a fundamentalist interpretation of the Genesis narrative.(4)

1 Corinthians 11:2-16 is illuminating for us not because it contributes useful ethical practice for us in our time, except for the most rigid literalist, but precisely because it reveals what happens to a man, even a great theologian, when the gospel hits him in his "blind side." It shows Paul's inability to deal with the gospel and, as such, may be useful to us when we ourselves, blind to its intrusion, are blindsided by the gospel.(5)

These quotes are not good descriptions of Paul's interpretation of the scriptures or the gospel. They are much better as illustrations of the authors' misinterpretations of Paul. However, they illustrate a principle which is commonly employed: Paul (or some other scriptural writer) either does not understand certain elements of the Old Testament correctly, or he does not understand certain aspects of the teachings of Jesus. Hence, we do not have to submit to his teachings. At best, his writings on these points provide an object lesson of how someone can make mistakes in interpreting scripture. There are, to be sure, many difficulties in understanding how Paul interprets the Old Testament, and in understanding how some of Paul's teaching relates to some of Jesus' teaching. Yet, to resolve those difficulties by saying that Paul does not know how to interpret scripture or the gospel properly, and that therefore there is no need to follow what he says in a particular respect, is to disagree with canonical scripture. It may be acceptable for one to personally prefer different approaches to scriptural interpretation than those which Paul used. However, to dismiss what Paul teaches on the basis of one's not agreeing with his approach to scripture is to disagree with scripture itself.

C. *"Modern scholars understand scripture better than the apostle did."*

This bypass is a variation on the previous one: The apostle cannot interpret the scripture correctly. However, it is a significant variation because it confers great authority on contemporary scholars (an authority often conferred by people who would consider themselves as being among those scholars). This view is demonstrated in the following quotes:

Then there is his biased statement which has been quoted with relish by preachers ever since: "For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man." Modern scripture scholars do not, of course, agree with this interpretation of Genesis. Moreover, Paul himself evidently noticed that there was something wrong and corrected himself immediately afterward. . . .(6)

In 5:13, Adam and Eve are regarded as archetypes of man and woman (cf. 1 Cor 11:8) and, according to ancient thinking, the older person, for example the first born son, was considered

the better and the senior who should bear the authority. In this case, therefore, Adam is considered as the senior because he was formed first. This, as I have said, cannot be accepted according to the standards of modern Biblical scholarship. Scholars do not class the creation narratives in Genesis as history.<sup>(7)</sup>

The latter quote is based upon a mistake discussed in Chapter One, pp. 5-9, in which the author proceeds from a view that the creation narratives are not history in the modern sense to the unfounded conclusion that they do not teach truth. The former quote illustrates another common approach when a New Testament writer, interpreting another passage from scripture, disagrees with what contemporary scriptural scholarship understands to be the intent of the original author. The conclusion is then made that the New Testament writer has misunderstood the passage. This approach is dubious, in that it rests on the assumption that the meaning of the passage lies in the conscious intent of the human author, regardless of any intent that the divine author may have. The concern here, however, is primarily in the authority such quotes give to "contemporary scholarship." "Contemporary scholarship" turns out to be more authoritative than the apostle in understanding scripture. It therefore is a source of opinion which might allow us to bypass, if not dismiss, teaching in scripture. Even an excellent scholar should not have higher authority for a Christian than the writers of scripture.

D. *"The arguments given in scripture are not sufficiently cogent for us to accept them."* This is likewise a fairly common approach to dealing with scriptural teaching. The following quote expresses it well:

The bulk of I Cor 11:2-16 is a defense of religion of the most feckless, proof-texty sort ... By the same dismal argument, Paul might have used the creation story to prove differences in race and class, declaring just as logically that these also were decreed by God ... As a consequence, because at bottom he knew he was wrong, he became angry, argued from propriety, nature and proof texts which did not prove. We are saying that he was not ignorant of the gospel here. Rather, he knew it and could not face it.<sup>(8)</sup>

Underlying this quote is a supposition that we can examine the arguments of the scripture writer, observe their quality, and then dismiss what his teaching is if the arguments appear inadequate. This writer not only dismisses Paul's teaching, but dismisses it with contempt, placing himself in the position of judging how well the apostle Paul's opinions measure up to "the gospel." However, this line of thought rests upon an approach to arguments in general, and to argument in the scripture in particular, which is itself inadequate.

Arguments are a means of asserting a point to others; hence, their content depends upon the premises accepted by the people being addressed. Arguments for a peasant and a professor, for a German and a Malay, will often have to be framed differently, even though the basic assertions may be the same, and even though the person arguing draws from the same understanding in each case. An argument which convinces one person may not convince another whose circumstances are foreign to those of the argument. Many scriptural arguments will not appear convincing to us because they are not intended to address people from the modern thought-world. The scripture writer was primarily addressing those who accepted his own thought-world. The author of the above passage simply demonstrates that he is not in the category of people to whom Paul was addressing his arguments, not only by pronouncing the arguments inadequate, but also by his consistent failure to understand the meaning and significance of the arguments.

Yet, merely because these arguments were not aimed at the modern mind does not mean that the



teaching in the passages in which those arguments occur need not be accepted. The authority of the teaching is established by the status of the passage as canonical scripture. It does not depend on the actual weight of the argument, much less on how weighty the argument happens to appear to a modern reader. Moreover, the scriptural argument itself can be instructive, even though it may not appear telling as an argument. For instance, Paul believes the Genesis account to be a very important grounding for his teaching on men and women, as well as his teaching in other areas. This reveals something about the authority of the Genesis account, and something about the way it should be approached by those seeking God's revelation. Once Christians accept a scriptural argument as instructive even without finding it forceful or helpful, their understanding can be formed more fully. They will be able to understand the scripture more completely, and will be better able to perceive the force of the arguments in scripture instinctively. In short, the fact that someone does not find an argument from scripture convincing should not be a sign that the passage can be dismissed. Rather, it is a sign that there is something more to learn.

E. *"I can dismiss certain elements of the scriptural teaching when they originate in an outside influence—such as rabbinic influence—rather than in the real Christian message."* To be sure, some writers would dismiss all New Testament teaching on the basis that it is due more to outside influences, but most of these persons do not identify themselves as Christians. However, some who consider themselves Christians would like to reserve the option to dismiss some New Testament teaching on that basis. The following quote contains a careful presentation of this approach:

To the question of whether this attitude toward women should be determinative for us, the answer in this case is clear. Paul's regulations are to a certain extent a regression to rabbinic Judaism, which is so much the more comprehensible because the primitive community wished no revolution, at least not in the social area.<sup>(9)</sup>

Elsewhere this author uses the term "canonized rabbinism" to characterize those parts of the New Testament with which he does not agree. But for this writer and others like him, "rabbinism," not "canonized," is the more significant part of the phrase. According to this view, the fact that some element in the scriptural teaching is in accord with the rabbinic teaching, or was even drawn from it originally, provides ample grounds for rejecting it. The fact that this element is also "canonized"—that is, incorporated into the canonical word of God—does not carry as much weight. This position amounts to saying that "the rabbinism I agree with has authority, and the rabbinism I do not agree with does not have authority." The key feature to notice is that the author feels able to judge with certainty where the scripture teaches truly and where it does not, and he can appeal to cultural influences as grounds for discounting the authority of portions of the New Testament. He assumes, in other words, an authority which allows him to judge the New Testament, to determine what within it is true and what is to be rejected. In short, this writer does not relate to the entire New Testament as genuinely authoritative.

This way of bypassing scriptural authority could be called "the genetic fallacy." It is common in discussions of the roles of men and women. Someone slips into the genetic fallacy when they devote a great deal of attention to discovering the source of the teaching in scripture—not so as to better understand it, not even to better gauge its intent, but in order to evaluate its worth.<sup>(10)</sup> They may decide, for instance, that some of Paul's teaching about the roles of men and women is actually rabbinic teaching, that is, teaching which originated among the rabbis, was passed on to Paul in his rabbinic training, and was reproduced in his letters. They would then reason that, having discovered the origin of the teaching and having seen that it is rabbinic and stands in contrast with Paul's new Christian inspiration, we can dismiss



it in favor of the elements which, we have discerned, have their origin in new Christian insight.<sup>(11)</sup>

This whole proceeding carries with it a number of problems, not the least of which is the tentativeness with which the origins of different teachings can be discerned. For our purposes here, the primary problem with the genetic fallacy is that it bypasses the canonicity of the passage in question. If Paul's teaching on the roles of men and women is in the canon, it bears scriptural authority. It makes no difference if he first heard it from Rabbi Gamaliel, or if he received it inscribed upon a scroll during a vision he had in the third heaven. The inspiration of the scripture does not mean that all scripture had to come by direct revelation, with no human help. Rather, it means that the selection of what is taught as truth was made under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, regardless of how it first came to the mind of the human author. If such teaching is in scripture, it is authoritative, no matter what its origin or what parallels it may have.

The genetic fallacy is one among many attempts to bypass scriptural authority by focussing on other factors in evaluating a passage than whether or not it is truly part of scripture. For instance, in some discussions of the roles of men and women, considerable attention is given to the latest critical opinion about which letters Paul actually wrote. Modern authors will sometimes argue that if a given passage was not actually written by Paul, there is no need to take the material in it all that seriously. In a study of the life and thought of Paul, there are good reasons for attempting to determine which books of the New Testament were actually written by Paul. However, whether or not a given scripture passage was actually written by Paul does not determine its authority. In a study of New Testament teaching on the roles of men and women, that the book in question is actually canonical (and perhaps that it comes to us under Pauline authority) is all that need be determined. If a book is canonical, various controversies over who wrote it are irrelevant for determining the truth of what it teaches.

F. *"I can pick out what is truly important about scripture and Judge the rest in terms of what is essential."*

The quote on p.353 is a good example of this attitude. The writer is convinced that he knows what "the gospel"-the important part of the New Testament teaching-truly is, and that he is able with some certainty to discard the scriptural teaching which is not in accord with "the gospel." The following quote illustrates the same approach from a somewhat different angle:

The equal dignity and rights of all human beings as persons is of the essence of the Christian message. In the writings of Paul himself there are anticipations of a development toward realization of the full implications of this equality. We have seen that after the harshly androcentric text in 1 Cor he attempts to compensate somewhat:

Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God' (I Cor 11:11-12).

Moreover, the dichotomy of fixed classes as dominant-subservient is transcended:

'For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3:27-28).

As one theologian has pointed out:

'This does not mean that the kingdom of heaven has to do with non-sexed beings. Paul is enumerating the relationships of domination; these are radically denounced by the Gospel, in the sense that man no more has the right to impose his will to power upon woman than does a class or a race upon another class or another race.'

It is not surprising that Paul did not see the full implications of this transcendence. There is an unresolved tension between the personalist Christian message and the restrictions and compromises imposed by the historical situation. It would be naive to think that Paul foresaw social evolution. For him, transcendence would come soon enough—in the next life. The inconsistency and ambivalence of his words concerning women could only be recognized at a later time, as a result of historical processes. Those who have benefitted from the insights of a later age have the task of distinguishing elements which are sociological in origin from the life-fostering, personalist elements which pertain essentially to the Christian message.(12)

The author of this quote asserts her ability to distinguish the true Christian message from the rest of the material in the New Testament, and to hold to that true, essential message. What she picks out as the essence of the Christian message will probably fail to convince most Christians that she has a very good grasp on what the New Testament is saying. The quote is, in fact, an excellent example of the position which judges the New Testament with a standard derived from a nonscriptural source—in this case, modern personalist ethics. Holding this position leads to approving the New Testament where it agrees with the external standard, dismissing it as having no authority or value where it fails to agree. To claim an ability to choose what is the essential or valuable New Testament message is to set oneself over the New Testament as its judge and to evaluate the New Testament itself.

The last two ways of bypassing scriptural authority illustrate a common approach found in modern writings on the roles of men and women. Many modern writings on scripture are pervaded by a search for authority in Christian teaching. Many Christians, among them many scripture scholars, have lost their belief in the creed and the commandments, in Christianity as taught to us by the New Testament. They have not, however, lost all commitment to various elements of Christianity. Perhaps they have some commitment to Christ, or to the Christian symbol system, or to the church in which they hold office, or to teaching the discipline of Christian theology. Having lost a foundation in what formerly would have been understood as orthodoxy in all Christian churches, they are seeking criteria for calling something "Christian" or "authoritative," or are seeking bases for holding views with other "Christians" and for acting together with them.(13)

This search for a new standard may take various forms. Some will look for the "unique or distinctive Christian message," proceeding as if, once they had found those elements which have not been held in common with any previous people—whether rabbis, Greek philosophers, or anyone else—they would have the elements of the New Testament which truly bear authority. Others will use a doctrinal view (that of Christian freedom, for instance) as a standard for determining what else in the New Testament is truly Christian. Still others will attempt to reconstruct the "authentic" teaching of Christ (or of Paul)—as if a modern scholar's presentation of Christ's teaching is likely to be purer or freer from a personal shaping of Christ's message than that of an apostle who lived in the same milieu as Christ and was taught by him or by someone close to him.(14) Such efforts can have a certain persuasiveness, and they are often illuminating. But it is not until we see that they are an attempt to establish a new authority, a new canon, replacing the one that has been handed down to us, that we can recognize them for what they are.(15)

Some Christian writers hold firm to the principle that all scriptural teaching must be accepted as authoritative, yet, at times, the practice does not follow the theory. One of the more curious lapses in an

active acceptance of the authority of scripture can be found among some modern Evangelicals who are very firm in their defense of the authority of scripture. They strongly defend what could be called the "doctrinal basics"; for example, the divinity of Jesus or the importance of the atonement. "Where the scripture teaches," they would say, "there we must believe, because the authority of scripture is supreme." Yet they will often neglect to apply this principle to scriptural teaching about personal relationships and Christian social structure. In these areas they feel content to supplant scriptural teaching with the norms of our society, often without seeing any need to justify what they are doing. These Evangelicals are committed to fight in defense of scripture in the places where it was being challenged vigorously fifty years ago, but they do not uphold scriptural authority in many of the places where it is being most vigorously challenged today.

G. *"I am trying to be led by the Spirit, and the Spirit has not led me to adopt the kind of position that scripture seems to teach."*

This approach is not commonly represented in scholarly literature, but can be commonly heard among Christians at large. It is another way of denying the authority of scripture without seeming to do so. The above statement could actually be approached in two very different ways. The first of these ways (touched upon in the previous chapter in the discussion about submission to scripture) involves avoiding an overly legalistic approach to scripture. People need not always submit to scripture legalistically. Those who are seeking to follow the Lord and to submit their minds to his truth can wait upon the Lord's assistance. They can accept a truth as the Lord teaches them the reality of the truth and a way of applying that truth in their own lives. In this sense, waiting for the leading of the Spirit is not a refusal to accept the authority of scripture. It is simply a confession of the need to have more than the bare written page of scripture in order to arrive at the truth—in this case, the need for some direct help from the Holy Spirit. To understand the meaning of scripture and how to apply it needs light from the Holy Spirit. A submissive person can wait for God's light before attempting to implement scriptural teaching.

There is, however, a second way of approaching the above statement, in which being "led by the Spirit" can be a way to bypass scriptural authority. This happens when someone makes the Spirit's leading the decisive factor in accepting anything as true. When such people say they are "waiting for the Spirit's leading," they are saying that they personally require direct revelation or inspiration in order to accept something as true. In a discussion of a topic like the roles of men and women, it can often mean that they have a suspicion or a conviction that the Spirit is leading Christians nowadays differently than he was leading the early Christians. It would be a mistake, they feel, to pattern our lives on the way he was leading a group of Christians 2000 years ago. Such a position does not deny outright the authority of scripture, but it does amount to such a denial in practice. If the scripture teaches "Thou shalt not steal," one should not need a personal revelation to ascertain whether the Spirit will lead one to steal or not. In fact, any "spirit" who leads someone to contradict the teaching of canonical scripture is exhibiting clear signs of not being the one Holy Spirit. One of the greatest values of possessing a canon of scripture is that it provides a means of discerning spirits. The scripture and other teachings were given in order that the minds of Christians could be formed so as to perceive spiritual influences in the right way. For a Christian to neglect the highest teaching authority in favor of individual or collective revelation or inspiration is a major spiritual mistake.

H. *"There are contradictions in scripture. Or, at least some approaches in scripture are so much at variance with one another that we cannot hold both with intellectual integrity. Hence, we can only hold to some of scripture."*

Certain aspects of this position have been discussed in earlier chapters. Modern writers have asserted contradiction or variance in the scripture's teaching on the roles of men and women in two primary places: between Jesus and Paul, and between Galatians 3:28 and much of the rest of Paul's teaching on men and women.<sup>(16)</sup> In both these instances (as was treated in Chapters Six and Ten), the contradictions cited are more apparent than real. The actual contradiction is not between Jesus as the New Testament evidence shows him to be and Paul, or between Gal 3:28 as Paul really meant it and the other key texts. Rather, it is between Jesus (or Gal 3:28) as understood or wished by certain modern writers and the rest of the New Testament teaching in our area. Such contradictions arise from the interpretations of modern writers, not from the scripture.

The question remains, however, how people who approach the scripture as authoritative and from God should deal with the contradictions which they think they might be perceiving. Scripture scholarship in the last 150 years or so has made the question of contradictions in scripture an acute one for Christians. Hegelian thought patterns affected German Protestant scripture scholarship throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. In turn, German Protestant scripture scholarship has been an important influence among academic scripture scholars in other countries and environments. Even when scripture scholars do not adopt actual Hegelian positions, the dominant Hegelian dialectical thought form often persists.<sup>(17)</sup> Dialectical thinking leads a person to see historical development in terms of opposition and contradiction that need to be resolved. An instinctively dialectical temper, which scripture scholars possess because of their training, will tend to presume opposition and contradiction, or to perceive things in those terms, even when the evidence is not strong that such contradiction is present. Even where the dialectical temper among scripture scholars has been less prominent, an oppositional or contrasting rather than a synthetic style of thought is still valued, leading scholars to stress the differences between various New Testament "theologies," and "church orders."<sup>(18)</sup>

Moreover, where the historical approach prevails in New Testament scholarship, there is a tendency to place greater emphasis on the "genetic origins" of different opinions and approaches in the New Testament, and in so doing, to contrast different communities and authors, so that an evolutionary description can be traced. The results of this scholarly attempt to discern differences between authors and communities in the New Testament have been mixed. Some go beyond the available evidence and occasionally even fly right in the face of available evidence. Some have been of real value. Yet, however valuable it may be, this approach does produce a problem at times for Christians who are not as interested in an evolutionary description of Biblical thought in an area as they are in what the word of God is teaching them about how to live their lives. The two perspectives involved are different.

How then does one seeking to learn from God's word approach a perceived contradiction? There are three main approaches. One approach is to use the contradiction as a means for eliminating one of the passages.<sup>(19)</sup> However, such an approach is a denial of the authority of scripture as a whole. Perhaps many who eliminate passages this way do so on the basis of a conviction that scripture as a whole cannot have authority because of such discrepancies. The second approach could be called the harmonizing approach. This approach smooths out seeming contradictions, and often differences as well, by maintaining that the authors are really asserting the same thing. Two passages on the same subject will be interpreted by each other with the understanding that they must be making the same point because they have the same author—the Holy Spirit. However, harmonizing has an important drawback: It often leads to passing over important differences between passages, books, authors, and communities.

The third approach could be called the synthetic approach. The synthetic approach is based

upon the view that differences in the New Testament can often be combined into a stronger synthesis, a synthesis which can be richer once the differences have been understood. Ephesians 5:22-33 and 1 Pt 3:1-7, for instance, present many differences when compared with each another. Yet the stress in 1 Peter on the wife's respect for her husband can be combined with the stress in Ephesians on her subordination to provide a fuller picture of how the wife should relate to her husband. The passages can be synthesized even after recognizing that they are not saying exactly the same thing.

Some assert that there is not sufficient unity in the New Testament to make either a harmonizing or a synthesizing approach intellectually honest. This issue cannot be fully discussed at this point, although the previous chapters indicate that such a view is based more on presuppositions than on actual evidence. The concern of this chapter is not with the historical question of unity in the New Testament, but with the approach that a believing Christian should take to the New Testament canon.[\(20\)](#)

For such Christians, the question at this point is: What does the New Testament teach—that is, assert authoritatively[\(21\)](#)—and what do believers do when they think the New Testament might be asserting two contradictory or incompatible things? A complete answer cannot easily be given here, but two points are important for someone who approaches the scripture as the canonical word of God. First, a Christian cannot hold that scripture is actually teaching two contradictory things in areas where it is intending to teach. If the whole scripture is the canon, the measure of all else and of highest authority, then it cannot be teaching two irreconcilable statements. It is not possible to hold that the scripture is fully canonical and also contains contradictions. Secondly, Christians do not have to feel responsible for reconciling everything they see in scripture. They may see an apparent contradiction, but the right approach is frequently to acknowledge that they do not yet understand how the two statements go together, and to wait for some resolution compatible with submission to scripture. In such an approach, the final criterion is a faith criterion about the authority of scripture, rather than a criterion which makes one's own mind or modern scholarship the final arbiter. The lesson from the study of Gal 3:28 in Chapter Six is that once an interpreter would let go of some of the presuppositions of contemporary society which have the strongest hold, the apparent contradiction in the scripture would disappear. At such times, scripture can be seen in a perspective which the reader has been unwilling to even consider. In other words, it is not intellectually dishonest for a Christian to hold that scripture does not contradict itself. Often, more complete understanding actually dissolves the seeming contradiction.

To this point in the chapter, we have discussed eight of the major bypasses of scriptural authority. There is yet another way of calling into question the authority of scripture which cannot be listed as a bypass on its own, but which pervades much of the literature on the roles of men and women—namely, a disrespect for the scriptures or for one of the authors of scripture (Paul receives more than his share of this). We are told at times that "Paul confuses himself and us" or that "Paul was a typical male" or that "Paul knew the gospel and could not face it." The authors of these lines demonstrate a freedom to express disrespect for Paul which clearly indicates that they have not submitted themselves to the writings of Paul (that is, to part of scripture) as to writings which bear an authority over them. They are holding themselves as the ones whose evaluation counts, and even Paul has to receive their approval. Such disrespect for an author of scripture, and thus toward scripture itself, is a manifestation of the underlying spiritual attitude with which they approach Christianity.

## Summary: The Need to Submit to Scripture

In summary, there is a variety of ways of bypassing the authority of scripture—that is, of dismissing what scripture says as having no authority without directly disputing scripture's authority. Some of these bypasses are based upon preferring another authority to that of scripture, perhaps an ethical theory or a scholarly view which would dispute the teaching of scripture. In effect, preferring another authority to that of scripture is setting up a judge over scripture, a judge with higher authority than the scripture itself. Those who advance such views are submitting to something other than scripture rather than to scripture itself. Others of these bypasses proceed by dismissing the authority of certain parts of the New Testament in favor of other parts of it. Although these approaches are often stated with a reverence for scripture (parts of it), they in fact rely on something other than the scripture itself for sorting out scripture. Some theory of influences, some ethical judgment, some preference for a particular doctrine or interpretation of a particular doctrine becomes the canon by which scripture is measured and by which parts of it are found wanting. This too is submitting oneself to something other than scripture itself and making oneself a judge of scripture.

The authority of scripture as a standard by which to measure all other teaching has been unquestioningly recognized by Christians until the last century or so. On this subject Catholics and Protestants have been at one. Now, however, there is significant unclarity on the subject among those who call themselves Christians. The result of the unclarity has been to leave many Christians without the criteria which allow them to ascertain what the truth is. Christian thinking has consequently become increasingly subject to influences from the secular world. Teaching about roles of men and women is by no means the most important area of Christian teaching. It is, however, probably because it is not of first importance that it has felt the influence of some principles of Christian thinking that will eventually be used elsewhere. If someone can be a Christian and can disagree with the scripture in this area, putting his own judgment or the judgment of scholars or of modern thought over the scripture, he can do so in any other area.

The next area for the application of such principles is commonly that of homosexuality. Then follows the rest of Christian sexual morality, and then practically any area of Christian life. Once a principle for judging scripture is accepted, it can be validly applied to any subject matter. This does not mean that someone cannot disagree with this book's approach to the roles of men and women without automatically challenging the authority of scripture. People can disagree with what has been said in this book on other grounds. They can dispute the interpretation of the texts, or disagree with the judgment made about the intent of the scriptural writer in saying what he said in the texts, or reject the approach (to be set forth in the rest of this book) about how to apply the texts. But when people understand that something is actually taught in scripture, and then disagree with it, they are on spiritually dangerous grounds for a Christian, because they are disagreeing with the canonical word of God. For a Christian, this is rebellion. It is believing the serpent once again when he disagrees with what God has said (Gn 3:4).

### *The Real Challenge*

The first part of this book has been concerned with the scriptural teaching on the roles of men and women. The earlier chapters argued that scripture presents a unified teaching on the roles of men and women—one which is significant within scriptural teaching as a whole. Those chapters also maintained that this teaching was delivered as something valid for all Christians, and it was not merely designed to handle a special social or cultural situation. The last two chapters have dealt with questions concerning the authority of scriptural teaching. They have

held the view that any attempt to place another authority over the scripture is a fundamental mistake. To use an alternate authority to revise or nullify (rather than interpret) something in scripture denies in practice the supreme authority that Christians have always accorded to scripture.

One could get the impression from these last two chapters that it would not be difficult to simply follow the scriptural teaching today in much the same way that the early Christians did. The point of these chapters, however, is not to deny that real difficulties or objections regarding the application of the teaching exist. These chapters address only the issue of scriptural authority, not that of application. Their point is that Christians should not raise objections which ultimately call into question the authority of scriptural teaching. Many Christians, in attempting to cope with the real problems-both social and intellectual of living as a Christian in the modern world can end up jettisoning Christian essentials and denying the authority of Christian revelation. Often, they do not do so in a clear, carefully considered way, but they do so nonetheless.

The more difficult question of applying the scripture remains. It is here that the most serious objection to applying the scriptural teaching on the roles of men and women is encountered. Behind many of the questions about culture, intent, and authority lie significant concerns or objections regarding the applicability of the' scriptural teaching on men and women. The differences between the world of the scripture and our own world seem to call into doubt the possibility of applying the scripture's teaching today. Human society has changed so drastically since the times of Jesus, especially in the last few centuries, that it is very difficult to conceive of following scriptural teaching on almost anything related to social structure. What is more, most Christians cannot even find a context within which they could follow the scriptural teaching on the roles of men and women without causing major offense. Their own homes are the only possible opportunity, but for many even the home is not a real possibility because the family members are no more open to such an approach than is the rest of society. For instance, many women might be eager to assume the kind of role for wives which they read about in scripture, but they often have husbands whom they do not feel they can trust, or, even more, who are unwilling to be heads in the scriptural sense.

Finally, there are many situations not covered by scriptural teaching-and they are often the situations which are most important. For instance, whether a woman should be a head of a Christian community is a minor question in most women's lives compared with the multitude of job and education questions confronting her, questions such as whether a woman should be a doctor, a lawyer, a foreman, an airplane pilot, a major administrator, a senator, or a corporation executive. Similarly, the question of wearing headcoverings in worship services seems to be trivial when one is confronted with issues raised by unisex clothing styles. The world has changed so much that the scriptural teaching seems distant, if not positively inapplicable.

This problem of applying scripture arises from the current situation in which we find ourselves. "We" here primarily means Christian people in a contemporary technological society which has been "Westernized" to some significant degree. The question is: How can Christians, in their current circumstances, reasonably interpret and apply what the scripture enjoined in some very different circumstances? In what way should they approach and receive the teaching in those authoritative texts? In order to provide more of a basis for answering these serious

questions of interpretation and application, the third part of this book will examine data from the social sciences (especially psychology and anthropology) on men-women differences, and will then assess the current situation from the perspective of social history. In light of these investigations, the difficult question of application can then be more profitably addressed.



# The Work of the Holy Spirit in the Ministry of the Word

by Raniero Cantalamessa

## *1. The Spirit, force of the Word*

The Spirit, as I have said, was given to Jesus for the quite special purpose of evangelizing. The Spirit does not give Jesus the word to preach, for Jesus is himself the Word of God, but gives force to his word, and so is the very force of the word of God.

What, in concrete terms, does the Spirit do to the word of Jesus? He confers authority on it (“He speaks with authority!”) and efficacy. When Jesus speaks, things always happen: the paralyzed man stands up, the sea grows calm, the fig-tree withers, “the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news proclaimed to them” (Luke 7:22). The Spirit also confers a divine freedom on Jesus in his preaching, which places him above conflictual situations and party interests (Pharisees, Saducees, Zealots, Herodians), so causing even his opponents to admit: “You do not regard a person’s status but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth” (Mark 12:14). A powerful breath once more pervades the country, after the long silence of the prophets. This breath, besides giving force to Jesus’ words, also gives them unctio, that is, sweetness, consolation, suavity: “Never before has anyone spoken like this one,” say the guards who have been sent to arrest him (John 7:46). Above all, however, the Spirit gives Jesus the strength not to become downcast (cf. Isa 42:4). One could say the Spirit is given to Jesus more with a view to failure than to success (that same day in Nazareth, he had to flee for his life!); the mission of servant, accepted by Jesus at his baptism, passes by way of rejection, failure, and defeat.

It is certainly a marvelous thing to see Jesus going right ahead, without regrets or second thoughts, consenting to pass – he, the Son of God – from disappointment to disappointment, from rejection to rejection, from obstruction to obstruction. When, in one such situation, some of the disciples suggested he should call down fire from heaven, Jesus “turned and rebuked them, saying ‘You do not know of what spirit you are’” (Luke 9:55, according to a textual variant). However, he neither assumes the air of a victim, nor disdainfully retires from the fray, as human beings do in similar circumstances; he goes on speaking, agrees to discuss things, never refuses to explain, except when faced with manifest bad faith or hypocrisy. He goes on like this until he dies, evangelizing even on the walk to Calvary, even on the cross.

Constancy, generosity, fortitude, unctio, wisdom, piety: all the gifts of the Spirit listed in Isaiah 11: 1f., and an infinite number of other ones, shine in Jesus’ evangelistic activity, and it is natural this should be so if it is true that “every grace” and every spiritual gift comes from him: “It was fitting that the first fruits and the first gifts of the Holy Spirit who is imparted to the baptized should have been conferred on the manhood of the Savior, who himself bestows every grace.”<sup>1</sup>

The Spirit therefore urges Jesus on to evangelize, but not only while remaining outside him; he follows him, helps him in the unfolding of the mission, becomes his inseparable companion. What Jesus says in promising the Spirit to the disciples at the Last Supper shows us that between him and the Paraclete there reigns perfect understanding and complete communion about the things to be proclaimed, to so great a degree that the latter can continue Jesus’ proclamation, remind the disciples about him, and bring them to full understanding of him (John 14:26; 16:12).

## *2. From Jesus to the Church*

We could go on describing the marvels wrought by the Holy Spirit in Jesus’ evangelistic activity, but our original intention in studying what the Spirit effects in Jesus was primarily to find out what he wants to effect in us. So we must take leave of the Jesus of the Gospels and turn our eyes to the Church of today. If it is true that the Spirit prompts the Church to do the same things as he prompted her Head, Jesus, it is now for the Church, speaking in the first person, to repeat those solemn words pronounced in the synagogue at Nazareth: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. . . He has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor!”

But it is important to know at this point what those glad tidings consist of that she has been commissioned to bear: what the true content of this word *euangelion* is, in which so relevant a part of Jesus' messianic activity is summed up. Not all that Jesus himself says in the Gospels is "gospel"; the word "gospel" had, in the first instance, a restricted meaning and this we need to rediscover, since it is with a special view to proclaiming this that the Spirit is conferred.

What exactly is the good news Jesus has come to proclaim to the poor? Repeated in various forms, it is always the same: "The kingdom of God is at hand for you" (Luke 10:9; 11:20). This news is the implicit preamble to all his teaching: the kingdom of God is at hand for you, therefore love your enemies; the kingdom of God is at hand for you, therefore if your hand offends you cut it off; the kingdom of God is at hand for you, therefore do not worry about your own life but before all else seek the kingdom of God. In a word, the good news is this: the old things have passed away and the world has become a new creation, for God has come down to it as king (C. H. Dodd). Everything else hangs on this brief but great news. Jesus' "glad tidings" (*euangelion*) are the same as those proclaimed in Isaiah: "Your God reigns!" (Isa 52:7), but whereas in Isaiah it is a matter of hope and prophecy, now, with Jesus, it is a matter of fact.

[Excerpt from *The Holy Spirit in the Life of Jesus*, Chapter 3, *Prophetic Anointing*, by Raniero Cantalamessa, 1994, translated by Alan Neame, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, USA.]

# ‘Authority of Scripture’ is a Shorthand for God’s Authority Exercised *through* Scripture

By N.T. Wright

We now arrive at the central claim of this book: that the phrase ‘authority of scripture’ can only make Christian sense if it is a shorthand for ‘the authority of the triune God, exercised somehow *through* scripture’. Once we think this through, several other things appear much more clearly.

All authority is from God, declares Paul in relation to governments (Romans 13:1); Jesus says something very similar in John 19:11. In Matthew 28:18, the risen Jesus makes the still more striking claim that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to *him*, a statement echoed elsewhere, for instance in Philippians 2:9–11. A quick glance through many other texts in both Old Testament (e.g. Isaiah 40–55) and New (e.g. Revelation 4 and 5) would confirm this kind of picture. When John declares that ‘in the beginning was the word’, he does not reach a climax with ‘and the word was written down’ but ‘and the word became flesh’. The letter to the Hebrews speaks glowingly of God speaking through scripture in time past, but insists that now, at last, God has spoken through his own son (1:1–2). Since these are themselves ‘scriptural’ statements, that means that scripture itself points—authoritatively, if it does indeed possess authority!—away from itself and to the fact that final and true authority belongs to God himself, now delegated to Jesus Christ. It is Jesus, according to John 8:39–40, who speaks the truth which he has heard from God.

The familiar phrase, ‘the authority of scripture’, thus turns out to be more complicated than it might at first sight appear. This hidden complication may perhaps be the reason why some current debates remain so sterile.

This kind of problem, though, is endemic in many disciplines, and we ought to be grown-up enough to cope with it. Slogans and clichés are often shorthand ways of making more complex statements. In Christian theology, such phrases regularly act as ‘portable stories’, that is, ways of packing up longer narratives about God, Jesus, the church and the world, folding them away into convenient suitcases, and then carrying them about with us. (A good example is the phrase ‘the atonement’. This phrase is rare in the Bible itself; instead, we find things like ‘the Messiah died for our sins according to the scriptures’; ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only son’, and so on. But if we are to discuss the atonement, it is easier to do so with a single phrase, assumed to ‘contain’ all these sentences, than by repeating one or more of them each time.) Shorthands, in other words, are useful in the same way that suitcases are. They enable us to pick up lots of complicated things and carry them around all together. But we should never forget that the point of doing so, like the point of carrying belongings in a suitcase, is that they can then be unpacked and put to use in the new location. Too much debate about scriptural authority has had the form of people hitting one another over the head with locked suitcases. It is time to unpack our shorthand doctrines, to lay them out and inspect them. Long years in a suitcase may have made some of the contents go mouldy. They will benefit from fresh air, and perhaps a hot iron.

When we take the phrase ‘the authority of scripture’ out of its suitcase, then, we recognize that it can only have any Christian meaning if we are referring to scripture’s authority *in a delegated or mediated sense* from that which God himself possesses, and that which Jesus possesses as the risen Lord and Son of God, the Emmanuel. It must mean, if it means anything Christian, ‘the authority of God *exercised through* scripture’. The question then becomes: what might we mean by the authority of God, or of Jesus? What role does scripture have *within that*? Where does the Spirit come into the picture? And, not least, how does this ‘authority’ actually

*work?*. How does it relate, if at all, to the ‘authority’ of leaders or office-bearers within the church?

## Authority and Story

Before we begin to answer these questions, we must face another complication. Not only does the Bible itself declare that all authority belongs to the God revealed in Jesus and the Spirit; the Bible itself, as a whole and in most of its parts, is not the sort of thing that many people envisage today when they hear the word ‘authority’.

It is not, for a start, a list of rules, though it contains many commandments of various sorts and in various contexts. Nor is it a compendium of true doctrines, though of course many parts of the Bible declare the great truths about God, Jesus, the world and ourselves in no uncertain terms. Most of its constituent parts, and all of it when put together whether in the Jewish canonical form or the Christian one, can best be described as *story*. This is a complicated and much-discussed theme, but there is nothing to be gained by ignoring it.

The question is, how can a story be authoritative? If the commanding officer walks into the barrack-room and begins ‘once upon a time’, the soldiers are likely to be puzzled. If the secretary of the cycling club pins up a notice which, instead of listing times for outings, offers a short story, the members will not know when to turn up. At first sight, what we think of as ‘authority’ and what we know as ‘story’ do not readily fit together.

But a moment’s thought suggests that, at deeper levels, there is more to it than that. For a start, the commanding officer might well need to brief the soldiers about what has been going on over the last few weeks, so that they will understand the sensitivities and internal dynamics of the peace-keeping task they are now to undertake. The narrative will bring them up to date; now it will be their task to act out the next chapter in the ongoing saga. Or supposing the secretary of the club, having attempted unsuccessfully to make the members more conscious of safety procedures, decides to try a different tack, and puts up a notice consisting simply of a tragic story, without further comment, of a cyclist who ignored the rules and came to grief. In both cases we would understand that some kind of ‘authority’ was being exercised, and probably all the more effectively than through a simple list of commands.

There are other ways, too, in which stories can wield the power to change the way people think and behave—in other words, can exercise power and/or authority. (The relationship between those two concepts is of course another well-known nest of puzzles, but I hope the point I am making is clear enough.) A familiar story told with a new twist in the tail jolts people into thinking differently about themselves and the world. A story told with pathos, humour or drama opens the imagination and invites readers and hearers to imagine themselves in similar situations, offering new insights about God and human beings which enable them then to order their own lives more wisely.

All of these examples, and many more besides which one might easily think of, are ways in which the Bible does in fact work, does in fact exercise authority. This strongly suggests that for the Bible to have the effect it seems to be designed to have it will be necessary for the church to hear it as it is, not to chop it up in the effort to make it into something else. To this we shall return.

## Authority of Scripture’ as the Language of Protest

One more introductory remark on the way in which the phrase ‘authority of scripture’ has functioned and developed in recent centuries. It is my impression that it has emerged in situations of protest, whether that of Martin Luther against the Pope, of the great free church movements against Anglicanism (I think of the nineteenth-century Baptist Charles H. Spurgeon appealing to scripture to explain why he opposed so much in the established church), and, within various denominations, the protest of a would-be ‘biblical’ minority against a supposed ‘liberal’ leadership. In other words, the phrase is invoked when something is proposed or done in the church to which others object: ‘You can’t do that, because the Bible says ...’ Of course, there is a positive use as well, exemplified in the teaching and preaching of scripture. But it has often been observed that when people who insist on the authority of scripture have things all to themselves—perhaps by leaving a supposedly unbiblical denomination and setting up on their own—they quickly subdivide into those who read the Bible *this* way against those who read it *that* way. This itself suggests that an over-hasty appeal to scripture all by itself does not in fact work. We need to set scripture within the larger context which the biblical writers themselves insist upon: that of the authority of God himself.

But what does the Bible itself have to say about the authority of God?

### ‘God’s ‘Authority’ is Best Understood within the Context of God’s ‘Kingdom’

When we say or hear the word ‘authority’, we by no means always think of the sort of thing that the Bible has in mind when speaking of the way in which the one true God exercises ‘authority’ over the world. Scripture’s own preferred way of referring to such matters, and indeed to the saving rule of Jesus himself, is within the more dynamic concept of God’s sovereignty, or *kingdom*. It is not, that is, the kind of ‘authority’ which consists solely in a final court of appeal, or a commanding officer giving orders for the day, or a list of rules pinned up on the wall of the golf club. This emerges clearly in the gospels, where Jesus’ ‘authority’ consists both in healing power and a different kind of teaching, all of which the gospel writers—and Jesus himself—understand as part of the breaking-in of God’s kingdom. And the notion of God’s kingdom is itself to be understood not, first and foremost, within the very different usage of the last two or three centuries in *our* culture, but within the setting and aspirations of Israel both in the Old Testament (the Psalms, Isaiah, Daniel, and so on) and in the world of Jesus’ own day. (I and others have explored this world and these meanings at length: see e.g. *Jesus and the Victory of God* [SPCK, 1996] Part II.)

The biblical writers live with the tension of believing both that in one sense God has always been sovereign over the world and that in another sense this sovereignty, this saving rule, is something which must break afresh into the world of corruption, decay and death, and the human rebellion, idolatry and sin which are so closely linked with it. ‘In that day,’ says the prophet, ‘YHWH will be king over all the world; he will be one and his name one’ (Zechariah 14:9)—with the clear sense, however paradoxical when speaking of the creator God, that this state of affairs has not yet come about. The Jewish hope was that God’s kingdom would break in to their world, to set them free from oppression and put the whole world to rights. When Revelation speaks of God and the Lamb receiving all power, glory, honour and so forth, it is because through the Lamb’s victory the whole of creation is being brought back into its intended harmony, rescued from evil and death. God’s *authority*, if we are to locate it at this point, is his sovereign power accomplishing this renewal of all creation. Specific authority over human beings, notably the church, must be seen as part of that larger whole.

This is where I go beyond the very helpful thesis of Telford Work, who examines the way in which scripture functions dynamically within the complex events of human salvation. This is

fine as far as it goes. But in scripture itself God's purpose is not just to save human beings, but to renew the whole world. This is the unfinished story in which readers of scripture are invited to become actors in their own right. 'The authority of scripture' is thus a sub-branch of several other theological topics: the mission of the church, the work of the Spirit, the ultimate future hope and the way it is anticipated in the present, and of course the nature of the church. Failure to pay attention to all of these in discussing how scripture functions is part of the problem, as we can see when people, hearing the word 'scripture', instantly think of a rule-book—and then, according to taste, either assume that all the rules are to be followed without question or assume that they can all now be broken.

The question addressed in Work's book, however, remains the right one: what *role* does scripture play *within* God's accomplishment of this goal? It is enormously important that we see the role of scripture not simply as being to provide *true information about*, or even an accurate running commentary upon, the work of God in salvation and new creation, but as taking an active part *within* that ongoing purpose. If we are to discover a fully rounded—and itself biblical!—meaning of 'the authority of scripture', it will be within this setting. Short-circuiting the question of biblical authority by ignoring these opening moves is one of the root causes of our continuing puzzles and polarizations. Scripture is there to be a means of God's action in and through us—which will include, but go far beyond, the mere conveying of information.

### Scripture Thus Transcends (Though It Includes) 'Revelation'

All this alerts us to the fact that scripture is more than simply 'revelation' in the sense of 'conveying information'; more even than 'divine self-communication'; more, certainly, than simply a 'record of revelation'. Those categories come to us today primarily from an older framework of thought, in which the key question was conceived to be about a mostly absent God choosing to send the world certain messages about himself and his purposes. That usurped the richer biblical picture of a present, albeit transcendent, God, celebrating with the rich dynamic life of his creation and grieving over its shame and pain.

Of course, there is a much older notion of 'revelation', according to which God is continually revealing himself to and within the world he has made, and particularly to and within his people Israel. This would accord much better with the richer image I have in mind. But in much post-Enlightenment thought this has given way to a shrunken version of the idea, namely a picture of God merely conveying true religious, theological or ethical information. That, in turn, gave birth to the alternative hypothesis, popular not least within existentialist movements, that scripture was simply the 'record' of a revelation which had taken place elsewhere, presumably in events in the life of God's people, or in their personal religious experience. This then gave rise to the false antithesis of seeing scripture either as a convenient repository of timeless truth, a vehicle for imparting 'true information', or as a take-it-or-leave-it resource, itself at one remove from the reality of which it spoke, some of which might come in handy from time to time within a strategy whose outline, purpose and energy derived from elsewhere, but which could be dispensed with, at least in part, if it seemed unhelpful for those purposes. A fully Christian view of the Bible includes the idea of God's self-revelation but, by setting it in a larger context, transforms it. Precisely because the God who reveals himself is the world's lover and judge, rather than its absentee landlord, that self-revelation is always to be understood within the category of God's mission to the world, God's saving sovereignty let loose through Jesus and the Spirit and aimed at the healing and renewal of all creation.

## Nor is Scripture Simply a Devotional Manual

If the Bible is not simply ‘revelation’, nor is it simply a devotional aid, even the primary devotional aid. It does of course play that role within many traditions, including my own. Indeed, I cannot conceive of daily communion with God without scripture at its centre. There have been many different traditions of using scripture as the fuel and raw material of personal prayer, adoration, meditation, and so on. The monastic *lecti divina*, the evangelical ‘quiet time’, and the increasingly popular ‘Ignatian’ meditation all provide examples. In those communities that use a daily office, there is often a time of silence following one or all of the readings, designed to allow for prayerful reflection. Such uses of scripture, I fully believe, embody something which is vital for healthy Christian living.

But all this is not primarily what is meant by ‘the authority of scripture’. Confusion can arise at this point, not least within the Protestant emphasis, articulated afresh in some circles today, that ‘God speaks only through scripture’. This arises, I think, in relation particularly to questions of personal guidance, where a warning is being given not to believe or follow ideas and impulses which do not come from, or at least cannot be backed up by, scripture itself.

But it is wrong to confuse *devotion* with *authority*. All sorts of things happen in prayer, not least when it is based on scripture. Connections are made as sparks jump to and fro between a passage of scripture and one’s own life and circumstances. Sometimes these are deeply compelling. But by itself this process is neither a sufficient nor a necessary part of letting scripture be *authoritative* in the church. The flying sparks of prayerful interpretation can still, alas, lead us astray. Self-deceit remains a powerful and dangerous possibility (as Wittgenstein said, ‘Nothing is so difficult as not deceiving oneself’). Those individuals and churches which have ‘heard God speaking’ through a passage of scripture, and have acted accordingly, tend to be those where division is most apparent. Equally, the strong testimony both of scripture itself and of Christian (and other) experience is both that God speaks in many and various ways, including through creation itself (Psalm 19; Romans 1:20; 10:18), and supremely through the Living Word, the Word become flesh (John 1:14; Hebrews 1:1–2).

God does indeed speak through scripture. But we cannot either reduce God’s speech to scripture alone, or for that matter ignore the fact (which much recent writing has emphasized) that ‘speech’ must itself be thought of in terms of ‘speech-acts’, the deeds which are performed by the fact of speaking at all, in particular saying certain types of things (‘I promise’, ‘I find the defendant innocent’, and so on). And we must not confuse the idea of God speaking, in this or any other way, with the notion of *authority*. Authority, particularly when we locate it within the notion of God’s kingdom, is much more than that. It is the sovereign rule of God sweeping through creation to judge and to heal. It is the powerful love of God in Jesus Christ, putting sin to death and launching new creation. It is the fresh, bracing and energizing wind of the Spirit.

In particular, the role of the Bible within the church and the individual Christian life indicates three things which are of central importance as we proceed. To begin with, it reminds us that the God Christians worship is characterized not least as a God who *speaks*, who communicates with his human creatures in words. This differentiates the God of Old and New Testaments from some other gods known in the worlds of the time, and indeed today. It means that the idea of reading a book to hear and know God is not far-fetched, but cognate with the nature of God himself.

Second, it is central to early Christian instruction that we be transformed by the renewal of our minds (Romans 12:1–2). In other words, it is important that God’s transforming grace is given to us not least through enabling us to *think* in new ways. Again, this means that the idea of reading a book in order to have one’s life reordered by the wisdom of God is not counter-intuitive, but is cognate with the nature of Christian holiness itself.

Third, it reminds us that the God we worship is the God whose world-conquering power, seen in action in the resurrection of Jesus, is on offer to all those who ask for it in order thereby to work for the gospel in the world (Ephesians 1:15–23). The idea of reading a book in order to be energized for the task of mission is not a distraction, but flows directly from the fact that we humans are made in God’s image, and that, as we hear his word and obey his call, we are able to live out our calling to reflect the creator into his world.

To put all this in context, we must stand back and reflect on what we mean by God’s kingdom, and then consider the role of scripture within it.



# Scripture and Jesus

By N.T. Wright

## Jesus Accomplishes That to Which Scripture had Pointed

‘When the time had fully come, God sent forth his son ...’ (Galatians 4:4). Understanding Jesus within his historical context means understanding him where, according to scripture itself, he belongs. A historically grounded understanding of his proclamation, achievement, death and resurrection suggests that at the heart of his work lay the sense of bringing the *story* of scripture to its climax, and thereby offering to God the *obedience* through which the kingdom would be accomplished. As he himself declared, ‘The time is fulfilled; God’s kingdom is at hand.’ There is of course quite a lot to be said about Jesus himself, and within that about his relationship to Israel’s scriptures. I have written about this at length elsewhere, and for our present purposes only need to draw out some short, but vital, points. (See, for instance, *Jesus and the Victory of God* [SPCK, 1996]; *The Challenge of Jesus* [SPCK, 2000].)

For good historical reasons, I cannot agree with those (not least some members of the ‘Jesus Seminar’) who have suggested in the last decade or so that Jesus was either illiterate or nearly so, with little knowledge of or interest in Israel’s scriptures. This is to invent a Jesus out of thin air, and non-Jewish thin air at that. Instead, I have argued in the books already mentioned, in line with a good deal of contemporary scholarship on his aims and motives, that Jesus believed himself called to undertake the task, marked out in various ways in Israel’s scriptures, through which God’s long-range purposes would at last be brought to fruition. As Telford Work puts it (p. 12), ‘Jewish biblical practice is actually *constitutive* of the human Jesus.’ What this means in practice is that, in and through him, evil is confronted and judged, and forgiveness and renewal are brought to birth. The covenant is renewed; new creation is inaugurated. The work which God had done through scripture in the Old Testament is done by Jesus in his public career, his death and resurrection, and his sending of the Spirit.

Jesus thus does, climactically and decisively, what scripture had in a sense been trying to do: to bring God’s fresh kingdom-order to God’s people and thence to the world. He is, in that sense as well as others, the Word made flesh. Who he was and is, and what he accomplished, are to be understood in the light of what scripture had said. He was, in himself, the ‘true Israel’, formed by scripture, bringing the kingdom to birth. When he spoke of the scripture needing to be fulfilled (e.g. Mark 14:49), he was not simply envisaging himself doing a few scattered and random acts which corresponded to various distant and detached prophetic sayings; he was thinking of the entire storyline at last coming to fruition, and of an entire world of hints and shadows now coming to plain statement and full light. This, I take it, is the deep meaning of sayings like Matthew 5:17–18, where Jesus insists that he has come not to abolish the law but to fulfil it.

Beneath this again, as the earliest church came quickly to acknowledge, Jesus was the living embodiment of Israel’s God, the God whose Spirit had inspired the scriptures in the first place. And if he understood his own vocation and identity in terms of scripture, the early church quickly learned to make the equation the other way as well: they read the Old Testament, both its story (including covenant, promise, warning, and so on) and its commands in terms of what they had discovered in Jesus. This is set out programmatically in Luke 24, as the two disciples on the road to Emmaus are treated to a lengthy exposition from ‘Moses, the prophets and all the scriptures’, and as the risen Jesus opens the minds of the disciples to understand what the

scriptures had been about all along (Luke 24:27, 44–5). But the same point, implicit or explicit, is everywhere apparent in the gospel stories.

### Jesus Insists on Scripture's Authority

The backbone of many traditional arguments for the authority of scripture has been those specific sayings of Jesus which stress that he himself regarded scripture as authoritative and criticized his opponents for not doing so. Obvious passages include Jesus' splendid retort to the Sadducees, that they were wrong because they knew neither the Bible nor God's power (Matthew 22:29 and parallels); his attack on the scribes and Pharisees because they made God's word null and void through their traditions (Matthew 15:6–9, quoting Isaiah to the same effect); and the more cryptic argument that if Psalm 82 calls the ancient Israelites 'gods', why should the one whom God has sent into the world not be called God's son, which is backed up with the reminder that 'scripture cannot be broken' (John 10:35). Granted these are all somewhat ad hoc—in other words, that Jesus is not reported to have made the authority of scripture a major theme in his teaching—they are none the less important, revealing an underlying attitude which, after the manner of presuppositions, is only brought into the light of day when it has been implicitly questioned.

This attitude dovetails nicely into the previous point about Jesus' consciousness of bringing scripture to its long-awaited climax. In fact, these specific sayings about scriptural authority only really work within that context. Without it, we would remain puzzled: how can Jesus, in the very passage where he insists on the priority of scripture over human traditions, then declare all foods clean (Mark 7:1–23; Mark's own note in verse 19 underlines the point)? If he is insisting that not only the acts of murder, theft and adultery but also the cherishing of motivations towards those acts come under divine prohibition, what can justify his apparently cavalier attitude to the sabbath? If the command to honour one's father and mother is to be fulfilled, why did Jesus not only ignore his own mother and brothers in favour of his followers (Mark 3:31–5) but also warn his followers that they would have to be prepared to hate their father, mother and almost everyone else as well (Luke 14:26)? If scripture pointed to the exaltation of Israel and the consequent ingathering of the nations, why did Jesus say that when people came from east and west to sit down with Abraham in God's kingdom 'the heirs of the kingdom' would be thrown out (Matthew 8:11–12)?

With the usual argument, which sees 'scripture' simply in black and white, almost on a take-it-or-leave-it basis, it is hard to see what on earth is going on. Once we set Jesus in the context of the larger scriptural story, however, and get to grips with his sense of what exactly the new covenant would mean, and how it would both fulfil and transform the old one (a task which lies way beyond the scope of the present book), we discover a much richer, and more narrational, sense of 'fulfilment', which generates the subtle and powerful view of scripture which we find in the early church.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Wright, N. T. (2005). *Scripture and the Authority of God* (31–33). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

# ‘Word of God’ and Scripture in the Apostolic Church

By NT Wright

## Apostolic Preaching of ‘the Word’: the Jesus-Story Fulfils the (OT) Scripture-Story

The earliest apostolic preaching was neither a standard Jewish message with Jesus added on at the end, nor a free-standing announcement of a new religion cut off from its Jewish roots, but rather the story of Jesus *understood as* the fulfilment of the OT covenant narrative, and thus as the *euangelion*, the good news or ‘gospel’, and thus as the creative force which called the church into being and shaped its mission and life. It was this biblical story, rather than some other (that of human empire, say, or of individual spiritual self-discovery) that provided the interpretative matrix within which the accomplishment of Jesus made the sense it did. The complex and multiple genres and themes of the Old Testament, shaping the life and thought of Israel, had raised in practical as well as theoretical terms the questions of good and evil, of Israel and the nations, of empire and resistance, and above all of the sovereignty, justice and saving purposes of the creator and covenant God. It was these questions, raised in this scripturally shaped way, to which Jesus’ kingdom-movement, climaxing in his death and resurrection, offered the God-given answer. When Paul says, quoting an earlier and widely used summary of the Christian message, ‘The Messiah died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures ... and was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures’ (1 Corinthians 15:3–4), he does not mean that he and his friends can find one or two proof-texts to back up their claim, but rather that these events have come as the climax to the long and winding narrative of Israel’s scriptures. ‘The authority of the Old Testament’ in the early church, at its heart, meant that what God had done in Jesus Christ was to be seen in terms of a character within a particular story, a portrait in a particular landscape, where everything in the story, or the landscape, points us to a key facet of who this central character is and what he has accomplished.

The earliest Christian oral tradition we can trace, and the earliest sermons we can reconstruct, embody what Paul called ‘the word’, ‘the word of truth’, or simply ‘the gospel’ (for instance, Colossians 1:5; 1 Thessalonians 2:13). Thus, before there was any ‘New Testament’, there was already a clear understanding in early Christianity that ‘the word of God’, to which the apostles committed themselves when refusing to engage in extra administrative duties (Acts 6:1–4), lay at the heart of the church’s mission and life. It is not difficult to summarize this ‘word’. It was the story of Jesus (particularly his death and resurrection), told as the climax of the story of God and Israel and thus offering itself as both the true story of the world and the foundation and energizing force for the church’s mission. Exactly this story, seen in exactly this (admittedly rather complex) way, is precisely what we find in the four canonical ‘gospels’, and for that matter in some at least of the sources which may be deemed to stand behind them. This last point is controversial in the present climate of scholarship, but is I believe defensible.

## This ‘Word’ Carried the Spirit’s Power to Change Lives, Calling the Church into Being and Shaping Its Mission and Life

Paul expressed what the apostles all discovered: that this retelling of the ancient story, climaxing now in Jesus, carried *power*—power to change minds, hearts and lives. ‘The gospel is God’s power to salvation’ (Romans 1:16; compare 1 Thessalonians 1:5; 2:13). The ‘word’ did not ‘offer itself’ in a take-it-or-leave-it fashion, any more than Caesar’s heralds would have said, ‘If you’d like a new kind of imperial experience, you might like to try giving allegiance to the new emperor.’ The word was announced as a sovereign summons, and it brought into being a new situation, new possibilities, and a new life-changing power. The apostles and evangelists believed that the power thus unleashed was God’s own power, at work through the freshly outpoured Spirit, calling into being the new covenant people, the restored Israel-for-the-world. The ‘word’ was not just *information about* the kingdom and its effects, important though that was and is. It was the way God’s kingdom, accomplished in Jesus, was making its way in the world (referred to in this fashion frequently in Acts, e.g. 6:7). The kingdom, we remind ourselves, was always about the creator God acting sovereignly to put the world to rights, judging evil and bringing forgiveness and new life. This was what the ‘word’ accomplished in those who heard it in faith and obedience.

Here we have the roots of a fully Christian theology of scriptural authority: planted firmly in the soil of the missionary community, confronting the powers of the world with the news of the kingdom of God, refreshed and invigorated by the Spirit, growing particularly through the preaching and teaching of the apostles, and bearing fruit in the transformation of human lives as the start of God’s project to put the whole cosmos to rights. God accomplishes these things, so the early church believed, through ‘the word’: the story of Israel now told as reaching its climax in Jesus, God’s call to Israel now transmuted into God’s call to his renewed people. And it was this ‘word’ which came, through the work of the early writers, to be expressed in writing in the New Testament as we know it.

The church was thus from the very beginning characterized, precisely as the transformed people of God, as the community created by God’s call and promise, and summoned to hear the ‘word’ of the gospel in all its fullness. The earliest church was centrally constituted as the people called into existence, and sustained in that existence, by the powerful, effective and (in that sense and many others) ‘authoritative’ word of God, written in the Old Testament, embodied in Jesus, announced to the world, taught in the church. This was the heart of the church’s mission (Israel’s story has been fulfilled; the world must therefore hear of it); of its common life (the first ‘mark of the church’ in Acts 2:42 is ‘the teaching of the apostles’); and of the call to a holiness which would express both the true-Israel and the newly human dimensions (‘renewed according to God’s image’) characteristic of the new identity. Some of the major disputes in the early church were precisely about what this holiness meant in practice.

## The Writers of the NT Intended to Energize, Shape and Direct the Church; Their Writings were Intended to be Vehicles of the Spirit’s Authority, and were Perceived to be That in Fact

At least one of the actual apostles (Paul), and some of their colleagues and immediate successors, wrote books which were intended to continue this work on a wider scale. Recent study of the letters, and of the intention of the gospel writers, emphasizes the self-conscious way in which the New Testament authors believed themselves called to exercise their calling as ‘authorized’

teachers, by the guidance and power of the Spirit, writing books and letters to sustain, energize, shape, judge and renew the church. The apostolic writings, like the ‘word’ which they now wrote down, were not simply *about* the coming of God’s kingdom into all the world; they were, and were designed to be, part of the *means whereby* that happened, and whereby those through whom it happened could themselves be transformed into Christ’s likeness.

Those who read these writings discovered, from very early on, that the books themselves carried the same power, the same *authority in action*, that had characterized the initial preaching of the word. It used to be said that the New Testament writers ‘didn’t think they were writing “scripture”’. That is hard to sustain historically today. The fact that their writings were, in various senses, ‘occasional’ (Paul’s letters written to address sudden emergencies being the most striking example), is not to the point. At precisely those points of urgent need (when, for instance, writing Galatians or 2 Corinthians) Paul is most conscious that he is writing as one authorized, by the apostolic call he had received from Jesus Christ, and in the power of the Spirit, to bring life and order to the church by his words. How much more, one who begins a book with the earth-shatteringly simple ‘In the beginning was the word ... and the word became flesh’, and concludes it by telling his readers that ‘these things are written so that you may believe that the Messiah, the Son of God, is Jesus, and that by believing you may have life in his name’ (John 1:1, 14; 20:31)?

This is not to say, of course, that the writers of the New Testament specifically envisaged a time when their books would be collected together and form something like what we now know as the canon. I doubt very much if such an idea ever crossed their minds. But that they were conscious of a unique vocation to write Jesus-shaped, Spirit-led, church-shaping books, as part of their strange first-generation calling, we should not doubt.

### The Rich Diversity in the Canon Appears as ‘Contradictory’ Only When Seen through the Lens of Later, Distorting Worldviews and Theologies

This does not mean, of course, that all the early Christian writers said exactly the same thing. Few today would deny the rich diversity of their work. Yet, as we shall see presently, many of the accusations not merely of diversity but of flat contradiction arise not from historical study proper but from the imposition on the texts of categories from much later Western thought (from, for instance, the sixteenth or the nineteenth centuries). Obvious examples include the idea that a book which teaches ‘justification by faith’ cannot also teach ‘final judgment according to works’, let alone what we today see as a ‘high view of the church’; or that the proclamation of Jesus as ‘Messiah’ (a Jewish category) is somehow in tension with announcing him as ‘Lord’ (a Gentile category, supposedly). Such judgments have led many in the last 200 years to rush to hasty conclusions about contradictions within the New Testament; but just because some Western theologians cannot see how those fit coherently together, that does not mean that they did not in the first century. A good many well-known apparent problems of inner-canonical coherence and complementarity are of this type. Those that remain are best seen as a challenge to further thought rather than as an undermining of the remarkably consistent proclamation of the NT (see Chapters 8 and 9).

### The Early Christians Worked out a Multi-Layered Reading of the OT: Not Arbitrarily, but Reflecting Their Understanding of the Church as God’s New Covenant People and Their Place in the Ongoing Story

In particular, precisely because of what the early Christians believed about Israel's story having come to fulfilment in Jesus, they developed a *multi-layered, nuanced and theologically grounded* reading of the Old Testament. They firmly believed that the Old Testament was, and remained, the book which God had given to his people—the covenant people who had spearheaded God's purposes for the world and from whom the Messiah, Jesus, had come. But from the very beginning they read the ancient scriptures in a new way. This new way resulted in their recognizing that some parts of the scriptures were no longer relevant for their ongoing life—not, we must stress, because those parts were bad, or not God-given, or less inspired, but *because they belonged with earlier parts of the story which had now reached its climax*.

This is the key insight which enables us to understand how the early Christians understood the Old Testament and how the New Testament writers used it. Again and again one hears accusations that the New Testament writers (and their predecessors within oral teaching and tradition) treated the Old Testament as a rag-bag from which they could pick and choose what they wanted and leave what was inconvenient. This has then been used, over and over within recent decades, as an argument for saying that we today can and should treat the New Testament itself (let alone the Old Testament!) in the same way. But this is unwarranted, and springs from a misunderstanding about how the early Christians understood and used scripture.

As the renewed-Israel people, now transformed through Jesus and the Spirit into a multi-ethnic, non-geographically-based people charged with a mission to the whole world, the early Christians figured out very early on an appropriate, and in no way arbitrary, continuity and discontinuity between the Old Testament period and their own. (This has nothing in common, by the way, with the fanciful speculations and periodizations of 'Dispensationalism'.) This needs to be explored in more detail.

### Continuity and Discontinuity in the Early Church's Use of Scripture

The earliest Christians were quickly forced into thinking through the question of continuity and discontinuity. The early controversy about the admission of non-Jews into God's people (did they need to be circumcised? did they need to obey the Jewish food laws and sabbath regulations?) precipitated a detailed argument, articulated by Paul in Galatians 2 and 3, about the way in which, precisely because God was fulfilling the covenant promises to Abraham by creating a single multi-ethnic family, those regulations in the Mosaic law which explicitly marked out Jews from their non-Jewish neighbours were now to be set aside, not because they were not good, or not given by God, but because they had been given for a temporary purpose which was now complete. The same pattern is repeated in many other cases. The inauguration of the new covenant in Jesus and by the Spirit meant that the Christians had to work out in what sense this was the renewal of the same covenant, and in what sense it was 'new' in the sense of 'different'. Paul himself sums up the hermeneutical tension which covenant renewal has set up: God's righteousness is revealed 'apart from the Law', although 'the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it' (Romans 3:21).

This provides a model which helps us to track the continuity and discontinuity which the early Christians saw between their own time and that of Israel BC. Continuity is seen, for example, in the early Christian insistence on the world as God's good creation; on God's sovereign duty and promise to deal with evil; on the covenant with Abraham as the framework by which God would achieve this universal aim; and on the call to holiness, to genuine and renewed humanness, over against the dehumanized world of pagan idolatry and immorality (though of course many in the first century saw that 'holiness' as requiring adherence to the Jewish law, at which point it would tip over into the next category).

Obvious examples of discontinuity are all over the place. The ancient Jewish purity laws are seen as no longer relevant to a community in which Gentiles are welcome on equal terms (Mark 7; Acts 15; Galatians 2). The Temple in Jerusalem, and the sacrifices that took place there, were no longer the focal point of God's meeting with his people (Mark 12:28–34; Acts 7; Romans 12:1–2; Hebrews 8–10); indeed, there would be no Temple in the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21–22, the more remarkable since that passage is built on the Temple-centred climax of Ezekiel). The sabbath is no longer mandatory (Romans 14:5–6), and indeed if people insist on such observances they are cutting against the grain of the gospel (Galatians 4:10). There is now no holy land: in Paul's reinterpretation of the Abrahamic promises in Romans 4:13, God promises Abraham not just one strip of territory but the whole world, anticipating the renewal of all creation as in Romans 8. Perhaps most importantly, the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile has been abolished (throughout Paul, and summarized in Ephesians 2:11–22). These conclusions were reached by the early Christians, not by a cavalier process of setting aside bits of the Old Testament which they found unwelcome, but through a deep-rooted sense, worked out theologically and practically, that all of that scripture had been summed up in Jesus Christ (Matthew 5:17, itself summing up the message of much of the book; Romans 3:31; 2 Corinthians 1:20) and that now God's project of new covenant and new creation had begun, necessarily taking a new mode. John sums it up in a sentence which has often teased commentators. 'The law', he writes, 'was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (1:17). Should we understand him to mean '*but* grace and truth came through Jesus Christ', or should it be '*and*'? The rest of the gospel suggests that John deliberately left it ambiguous.

The early Christian use of the Old Testament reflects exactly this double-edged position. Precisely because of the emphasis on the unique accomplishment of Jesus Christ, the Old Testament could not continue to have exactly the same role within the Christian community as it had had before. Christianity does not *repeat* the earlier stages of the story, any more than it repeats the unique achievement of Jesus; it celebrates and builds upon them. From the start, in the ministry of Jesus and the work of Paul, we find constant reference to the fact that with the fulfilment comes a new moment in the story, a new act in the play (see pages 88–92). Heavy-handed schemes such as those of Marcion (the God of the Old Testament is a different God to that of the New) and the theologically cognate ones of some Reformers (a strict antithesis between law and gospel pressed into meaning that, as Luther once said despite his general awareness that things were not quite so simple, 'Moses knows nothing of Christ') do no justice to the sophisticated early Christian sense of continuing to live under the *whole* scripture albeit in this *multi-layered* manner. Nor, for that matter, do the pragmatic, rule-of-thumb conclusions of some other writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, who saw the 'civil and ceremonial' laws being abolished while the 'moral' ones remained, ignoring the fact that most ancient Jews would not have recognized such a distinction.

It is not hard to imagine illustrations of how this continuity and discontinuity function. When travellers sail across a vast ocean and finally arrive on the distant shore, they leave the ship behind and continue over land, not because the ship was no good, or because their voyage had been misguided, but precisely because both ship and voyage had accomplished their purpose. During the new, dry-land stage of their journey, the travellers remain—and in this illustration must never forget that they remain—the people who made *that* voyage in *that* ship.

Perhaps the best example of this line of thought anywhere in the New Testament is one of the earliest: Galatians 3:22–9, where Paul argues that God gave the Mosaic law for a specific purpose which has now come to fruition, whereupon that law must be put aside, in terms of its task of defining the community, not because it was a bad thing but because it was a good thing whose task is now accomplished. But, as the whole letter indicates, the people of God renewed

through Jesus and the Spirit can never and must never forget the road by which they had travelled.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Wright, N. T. (2005). *Scripture and the Authority of God* (34–42). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.